Where to Settle?
A Brother's Advice

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"I AM CURIOUS to hear the result of your trip to Minisotah and your opinions of that semi arctic region. I have travelled over a great part of it, and find it very well and very beautiful to see, but I would not much like to bury myself there for life."

Thus wrote Henry Lewis to his elder brother George, a resident of St. Louis, Missouri, in October, 1862. Some fifteen years earlier, in 1847 and 1848, Henry had visited Minnesota, covering much of its southeastern section, especially in the Mississippi and St. Croix valleys, while assembling pictorial and descriptive material for a vast panorama of the upper Mississippi. Memories of that earlier experience filled his thoughts upon hearing that George was investigating the St. Croix area with a view to exchanging a business career in St. Louis for that of a farmer in a healthier locality. In the intervening years, Henry — an American citizen of English birth — had completed his panorama and traveled widely while displaying it both in America and Europe; had written, illustrated, and published in Germany a book entitled Das illustrirte Mississippithal ("The Mississippi Valley Illustrated"); and had established himself as a professional artist in Düsseldorf, then the world's art capital, where he married and continued to reside from 1853 until his death in 1904.

Henry Lewis included some impressions of the St. Croix Valley in Das illustrirte Mis-

\[\text{See Henry Lewis to George Lewis, October 24, 1862, Lewis Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.}\]

\[\text{The career of Henry Lewis will be fully reviewed in an English edition of Das illustrirte Mississippithal to be published in the near future by the Minnesota Historical Society. The work has been translated by A. Hermina Poatgieter, editor of the Gopher Historian, and it has been edited with an introduction and notes by the present writer.}\]
sissippithal, which was published in parts from 1854 to 1857. Less harsh than when describing it for his brother was his estimate of the climate. The winter, he recorded, "is indeed long and cold, but it is also dry and salubrious, and for those who live here, it is the main season for amusement. Balls, sleighing parties, ice fishing, hunting, etc., alternate, or rather follow one another, without interruption." By way of contrast, noted Lewis, "The summer is short and warm, and plants grow with a rapidity that those living in other climates can hardly imagine." To illustrate his point, he quoted from his diary of August 18, 1847, when he paused on the Willow River near the present site of Hudson, Wisconsin. "In the vicinity," he wrote, "someone had broken and planted a small piece of prairie land with a view to making a pre-emption claim. There was no house anywhere near; the field was not fenced and, since the sowing, had neither been weeded nor in any way cultivated. Our guide assured us that scarcely six weeks had passed since this land had been broken, yet we found corn six feet high, potatoes in bloom, watermelons nearly ripe, and turnips so big that we couldn't resist taking one along. In Stillwater we found that it had a circumference of eleven and one half inches, weighed seven and one half pounds, and was sound throughout."

Another attraction for Lewis was the abundance of fish in the neighboring lakes. "Carp, pike, and trout are found in enormous quantities," he remarked. "While we were busy sketching, our guide caught 185 such fish with a hook in two hours. Together they must have weighed about a hundred pounds. He picked out the best ones and threw the rest away. When we criticized his

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The passages here quoted are from Miss Potgieter's translation. In the German edition (Düsseldorf, 1858), they appear on p. 76.

CHEEVER'S MILL on the St. Croix, an oil sketch by Lewis
cruel and wasteful behaviour, he answered simply. 'Where they come from there will be more for a long time.'” It is perhaps worth noting that the St. Croix Valley is still a fisherman's paradise.

An experience on the Kinnikinnic River, a small stream that empties into the St. Croix from the east not far above its mouth, is among others described in Das illustirte Mississippithal. Lewis shared that adventure with two scientists who were working under David Dale Owen on a geological survey of Wisconsin, Iowa, and what was soon to become Minnesota Territory. One of their findings while exploring on the Kinnikinnic in the summer of 1847 is described in scientific terms by Owen as “an isolated mound, surmounted by about forty feet of bare ledges of the sandstone . . . capped by a few inches of shell limestone on the summit.” The mound is pictured in an accompanying woodcut based upon a sketch by Henry Lewis.* In the artist's narrative, however, this natural sandstone formation becomes the “Great Manito” — an object highly venerated by the Indians of the area. The explorers’ arrival, according to Lewis, was punctuated by a severe thunderstorm, which their Indian guide interpreted as a “bad omen” until the appearance of a rainbow convinced him “that the Great Spirit had taken this way to show his approval.”

Although the artist-author recalled with enthusiasm the beautiful valley where he had explored and sketched in the late 1840s, he did not hesitate to advise George against going there to farm. “Why not try Illinois?” inquired Henry. “There are parts of it very healthy, and if you settle . . . near a railway you can communicate with the inner world occasionally. But I fear for you to begin to open up a farm in the wilderness will be too much for your strength, especially at your time of life, when you should be retiring from its toils and cares and settling quietly down, to enjoy its evening repose.”

Henry was naturally apprehensive that the rigors of frontier farming would spell disaster for his beloved brother, who was nearly fifty years of age and was unaccustomed to rural living.

Nevertheless, Henry expressed some second thoughts about the St. Croix Valley in his next letter to George, written in January, 1863. In the meantime he seems to have re-

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* For Lewis’ account of the trip to the “Great Manito,” see Das illustirte Mississippithal, 186-189.


5 Henry to George, October 24, 1862, Lewis Papers, Clements Library.
ceived reports of the Minnesota trip from George, who had evidently decided against buying a farm in the state. Henry, however, found it "curious and interesting" to receive from his brother a detailed description of a spot on the St. Croix and to recall that "years ago I went over exactly the same ground and wrote you long accounts of my journey, and made sketches of all the principle [sic] points of interest in that most beautiful region." The artist then made the following suggestion: "I only wish you were comfortably settled there, not as a farmer, for you are now too old to commence opening up a farm in the wilderness, but, if you had money enough to buy five or six hundred acres, and then divide it into some four or five snug little farms with good, but cheap improvements on each, suitable for a small family, you might rent each one out to good advantage, and live . . . from the proceeds of your rents, giving your superintendence to the whole. Who knows but what you may be able to accomplish this by and by." Carried away by this vision of his brother as a gentleman landlord, Henry brought himself into the picture by adding: "then I will come and live with you for a time at least, and paint a whole cargo of pictures, with which I will travel East once a year and realize on them. My wife is quite ready to go, and delighted with the idea and the fortunes she is going to make with her chickens, eggs, and butter." That this was all an impractical dream did not escape Henry, however, for he concluded by remarking: "After all it is pleasant to build castles — if the next breath blows them down again."

George, too, must have considered the scheme outside the realm of possibility, for instead of going to Minnesota he decided to become a banker in Iowa, at Victor, within easy reach of Grinnell College and the Amana colonies. There, in 1881, Henry paid his brother a visit and drew the little sketch of George's Iowa home reproduced below. Evidence that the artist did not forget his earlier experience in the Minnesota country, however, is found in many of his oil paintings, including four St. Croix River views owned by the Minnesota Historical Society and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

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1 Henry to George, January 20, 1863, Lewis Papers, Clements Library.

2 The sketch, which is dated November 16, 1881, is in a sketchbook owned by the City Art Museum of St. Louis. George's Iowa career is described in a letter from his granddaughter, Mrs. Myron B. Chapin, to the author, August 17, 1965.

THE SKETCH of Henry Lewis on page 286 was drawn by A. Flann, and the original is owned by Wilson Lewis, St. Louis, Missouri. That on page 287 is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.