The FIRST run of a railroad train in Minnesota was an anticlimax; actuality fell far short of the visions that preceded it. The *St. Paul Daily Press* of July 2, 1862, could not have treated the event more casually. Under the heading, “The City,” on the last page of that four-page paper—and beneath an item that called attention to an advertisement for strawberries—the *Press* noted laconically: “The regular trains on the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad commence running this morning. The time table will be found in our advertising columns.” A nine-line item in the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat* for the following day was only a little more detailed. It added that “The Road commenced carrying the mail yesterday.”

Where were the civic celebrations—the parades, the oratory, the toasts, the “elegant” balls—with which St. Paul had greeted the great Rock Island Railroad excursion only eight years earlier? Where was the jubilation with which St. Anthony celebrated the arrival of the first steamboat at the falls four years before that? The first train of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad did not even ignite a bonfire.

The explanation probably lies in a combination of circumstances, of which the most important was the Civil War. Dispatches covering events in that conflict crowded the columns of the papers. Moreover, the track spanned as yet a distance of only eight miles between St. Paul and St. Anthony—rather a letdown from the project chartered by the territorial legislature in 1857.¹

¹The charter, which was originally granted to the Minnesota and Pacific Railroad Company, called for a line “from Stillwater, by way of St. Paul and Saint Anthony, via Minneapolis, to the town of Breckinridge. . . with a branch from St. Anthony via Anoka, St. Cloud and Crow Wing, to St. Vincent, near the mouth of the Pembina River.” See Minnesota Territory, *Session Laws*, 1857, p. 4.
Those eight miles reflected how war could shrink investment capital. In June, 1861, Edmund Rice and William Crooks, the road's promoters, had been in Philadelphia, negotiating with owners of the Pennsylvania Railroad to obtain backing for a line from Stillwater through St. Paul and St. Anthony, west across the state to Big Stone Lake, and north from St. Anthony to Crow Wing. News of the skirmish at Big Bethel on June 10 convinced the Pennsylvanians that the bombardment of Fort Sumter was no mere flare-up of unruly South Carolina, and Rice and Crooks felt lucky to salvage financing for the St. Paul-St. Anthony part of the route, which they finally secured from a group of Ohioans.²

A longer road, initiated under happier circumstances, would certainly have inspired demonstrations of civic pride and expressions of the community's promise, for the importance of railroads was not underestimated by Minnesota residents. The territory had been less than a year old when James M. Goodhue, editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, urged the need for a railroad between St. Paul and St. Anthony, and other editors after him extended the range of railroad proposals as well as the arguments for them. Most of these articles stressed the economic benefits that would accrue to town and farm, although some writers had reservations about Wall Street speculators, and others pondered whether the territory's natural outlet lay to the East or down the Mississippi to the South.³ The latter disagreement was resolved in favor of an east-west flow of trade when talk of a railroad to the Pacific excited the territory in the spring of 1853.

But the railroad appealed to more than man's material aspirations. It was also made to carry a freight of ideas. Indeed, it inspired the more articulate settlers to express in new ways familiar concepts of a common ideology. That ideology in pre-Civil War America encompassed two dominant clusters of concepts: faith in democratic political institutions as a means of social progress and enlightenment and in evangelical Protestantism as the road to human redemption from sin. These two bodies of thought reinforced and complemented each other to provide Americans with a whole philosophy. Ralph Henry Gabriel, in a study of American intellectual history, has cited the democratic belief in progress and the Protestant hope of the millennium as one of many parallels between the two creeds. He adds: "The mission of American democracy to save the world from the oppression of autocrats was a secular version of the destiny of Christianity to save the world from the governance of Satan."⁴

The interweaving of these themes around the symbol of the railroad in the imaginations of nineteenth-century Minnesotans is strikingly shown by two articles published in the territorial press several years before the first iron rails of the St. Paul and Pacific were laid. One fused the railroad with ideas of the democratic faith; the other, with those of evangelical Protestantism.

IN THE SPRING of 1853, the departure from St. Paul of an expedition led by Isaac I. Stevens to explore a northern route for a railroad to the Pacific was the apparent inspiration of a fantasy published by the *Pioneer* on April 28, 1853. Entitled "A Vision," it was signed "A Dreamer," who was subsequently identified as John Wesley Bond, a St. Paul druggist.⁵

The writer described a dream in which he stood upon "the lofty bluffs overlooking the great and populous city of St. Paul," on the Fourth of July, 1876. The city spread below him was thronged with visitors from the


⁴ Minnesota Pioneer (St. Paul), August 23, 1849; April 3, 1850; October 23, November 27, 1851; January 22, 29, 1852; January 13, May 26, November 17, 1853; Minnesota Democrat (St. Paul), May 26, 1852; May 11, 1853; St. Anthony Express, October 22, November 29, 1852; Weekly Minnesotian (St. Paul), May 14, 1853.


⁶ The article was republished in J. Wesley Bond, *Minnesota and Its Resources* (New York, 1853).
East, from the old states of the Mississippi Valley, from as far west as the Rockies, from Canada—all drawn to St. Paul to celebrate the one hundredth birthday of American independence, "and to witness as well the opening of the great Atlantic and Pacific Railway, from Boston, New York and Philadelphia, via St. Paul to Oregon and California, its terminus being San Francisco. . . . The hour was near at hand in which the most sanguine expectations and long cherished desires of the civilized world were about to be completely realized, and a great 'National Highway,' for travel and commerce, as well as for thought and intelligence, opened and established from the rising to the setting sun." St. Paul, the dreamer reflected, had seen some celebrations before—at the ratification of the Sioux treaties in 1852, when Mexico joined the Union in 1866, and when Canada and Cuba were annexed in 1871. But never had there been such a day as this!

"The sun had scarcely reached the zenith, when the roar of the cannon, the sounds of martial music, and the approach of an immense procession, with banners floating to the breeze, attracted my attention far up the river to the southwest. I turned, and beheld a scene, which for a moment rendered me almost delirious with excitement." From the south side of the river, the first train from San Francisco was approaching a double-track suspension bridge over the Mississippi just above Wabasha Street. The narrator recovered command of his faculties in time to observe the procession in minute detail.

"First, came an open car, or platform, extending across from one track to the other, richly draped and ornamented with banners, and containing a band of fifty musicians, who played 'Hail Columbia.' Next came two splendid locomotives, one on either track, moving abreast. On the one upon the right, I read 'Atlantic'; on that upon the left, 'Pacific.' Over these, extending across from track to track, and for three hundred feet in the rear, was a continuous platform, supported on wheels, covered with rich and gorgeous tapestry, forming upon the most magnificent scale a grand Triumphant Car.'"

At the front of this platform the dreamer saw two white columns about thirty feet high, representing the Union and the Constitution. Between them stretched an arch, "composed of the 'Coat of Arms' of the several States of the Union carved on blocks of marble." The keystone, engraved with the motto, "E Pluribus Unum," was surmounted by "an immense spread eagle, glittering with gold, and holding in his beak a likeness of 'The Father of his Country,' in a plain gold setting, enwreathed with laurel; while high above, and over all floated the 'Star Spangled Banner.'"

"Immediately under the arch, was an altar of pure white, upon which I read 'Freedom,' and from the top of the altar arose a square shaft of white, some four or five feet in height. . . . On the top of this shaft, rested a vase of pure gold, bearing the inscription, 'California and Minnesota, the Twin Sisters, are this day indissolubly bound together by an Iron band.' In this was contained water from the Pacific ocean. On either side of this stood a beautiful young woman, in the bloom of health, dressed in muslin robes of snowy whiteness, trimmed with gold and evergreens, and bearing appropriate emblems, typical of the genius of 'Peace' and 'Commerce.'"

Just behind them rode Neptune, complete with trident and dolphin-drawn chariot. It was apparent to the beholder that this meant not only that commerce between the oceans would follow the railroad, but also that "our advancement in the arts and sciences" had lured even Neptune to travel overland.

But that was not all. After Neptune, fifty pedestals in a double row were surmounted by fifty beautiful young women in white drapery—one for each state of the Union, "which included the Canadas on the North to the Isthmus of Darien on the South, and from Cuba, in the South East to the Russian Settlements in the North West, from the Equator to the Frozen Regions."

Behind the young ladies rode the presi-
dent of the United States — "himself a citizen of Minnesota" — and a brilliant company that included cabinet members, diplomats, senators and representatives, and heads of departments. They were followed by a "delegation of Aborigines," and winding up the procession was another band, this one playing "The Star Spangled Banner."

At the middle of the bridge, the trains stopped. The president, accompanied by a minister ("the Rev. E[dward] D. Neill, I think"), moved forward to the triumphal arch where, after their appropriate remarks, "Peace" and "Commerce" tipped the golden vase, and the waters of the Pacific were mingled with those of the Mississippi. This was the signal for the arrival of trains from New Orleans (carrying thousands of wealthy planters and their families to the Minnesota vacation land) and from New York, Lake Superior, and Pembina.

"Then the mighty throng of assembled thousands raised a loud hozannah, and methought the chorus of their mighty voices resounded adown the flowing stream and o'er the Gulf and broad Atlantic, and then re-echoed across Europe's peopled surface with redoubled force, till in the wilds of Russia, it reached the last and only home of the despot — the descendant of the Nicholas of 1853 — who has long since laid mouldering in a tyrant's grave. Then did the heart of the last of the line of kings and emperors which this fair earth shall ever witness, grow faint within him, as he saw his inevitable doom portrayed as plain as the hand writing upon the wall, and heard his death knell proclaimed in tones of might and wrath, which told him that an avenging God was nigh. Aye, he listened, while the pallor of death stole over his guilty features, and the craven hearted usurper of the rights of man, and violator of all his Maker's laws, did tremble for very fear; aye, trembled like an aspen leaf, as he heard the voices of the mighty host exultingly jubilate on that 'Centennial Anniversary' of a Nation's Birthday; — the greatest nation too, which old Time and events have yet given to the world. Its population now being sixty millions.

"Then rose the Serf, the Cossack, and all the Republicans of Europe, led on by the aged heroes, Kossuth and Mazzini, and a host of others, and struck a tremendous and final blow for freedom; — the Goddess of Liberty flitting and hovering over the scene — until at length, a loud, triumphant shout came ringing back across the ocean and the Gulf, and up the noble river to the spot where the multitudinous hosts were still pealing forth their anthems of praise to the God of Hosts — proclaiming to them, that the final victory between Liberty and Despotism had been fairly won, and that tyranny had sunk his frightful head amid a perfect cataract of blood."

At this point, the processional train moved on from St. Paul — and the dreamer awoke. It is doubtful that he could have conjured up any additional symbols from the democratic iconography if he had slept until July 4, 1976.

Eight years before Bond shared his dream with readers of the Minnesota Pioneer, a writer for the monthly Democratic Review had introduced the term "manifest destiny" to suggest the inevitability of national expansion as well as the superiority of American political institutions. The idea encompassed both more and less than what Mr. Gabriel has called American democracy's sense of mission. Bond did not use the phrase, despite its wide popularity during the period in which he wrote, but his dream train might as well have been whistling it. Although to Americans as a whole the term connoted expansion generally, it was most often associated with ambitions for Texas in the minds of Southerners and with designs on Canada among Northerners. Bond played no sectional favorites in subscribing to the idea. His prophecy of a Union com-

* Neill was at the time St. Paul's leading Protestant cleric.

prised of fifty states happened to coincide with the actuality of almost a century later, but his specifications of Canada, Panama, Cuba, and Alaska were fairly representative of the direction taken by expansionist thinking of his period.

BOND’S “Vision” was invoked by the possibility of a railroad to the Pacific. A sermon delivered a year later by the Reverend Edward D. Neill, who had figured in Bond’s dream, was inspired by the actuality of a railroad from Chicago to the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Illinois, about forty hours by steamboat from St. Paul. The Road’s completion was signaled in June, 1854, by an excursion in “the cars” to Rock Island and thence by steamboat to St. Paul. Elaborate plans were made at St. Paul to entertain the excursion party, which included ex-President Millard Fillmore and numerous other notables, but the company arrived a day ahead of schedule and the hosts were hard pressed to carry out their plans.\(^8\) The following Sunday, June 11, 1854, Neill, who was much in demand as a public speaker, addressed his congregation in the First Presbyterian Church on “Railways in their Higher Aspects.” He apologized for having been unable to give “severe thought” to a sermon because of the increased duties of the past week, but twelve of his flock were so impressed by the address that they asked his permission to have it published in the *Daily Minnesotian* of June 14, 1854.

Neill chose for his text Isaiah 40:3 — “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.”

After discussing briefly the meaning of the scripture, Neill proceeded to line up the railroad with the way of the Lord. More than half the sermon was concerned with the effects of the railroad on man’s morals, mind, and politics. These considered, the minister turned to theological and spiritual consequences. His over-all view of railroads was highly optimistic.

“In the first place,” he declared, “their construction and repairs decrease idleness. The greatest political curse is an idle population. Wherever men are standing about the wharves and market-places, with no labor for their hands, there are the fomenting vats of vice. . . . Let a nation cease to have enterprise and disregard internal improvements, and there is soon a concentration of wealth among the few, while the masses, with nothing to do, deteriorate.”

A second virtue of the railroad, in Neill’s view, was that “our great thoroughfares expand the mind of the nation.” Not only was the traveler broadened (“he obtains an idea of vastness, which is never learned elsewhere”) but also the laborer employed in railroad construction saw vistas open before him. Just as those who piled stone for the pyramids must have “had larger views” than the tillers of the soil, so the laborer at work on the massive abutments of railroad bridges must have more weighty thoughts” than the digger of peat or the keeper of cows.

A related virtue claimed for the railroad by Neill was its tendency to “produce great general intelligence.” No longer would the inhabitant of the distant hamlet have to rely for news of the outside world upon the infrequent stops of the stage or the horseback trips of the storekeeper to the city. Also related was the claim that “use of steam vehicles has driven superstitution from her ancient haunts.” Because of the railroad and the steamboat, the newspaper story had supplanted the ghost story, and the farmer sent his children to the city to learn to apply science to agriculture.

Neill saw a quite different attribute in the great national thoroughfares as “valuable
PORTRAIT of the Reverend Edward D. Neill, 
taken from an early daguerreotype

aids to contentment." They permitted easy 
gratification of the country man's yearning 
for city sights, while they "allow the profes-
sional man, jaded with the cares of life, and 
the hard-working mechanic to keep their of-
fices in the crowded streets, and their wives 
and little ones in some country villa not far 
distant, to which they can retire at the set-
ting of the sun, and watch their own cow 
return from the pasture."

It followed that "the dweller in man-built 
city and God-built country" became familiar 
with each other, thus reducing "sectional 
prejudices." And the railroads operated 
against such prejudices on a wider scale, 
making the Southerner familiar with the 
New Englander and the Easterner with the 
Westerner. Such familiarity had brought 
about a "softening down of prejudices," Neill 
declared.

A further consequence was that railroads 
promoted "a common and correct public 
sentiment." True leaders of the country 
would win wide public support, while dema-
gogues would be rejected. "As long as there 
are public thoroughfares bringing into close 
communion the citizens of extreme sections 
of the Union, if there is any true patriotism 
we need not fear a dissolution of the United 
States. Though heated partizans may create 
a temporary excitement, the voice of the free 
minded will at least be heard, a correct pub-
lic opinion be formed, and the people will 
repudiate all political aspirants that would 
array State against State, and introduce dis-
cord among brethren."

There remained "the most important as-
pect" of railroads for Neill to note: "They are 
invaluable aids in the promotion of pure and 
undefiled religion." Before the railroads, he 
intimated, the sheep were too widely scat-
tered on the frontier to be easily reached by 
the ministry. Further, they were likely to be 
so ignorant that they attracted only bigoted 
preachers for whom they were easy prey. 
So much time was needed for travel that 
such ministers had little left for study, medi-
tation, and prayer. The railroad had changed 
—and would continue to change — all that. 
The flock, being less scattered and more ac-
cessible, would have the chance to hear 
preachers of varied training and beliefs, so 
that none could afford to belittle the others. 
"The contractedness that in days gone by 
was manifested in places that were settled 
almost exclusively by Scotch Presbyterians, 
English Puritans, and Wesleyan Methodists, 
in this progressive age will now disappear, 
and religion will assume a higher and more 
effective, because a more scriptural type."

Neill's belief in the perfectibility of man 
(with assistance from the railroad) was not
limited to Americans. He saw the great thoroughfares as “destined to facilitate intercourse with the Pagan world of Asia, and hasten the approach of Millennial glory. . . . Every great invention is an aid to the cause of religion. The telescope, the printing press, the telegraph, the ocean steamers, a Pacific Railway, are ordained by God, not for the pulling down but the upbuilding of religion—they are all working together to produce the grand consummation of giving the kingdoms of this world to Christ.”

The frontier cleric concluded his sermon with an analogy designed to remind his hearers that it was indeed the age of speed. “It would be doing violence to my own feelings and a neglect of ministerial duty if I should conclude this discourse without reminding this audience that this world is a great station-house, in which we are awaiting the approach of the cars that lead to ‘that bourne from whence no traveler returns,’ but through which every traveler passes to regions of bliss or despair.

“My hearers! some of you have tickets that will lead you to Hell. The car of death is hastening on swifter than an eagle hasteneth to its prey, or any ‘lightening train.’ Before it appears we urge you to change that ticket. Christ is always in his office. He says, ‘If any many knocketh . . . he will change his ticket, and that without money and without price.’”

IT MAY BE assumed that Neill’s hearers shared his viewpoint. But in the East a discordant voice was raised. The St. Paul Daily Democrat for July 26, 1854, reprinted an excerpt from a scathing editorial in the New York Times: “We have recently read a sermon on railroads, published in a Northwestern newspaper. . . . It abounds in cheering anticipations. All who had real estate to be advanced or railroad stock to be appreciated must have enjoyed the effort. Passing an hour in the sanctuary, in meditation on the rise of stocks, on the increase of population and trade, on the fulfilment of those prophecies which speak of the blossoming of the wilderness must have been agreeable to this nature of ours, which so often feels the Sabbath to be ‘a weariness.’” The editor of the Times, however, confessed to some misgivings: “We rather think that Railroads do not belong to the plan of Salvation, and that an order of men, solemnly set apart to preach ‘Christ crucified’ are singularly forgetful of their commission and anointing, if they exchange their position on Calvary for a Railroad Depot.”

The Democrat, in rebuttal, assured its readers that it held no such narrow view of the pulpit. “Civilization is the handmaid of morality and Religion,” it echoed Neill, “and we regard every great improvement by which it is advanced as a step onward in the great mission of Christianity . . . no temporal means have ever been introduced into this terrestrial sphere which tended more to the advancement of civilization than railroads. If we are correct then in the assumption that civilization, if not a forerunner, is at least a concomitant of religion, then why is not the pulpit the proper place to treat of its advancement?”

NEILL’S railroad, it should be noted, was more versatile than that of Bond. Whereas the latter traveled the single track of the democratic faith, Neill’s switched easily from democracy to evangelical Protestantism. Bond’s vision, moreover, presented democracy consummated in the completion of the transcontinental railroad, whereas Neill used the symbol of progress to represent a continuing process, both social and religious. Perhaps because his vision was limited, Bond escaped the inconsistencies that in the Neill address reveal so clearly the complexity of nineteenth-century American attitudes. Certainly the values Neill attached to pastoral surroundings in his comments on contentment were the dominant romantic ones of the period. The city, built by man, while not explicitly a source of evil, provided only superficial gratifications, whereas the country, built by God, was equated with virtue. If Neill was aware of the way in which some of
his other assumptions undercut those values, he seemed undisturbed by the fact. He made no effort to reconcile the pastoral retreat sought by the jaded city workers with the haunts of superstition and parochialism.

Both Bond and Neill, thoroughgoing optimists, saw the railroad re-enforcing ties between East and West, North and South: foremost among the druggist's symbols were the Union, the Constitution, and "E Pluribus Unum"; in the cleric's view the railroad accomplished a "softening" of sectional prejudices and a strengthening of "true patriotism." In less than ten years, both men had been stripped of that particular illusion. It is ironic that when the railroad which they heralded finally appeared without fanfare in 1862, Bond was a captain in the commissary department of the Union army, and Neill was chaplain of the First Minnesota Regiment of Volunteers. The faiths which they had proclaimed were undergoing the severest test to which they had yet been exposed.

THE DESIGN on the title page was drawn by Celine Charpentier, and the one below is from the St. Paul City Directory for 1867. The portrait of Neill is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

"Never before . . . the Ease and Quietude"

THE FOLLOWING letter was written from Albany, New York, on January 9, 1837, by Andrew G. Chatfield, who later moved west and became a pioneer jurist in Minnesota Territory. It is preserved in the manuscript collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. Chatfield, then a young attorney, had just experienced his first railroad journey. His route had taken him over the newly opened line of the Utica and Schenectady, connecting at the latter place with the Mohawk and Hudson, which carried passengers on to Albany. He described it thus to his wife:

"I arrived in this city . . . about 5 P.M. passing over a distance of 94 mi. after 10 A.M. making no greater time than five hours including stoppages. This is rapid travelling and as easy as it is rapid. One is put upon a car which has 3 rooms sufficient for 8 persons each. Those rooms are perfectly tight and when full are comfortably warm even in very cold weather and while under such great velocity. The car rolls along upon the rails without producing any motion except a slight jar and occasionally a little swinging sidewise. I never before rode upon land 20 miles with the same ease and quietude with which I was transported from Utica to Albany on Saturday last. Yet there is a strange excitement produced upon an individual who has never rode upon a Rail-Road occasioned as I supposed by the mingled feeling of fear and pleasure which is raised by being carried along so much faster than the speed with which one has been accustomed to travel. There is also another exciting circumstance attending it — and that is that one is moved along by an invisible power by machinery which seems to put itself in motion. Like a frightened steed the engine speeds his onward course puffing clouds of steam from his nostrils, constrained in his direction, not heeding the load which he draws in his train. 'Tis a splendid sight, and the breast that would not beat high with admiration at beholding it must be worse, far worse than that soul which has no music in it."