

Pioneers in Iron Land

EVA L. ALVEY RICHARDS

THE NEW YEAR'S BELLS of 1893 had scarcely ceased their ringing when Father declared his New Year's resolution. He resolved to sell our home in Milwaukee and to move us all to northern Minnesota.¹ It wasn't a sudden decision; in truth, he had been thinking about it for some time. And several good reasons guided his thinking.

To begin with, recently business in his line had shown some decline. Not much, but it presaged a little straw and the wind was stirring. Luxuries find few buyers when the economy of a country seems even vaguely dislocated, and Father at that time was importing luxuries—table luxuries, such as truffles and *pâté de foie gras*, caviar, olives, wines, and cordials—a business he had followed for many years.

Father had enjoyed remarkable success in this business—had persistently made the heights his own from the day, when as a boy, barefooted and with his one pair of shoes under his arm, he had walked forty miles from his father's home to seek his first job in St. Paul, and to find it cleaning counters and shelves in a small mid-town grocery store. From his days as chore boy, through less arduous years of hobnobbing with noted chefs and *maître d'hôtel* of the Continent and our own great cities, the years had been kind. But he was tired—merely handling table delicacies can cloy—and weary of travel and of being away from home for long weeks at a time. Take his last trip; he had barely reached home in time for Christmas and then he had been away so long his children regarded him as a stranger. An incident of this home-coming had jolted him to the sober truth of this. His eldest child, then in kindergarten, had told her teacher that "the nice man we call papa has come again and is kissing our mamma and our house is happy now." So Father voiced his resolution. Next he was to live it.

¹The present narrative is a chapter from a forthcoming book to be entitled "Child Pioneer." It will be published by the Caxton Printers of Caldwell, Idaho; this firm has given the author permission to contribute some preliminary sections to this magazine. Others will follow in future issues of *Minnesota History*. In her preface, Mrs. Richards points out that "Child Pioneer" is concerned with social history. "It is well to study the manners and customs of other days," she writes. "The people of *my* Minnesota were people of strong faiths and stout hearts. They worked long hours and hard; they were resourceful; they helped one another; above all, they loved deeply." It is of these people and of their lives on the St. Louis County mining frontier of the 1890's that Mrs. Richards writes in this and the articles to follow. *Ed.*

A great development was taking place in northern Minnesota, up in the Lake Superior district, where newly discovered iron ore fields had but recently been opened. Father tells me it was just before my eighth birthday that John D. Rockefeller had brought about the consolidation of two great companies, the American Steel Barge Company and the West Superior Rolling Mills, representing seven million dollars in capital.² In that day a transaction involving so huge a sum elicited sensational four-inch headlines, but word of it came to Father in a less noisome and more convincing way.

His parents lived in that district—about thirty miles north of Duluth—on a large tract of forest land. Part of this tract they had cleared, and Grandfather and Grandmother were very happy on the small farm they had made for themselves. Now, almost overnight, they and their farm were caught up in a confusion of surveyors and steam shovels and track laying, as the enterprising arms of the steel interests reached out for rich beds of raw material—solid seams of pure hematite, the highest grade of iron ore yet discovered.

This confusion was all very disturbing to Grandpa and Grandma. They were approaching the evening of their lives and wanted above all to be left alone in the calm serenity of their farm, their potato patches, their peas and beans and little pigs. And now here was a tumult advancing upon them—steel rails and spikes and their very woodland about to be desecrated. Grandpa described it pretty well in after years—“just like they put crowbar under my barn and turn it over on Cloquet.” Consequently, in their dilemma they appealed to Father, their one son, Grandpa avowed, whose “head was dependable for business.” To Father, this appeal held just one meaning. Opportunity was knocking at his door.

There followed a different sort of confusion for us—packing crates and barrels—empty rooms with shreds of paper and excelsior lying about—and Mother trying to understand the ways of men.

“Pour l’amour de Dieu, Edouard, why do you want to move us to a wilderness when we are all so comfortable here with everything going so well?”

“What you say is so true, Josephine, we have been comfortable here, but of late my pillow has become but a rock pile—everything is *not* going so well, chérie.”

Father’s decision was timely. The business outlook was none too favorable after President Cleveland’s election. Bank failures and commercial

²The birthday mentioned was on March 15, 1893. Rockefeller formed his corporation about five weeks earlier. *Ed.*

distress were widespread. After we were settled in northern Minnesota, repercussions from the bloody Pullman strike in Chicago reached Mother's ears, and she decided that the wilderness might be the safest place after all, and concluded that Father had moved under lucky stars.

Before our home was dismantled, however, Father and Mother gave a farewell dinner. "It would be a comfort to have a picture of our dear friends together this one more time," they agreed. Father's home-comings had always ushered in a round of dinners and parties and visitings, which we children always enjoyed from the edges, walking with big eyes around the flower and cut-glass decked dining table, or standing on our toes before the sideboard to gaze on mounded fruits and frosted cakes and bonbons, or pointing, as we spoke in awed whispers, at the array of hats and feather boas and silk and velvet cloaks reposing on the great bed in the guest room while the festivities rang high below stairs.

For this special occasion Mother dressed us in our best embroideries with ribbon sashes to meet the guests—to be seen and not heard, you must know—the Browns, the Seligmanns, the Bachs, Monsieur and Madame La Boissiere, the Wells, and others whose names I have forgotten. Mrs. Bach was very beautiful, her dark hair elaborately dressed with rhinestone pins and white roses. That evening she wore a pink and white striped satin gown, and I remarked to Mother that she looked like an angel. Madame La Boissiere could sing like a bird—a second Adelina Patti, they called her. The Wells brought their young son John who was at once turned over to us children to be entertained. Jonné, we called him. He was very prim in black velvet with a cascade of ruffles down his silk blouse; Little Lord Fauntleroy apparel was in fashion then. I ran for the picture books and dolls and set them all before him. Our Aunt Clemence set a small table and tied on our bibs, and presently there we were, passing ice cream to one another with spoons—most of it to Jonné—and enjoying ourselves just as all children do when they are treated to an extra party.

This dinner in our spacious home, glittering in retrospect with lights and jewels, music, and gay conversation, was a gala affair. I cannot remember Mother more radiantly beautiful than she was that night, nor Father more lavish of good cheer and hospitality. So they would be remembered by their dearest friends.

Melting snows and gray slush lay around the houses and lined the streets the morning we left Milwaukee. A pale sun pushed its way through murky clouds to throw a lattice pattern of light across the cold waters of Lake Michigan. Father's lively enthusiasms bolstered Mother,

bravely hiding her grief at leaving the home she so loved, while Aunt Clemence disposed the bags and the children in the car seats as if she had been living in trains all her life. Right away I had to exclaim that the red plush seats were "just like our settee at home." Thoughtless little me! to send Mother into a fresh burst of tears! For her the trip was all too sad. For me it was all adventure, the new country, the rivers, the names of the stations, the people — everything.

We must have changed trains once or twice, but of this I remember very little. Of the great city of Duluth I retain an impression of walking up and down steep hills, of a night in a hotel and the novelty of breakfast in a big dining room, and of the day Aunt Clemence left us to stay with friends until we should be settled. But of all these cherished impressions none looms more vividly than the excitement and bustle when we boarded the Duluth, Missabe and Northern train for the last lap of our journey. This time Mother helped to get us all settled in our seats. She was feeling better. I could tell it by the happy way she was pointing out things like birds and cows to our little brother.

Presently our train went clicketing over a wide network of tracks with freight trains moving on one side and ore trains on the other, and flatcars with switch engines between. We shouted and clapped our hands and ran pell-mell from one side of the car to the other trying to see everything. Over across all the tracks was a roundhouse. Papa explained about the roundhouse: how the engines ran into it onto a huge turntable, where they were greased and oiled and sometimes repaired, and then turned around to steam off again, north or south, in whatever direction they were to haul the trains. Papa spelled out a station name for us too — P-r-o-c-t-o-r K-n-o-t-t.³ What child could ever forget that?

And then almost at once our train was running through the forest, the trees close on each side as if they were crowding there, like people, to wave their arms at us as we went by. Papa knew all about the forest, the balsam trees and the spruce, the tamaracks and tall slim birches, white as ghost trees against the pines. He told us how the Indians made their canoes of birch bark, as well as little baskets to pick blueberries or cranberries in. He pointed out to us where these berries grew whenever we passed the bare or swampy places; muskeg, he said, the swamps were called in the north countries.

How we would jump up and look around every time the whistle blew! And this happened many times, for all along the way there were

³ This village west of Duluth was named for James Proctor Knott, a Congressman from Kentucky. Although he intended to ridicule Duluth in his satirical speech in Congress on January 27, 1871, instead he did much to advertise and promote the infant city. *Ed.*

men working on the tracks—"section gangs," Papa called them—who had to be warned of the approaching train. The new gravel roadbed required constant refilling and attention. You see, at that time, the Duluth, Missabe and Northern Railroad had not been in operation very long and the part over which our train was traveling was a new spur that had just been opened to link up with the Duluth and Winnipeg line at Stony Brook junction, now Brookston. It was so new that when we arrived at Grandpa's he was not yet recovered from the excitement that had prevailed when the first train of ore cars went rolling down to Duluth over it. He would "never forget the first week of October of 1892," he said. Right here I may as well tell you that he did not forget it, for when he was almost ninety he lived those days all over again as he recalled for me, and for the author James Stevens, his experiences of those momentous years.⁴

Suddenly the whistle blew again and the train began to slow up.

"When we get across this bridge . . ."

But Papa never finished, for when we saw him reaching under the seats to get our luggage together, we all shouted at once:

"Papa, are we there? Is this the station? Are we there?"

Mother was tying on our bonnets when we heard the hollow rumbling sound that a train always makes when it is crossing over high bridge work, and looking out we saw the swift brown waters of the Cloquet River far below us.

"Burr-nett! All out for Burnett!"

And there we were, bag and baggage on the platform, the train chugging on in front of us and a small telegraph office behind us—a building so small it was hardly more than a sentry box. Above the door, painted in white letters was the station name, Burnett. Under it, as if to locate the spot for us, were these additions:

DULUTH 27 miles —————→S
N←— MOUNTAIN IRON 43 miles

The telegraph operator was away, but through the window we could see the key with a pad of yellow dispatch paper beside it. In one corner was a tiny pot-bellied stove. There was scarcely room for the operator. It looked a deserted and lonely place. Many years later Mother told me

⁴In the introduction to his *Paul Bunyan*, 2 (New York, 1925), Stevens relates that at Puyallup, Washington, "Z. Berneche, a snowy-maned, shining-eyed, keen-minded veteran logger of ninety years, told me about" Paul Bunyon, hero of the French-Canadian logging camps and of the Papineau Rebellion of 1837. Steven expresses the belief that the Paul Bunyan legends grew out of tales of the historical Paul Bunyon. Berneche, who was Mrs. Richards' grandfather, is listed as "Zephirin Barnache," aged fifty-five, in the manuscript census of Industrial Township, St. Louis County, for 1895, which is among the state census schedules at the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

that I had taken her hand in that moment and patted it, as if to comfort her. Perhaps I had been afraid she was going to cry again.

When the train had gone by, we saw Grandpa Berneche across the track. He had come to meet us with his old box wagon, and there he was holding the horses—the poor animals frightened by the train—and beckoning us to come on.

I would like to tell you of that ride here, but I will omit the long way through the forest over the bumpy road with its deep ruts, still frozen in some places, and tell you only of how happy Grandpa and Grandma were to see us.

The mid-afternoon light of a late February day becomes an early violet twilight in these northern Minnesota latitudes, and long before we reached the clearing we could see the lighted windows of the little log house twinkling through the trees. Grandma was standing in the road as we drove up, and I thought she would never leave off kissing each one of us, on both cheeks in turn, and then in turn again.

Theirs was only a one-room log cabin with a loft, but their hearts' welcome presaged a mansion, the threshold of which proved to be my entry into the happiest world a child could ever know.

I started in at once to get acquainted with Grandpa Berneche's farm. Every time he went out to the barn, or to carry in wood, I trudged after him. First thing Grandma did was to find a pair of old shoes for me, big enough to lose myself in, because the paths were in a half-thaw, half-frozen state, and my new kid button shoes were far too fine, she said, for a visit to the cow. Grandpa said my bonnet was too fine also, so he found one of his old knitted caps, and the next thing he was calling me "Garçon." I carried the lantern for him and held it while he milked old Festin. "A fine name for a fine cow," he told me, because it was like sitting down to a banquet every time he milked her—"she gives so much milk and butter and fromage."

Grandma gave him two big ticks as we went out, with instructions to fill them with hay. These were to be our beds for the night. They looked like big balloons when he brought them in, and such a time as he had getting them up the ladder to the loft. Father helped him, Grandpa pulling and Father pushing and squeezing the ticks through the square opening in the ceiling. Later Grandma and Mother went up to make them up as beds, with pillows and red blankets. The pillow-cases were made of blue flowered calico. Over our heads hung long strings of dried onions, shining like Christmas festoons of silver in the light of the lantern. In the corner spaces, back under the eaves, were sacks of peas and beans and store supplies, like brown sugar and coffee,

which Grandpa bought in Cloquet. There was a keg of molasses too, right next to the chimney. Through the cracks in the floor we could see the light of downstairs. If we put our eyes to the cracks, we could see the fireplace and Grandma's big bed and her rocking chair.

I found out all this the first night, for I was much too excited to sleep. There was a little square window in the east gable. We could see Grandpa's turnip patch from there, and quite a way beyond—over a quarter of a mile, I guess—the little lighted windows of the Brousseau house, gleaming like yellow stars through the clearing. The Brousseaus were Grandpa's only near neighbors. They were a large family. One daughter was married and lived in Duluth. Mrs. Brousseau's mother lived with them, "a very feeble old lady," Grandma whispered to Mother. We heard about all the neighbors before we went to bed, some of them living miles away.

Grandma knew how to make the nicest bed for our little brother. She turned her big rocker "on its heels" and rested its back on the wood box. It made the dearest crib. And thus we were tucked in for the night in Grandpa's little log cabin, and no covey of young partridges was ever more cozily cuddled. I thought it was wonderful to sleep on the floor up in the loft of Grandpa's house, for it was like being in a big nest full of birds.

It snowed during the night. But that was so we could see the deer tracks in the turnip patch better, Grandpa said. We all trooped out before breakfast to see the dainty footprints, by far, I must say, the most prettily dainty of all wild-life tracks. We could see where the deer had been feeding on the turnips and where they had come out of the forest.

While we were hopping excitedly all over the place, two of the Brousseau children came up with a big pan of hot corn bread their mother had sent. The pan was covered with a flour sack and wrapped in a thick mackinaw jacket. The children carried it very carefully, for you may surmise their eyes were not on the path at all, but rather on us, appraising us from head to foot shyly, as county children have a way of doing when they are under the impression that city children must be far superior to themselves. You see, Grandma had been telling the Brousseaus about us. Grandmothers have a chesty way of talking about their grandchildren, and I suspect that while doing so, our grandmother had placed bright haloes on our heads—little angels in her eyes.

But I was far from looking or acting like an angel that morning, with Grandpa's big boots on and his cap half over my eyes, yelling in the turnip patch:

"Look! A *big, big* deer has been here!"

Whereupon my playmates to be, George and Nellie Brousseau, walked over, looked down at the hoofprints, and said:

"Poof! That's not a *big* deer track. There was a bigger deer than that in *our* turnip patch!"

Such airs to boast a turnip patch! It was no time to punch their noses, but I wanted to.

It was Nellie who smoothed my ruffled pride.

"This is the track of a doe," she said. "Maybe if we look around we can find a buck track."

And look around we did, first giving the corn bread to Grandma. But she made us wait until she cut three big squares, splitting them and placing big lumps of butter between, before sending us out again to see all the deer tracks in the world. It was wonderful! There was not even one admonition—"Be careful of your dress," "Be careful of your shoes," "Don't play in the street," "Don't slide down the cellar door"—but be free to roam the woods of Minnesota as far as your little legs can take you! Free we were—free as the wind that was even then blowing cotton tufts of snow off the trees.

My first day in Minnesota! Oh, the joyousness of that morning! Deer tracks and rabbit tracks and weasels and an owl! And the Brousseau children, who knew everything!



THE FOLLOWING is quoted from J. Proctor Knott's speech on Duluth before the House of Representatives in 1871. A joint resolution relating to the construction of a railroad from the St. Croix River to Lake Superior was under discussion. Although Congressman Knott, who came from Kentucky, intended to be satirical, his address later was used for promotional purposes, and it did much to advertise the infant city at the head of the lakes.

"The climate of Duluth [is] unquestionably the most salubrious and delightful to be found anywhere on the Lord's earth. Now, I have always been under the impression . . . that in the region of Lake Superior it was cold enough for at least nine months in the year to freeze the smoke-stack off a locomotive. [Great laughter.] But I see it represented on this map that Duluth is situated exactly half way between the latitudes of Paris and Venice, so that gentlemen who have inhaled the exhilarating airs of the one or basked in the golden sunlight of the other may see at a glance that Duluth must be a place of untold delights; [laughter,] a terrestrial paradise, fanned by the balmy zephyrs of an eternal spring, clothed in the gorgeous sheen of ever-blooming flowers, and vocal with the silvery melody of nature's choicest songsters."



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