EXACTLY a hundred years ago, Laurence Oliphant, an English writer and traveler, visited Minnesota and recorded his observations in a book illustrated with his own sketches and called *Minnesota and the Far West*. 1 Minnesota has been seen by many European visitors, but few have had careers as checkered and intriguing as Oliphant's. Few have been as trenchant observers or as enthusiastic reporters of Minnesota's potentialities. Even fewer have written travel books about the American West with the sparkle and good humor displayed by this world adventurer.

Oliphant's career comes close to the incredible. He was born in 1829 in Capetown, South Africa, where his father was in the colonial service. He was only twenty-five when, as superintendent general of Indian affairs in Canada under Lord Elgin, he turned an official trip to the Lake Superior region into a pleasure tour through Minnesota. In that short span of years he had had schooling as a youth in England, two years of travel on the Continent, a tour of duty as secretary to his father, who had become chief justice in Ceylon, study and experience as a lawyer in Ceylon (he says that at the age of twenty-two he "had been engaged in twenty-three murder cases"), a hunting expedition into Nepal, study of law in London and Edinburgh, a fabulous trip down the Volga and into the Crimea, and top-level diplomatic experience as private secretary to Lord Elgin in the negotiations of the Reciprocity Treaty between Canada and the United States in 1854. Amid all this

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bustle he had found time, also, to write two
travel books about Nepal and the Crimea.®
It was no ordinary observer, then, who so
gaily floated down the Mississippi to St.
Paul in the summer of 1854.
Oliphant decided to extend his American
carries beyond Lake Superior into the Mis­
sissippi Valley when on a lake steamer he
met some English fellow passengers who
were bound for a Western tour. After leav­
ing the new settlement of Superior in the
middle of August, the party, which con­
sisted of four Englishmen, two voyageurs,
a couple of Indians, first made its way
by canoe slowly up the St. Louis River.
Some eighty miles upstream they turned
off the St. Louis and entered the East Sa­
nan River, where the progress, as Oli­
phant wrote, “was even slower than in the
St Louis. In places the channel was almost
choked up with fallen trees, drift-wood,
weeds, and debris of all sorts—a prominent
feature in which was frequently the wreck
of a canoe.”

The voyage up the eastward-flowing
stream is described in great detail. “Some­
times, where a tree had fallen right across
the river, we were obliged to lift the canoes
over it, and, more often still, to press them
under the logs, and jump over them our­selves,” Oliphant reported. “Some of these
trees, we observed, from their pointed ends,
had been cut down by the industrious
beaver; and the voyageurs showed us the
remains of a former dam. The danger of
sharp rocks was here exchanged for that of
snags, and it set our teeth on edge to hear
the grating of a pointed stick along the bot­
tom of the thin bark canoe. The effects of
this were soon apparent, and we found our
canoes leaking heavily before the close of
the first day in the Savannah.”

Oliphant then described the country
through which the travelers passed. “The
stream wound sluggishly between low
banks covered with long grass, from which
shot lofty trees, aspen, maple, ash, elm,
birch, hemlock, pine, and fir, that met over­
head, and formed an agreeable shade from
the noonday sun. It was just such a jungle
as would have been considered good tiger­
cover in India; and yet here not even the
chirp of a bird broke the perfect stillness,
which is one of the most striking peculiari­
ties of American forests, and which often
exercises a painfully depressing influence
upon the spirits. Nevertheless, as the sun
glanced through the thick foliage, the ef­
cfects were certainly pretty, and there was
a novelty in the style of navigation which
rendered it full of interest.”® The travelers
next entered a huge swamp and with tremen­
dous exertion pushed their way through
the wild rice which grew in great profusion.

The journey was slower than had been
anticipated, and the date of arriving at St.
Paul no one could predict. Two Chippewa
Indians who had been engaged en route at
Fond du Lac grew uneasy and turned back
as they neared the land of the Sioux. To ad­
to the Englishmen’s troubles there were
swarms of mosquitoes and, to top it all,
poison ivy, which caused one of the men to
become so swollen that his eyes were almost
hidden and his hands and arms twice their
normal size. Oliphant, too, was affected,
and although he was not so badly disfig­
ured, his fingers “looked very much like
Bologna sausages.” But the travelers’ trou­
bles all came to an end when they reached
the West Savannah River, a tributary of the

® Nor did his active and remarkable career end
here, for his later life included a trip to Constan­
tinople and the Crimea, a tour of the Southern
states of the United States, a filibuster expedition,
diplomatic service in China and Japan, publish­ing
a successful novel of social satire entitled Piccadilly,
and a seat in Parliament—to say nothing of a stretch
of years in sharp contrast to his active life when
he attached himself wholeheartedly to Thomas
Lake Harris’ utopian community, the Brotherhood
of the New Life, in New York and California. For
the facts of Oliphant’s career see his own Episodes
in a Life of Adventure (New York, 1887); Mar­
garet O. W. Oliphant, Memoir of the Life of
Laurence Oliphant and of Alice Oliphant, His Wife
(New York, 1891); and Leslie Stephen’s sketch in
the Dictionary of National Biography, 14: 1027–
1031. An exhaustive study of Oliphant’s relations
with Harris is found in Herbert W. Schneider and
George Lawton, A Prophet and a Pilgrim (New
York, 1942).

® Oliphant, Minnesota and the Far West, 180.
Mississippi. Then the whole aspect of affairs changed. “Instead of punting laboriously against an overpowering current, or forcing our gloomy way amid sedge and rush, or tramping wearily, with loaded backs, through mud and water, we were now gliding easily and rapidly down the stream.”

Oliphant was a great sportsman. Wherever he went his fishing rod was handy and he delighted in his prowess as a fisherman. The wilderness had a fascination for him, but he had one complaint about the Minnesota forests. “The principal drawback to travelling in this part of America,” he wrote, “is the almost utter absence of all game; so that not only is sport out of the question, but there is an actual difficulty in procuring means of subsistence with the rifle in case the supply of flour running out.”

ALTHOUGH Oliphant enjoyed the wild country through which he passed, and revelled in its scenery, the theme of his book went beyond rapture over natural beauty. It was the booming spirit of economic development and progress that most impressed him. Everywhere in the West he found the same drive and optimism — the same belief that prosperity could be had for the asking by those who had the enterprise to withstand the initial difficulties of frontier life.

“'The impressions of a traveller visiting the United States of America for the first time,’ Oliphant wrote in the first paragraph of Minnesota and the Far West, ‘are so totally unlike those which he has experienced in the course of his rambles in the Old World, that he at once perceives that,’ in order to appreciate the new country, ‘an entire revolution must be effected in those habits of thought and observation in which he had hitherto indulged. He finds that, instead of moralising over magnificence in a process of decay, he must here watch resources in a process of development — he must substitute the pleasures of anticipation for those of retrospection — must be more familiar with pecuniary speculations than with historical associations — delight himself rather in statistics than in poetry — visit docks instead of ruins, converse of dollars, and not antique coins — prefer printed calico to oil-paintings, and admire the model of a steam-engine more than the statue of a Venus. He looks on scenery with an eye for the practical, as well as the picturesque; when gazing on a lovely valley or extensive plain, he discerns at a glance the best line for a railway; and never sees a waterfall without remembering that it is a mill-site.’

The high hopes he found everywhere were a constant source of amazement to Oliphant. “I was glad to have the opportunity of witnessing the process by which a vast and heretofore almost uninhabited country was becoming thickly and rapidly populated, as a process which involved so much that was interesting and anomalous,” he commented. “The blind confidence

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1 Oliphant, Minnesota, 168, 185, 189.
2 Oliphant, Minnesota, 177.
which induces crowds of utterly destitute people to emigrate to comparatively unknown and altogether uncivilised regions, with the intention of living there permanently. — the cool presumption with which crowded steamers start for cities which do not exist, and disgorge their living freights upon lonesome and desolate shores, to shift for themselves; — and the very remarkable manner in which they do shift for themselves — first, by building a hotel, then a newspaper office, then probably a masonic lodge, or something equally unnecessary, then saloons and places of public entertainment — and, finally, shops and ordinary dwelling-houses, — are amongst the most novel and characteristic experiences of a traveller in the Far West."

In the course of their canoe voyage down the Mississippi, Oliphant and his companions stopped at Fort Ripley, where they found a garrison of only thirty-four men, and at Sauk Rapids, which Oliphant asserted was "doubtless destined to be a town of some importance." The first settlement of any size or importance, however, that met the Englishmen's gaze after they left Superior was St. Anthony, now a part of Minneapolis. After depositing their canoe and belongings in a cart in order to transport them around the falls, the group made a dramatic entrance into the village.

"There was no little curiosity excited in the quiet and remote town of St Anthony, as the unusual procession passed through it, of a bark canoe in a waggon, followed by two voyageurs and four Englishmen," Oliphant recorded; "and when we stopped for a moment at the hotel and entered the bar, the billiard-players in the adjoining room, and the loafers of the neighbourhood, crowded inquisitively round to discover the origin of the visit. When they heard the route we had taken from Superior, we were overwhelmed with inquiries as to the nature of the country, the character of the pines on the Upper Mississippi, and its advantages generally as a district in which to settle; for most of the inhabitants of these western towns are anxious to hold land beyond them, so as to profit by the advance of civilisation, and are ever seeking information from explorers, who, if they are personally interested, give the public no more of their experience and observation than they can help, until they have established their own claims in an indisputable manner, and then their descriptions are of course framed so as to induce emigration to flow in the desired direction as freely as possible. As we were quite uninterested, we were also quite impartial, and gave a true account, which, however, was most probably not believed."

OLIPHANT pictured St. Anthony as a cheerful and pretty place, and he noted the rivalry existing between it and St. Paul, "the former owing its prosperity to the conveniences it derives for timber operations from the magnificent water-power — the latter from its position at the head of Mississippi navigation." This traveler of a century ago found the settlement at the Falls of St. Anthony "already a curious mixture of a manufacturing town and a watering-place. The extreme beauty of the scenery in the neighbourhood, the attractions of the Falls themselves, and the comfortable and civilised aspect of the town, are beginning to render it a fashionable summer resort, and picturesque villas are springing up on all available sites; but upon the bank of the river saw-mills, foundries, shingle-machines, lathe-factories, &c., keep up an incessant hubbub — delightful music to the white man, who recognises in the plashing of water, and the roar of steam, and the ring of a thousand hammers, the potent agency which is to regenerate a magnificent country, and to enrich himself — but the harshest sounds that ever fell upon the ear of the Indian, for they remind him of the great change through which he has already passed, and proclaim

"Oliphant, Minnesota, 158, 159.
This and the passages in the paragraph that follows are quoted from Oliphant, Minnesota, 243-245.
his inevitable destiny in loud unaltering
tones.”

Like many visitors before and after him,
Oliphant was impressed by the beauty of
the Falls of St. Anthony. “At the foot of the
Falls the voyageurs launched the canoe and
prepared lunch,” Oliphant noted, “while we
explored the neighbourhood and sketched
the Falls. They are only twenty feet in
height; but the scenery does not derive its
interest from their grandeur, but from the
perfect grouping of rock and wood and
water on a magnificent scale. The Missis­
sippi is upwards of six hundred yards wide
above the Falls. These are quite perpen­
dicular, and the water drops in beautiful
single sheets on either side of a huge mass
of white sandstone, of a pyramidal form,
which splits the stream. The rapids below
extend for several hundred yards, and are
very broad, divided into various channels
by precipitous islands of sandstone, gigantic
blocks of which are strewn in grotesque
confusion at the base of lofty walls of strati­
fication of dazzling whiteness. These fantas­
tically-shaped islands are thickly wooded,
and birch and maple cling with desperate
tenacity to nooks and crannies in the perpen­
dicular cliffs. The banks of the river are of
a character similar to the islands in its stream.”

Oliphant was attracted by “a picturesque
old mill upon the opposite side, the first
that was built here, which has just arrived
at such a stage of decay as to add an ad­
ditional charm to the scene.” He referred,
undoubtedly, to the government mills on
the east bank of the river, which were built
by soldiers from Fort Snelling in 1821 and
1823, and were still in operation at the time
of the Englishmen’s visit to old St. Anthony.
Only with great difficulty did the travelers
tear themselves away from this scenic beau­
ty spot, but after two hours spent in ex­
ploring its grandeur, they were on their way
to St. Paul.8

ST. PAUL was a prime example of the
sort of “manifest destiny” which attracted
Oliphant’s attention — “the best specimen
to be found in the States, of a town still in
its infancy with a great destiny before it.”
His own visit was too short to enable him
to discover all its potentialities at firsthand,
but he armed himself with the ebullient
and vociferously optimistic handbook of J. Wes­
ley Bond, Minnesota and Its Resources, and
placed before his readers an enthusiastic

8 Oliphant, Minnesota, 246; Edward A. Bromley,
“The Old Government Mills at the Falls of St.
Anthony,” in Minnesota Historical Collections, 10:
635, 641–643.
report of the city’s rapid growth and its glories still to come.9

Oliphant, indeed, seemed to absorb the very spirit of the territory’s most eager inhabitants. He noted its development from “a few trading huts, rejoicing under the sobriquet of Pig’s Eye,” in 1847, through the expansion that came with the organization of the territory in 1849, to the thriving city he found in 1854. “There are now four daily, four weekly, and two tri-weekly papers,” he wrote, “which is pretty well for a Far West town only five years old, and more than Manchester and Liverpool put together." There are four or five hotels, and at least half-a-dozen handsome churches, with tall spires pointing heavenward, and sunlit meeting-houses, and a population of seven or eight thousand to go to them, and good streets with side-walks, and lofty brick warehouses, and stores, and shops, as well supplied as any in the Union, and ‘an academy of the highest grade for young ladies;’ and wharves at which upwards of three hundred steamers arrive annually, bringing new settlers to this favoured land, and carrying away its produce to the south and east. The navigation of the river is closed during the four winter months, or from November to March.”11 One suspects that it was Oliphant’s rule to put everything in the best possible light, a principle that was a product of his enthusiasm for the territory and was perhaps due in large part to his avid reading of Bond. The Mississippi, for example, was rarely open to navigation before mid-April.

“As the resources of Minnesota are developed,” Oliphant believed, “the trade upon the river must continue to increase. The saw-mills of St Anthony, St Paul, and Stillwater will supply countless feet of timber for the States further south; its prairies will furnish live stock ad libitum; and its cereal produce will, according to Colonel [James M.] Goodhue, hold its own with the most favoured states.”12

Oliphant made vivid for his readers the zooming land values which encouraged the speculator and rewarded the successful first-comer by citing the example of one businessman he met in St. Paul. “Some idea may be formed of the rapid increase of the value of town lots in new cities,” he reported, “from the fact that Mr [F. E.] Collins showed us one which he had purchased three years before for 150 dollars. He was allowed three years in which to pay his purchase-money. Upon the day he paid in the last instalment, and thus completed his title, he sold the same lot for 1600 dollars.”13

In contrast to the booming, nascent metropolis was the still undeveloped wilderness round about. “In whatever direction you ascend the hills which encircle the town,” Oliphant found, “with the exception of the busy, gay-looking city, all is gloomy forest or solitary prairie; and there can be no stronger testimony to the rapid growth of the place, than the fact that the country

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9 Bond’s book (New York, 1853), which had several subsequent printings, quotes extensively from contemporary accounts of Minnesota, stresses its rich prospects, and presents the author’s own enthusiastic views. In the passages that follow from Oliphant’s Minnesota, 252-255, the writer drew heavily on Bond for facts of Minnesota’s past and predictions of its future.

10 Daily and weekly editions of four newspapers began to appear regularly in St. Paul in May, 1854, but no tri-weekly papers were issued there. See J. Fletcher Wifflins, A History of the City of Saint Paul, 352 (Minnesota Historical Collections, vol. 4—St. Paul, 1876).

11 Oliphant, Minnesota, 252-254. The visitor quoted his statement about an academy for young ladies from an article by James M. Goodhue in the Minnesota Pioneer, April 8, 1852. It is reprinted, with editorial comment by Mary W. Berthel, in Minnesota History, 29:212 (September, 1948).

12 Oliphant, Minnesota, 254. Goodhue, who began to publish the Pioneer in 1849, died shortly before Oliphant’s arrival, but the English visitor still picked up some of the editor’s spirit and quoted from his writings.

13 Oliphant, Minnesota, 267. Collins is listed in the St. Paul City Directory for 1856-57 as the owner of a livery, and in that for 1858 as an auctioneer.
in the immediate vicinity is still in a state of savage nature. No doubt a few years will work a marvellous change here too; but the most interesting element of the scenery will be destroyed when this wonderful combination of civilisation and barbarism has disappeared."

The visitor expressed views, too, about the agricultural value of the surrounding country. "The land immediately round St Paul is not very fertile," he concluded, "as it consists principally of sand and loam; it possesses, however, the advantage of retaining heat and producing rapid vegetation. That portion of Minnesota which is universally admitted to be endowed with greater advantages of soil and climate, and to be generally a more favoured district than any other in the north-west, is the valley of the St Peter’s [Minnesota River], and which was described as 'the prettiest country lying wild that the world can boast of, got up with the greatest care and effort by old dame Nature ten thousand years or more ago, and which she has been improving ever since.' Indeed, I was quite tired of hearing its praises, and looking at the plans of prospective cities on the banks of the river."

The travelers had little more than accidental social dealings with the people of St. Paul, except during the auctioning of their canoe and camp equipment. This business was handled by Collins, whose successful speculation in city lots has already been noted. "He was a prosperous merchant of the place," Oliphant wrote, "with a well-supplied store; and we were referred to him as the principal auctioneer. Accordingly, we arranged the time and place for the auction, and two small boys perambulated the streets with dinner-bells, informing the public of St Paul, at the pitch of their voices, that a bark-canoe, gun, and camp-fixings were to be put up for competition near the wharf, where our faithful canoe was peacefully reclining. At the appointed hour we sneaked down to the river-side, to see our dear old craft knocked down to the highest bidder. Our respect for her was too great to admit of our approach so near as to hear the unkind criticisms made at her expense; and the natural delicacy of our feelings prevented our listening to the deprecatory remarks which were lavished upon our property generally; so we retired to a respectful distance, just far enough off to hear Mr Collins, with a loud voice, proclaim that she had 'gone' for seven dollars, and accompany his assertion by a rap with his hammer, which I hoped knocked a hole in the bottom, for she was worth more in spite of her patches, and we had originally purchased her for twenty dollars. We were somewhat consoled by hearing that an extra gun which we had bought at the Sault for ten dollars, for the use of the Indians or voyageurs, fetched twelve. It was a wretched piece of workmanship: one barrel had never been known to go off; the other, which everybody seemed to consider a special duty to keep loaded, used to explode spontaneously at the most unexpected and inconvenient seasons." 14

OLIPHANT was observant also of the social customs and manners of the people with whom he came in contact, and he devoted several pages to a picture of life as he found it in mid-century St. Paul. "Everybody in the Far West is hospitable," he wrote, "but there is very little time for idle ceremony in the exercise of hospitality." He went on to comment on a variety of topics. "The weather," he noted, "was frightfully hot during our stay in St Paul: the thermometer stood one day at 95° in my bedroom. There is in consequence an immense consumption always going on at the bar of red lions and white lions, cock-tails, mint-juleps, gin slings, cobblers, and other cooling drinks with as many different names as there are political parties in the United States, which is saying a good deal. On Sun-

14 Oliphant, Minnesota, 257.
15 This and the passages that follow immediately are quoted from Oliphant, Minnesota, 257-269.
day I was struck with a greater observance of the day than I had anticipated. The numerous churches are well filled, and St Paul is rather celebrated for a more universal profession of religion than ordinarily characterises western towns, the inhabitants of which will tell you that the Sunday is 'just like any other day, or indeed rather more so.'

"We were always roused to the labours of the day by a boisterous gong, which at six o'clock in the morning reverberated through the long passages of the hotel, rendering a renewed attempt at sleep utterly out of the question. Soon after people began to drop in to breakfast, and eat hot rolls, soaked toast, buckwheat cakes, and hominy, and drink iced milk; then they grouped round spitoons, lighted their cigars, corrected their cold potations with 'nippers' of brandy, skimmed the papers, swore at the contents, and finally strutted off to their respective duties."

Oliphant reported that he and his fellow travelers went out to shop and look around the town, amusing themselves until three o'clock in the afternoon, when dinner was served. "This was the most unpleasant process at St Paul," the Englishman thought. "In the first place, the rush into the room at the sound of the gong was terrific, and excited and heated one in an atmosphere at 'blood heat' to such an extent that, combined with the exertion of scrambling for dishes, and the rapidity with which their contents were necessarily bolted, we found ourselves at the end of ten minutes seated at the deserted tables, replete, panting, perspiring, and exhausted. The master of the hotel sat at an upper table, upon the sanctity of which 'unprotected males' were not allowed to intrude, much to our disgust, for the ladies have a private entry before the gong rings, and sit at least three minutes longer after dinner than the gentlemen, besides indulging in more elaborate preparations of corn, buckwheat, and other special delicacies."

But frontier St. Paul did not limit its meal-time enjoyment to the table. "After dinner," Oliphant discovered, "it is the correct thing to go out upon the steps in front of the hotel, unbutton your waistcoat and make one of a row of tobacco-consumers, some of whom chew, some smoke, and some do both. Here we tilt our chairs well back, criticise the passers-by, as this is in the main street — talk politics, and drink cooling beverages; indeed, the object of hurrying through dinner at a railway pace is thus most satisfactorily explained. It is evident that the pleasures of the table consist, in this country, not in the delicacy of the
viands, or in the act of their consumption, but in the process of their digestion, which is certainly doubly necessary, and which is prolonged as much as possible, and enjoyed in a very epicurean manner."

Oliphant thus joined the crowd on the porch and listened with interest to Northern and Southern views of politics, in which the evils and benefits of slavery, respectively, were prominent topics, or the annexation of Canada or Cuba. The talk here was apparently much freer than Oliphant had experienced with settlers along the route of his travels. "There is some practice required in fencing with Far-Westers," he wrote after visiting with a farmer near Crow Wing; "they are very dexterous in 'pumping,' and exceedingly difficult to 'pump.' The only way is never to answer a question without putting a portion of the reply into an interrogatory form." 16

ST. PAUL was a new and exciting place in 1854— even to world travelers. It was a gathering spot for all sorts of men. "As the territory is only six years old, all here are strangers, and all adventurers," Oliphant observed, "and the most confused Babel of languages greets our ears as we stroll along. Of course, the Anglo-Saxon language, in its varied modifications of Yankee, English, Scotch, and Irish, prevails; but there is plenty of good French, and the voyageur patois, Chippeway or Sioux, German, Dutch, and Norwegian. The possessors of these divers tongues are, however, all very industrious and prosperous, and happy in the anticipation of fortune-making."

The Englishmen joined a group of men who were entering a "bowling-saloon," where they made use of the opportunity to observe the manners of the people gathered there. "The roughest characters from all parts of the West, between the Mississippi and the Pacific, collect here," wrote Oliphant, "and from morning till night, shouts of hoarse laughter, extraordinary and complicated imprecations, the shrill cries of the boy-markers calling the game, and the booming of the heavy bowls, are strangely intermingled, and you come out stunned with noise, and half blinded with tobacco smoke. Some of these men were settlers from Pembina and the Red River settlements. They come down to Traverse des Sioux with a long caravan of carts, horses, and oxen. These they leave here, and take steamer to St Paul for a hundred miles down the St Peter, and lay in their luxuries of civilisation, and those necessaries of life which are unprocurable in their remote settlement." 17

At length, reluctant to depart, yet pressed for time on a journey that had taken more days to accomplish than they had anticipated, the Englishmen left St. Paul on board a Mississippi steamboat. When they met another steamer headed north, Oliphant felt envy for the passengers who were going to try their fortune in the country he had just left. "The boundary of Iowa and Minnesota was upon our right," he wrote, "and I looked for the last time with regret upon this vast territory, which covers an area of 200,000 miles, which gives origin to the mighty Mississippi, and furnishes a thousand miles of its banks, and which is as prolific in its resources as inviting in its aspect. Blessed with such advantages of soil and climate, daily becoming more easy of access, with mercantile, agricultural, lumbering, and mineral interests so rapidly developing, no wonder that the tide of emigration sets steadily in its direction; and he would be a rash individual indeed, who would dare to take the bet of one of its inhabitants, who said, 'We just set up Minnesota against the rest of the world, and all the other planets, and coolly offer to back her with any odds you may choose to offer.'" 18