MUCH of the literature of immigration is marked by the stereotype of the poverty and hardship of agricultural pioneering. An exception to this pattern is the career of a young German immigrant named Wenzel Petran, who disembarked from a steamboat at St. Paul in the late spring of 1855, accompanied by his wife and three young children. Petran had already been a resident of the United States for six years; he arrived with several hundred dollars in his pocket and promptly established himself in the merchandise business in St. Anthony. The story of Wenzel Petran is told in a series of letters, now in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, written to relatives in Germany over a period of four decades. The following selections from the correspondence describe his life in St. Anthony and Minneapolis during the years from the mid-fifties until just after the Civil War. The letters have been translated by Jacob Reiner.

Petran was raised in middle-class circumstances in the city of Tetschen (later Cieszyn), in the much contested border region of Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Moravia. Because of his father's early death and his mother's remarriage, he was brought up by an uncle and aunt, Johann and Theresia Pompe. The Pompes were a well-to-do family and, until it became apparent that Wenzel would not return from America, they expected to make him the heir to their business and property holdings. Perhaps because of this relationship, Petran's letters to them are rich in details of economic life which give them particular interest for students of Minnesota history.

In 1849, for reasons which may only be speculated about, Wenzel Petran left Tetschen and began a journey to the United States. In August of that year he sent to his aunt and uncle a letter which described his crossing of the Atlantic in the three-masted sailing vessel "Rio Grande" along with 135 other immigrants and his trip by steamboat to Albany and by railroad to Buffalo. At Buffalo he left his companions and struck off on a walking trip through the northwest corner of New York State which took him to Niagara Falls and thence to Lockport, a town on the Erie Canal.

Despite Petran's limited knowledge of the English language, he found employment within a few hours of his arrival with a Lockport firm which sold dry goods and groceries. Subsequent letters over the next few years described how well he was getting on, business conditions generally, his investments in land, his marriage, and the birth of his first child.

Then, on July 18, 1855, he wrote to his
aunt and uncle from St. Anthony, Minnesota. His letters carry on the story from this point.

IN THE hope that you have received my letter of last April enclosing the pictures, I am keeping my promise to write to you about my journey and my present place of residence. Gripped, like many thousands of others, by the fever to seek happiness in the Far West, I decided early this year to go there. I sold all my property and belongings except the most essential and left with my family on May 3. I sold my land for $900, receiving $200 in cash and the balance to be paid in four yearly installments. My other property I sold mostly against notes dated October 1, 1855, at one per cent interest. Thus I took with me about $650 in cash. My notes and debentures for the land I left behind with my wife's brother-in-law. Our farewell from my wife's parents was a very painful one, and made us actually regret our decision. My wife often longs to return, as she has always lived near her friends, but she consoles herself with the hope that she may be able to visit her friends in about a year.

Laden with good wishes for a happy journey and for our future welfare, we left Lockport on May 3, on the railroad. Our journey took us after a day and a night to Detroit, the principal city of Michigan, on Lake Erie. We traveled on the recently completed railroad along the north shore of Lake Erie, through the English province (Canada). After one night's rest we continued our journey on the railroad through the states of Michigan and Indiana to Chicago in the state of Illinois. Chicago lies on Lake Michigan and is a large commercial city of 100,000 inhabitants. However, it lies rather low and therefore is dirty and unhealthy. As it was our intention to go to the state of Iowa, we took one of the eleven trains that go out of Chicago. The train cuts across the state in a southwesterly direction and ends at Rock Island on the Mississippi. After arriving at Rock Island, not an important city, we crossed over the river to Davenport, Iowa. I wanted to go from here into the interior of the state, but this could be done only by wagon transportation, and it was already so warm that I could imagine how hot the summers must be. After three days' delay, I decided to go up the river to Minnesota, where St. Paul, the principal city, is situated on the Mississippi. We therefore embarked in Davenport on a steamer bound for St. Paul, (four hundred miles from Davenport) and arrived after a six-day journey. The trip up the river would have been a very pleasant one; on such a large steamer one lives as comfortably as in a house; every family has its own room, and the table was very well supplied. However, since our sojourn in Davenport, I had been troubled with diarrhea, which did not leave me
A portrait of Wenzel Petran and his family, probably taken about 1856

until three weeks later. Also there were many cases of cholera on the steamer and in southern cities along the Mississippi. The shores of the Mississippi afford the traveler a view of many romantically beautiful districts and growing cities. It is the largest river of North America, cutting through the country from north to south, and has its source in Canada, north of the United States. It runs through Minnesota, touches in its course the borders of Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri, and continues on through the southern slave states, where it empties into the sea at New Orleans.

Only four years ago, St. Paul, like St. Anthony (nine miles from St. Paul), was a place of few houses. Now it has around ten thousand inhabitants, and is the seat of government of Minnesota. It is situated one hundred miles southwest of Lake Superior and about two thousand miles from New York. Upon arriving in St. Paul, I lodged my family in a boarding house and went to several places looking for openings, but could find none, as so many thousands of others had arrived this spring. I made my way on foot into the interior, where I looked up an acquaintance from Lockport, who lived thirty-five miles from St. Paul on a farm. On my return trip I passed through St. Anthony, where I again looked for an opening and succeeded in finding a shop, which I rented for one year for $146. As soon as I have got my money together, I wish to buy myself a lot, as real property here soon increases in value. Two or three years ago, one could buy lots on the best streets for three hundred dollars, but now they ask a thousand and get it too. I opened my business here on June 18, after buying my stock in St. Paul. It consists of groceries, hardware, and farm-
ers' supplies. As soon as I get my money in
the fall, I want to go to Chicago or St.
Louis, the best markets of the West, to
buy my supply for the winter, as one can
buy much cheaper there. St. Paul is the
end point for shipping on the Mississippi,
as the river farther up is too shallow for
heavy boats. Recently a boat was built
which came here for the first time on July
6, and the inhabitants of St. Anthony were
extremely happy that it really could be
done with the water at such a low level.

St. Anthony is delightfully located on the
Mississippi, which here forms a beautiful
falls seventeen feet high. A fine suspension
bridge over the river has just been com­
pleted. It has approximately six thousand
inhabitants. Business here is somewhat
at a standstill, as with the low water
level, timber cannot be floated down the
river, and consequently no building can be
done, which deprives several thousand per­
sons of employment.

Minnesota is not yet a state; it is now
classed as a territory. It has a very healthy
climate, beautiful country and natural
scenery, and with its clean, fresh air it
reminds me strongly of the northern part
of Germany. It has good well water, many
rivers and small lakes, which are all fed by
springs, and are full of fish. The railroads
have not yet come here, although one is
expected from Iowa or Illinois within the
next two years. Fruit is not grown here as
yet, but must be brought from below.

There is still much good government
land here, of which every man may take
160 acres if he builds a cabin on it, lives
there and cultivates the land. However,
after several years, until [when] it is
measured, he must pay $1.25 per acre. This
would be a good place for speculation in
real property, as the land is rapidly being
populated. As money is not so plentiful
here as in the eastern states, high rates are
paid, twenty-five dollars to forty dollars per
hundred being very common.

My dear friends, I greet you most
heartily in the name of my family, and
hope with all my heart that this letter will
find you in good health and happy spirits.
As for us, we are well, and will be quite
well satisfied until [when] we get our own
ground under our feet.

WHEN Petran wrote to his aunt and uncle
two and a half years later, his stationery
was illustrated with an engraving of the
village of St. Anthony, on which he had
marked the location of his house. Among a
variety of other matters, Petran comments
on the effects of the Panic of 1857, which
had a severely depressing impact on the
economy of Minnesota Territory. The letter
is dated January 30, 1858.

I received your welcome letter of August
30, 1857, and notice with pleasure that you
are all well. You mention that traveling is
connected with my business and you con­
sider that burdensome, but it is the oppo­
site from that. One counts it a pleasure
here (although taken as a whole, it is more
dangerous here than in Europe) to make
a trip twice a year. Traveling here is much
more common than in Germany, both as
regards private as well as business people.
The American people are lovers of travel,
the whole mass of them.

My house and ground seem expensive,
but the ground is valuable as it is in the
business district. A distance from town,
one can buy a building site 65 feet wide
and 160 feet long for $100. My place just
now is worth $100 the front foot. I have
25 feet on the front street and it extends

2 Petran probably refers to the "Falls City," a
steamboat owned by a group of Minneapolis
who were anxious to promote navigation between
Minneapolis and the lower river. Its trip repre­
sented one of a number of unsuccessful attempts
to challenge St. Paul's pre-eminence as a river port.
For more information on this subject see Lucile M.
Kane, "Rivalry for a River: The Twin Cities and
the Mississippi," in Minnesota History, 37: 309-323
(December, 1961).

3 The store stood on Main Street near the Sus­
pension Bridge (which was located at about the
site of the present Hennepin Avenue Bridge), ac­
cording to the Commercial Advertiser and Directory
for St. Anthony and Minneapolis of 1859.
The engraving of St. Anthony which appeared on Petran’s stationery.

110 feet back to the next street where the hotel stands. The main street is adapted for business only and not many families dwell there. Most of them choose homesteads for building places; these are much bigger and cheaper. I am, at the present, still living over my store. I am, however, considering finding a suitable place in a nearby town. This town named Minneapolis has a very attractive situation and very beautiful buildings for a new city.

Since March the 5, I have bought three building lots here in St. Anthony and two in Minneapolis that are more suitable for business than for living quarters. These two places together cost me $2,800. I bought these places fairly cheap and would have been able to sell them for a good profit, but there is still a chance of an increase in valuation as new cities are populated quickly and real estate is rising in value.

After I sent the last letter to you, I went as usual to Chicago in ’56 to buy merchandise. I only had $2,300 with me, but bought $6,500 worth of merchandise. Naturally the balance is on two, three, and five-months credit. I have had considerable business this fall and winter, because there was so much money in circulation. I pay my debts promptly and have made a nice profit.

Last spring (’57) I did not go to buy but ordered my merchandise for the summer trade. Throughout the whole summer, trade was not as lively as it had been before. There seemed to be a decrease in the amount of money. In the fall, it seemed to get worse, and I arranged my merchandise accordingly and did not even look at those things that were not absolutely necessary, and I had very good results. Then in the month of October, 1,450 private banks, that issue all the notes which circulate as money, defaulted on half of the payments and so most of the notes were worthless. Although at one time I had hundreds of dollars worth of notes, I lost on none of them as I had handed all questionable notes out in good time.

Following this, trade was practically stopped for a time and trades people who depended on credit (without capital) were in distress, being broken to pieces like thin wood, because they could not sell their merchandise quickly enough. As for me, the panic of which you have surely read and heard, which extended from America to England, France, Germany, and especially to Hamburg, found me in good condition. This was because I saw how trade was going and did not put my money into merchandise but loaned $1,500 of my
capital on good land mortgages to different companies up to twelve per cent per month. Several at three per cent, but most at four per cent per month. This will seem strange to you, but it is the usual amount of interest paid here. Even in New York, where the usual amount paid is seven per cent, they loaned out money from three to ten per cent per month.

It is not to be expected that business enterprises can stand another revolution like it, which caused many of the factories to let their employees go; which left thousands of people breadless, especially in the great cities. Many of the rich in New York who before lived like princes, have lost everything during this crisis and are now almost at the end of their resources. The amount of money squandered for luxuries and so forth for which the Americans are famous is the cause of the downfall.

Since the month of December, much gold is coming in from California (where the late crisis made no impression). This comes twice a month by steamship to New York. These shipments sometimes amounted to two millions to different establishments. By the end of December, the banks of New York had twenty-six millions of gold in their vaults, but still there is much distrust among the bankers and business people and so no use was made of it. Lately, the factories have taken their workers back again, and it is to be expected that by spring there will be more activity in trade and factories. Also the banks that had ceased making payments are now making payments again.

A great help to the poor was the fact that we had a very mild winter here in Minnesota. For the greater part we had sleigh roads and wonderful clear weather, the best I have ever experienced. And then, too, we had a big crop in the United States. Grain and fruit in the north; sugar and cotton in the south. Living commodities therefore are cheap. In the western states wheat costs forty-five cents a bushel; corn, twenty-five cents, and potatoes fifteen cents per bushel. In our territory, living commodities are somewhat more expensive, because it is a new land and farming is still at its beginning, and besides this, the grasshoppers did much damage last summer, especially to the Mississippi River country. They came in great swarms. In the month of July in the summer of '56, they came and laid their eggs and in the spring of '57 they hatched out in millions. After they had consumed everything and had grown up, they arose in clouds and took their way southwards where they still are, coming down in Texas and Kansas. This plague has set many new farmers back in their farming, as they have lost everything. Many of these are new immigrants from Germany.

Fruit does not grow at all as yet in our territory, although we bring many apples from the eastern states. We have a kind of berries that grow in a swampy meadow in big quantities. These berries are like the German berries called [name not given in translation] in color and taste but are much larger. These berries are called cranberries and are cooked with sugar and make a good and wholesome food. In the last two years they have been very plentiful and many thousands of bushels were gathered by the farmers, bought by the trades people and shipped out from [to] the East, as they grow in very few states.

Big quantities of wild game such as venison, rabbits, pheasants were brought in during the fall and winter. For the last two months, I have had hardly any other meat than venison, as at the beginning of the winter this meat is very fat and tender. There are also wolves and bears here, but they keep their distance from the settlements. One never hears of any calamities along that line.

The outstanding commodity that we ship from this territory is lumber. In the Northwest we have immense pine forests. The trees are felled in the winter time and are dragged by ox teams to the neighboring
rivers that run into the Mississippi, and in the spring they are transported to the southern states where there is no lumber. In St. Anthony and Minneapolis we have saw mills (part of them operate with water power, others with steam) that cut our immense quantity of lumber that is used everywhere in the surrounding territory and shipped southwards on the river. Lumber is the usual material used for building in a new country, because it is the cheapest and the fastest building material one can get. Brick is still very expensive here, eight dollars per thousand. In the East it is from four to five dollars per thousand. We have a good many stones (nice limestones) but they cost considerably because of wages and shipping rates. Limestone and bricklayers are paid very well, higher here than in the East. Bricklayers are paid from $2.25 to $3.00 a day; carpenters from $2.00 to $2.50; day laborers $1.50 per day without board. These prices should become lower, however, in a few more years.

Our territory will probably be accepted into full statehood by Congress in Washington this winter. Each territory has to have a population of eighty thousand inhabitants and must adopt a constitution as to whether it wants to be a free state or a slave state. This then must be presented to Congress. With us there is no idea of a slave state as in the territory of Kansas, which is south of Missouri, which is settled by people from the North and the South, both of whom want to win the question for their party. The last two years have brought much confusion, disagreement, struggle and bloodshed to that section. More recently it seemed as though it would become a free state anyway, although the South put forth much effort to win it over.

Utah is a more or less separated territory on the Salt Sea not far from the Rocky Mountains inhabited by some people who are called Mormons. They have their own religion. These Mormons have ten to fifty wives each according to the number they are able to support. Their high priests, as they call their rulers, have the most. They have lived there since 1845, after they had been driven out from the states of Illinois and Missouri. Brigham Young is their governor and high priest. This Young contributes one-half of his proceeds in order to be in closer contact with God and so receive direct revelations. His people are dumb enough to believe it. They have been upset of late, as the government has attempted to send them a new governor and other officials. They are now in confederation with the wild Indians of the Far West and are enemies to all who are not of their religion. This they have announced recently and they urged the Indians to rob and murder an immigrant train that was going from the eastern states over the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains to California. Hundreds of men, women, and children fell victims to their vengeance. The wagons, horses, and cattle were taken away, but the bodies were left to be devoured by the wolves. The government at Washington has tried previously to this to maintain a different governor and officials, but it was not safe living down there and they had to return.

Last October, the government tried anew to send a governor accompanied by two thousand soldiers. The Mormons heard that the soldiers were coming, prepared to make opposition, blocking all small passages with cannon and burned the grass everywhere. The military has gained considerably since October, but in spite of that the Mormons

---

1 Petran's civics and geography were both somewhat awry. Kansas is, of course, west of Missouri, and there was no hard and fast population requirement for statehood.

2 The reference is probably to the Mountain Meadows Massacre of September, 1857. A band of Mormons with some Indian allies murdered 120 immigrants who were passing through Utah on their way to California. The massacre was incident to the so-called Mormon War, a guerrilla action which the Mormons waged against a force of 2,500 troops sent by President Buchanan to assert federal authority in Utah Territory. The first Mormons had reached Utah in 1847. Ray Allen Billington, _The Far Western Frontier_, 1830-1860, p. 214-217 (New York, 1956).
took seventy private wagons that were not accompanied by militia and destroyed them. They were driving a herd, two thirds of which starved because of lack of grass. The military has had to cease its operations for the winter and make their winter quarters in tents.

So as not to try your patience anymore reading this long letter, I will close making these comments on things and inform you that my family is happy and well. Our boy, now over five years old, comes in very helpful in many things and is quite willing to do so. Although we always speak German to our children, they don’t learn the language because they mix with the neighbor children with whom they always talk English, which I regret very much because both languages are very essential. I have been coming in contact also with the Bohemian language. For the last nine years some of them have immigrated from near Prague to a town about ten miles from here and I come in contact with them.

IN THE following years Petran sent a number of letters to his family, mostly about personal matters. Johann Pompe died in the spring of 1858 and Petran wrote a letter of condolence to his aunt. It and other correspondence mention the birth of a fourth child, a girl, and of another son, who died in early infancy. Business was “a little more lively,” he noted in 1859.

On May 8, 1862, Petran wrote a long letter to a family friend, Joseph Steinhauer, in which he described the effects of the Civil War on business conditions and business ethics. It reads in part:

New Orleans was recently captured by the northerners. They now have most of the important places on the Atlantic. On the Mississippi, they made their way almost as far as Memphis in Tennessee. At Corinth in Tennessee, eighty miles east of Memphis, the two armies face each other and a slaughter is expected almost any hour. The northerners and the southerners each have about 100,000 men. During the last slaughter at Pittsburg Landing (a few miles from where they are now) the northerners lost 13,763 men in dead, wounded, and captives, without any result.

Our national debt by July, 1862, will amount to about six hundred million and should the war last, the amount will be much greater. Contractors became millionaires, and there are officers, the smallest and the greatest, who cheat as long as they have a chance. The war often offers such a chance. Their patriotism is much talked of, but in reality there are no signs of it. It is hard to imagine the swindling that comes out in war. Often the highest officers take part. It is hard to imagine how bad it is and surely you could not find it to such a degree in any other part of the world. It shows that there are Americans with no moral character, who will sacrifice everything for the gain of money.

If the South should be conquered, as is to be expected, there will not be the friendly union that is looked for. The South has always disliked the North and now more than ever. There are to be seen many examples, how they have poisoned and murdered the northern troops whenever there is an opportunity. If conquered, it will do no good in the long run.

It is clear that when there are large expenses, there must be a large income. They tax therefore everything possible to be taxed in order to pay the interest on the debt. Like everything else in unsettled times, there is not much business enterprise, in the investment of capital. Therefore, as can be imagined, industry and trade are very dull and earnings are small. My earnings in the last year were fairly good, but I have too much landed property which is worth little now and taxes are higher.

When Wenzel Petran next wrote to his aunt, on February 2, 1863, he had moved to Minneapolis. His letter describes his house and garden, as well as making fur-
ther comment on the Civil War and giving a brief description of the Sioux Uprising.

It is a long time since I have written to you and therefore I must ask your pardon. I was very much occupied all summer building a house which is now about ready. I had contracted a cough through a cold in November, 1861, and the house that I occupied in connection with a store in St. Anthony always had water in the cellar, which made the whole house damp and unhealthy.

As, because of the war, all goods became very high-priced and there was little to be gained, and as St. Anthony continued to decrease in business and the place across the Mississippi called Minneapolis is increasing in business and being a nicer city, I built myself a private dwelling and have given up business for the present. I rented my store December 1, 1862, and moved into a house where I could be more comfortable than over the store.¹

The lot on which I built is 65 feet wide and 155 feet long, which gives me a nice garden around the house. It is located on one of the best streets. It cost me, when I bought it five years back, $1,200, but is now worth only $800, as landed property has fallen greatly in price since that time.

My house is 20 feet wide, 30 feet long, with three rooms upstairs and three rooms downstairs, with a kitchen built on to it, 15 feet wide and 20 feet long, and with cellar and cistern under it. Behind the kitchen there is a wood shed 15 feet in width and length. At the end of the garden, I have a barn 16 feet wide and 24 feet long with a stall built in for a cow, which I lately bought. The house and the barn this far have cost me a little more than $900.

As I do not plan to go into business until I have got over my cough, I bought a horse and buggy last summer, so that I can go out every day in the fresh air, and in the fall I go hunting. The summers are very pleasant here, also the winter has been very nice thus far. We have had sleighing for only two weeks.

My six children all had the measles in December, but are all well now. My wife also is well, and I hope that you are comfortable and well in your old age.

The war in this country is doing terrible damage wherever it is raging. Whole communities are being destroyed and burned, and hundreds of thousands of people are losing their lives, and it is impossible to see the end yet as both sides are more bitter than formerly. Even though we are far from the scene, we feel the effects, as everything is very costly, except what one raises here: meat, flour, and vegetables. Taxes are also considerably higher and will stay high as the government’s debt is already two thousand [hundred?] millions.

The Indians that live on the borders of this state did considerable damage last fall. All of a sudden, in August, they began to attack the remote settlers, plundering, murdering, and burning up things. Those who got away with their lives had to leave everything and flee. About five hundred people lost their lives and many women and children were carried away captive by the Indians. The militia was sent out against them, and many of them were killed, but many of the Indians were captured and thirty-eight of these were hung. The war against the Indians is not ended yet, as nothing can be done in the unsettled part of the country. In our community, there is nothing to be feared any more, even though in the disturbance many of the farmers came to town to be safe.

Theresa Pompe died in 1866 and after her death Petran directed his letters to his sister Anna (Mrs. Joseph Liebsch). In January, 1867, he reported a marked improvement in economic conditions after the war. Minneapolis was thriving; mills and fac-

¹ The Petran house was located on First Street North, between the present Second and Third avenues. The store was on the same street, in the block north of Hennepin Avenue. Merwin’s Directory of Minneapolis and St. Anthony, 1867.
tories were being built and two railroads had been constructed. Petran himself had reopened his business at a new location in Minneapolis. His property, he boasted, was worth "considerably more" than the family business and lands in Germany.

A short letter written April 1, 1869, summarizes his situation at the end of the decade.

I have received your good letter of about a year ago, and also the Tetschen newspaper. I should have answered you long ago, and always meant to do so, but on account of the strenuous life here and of business, everything that does not absolutely have to be done is neglected.

The family consists now of seven children. My wife has been troubled with a chronic sickness for quite a while, and can go out of the house very little. I intend to keep a horse next summer so that I can take her out into the fresh air. The children are well. My oldest boy being sixteen years of age, and the youngest two and a half years.

Business has been very good since I started, until last July. But on July 12, 1868, my store burned down. My loss was about $3,500 to $4,000, of which I received $1,500 insurance. I started to build immediately on the same ground, and finished on December 1, 1868. I have now a better and larger place, built of brick, which is very comfortable and in which I can handle more goods. By and by I am going to go entirely into the wholesale business, whereas now I am both in retail and wholesale.

The main business in Minneapolis is the handling of wheat and since the same is very cheap now, there is little gold in circulation, which is also to be expected.

As long as one is in business one has to attend it all the time, for it cannot be left to others.

Although Petran continued his letters to his sister during the next two decades, his correspondence was devoted almost entirely to personal matters. His wife died of tuberculosis in 1874, and he himself suffered increasingly from poor health. Because of a lung condition he could no longer stand the cold winters of Minnesota. In 1876 or 1877 he gave up his wholesale firm and spent the cold months traveling in the warmer climate of California and the southern states. He died in 1891 in Jacksonville, Florida.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS are from the picture collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.