

SOME ASPECTS OF MID-WEST AMERICA¹

I should like to make use of the opportunity afforded me this evening to present to the members of the Minnesota Historical Society a phase of the larger history of our part of America. A new word, "ethno-geography," just coming into use among historians, best describes the aspect of the subject which I want to stress in my discussion — the inter-relation of man and geography. By Mid-west America I mean all that part of North America lying east of the Rocky Mountains and west of Hudson Bay, the Great Lakes, and the Appalachian Mountains. You will notice that in defining the region to be discussed I have added a large part of British North America to a corresponding portion of the United States. The justification for this lies in the fact that by history and geography all the inhabitants of the region are united and have practically the same problems in government and in their social and economic life.

From the point of view of physiography, Mid-west America consists of a vast lowland having three drainage systems — the southern, discharging its waters into the Gulf of Mexico; the central, including such rivers as the Red River of the North, the Saskatchewan, and the Churchill, discharging its waters into Hudson Bay; and the northern, of which the Mackenzie is the principal river, discharging its waters into the Arctic Ocean. The contour of this great lowland was produced by ice action during the two glacial epochs in the geological history of the region. It is for the most part unforested, probably never having reached the tree-bearing stage, except along the lakes and river courses and on the slopes of the mountains. The soil is of unusual fertility and the moisture sufficient for agriculture except in the western part. As a whole it is still

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the great fur and big game region of North America. The earliest inhabitants may be included in three or four large families, two of whom held most of the territory in early times. The climate is continental, that is, one of extremes, modified on the east and south by the presence of large bodies of water and on the west by the warm winds from the Pacific.

The history of the region corresponds with its geography; it has the same sweep and breadth; it is amply continental, never petty or sectional. The great interior of North America was for nearly two centuries after Columbus almost unknown to Spanish, French, and English explorers. The bare extent of this vast region was in itself a bar to exploration and trade and its lack of precious metals kept the Spanish from occupying it during this period. It was due to the enterprise and daring of the French explorers who followed Champlain's statesmanly initiative and no less to the devotion of the missionaries who traversed these wilds, that the great interior wilderness was added to the possessions of France. To the remarkable exploits of the intrepid Radisson in the region of Hudson Bay we owe the beginnings of the Hudson's Bay Company, which would have been a French fur-trading company but for the blindness of Louis XIV. La Salle added the valleys of the Ohio and the Mississippi. La Vérendrye, latest of these empire-builders, blocked out his fur-trade region so as to cut directly athwart the great English grant to the Hudson's Bay Company and the grant by France to La Salle and his successors. The story of the exploits of these three Frenchmen and of those who rounded out their work reads like a romance, for the chivalry and pride of the best French traditions fired the hearts of these daring men and kept their achievements from sinking to the level of mere fur-trading operations. Thus in less than fifty years there were added to the maps of the period the main features of the interior of North America. If the French government had matched the heroism and enterprise of these wilderness workers with a policy at all in keeping with the unbounded opportunity they had created for France, the sub-

sequent course of events in American history would have been entirely different.

During the eighteenth century the history of North America is concerned mainly with the contest of Spain, France, and England for possession of the middle portion of the continent. The Spanish held the southwest natives firmly in hand by a combination of forts and missions; the French were still profiting by the ancient treaty of Champlain with the great Algonquin family of Indian tribes in the Great Lakes region and farther west; the English with their Iroquois alliance of 1684 were in a position actively to compete with the French for possession of the Ohio Valley.

The Muskogean tribe of Indians was located in that small area north of the Gulf of Mexico which lies in the angle between the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and is bounded on the east by the Alleghany Mountains. Here they had permanent homes and a fixed village life; they cultivated fields of corn and tobacco and had a fairly well-developed tribal government. They controlled many of the fur-trade routes between the ocean and the interior and their friendship was valuable to all those who sought to win or to maintain a foothold upon the lower Ohio or the Mississippi. It is possible now to trace out the main lines of the exceedingly complex web of intrigue that enmeshed this group of Indian tribes. The Spanish influence, centering at Mobile and Pensacola, was the oldest, and for a long time it dominated the confederacy. The French at New Orleans, however, needed some Indian alliance for the defense of their eastern flank, and they soon had won over one of the tribes by well-planned diplomacy. The English from the Carolina settlements, last of all, found it necessary to cement the friendship of the tribe nearest them and controlling the mountain passes, and partly by force and partly by presents they built up a working alliance. When the United States, as a new nation, entered this western field, she swept away the whole fabric of alliances and finally banished the remnants of the tribes to a reservation across the Mississippi, in spite of

her own treaties and agreements and in the face of at least one supreme court decision.

On the southwest, France and Spain were competing strenuously for Texas and the adjoining territory. The struggle between France and England for the upper Ohio Valley, which ended in 1763, is usually referred to as the intercolonial wars. Pontiac, an Indian statesman of remarkable talent, performed the unusual feat of welding together all the western tribes that had been French allies in a last desperate effort to drive out the English. The year's war associated with his name is unique among Indian wars in the number of tribes involved and the immense area represented by the forces he was able to assemble under his single command.

The Revolutionary War was saved from being a purely local and sectional contest along the Atlantic seaboard by one considerable American offensive, the daring and successful exploit of George Rogers Clark. By this stroke the hardy frontiersmen of the Alleghany region made their contribution to the war in the region they looked upon as peculiarly their own. Their hopes for a great interior expansion were fully realized in the treaty of 1783. From a territorial point of view we were never again in serious hazard of losing our hold on the interior of North America, upon which, very obviously, depended our future national greatness.

Though in full possession of the Louisiana territory for nearly a century, France had not been able to measure up to the opportunity for a colonial empire far outranking anything England had yet developed. Up to the middle of the eighteenth century the Spanish had obtained but a vague idea of the extent and resources of Louisiana. Spain's interest was focused upon the lands bordering on the Gulf of Mexico such as Florida and Texas, which, because of their location, could be developed into a means of protection for her treasure fleet and the commerce she carried on with her possessions in the New World. Even when put in possession of this territory in 1763, she saw its value principally in the control of the gulf which

New Orleans gave her, though incidentally she was interested in developing the fur trade centering at the frontier post of St. Louis. It was this indifference to her vital territorial interests in America as well as her European preoccupation that smoothed the way for us in 1803, when we made our first essay at rounding out our Mid-west possessions in America. Of all the leading Americans of his time, Jefferson alone had sufficient vision to make full use of the unparalleled opportunity that had come to him as a result of the breakdown of Napoleon's remarkable scheme for colonial empire. Not only did he add a very large slice of the continent to our possessions in spite of the futile objections of the narrow-minded partisans of seaboard supremacy, but he planned and carried out the exploring expeditions of Pike and of Lewis and Clark. We possess in their reports an historical classic, embodying the first scientific survey of a region hitherto known only to the fur-trader.

But fortune was soon again to favor us. The establishment of the independence of Texas from Mexico in 1836 precipitated upon us another momentous decision complicated by the sinister issue of slavery extension. The national momentum acquired by the possession of the Louisiana territory carried us irresistibly to the Pacific coast in spite of Russia, England, and Mexico. Meanwhile the astute leaders of our slave-holding aristocracy understood their aspect of the case sufficiently to capitalize the impulse for national expansion and secure a valuable slave territory in the new state of Texas.

The rounding out of our Mid-west possessions by the Mexican War antedates by a generation a similar process going on north of us in British America. The first exploration of the extensive region beyond the valleys of the Saskatchewan and Churchill rivers in the Mackenzie River Valley was made between 1789 and 1795 by Alexander Mackenzie. The report of his explorations published in 1801 was the first account of the soil, climate, and populations of the northern portion of Mid-west America in these river valleys. Fired by this report

of the vast level tracts of fertile land in the interior of the continent, Lork Selkirk in 1811 planted the first colony in the valley of the Red River, where the city of Winnipeg now stands. Unfortunately for the success of the colony it was planned as a mere adjunct to the fur-trading operations of the Hudson's Bay Company and this brought the settlers into hostile contact with the rival fur-trade corporation, the Northwest Company. The union of the rival companies in 1821 did not set in motion true colonizing activity in these regions of prairie and river valley. While to the south in the United States wave after wave of population, native and foreign, was sweeping over a similar area, here in the northern wilderness conditions were still undisturbed. The imperial sway of the Hudson's Bay Company, undisputed master of the greatest fur-producing area in the world, served to keep all colonizing enterprises weak and entirely subservient to its interests alone. The solid wealth of the company, its cohorts of trading chiefs, trappers, hunters, and canoemen, the accumulated experience of generations of fur-taking, the mastery of woodcraft, and the art of dealing with savages — these all were brought to bear upon the problem of closing and barring the great wilderness to all but the servants of the company. The geography of the region favored this policy. The great river systems drained into the inhospitable water of Hudson Bay where the company reigned supreme. Immigration could not flow freely from the East on account of the almost impenetrable wilderness barrier that divided the provinces of Quebec and Ontario from this western continental plain. To reach this region there were but two Canadian routes and these were long and toilsome, taxing even the hardy trappers and hunters who were accustomed to them. Consequently the southern part of the great interior far outstripped the northern in the rate of its growth. Even the immigrants who came to Quebec and Ontario were not satisfied with the land outlook and crossed into the United States to swell the stream of settlers that was sweeping westward over the prairie regions like a tidal wave.

In the United States the arrangement of the important rivers tributary to the Mississippi was in every respect advantageous to settlement. Furthermore, the discovery of the precious metals, first in California, then in Idaho and Montana, and lastly in Colorado and Nevada, brought thousands of settlers hurrying over the intervening unoccupied spaces. The building of the transcontinental railroads, from 1853, when the first all-rail connection between Chicago and the Atlantic seaboard was completed, finished the subjugation of this portion of Mid-west America. The Indians were thrust off the land by the destruction of their great natural food supply, the buffalo herds, and by a series of sharp conflicts with the white settlers. The Homestead Act of 1862, exactly adapted to the rapid settlement of the wide and fertile areas of the United States, hastened the process till nearly every available acre was occupied. The reaction of this rapid conquest of the soil upon the relatively unoccupied lands to the north furnishes a striking illustration of the unity of the whole great continental area. From earliest times the traders of the Red River Valley had sent their hunters across the line into the United States to hunt the buffalo for robes and pemmican, especially for the latter which was used at the trading posts of the Hudson's Bay Company. These annual buffalo hunts brought hundreds of natives and half-breeds into contact with the fringe of settlement in the United States. Trade with the frontier post of St. Paul or Fort Snelling was soon developed. White traders from farther south began to filter northward. The oppressive regulations of the Hudson's Bay Company came to be understood for the tyranny they really represented. The upshot of this Yankee invasion was that the old monopoly of the company was broken and free trade with the United States was demanded and secured. Ideas of government follow trade routes and the Canadians got more than trade goods from our side of the line. The demand of western Canada for a share in the national government of that British North America union created in 1867 led to other phases of national

progress. The first transcontinental railroad from Montreal to Vancouver was completed in 1886. A flood of new settlers followed its progress westward; they came from Europe and they crossed over from the United States. The northern part of the great interior plain has been catching up with us ever since by the use of the same machinery of transportation familiar to us, the railway and the ocean liner.

The Civil War played its part in the making of Mid-west America. Slavery in the United States grew rapidly up to a certain point and thereafter fought a losing defensive battle until it was extinguished in a civil war. The Middle West played the leading role in this conflict. The admission of a western state, Missouri, precipitated the first controversy. The admission of another, Texas, forced the contest out of Congress into a presidential election where the popular will could pass upon it. The southern leaders were able to carry slavery on for a time by associating it with national expansion, but such tactics were at best futile. Again, a Westerner from Illinois championed squatter sovereignty; and another and greater Westerner from the same state shattered this theory, showing the whole nation by simple demonstration and irresistible logic why slavery must stop growing and thus disappear forever. Against the decision of the nation to entrust to this man the task of working out a solution of the question, the South appealed to arms. Two Westerners, Grant and Sherman, planned and executed the mighty strokes that ended the life of the Confederacy. Two out of three of their campaigns were launched in western territory — the opening of the Mississippi River and Sherman's march to the sea. Mid-west America solved the problem which the combined wisdom of the original thirteen states had been unable to solve. We were in 1865 a nation truly united by the potent force of social and political gravitation inherent in the states of the Middle West.

The interior part of Canada came to her own by civil war as truly as did our own Middle West. The establishment of the

British North America confederation in 1867 brought together Ontario and Quebec and the maritime provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The interior regions, however, were but recently released from the domination of the Hudson's Bay Company and they were hardly yet an integral part of the new nation. The half-breed revolt of 1870-71 brought the pressing need of real government home to the new state and the annexation sentiment favoring the United States acted as a powerful stimulus to unity. The province of Manitoba became for the new Canadian state what the trans-Alleghany territory was to our nation in 1783 — the first stepping-stone toward the conquest of the interior. A transcontinental railroad was planned to tap the vast forest and mineral resources of the West and to develop the agricultural wealth of the first of the prairie provinces. The more formidable Riel rebellion of 1885 finished the nationalizing process of 1871. The extraordinary resources of the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta were made known during the troubled period of military occupation and readjustment. Public attention was focused upon these areas hitherto regarded as merely wilderness. The process of national assimilation of Mid-west Canada was thus fairly launched.

This brief historical review of the continental area in middle North America reveals several facts of fundamental importance in our national life and in the national evolution of the people to the north of us. It is clear, in the first place, in our own history that sectionalism and narrowness break down where the constituencies of the Middle West begin to have an effect on the course of elections. Andrew Jackson, the first president to come from this part of the country, gave the initial impulse toward a real democracy in election and legislation, and he also established for the first time a working basis for that fundamental tenet of democracy, responsibility of appointive officeholders to the national constituency. Furthermore, that long-lived fallacy, constitutional nullification, was dealt a fatal blow by this clear-thinking man of the Mid-west

when he declared this doctrine to be simple treason if put into action. It was left for Abraham Lincoln, a man still more typical of this great national interior, to strike down the last manifestation of the original disunion theory and to proclaim freedom and union as the true basis of our greatness.

Again, the interior of this continent has furnished the first real opportunity for the amalgamation of European and American people under extremely favorable conditions and on a scale ample enough to bring forth the highest type of citizens that has yet appeared on the continent. Through difficulties and dangers, national and international, in spite of wars, panics, and sectional jealousies, the varied population of this most typical twentieth-century region has won its right to take part in all the civic enterprises that belong to community and national life. No population can long depend on a single industry if it is to maintain its leadership; the natural resources of Mid-west America are so wonderfully varied and rich that on the material side of civilization there is nothing more to be desired. Holland has made transportation her basis of development, England depends upon her factory system, Russia upon agriculture. But in the almost untouched resources of Mid-west America there are potentialities for each of these groups of industries in addition to the subsidiary one of mining. For the production of such staples as cereals and cotton the region is without a rival in actual as well as possible wealth. For manufacturing a relatively cheap and abundant power is a prerequisite. In that respect no part of America is so abundantly equipped. Water power is available from the four major rivers and their almost countless tributaries, and water power in the form of electricity may be transferred easily to great distances. On the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains lies a bed of coal sufficient to supply the continent with power at its present rate of consumption during many thousands of years. When the mines of the Appalachians are exhausted and the industries dependent upon them have migrated elsewhere, the lignite beds of the Rocky Mountain foot-

hills will still be in their first stages of development. The United States and Canada both are conducting researches into the field of the commercial production of lignite briquettes as a substitute for anthracite for heat and power. Already the process has been nearly perfected and the by-products have proved to be an exceedingly profitable part of the output. Oil and gas are abundant from Lake Athabasca to Texas, to say nothing of the oil by-products in a dozen forms which are produced in the briquetting process. There is no lack of iron, copper, nickel, and the host of other useful metals which recently have become a vital part of our industrial life. These and the large timber resources yet available make it possible to carry on the manufacture of every sort of machinery. The presence of extensive clay and cement beds of the finest quality anywhere to be found will give to the future manufacturing industry of this region a variety as well as a value beyond all estimate. Mid-west America is destined to be in the not distant future the great industrial region on this side of the Atlantic.

Moreover, its transportation possibilities are fully equal to its industrial outlook. The projected deep water-way through the Great Lakes will transform the lake cities of Canada and the United States into ocean ports. The construction of the Panama Canal has already affected our attitude toward interior water transportation on our great river systems. Canal building and the deepening and straightening of rivers has already begun in the Middle West. We have hardly used the wonderful interior system of water courses to be found here, but any one of the European peoples would long ago have linked them in as a vital part of its transportation system. The fact is that we have been in such blind haste in our subjection of the continent that we have literally wasted our substance in a riot of extravagance. Our transportation, freight and passenger, has been carried on mainly by the railways at an absolute sacrifice of ninety-five per cent of all the fuel used. What criminal negligence it represents to depend on a system of transporta-

tion that enables us to utilize only five per cent of all the coal consumed in carrying our freight back and forth from ocean to ocean! During the World War the congestion of freight on the lines into New York Harbor was so great that the government was put in charge of the entire system so as to make our aid more effective for our hard-pressed allies. This needless congestion at a single Atlantic port and this blind waste of our magnificent coal beds must be stopped if we are to continue our national development. In Mid-west America we have an opportunity to develop a more rational system of intercommunication. We have ample water-ways that can be made to carry all slow-moving freight and relieve the congestion on our overworked railways. The Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf of St. Lawrence ultimately will be utilized to break the wasteful monopoly of New York Harbor. Not for nothing have the producers of wealth in this great area been studying the problems of coöperative production and marketing. Already have the farmers of western Canada worked out their problem with some measure of success. One of our great railway systems has successfully applied electricity in the transportation of freight across the Rocky Mountains. There are abundant indications that the population of Mid-west America will match its development of a great industrial system with the creation of a system of transportation at once adequate, economical, and capable of an indefinite expansion, which will enable it to meet every demand future growth may make upon it.

It is not difficult to conclude from this brief survey of the topography and resources of the region under discussion that there are present all the material elements of strength and unity. A much more important consideration to be taken into account lies beyond the range of the purely material. Have the populations included in our discussion shown capacity for civic betterment? Have they provided the means for intellectual and moral development? What is their outlook and what have they accomplished? While it is much more difficult

to assemble facts and to compile statistics dealing with these somewhat intangible elements in civilization, a few salient features are clear. This region has come to be the home of one of the most typical products of American educational evolution, the state university. Nowhere in the realm of education can be found so many and such large institutions of this class. The state university is in many ways a product of the Middle West. Its basic element is still the old Puritan conception, first developed in New England, that public education is necessary for the perpetuity of good government. The migration westward of the population of the seaboard states carried the educational ideals of that great generation into a region where there was developing a new conception of the function of the state. The small privately endowed colleges of the East took root here as elsewhere but they were soon outgrown and replaced by another type of institution more in keeping with the community it was to serve. The founders of these western commonwealths had vision and practical good sense. Without the means to provide for higher education in their own time, they enacted legislation setting aside sufficient public land for the future support of their own state universities.

The evolution of our western state universities is a most interesting illustration of the widening conception of the scope of state and national government. In the raw, undeveloped territories in the West everything was done by the national government — Indian wars were fought, reservations laid out, lands surveyed, local governments established, roads and canals begun. This nationalistic policy, which Calhoun first definitely championed in Congress, brought home to the populations in these territories the possibilities of governmental functions. The state constitutional conventions followed the lead of the men who had grown up under this paternalistic régime. Constitutions were adopted and state governments provided for in full harmony with this theory of the state. Education was for the voter, be he rail-splitter or banker's son; the democracy

of the district school was to reach up to the apex of the public school system. Furthermore the state must be interested in giving particular kinds of education to those who were to specialize. Hence to the original college of letters and arts were added colleges of medicine, of engineering, of law, of music, of commerce, and of agriculture. On the campus of any such state university are to be found representatives of all nationalities mingled in the Middle West, meeting on the basis of a common democracy for the purpose of securing such an education at state expense as will enable them to serve their respective communities more efficiently. All the industries and professions are represented in the training given to citizens at the state university. Here are now being trained the experts who are to develop in Mid-west America her industries, who are to govern her cities and work out her municipal problems, who are to mold public opinion and give it permanent form in wise legislation.

We have by no means a monopoly of such state universities in the United States. Just to the north of us in the three prairie provinces of Canada are the beginnings of universities that have had their foundations laid like ours in the conception of public service and democracy. These universities are generously provided for and their faculties represent, in all the lines of scholarship and research, the highest type of university men in America. When these provinces have become industrial by the development of their iron and coal resources and when they contain the population of our own Middle West, their universities will stand easily at the forefront of the great, influential, state-controlled, educational agencies of that part of the continent.

State training for national and state leadership, community responsibility for every property owner and every officeholder, and an all-embracing democracy in every public function of the state or community — these are the civic and social ideals of the populations living in Mid-west America. That the boundary line now dividing us to the north and south will not

prevent united action in the future is certain. With resources and area sufficient for ten times the present population we will be compelled to solve common problems as they relate to the well-being of both continents and of states beyond the oceans. Such questions as the integrity of China, Japanese expansion, foreign immigration, disarmament, and the payment of indemnities are troubling the great powers a good deal just at this time. They will not all be solved when the population of the Middle West comes of age. That we shall bring to the age-old problems the fresh vision of youth and an unmarred faith in humanity is to be expected from the generous breadth of our sympathies and the wide scope of our experience. We shall not waste our resources in preparing for wars or in killing our neighbors, for we have lived too long in amicable association for anything so foolish. We are not cursed by aristocracies or kings. With our untouched wealth and the protection from invasion afforded by wide oceans and other natural barriers, we can help to quiet the nerves of those peoples less favorably situated, who have memories or traditions of wars and devastations to handicap them.

It is not too much to say that our nation has just passed a milestone in its history which has determined in a major way its course for the next generation at least. The war with Germany was but yesterday and we have hardly drawn breath since its termination. But in spite of that we have traveled very far since the armistice, farther, indeed, than we have gone in many a half century previously. We have made serious and far-reaching decisions since the beginning of the Great War. Wrenched out of a long-standing peace policy to share with Europe the horrors of war, we have been called upon to play an exceedingly important international rôle with rather inadequate preparation and upon the very shortest possible notice. This has made it necessary for us to set our house in order and to plan some fundamental reforms. When we complete this reform program we shall be a different people in many fundamental respects, our civic and economic life will have

passed through changes of which our fathers had no conception. If we are to take up the task of world leadership in the near future we need not fear for men to fill the places of responsibility. In Mid-west America is to be found today more of that old-fashioned but still indispensable stock, the Anglo-Saxon, than anywhere else in the world. We may confidently predict that the solution of the problem of world recovery from the shock of war will be the product of the statesmanlike coöperation of the peoples in that particular part of Canada and the United States which we have already described. Here above all other places in the continent are to be found the enlightened and fearless constituencies whose support will be the most important factor in carrying out the vital measures that are to restore society to its normal condition.

The plain and simple utterances of the Monroe Doctrine fell upon the ears of an astonished clique of militarists at a time when all the world seemed to be theirs to trample upon and devastate. It was the mandate of a free people announcing the end of Old World dominance and the appearance of the day-star of hope above the western horizon. Some such clear and free note as this is being listened for anxiously by the new little countries of Europe and by the battle-torn nations who have lost their power to will and to do as they have been accustomed in the past. The time is not far distant when the people of Mid-west America will speak out in the full consciousness of strength and purpose to serve, and their utterances, like their deeds, will express the ample breadth of their well-matured statesmanship and the vision and the uplift of their own generous democracy.

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