IN 1872 THE Lancashire town of Barrow-in-Furness, England, was in the middle of a period of spectacular growth which saw its population increase from little more than 3,000 in 1861 to well over 40,000 by 1881. The production of iron and steel, a docks building program, and an embryonic shipbuilding industry combined to create a pervasive atmosphere of optimism and prosperity. For the thousands of workers who crowded into Barrow in those years, life was not without its difficulties — an acute shortage of housing was one — but solace could easily be found in more than 100 inns and beerhouses scattered throughout the town. These offered a serious challenge to the local temperance movement made up of earnest but essentially negative individuals who were dedicated to creating an orderly and stable Christian society free from the temptations of alcohol. So unequal was the struggle between beer and water that by April, 1872, those in the local temperance ranks were disillusioned to the point where “deadness and apathy now prevail.”

However, two members of the Barrow Temperance Hall were determined to carry on the fight, though they preferred a new area in which to work. Richard Bailey, a schoolteacher, and William Hurst, a cabinetmaker, saw the New World of America, and especially the young states of the northwestern plains, as a more fertile ground for their ideals. They were not the first to take this course of action, nor was their plan merely an exercise in Templar migration. Rather, they wished to organize a commercial emigration society and then, once in the United States, mold the ordinary colony members into a cohesive temperance community. To this end they sought an alliance with the London office of the Northern Pacific Railroad, which supplied an agent to speak at the inaugural meeting of the Furness colony held at Barrow in the Preston Street schoolroom on October 22, 1872. A large audience heard how the railroad’s lands in Minnesota were so fertile that one had “merely to tickle the soil, and it smiled a harvest.” The state itself was “the most magnificent dwelling place formed for man by God,” with a climate so invigorating that consumptives were sent to St. Paul for cure. In this vein the Furness colony was enthusiastically launched on a winter recruitment campaign which, with the aid of the railroad, covered most of northern England and eventually spread into neighboring Scotland.¹

¹Commercial Directory of Barrow-in-Furness, 38-39 (Barrow, England, 1871); Barrow Herald, April 20, 1872 (quote). This and other Barrow and Ulverston newspapers that the author used are in the Barrow Public Library. The Minnesota Historical Society has copies of a few Barrow and Ulverston newspaper clippings, and these will be indicated.

The partnership between the Furness colony and the Northern Pacific was not an automatic liaison. By the early 1870s several fiercely competitive northwestern states and giant American railroads were actively seeking customers throughout Europe. Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota each had its own state immigration department, and railroads such as the Kansas Pacific, Illinois Central, and Burlington and Missouri River route owned literally millions of acres of land that they offered for sale at attractive prices. The Northern Pacific therefore was only one of many possibilities for Bailey and Hurst to consider, but in two respects that railroad held clear advantages over its rivals. First, a London office under the supervision of the Northern Pacific’s chief European agent, George Sheppard, conducted an efficient advertising campaign in the United Kingdom.


2Sheppard was formerly involved with emigration to Iowa. See Grant Foreman, "English Emigration in Iowa," in Iowa Journal of History and Politics, 44:385-420 (October, 1946). Land and Emigration was published in 1871-1873 in London where it is on file at the British Library. It is expected to be available soon at the MHS division of archives and manuscripts.

3Shappard to Frederick Billings (chairman of the Northern Pacific’s land department), December 7, 1872, in Northern Pacific Railroad Company Records, Land Department, Letters Received and Miscellaneous Papers (hereafter LD, LR & MP) in Minnesota Historical Society division of archives and manuscripts; Forres Gazette, May 28, 1873, in Moray District Library, Elgin, Scotland; John L. Harmsberger and Robert P. Wilkins, "New Yeoivil, Minnesota: A Northern Pacific Colony in 1873," in Arizona and the West, 12:5-22 (Spring, 1970); Harold F. Peterson, "Some Colonization Projects of the Northern Pacific Railroad," in Minnesota History, 10:127-144 (June, 1929).
This view of Preston Street in Barrow, England, in the 1870s was typical of the town's streets at that time. Richard Bailey had his school here.

From the Northern Pacific's point of view the Furness colony seemed a responsible organization full of "pushing, intelligent, thrifty tradesmen... who are doing much of the work themselves, with their own money." Richard Bailey was the organizing force who arranged the meetings and placed the advertisements. William Hurst provided boundless energy and a rousing turn of phrase on the platform — typical of the atmosphere of excitement that characterized the early months of the colony. Processions, complete with banners and a bell ringer, paraded through towns and villages of Furness, Cumberland, and Westmorland, and at evening meetings colony members described how their new lives in America would offer them salvation from a dreary future. If this confessional tactic was a reminder of the temperance motives behind the venture, more explicit emphasis was provided by the official Furness colony rules:

The promoters of this Colony being fully convinced that the sale of intoxicating drink is opposed to the commercial and spiritual prosperity of any community, have determined that while giving every member of the Colony perfect freedom of action in every other respect they will not allow the public traffic in these drinks to be carried on within the limits of the colony.5

Every colony member had to declare on the application form to "abstain from, and discountenance, in every way, idleness and vice of every kind; also, we will not sell, or allow to be sold, intoxicating drinks." As Bailey said at a meeting in January, 1873, "the promoters and the colonists were very determined to have no black sheep amongst them."6

George Sheppard's role became vital in his ability to graft onto this strong moral commitment an attractive commercial appeal so that the colony's message would reach the largest possible audience. Meetings were advertised as providing the means to achieve "Farms for the Farmless, Homes for the Homeless, and High Wages for Workmen." The Furness colony would become a community where "small capitalists might become rich farmers," and several examples were provided of how poor emigrants soon were worth thousands of dollars in Minnesota. Emphasis was also placed on the need for hard work and perseverance and the message that the most suitable colonists were practical outdoor men. According to Land and Emigration, "mere clerks and bookish people are not wanted" — presumably they were left behind to record the history!7

It was Sheppard's idea to spread the Furness colony net across England into Yorkshire, and at two meetings in Leeds in February, 1873, he personally provided details of generous loans which the Northern Pacific was willing to provide to settlers. He was also responsible for the decision to combine a struggling Scottish colony organized by Robert Kerr with the successful Furness organization, a liaison formally arranged after Kerr had lectured on behalf of the Furness colony in January and February, 1873. It was further agreed that Kerr would become the colony's resident pastor of a United Church to be financed by the railroad. Sheppard's work was all the more remarkable when one considers that his London office was run on frugal lines. His accounts for December, 1872, were accompanied by an apology to the head office in New York for the expense of about $80.00 for staff Christmas boxes — "an English custom from which there is no decent escape."8

5 Sheppard to Billings, November 7, 1872 ("tradesmen" quote), and Henderson to Sheppard, November 30, 1872, enclosed in Sheppard to Billings, December 7, 1872, both in Northern Pacific Records, LD, LR & MP, in MHS; Furness Colony Minutes, 1872-1874, in Furness Colony Papers, in MHS. The original minutes of the colony in England were presented to the society in 1942 by George Masters of Brookings, South Dakota. The records were kept by Richard Bailey, whose son, T. J. Bailey of Sacriston, Durham, England, sent them to Masters.

6 Furness Colony Minutes, Barrow Herald, January 25, 1873.

7 Furness Colony Minutes, meeting of January 25, 1873: Barrow Herald, January 25, 1873; Ulverston Mirror, January 25, 1873. Land and Emigration, vol. 10 (June, 1872). Ulverston was a market town some nine miles from Barrow.

By the spring of 1873 the association between the Furness colony and the Northern Pacific was about to reach fruition as groups of colonists prepared to sail for America. The colony leadership continued to talk in terms of the challenge of creating a new society in America. Kerr confessed that "there is something inspiring in the thought of being called to take a leading part in the founding of a new town . . . and to advance the highest well-being of a community that is destined to grow and to shine in the practice of Christian and temperance principles." Ordinary colony members, however, were more likely to have been attracted by the Northern Pacific's commercial "hard sell" and had only the mildest interest in a moral crusade. For them the colony offered an escape from bad housing, a crushing work regime, and an uncertain future. Kerr recruited most of his Scots from the industrial belt of Clydeside, and the colony headquarters at Barrow was described by a local journal in 1871 as:

Thou town of labour, drinking, swearing, Railway whistling, fighting, tearing, with houses crammed to suffocation. 

Most of those who joined the colony, however, were not from the poorest sections of the community; indeed, these were actively discouraged by the leadership and the railroad. Rather, they were skilled workers who had little hope of advancement but retained a strong sense of initiative and ambition. Among their numbers were Edward Cooper of Barrow, a wheelwright; Thomas Ashburner, Barrow, a ship's carpenter; John Stewart, Dumbarton, an iron molder; Alex Broadfoot, Barrow, a blockmaker in a printing firm; and James Devine, Aberdeen, Scotland, a joiner. With the exception of Thomas Ashburner they were all young men — Cooper was twenty-three; Joseph Askew, Cumberland, thirty-two; James Ashburner, Barrow, twenty-six; William Kissack, Barrow, twenty-six; and Thomas Robb of Scotland, eighteen. 

All these recruits had two other qualities in common.

Sheppard's accounts for December, 1872, are dated January 1, 1873, and enclosed in Sheppard to Billings, January 8, 1873, Northern Pacific Records, LD, LR & MP.

Furness Gazette, May 28, 1873 (Kerr quote); Barrow Volunteer, June 3, 1871. 

Furness Colony Minutes. The author gleaned these names from the 1871 census of Barrow in the Barrow Public Library and the 1875 Minnesota Manuscript Census Schedules in the Minnesota Historical Society. 

Frank Thislethwaite, "Migration from Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Herbert Moller, ed., Population Movements in Modern European History (London, 1964); Charlotte Erickson, Invisible Immigrants, 16 (London School of Economics, 1972); Furness Colony Minutes (last quote).

Furness Colony Minutes, meeting of March 18, 1873; Ulverston Mirror, May 31, 1873, copy in MHS.

First, they were used to traveling in search of work — Bailey was from Nottingham, Hurst from Cumberland, Kissack from the Isle of Man — and had developed the "migrant mentality" which accepted movement and dislocation. Second, they sought a simpler way of life in America, where the ownership of land gave greater independence and stability and:

Where a man is a man if he's willing to toil, Where the humblest may gather the fruits of the soil. 

It was with these thoughts that a Furness colony selection committee set out in April, 1873, to choose a settlement site in Minnesota.

THE SELECTION COMMITTEE that left Liverpool aboard the "City of Limerick" on April 8, 1873, consisted of Bailey and Hurst; R. E. Robinson, retired merchant of Kendal in Westmorland; Thomas Robb, tenant farmer of Perth in Scotland; and W. J. Mower, a landowner of Blackwell in Derbyshire. For them the Atlantic voyage was a leisurely affair in first-class cabins, and upon reaching New York they were escorted west by attentive Northern Pacific officials. In contrast, the advance guard of ordinary colony members who accompanied the elite faced literally more pressing problems. The steerage compartments of the "City of Limerick" were jammed to overflowing, an ironic situation for a ship carrying emigrants to the "wide open spaces" of America, and at Brainerd the newcomers were put to work completing a railroad reception house. 

This difference in experience resulted in a few dis-
cordant letters being sent back to Furness and did little to mold the colony into a cohesive unit. It took the selection committee the whole month of May to agree on the colony site, with the final choice resting between the rich prairie land of the Red River Valley and the mixed plain and timber country in Wadena County. Two factors worked against the Red River Valley: much of the land was already in the hands of speculators, and the supply of good water and timber was felt to be insufficient for the large farming community envisaged by the colony leaders. The Northern Pacific was keen on diverting attention to Wadena as the railroad would benefit directly from the establishment of a colony in a region which was still remote and unsettled. The local general agent, James B. Power, was permitted to offer especially favorable terms for the Furness colonists to settle at Wadena, and in the first week of June, 1873, Hurst and Bailey cabled east: "Tell friends all is right and to come at once." 13

When the first colonists reached Wadena they found it to be an isolated and undeveloped township with only a few services. In fact, the county had been formally organized only that February, and the first modern claims were little more than one year old. Yet the area's remoteness gave the colony the opportunity to create its own distinctive community free from any significant outside influence. William Hurst was eager to champion the colony site: "There is no mistake about the soil here. . . . The rapidity of growth here is simply marvellous." The Ashburner brothers soon began to work their land and wrote home: "We have got five and six acres broken and set with wheat, beans, potatoes, carrots, water melons, tomatoes, turnips, cucumber, reddish, lettuce and cabbage." 14

Not everyone was as taken with Wadena, however, and a Scottish emigrant, John Munro, soon left for Canada. He said: "I have found it [Wadena] very different to what it was represented to be. The mosquitoes are fearful." Munro's defection was not in itself a serious matter, but it did indicate the difficulties a young colony faced. For example, the cohesiveness of the settlement was upset immediately by the reluctance of the Scots and the English to mix together. Despite the formal merger between Robert Kerr's Scots and the Furness colony, the former had been left to make their own way to Minnesota via a long and tedious route up the St. Lawrence River and across the Great Lakes. Upon reaching Wadena the Scots congregated on what became known as Compton Prairie, leaving the English to scatter to the south and east of Wadena. 15

Another division surfaced at Wadena. Faced with the practical necessity of having to stake a claim, build a simple wooden shack, and prepare for their first winter in Minnesota, the ordinary colony members had no time for the loftier motives behind the Furness venture. One emigrant, John Stewart, later recorded his im-

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13 Power to George B. Hibbard (superintendent of emigration in the Northern Pacific land department), April 29, 1873, and Power to William A. Howard (N.P. land commissioner), May 10, 1873, both in Northern Pacific Records. LD, LR & MP; Hibbard to Sheppard (quot ing Hurst and Bailey), June 6, 1873, in Northern Pacific Records. Land Department, Letters Sent, Foreign Agents [LD. LS. to FA], p. 118-120, in MHS.
15 Forre Gazette, July 25, 1873; John Stewart, Building Up the Country on the Northwest Frontier, especially p. 7-18, a booklet privately printed, probably in the 1920s. It was later serialized in the Wadena Pioneer Journal from July 6, 1967, to October 26, 1967.
pressions of a welcoming talk delivered by Richard Bailey:

He organized a meeting on the track right off, and gave them quite a formidable speech...made up of a number of well-prepared quotations and trueisms as to their [the colonists'] duties, so that they would be an example to their neighbors, and an honor to their country.

The whole thing would have been in keeping for the starting of a "Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society," but out of place with these poor unsettled emigrants. . . . Their whole, earnest, anxious, serious considerations were to scrape a living out of that raw prairie before them.

Such problems were compounded by the fact that Bailey, the organizing force behind the colony, decided in the summer of 1873 that his health would not stand up to pioneer life, and he returned to England. Robert Kerr also was missing, domestic and money troubles having delayed his emigration to Minnesota. Nevertheless, the future for the Furness colony was not without hope. Kerr was committed to making the journey in 1874, and Hurst was established at Wadena and had, in fact, opened the Merchants Hotel in prospect of catering to further emigrants. His wife, Lavina, traveled to America heavily pregnant and on August 1, 1873, gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth — the first child of "New Wadena."

Hurst wrote home that "there are many Good Temp­lars amongst the settlers here, and as soon as we get time and a few more members we intend opening a lodge." Bailey and Hurst recognized that the first summer in Minnesota would have to be devoted solely to working the settlers' farms into shape for the coming winter. It was to the following year, 1874, that they looked for the development of the Furness colony as a temperance, Christian community. The Northern Pacific had promised financial assistance for a colony church and school, and much now depended on the railroad's commitment to its expanding immigration program and especially to its colony at Wadena. It is with this in mind that one can imagine the impact on the Furness colony when news reached Wadena in September, 1873, that the Northern Pacific's creditor, Jay Cooke and Company, had been forced to close its doors. Immediately the railroad was plunged into bankruptcy, and at a stroke the work of the previous two years was essentially wiped away.

THE NORTHERN PACIFIC Railroad was formed in 1864, but it struggled to find any support for the projected track between the Great Lakes and the Pacific coast until 1869 when the Jay Cooke banking house invested $5,000,000. This funding enabled the railroad to launch ambitious building and immigration policies and was typical of Cooke's cavalier approach to business. Unfortunately, the Northern Pacific was unable to attract any further creditors, so that when the weight of diverse speculations forced the Jay Cooke organization into liquidation the railroad had no alternative but to follow its partner into insolvency. Officials at the Northern Pacific's New York headquarters wired a rather startling message to agent Power: "Expect no further help from this end, take care of yourself as best you can." By ruthless pruning of staff and selling timberlands for stumpage, Power managed to bring some order to Northern Pacific affairs in the West, though in the winter of 1873-1874 the likelihood of survival was still uncertain. One of Power's many letters to New York conveyed the crushing sense of desperation he felt while isolated at the end of the road and harried by unpaid creditors: "We are completely, absolutely dead broke."

In England the effects of the Jay Cooke crash were

FURNESS COLONISTS, among others, stopped at this reception house, built at Brainerd by the Northern Pacific, for free accommodations and information.

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17Stewart, Building Up the Country, 35; Wadena Pioneer Journal, August 10, 1967, p. 1, feature section; Barrow Pilot, December 20, 1873; Kerr to Sheppard, April 1, 1873, enclosed in Sheppard to Alvred B. Netleton (trustees' agent for Jay Cooke and Company), April 3, 1873, in Northern Pacific Records, LD, LR & MP; Register of Births, Wadena County, Wadena.
18The Hurst quote is from the Ulverston Mirror, October 4, 1873, copy in MHS. Ellis P. Oberholtzer, Jay Cooke: Finan­cier of the Civil War, 2:378-439 (Philadelphia, 1907).
19James B. Power, "Bits of History Connected with the Early Days of the Northern Pacific Railway and the Organiza­tion of Its Land Department," in State Historical Society of North Dakota, Collections, 3:343-344 ('help' quote); Power to Hibbard, October 7, 1873, Northern Pacific Records, LD, LR & MP ('broke' quote).
equally dramatic. The London office of the railroad was starved for funds and ordered to dismiss all 800 European agents. Sheppard remained diligent nonetheless, and for a time he used his own money to keep the office open. He repeatedly criticized the New York office for failing to meet agents’ outstanding expenses, explaining that one man in Austria was so inconvenienced that “the poor fellow borrows money for his breakfast because we leave him unpaid.” Without the support of the railroad, another winter’s propaganda for the colony was out of the question. Three meetings were held, but these were only in Barrow and mainly to organize those colonists who had already committed themselves to farms at Wadena. When the later group of emigrants left in March, 1874, the business affairs of the Furness colony in England were wound up; by the end of the summer Sheppard had closed his London headquarters, and all official Northern Pacific activity in Europe ceased.

The disorganization of Northern Pacific affairs was evident at New York when the second group of Furness colonists was nearly led away by an agent of the Pennsylvania Railroad. At the last moment the Northern Pacific clerk noticed a familiar name (Ashburner) on the passenger list and was able to reclaim the bewildered emigrants. This second group included several names that were to become respected in Wadena County — Kissack, Broadfoot, Thomas Ashburner — but one member not in the party was Joseph Thompson of Lindal in Furness. It seems that Thompson was one of many who abandoned plans to emigrate after the Jay Cooke crash. In 1879 he did leave Lindal and settled in Colorado, where he stayed until his death in 1923.

At Wadena the winter of 1873-1874 had been a bleak one. The collapse of the railroad had left a rootless and barely formed community with the specter of a breakdown in its local economy. And in the isolation of Wadena one can appreciate a contemporary opinion that the crash left the Northern Pacific with “a railroad from Nowhere, through No-Man’s-Land to No Place.” Fortunately, the weather had been comparatively mild, with many “fair, sunny lucent days.” Nevertheless the very length of the winter became depressing and spring was gratefully welcomed: “It was a memorable day that they got their feet on the sod again.”

The prospects for the Furness colony were fundamentally altered by the events of September, 1873. Bailey and Hurst had hoped that a planned environment would create an atmosphere sympathetic to temperance, but instead the withdrawal of the Northern Pacific provided an alternative environment in which community ideals took second place to personal survival and independence. As a result, the story of the next decade at Wadena was one of struggle and slow progress, a story in which many of the original Furness colonists played a notable part.

For the great majority of Furness colonists the adjustment to a new life on the western prairies was a very gradual process. People accustomed to crowded streets and factories, or rolling hills and tidy fields, now stared across open plains and virgin woodlands. A neighbor was no longer literally “next door” but two miles or more away, which made visiting a special occasion rather than a casual part of normal life. James Robb was one who later reflected on his sadness at leaving “the highland glen, the healthy gale” of “my native vale.”

Yet it was perhaps not the altered scenery which presented the greatest challenge. The Wadena climate was radically different from the temperate weather of the United Kingdom. Instead of cool summers and wet, mild winters, the colonists faced summer temperatures that averaged 85 degrees Fahrenheit and winter months in which the mercury rarely climbed above the freezing point. The harshness of the Northwest winter was well known, and an English settler wrote to the Ulverston Mirror of July 12, 1873, to express his surprise that “a good many of our countrymen are coming to that cold climate of Minnesota to be frozen to death in the winter.” At Wadena the winter of 1874-1875 began in October, and there was still snow on the ground the following May. Potatoes and fruit froze in storage, bread had to be steamed to be cut, and, with the tracks to corn mills blocked by huge snowdrifts, flour had to be rationed. Week after week of below-zero temperatures and blizzards brought life almost to a standstill. Following the collapse of the Northern Pacific there was also a severe shortage of money in circulation at Wadena. Thus business had to be conducted through a crude system of barter.

This was certainly not what Robert Kerr had

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20 Sheppard to Billings, October 13, 1873, Northern Pacific Records, LD, LR & MP.
21 C. A. Wackerhagen (chief clerk of N.P. land department in New York) to Power, April 20, 1874, Northern Pacific Records, Land Department, Letters Sent, Minnesota District, p. 71-72.
22 Barrow Guardian, March 17, 1923.
23 Eugene V. Smalley, History of the Northern Pacific Railroad, 204 (New York, 1883); Brainerd Tribune, March 7, 1874.
26 See figures for St. Paul in the Andrew B. Paterson Meteorological Records, 1859-1870, in MHS division of archives and manuscripts.
27 Reminiscent letter from Mrs. Margaret Kerr, then of Wakefield, Kansas, to her daughter Annie (Mrs. Arthur P. Stacy of Minneapolis), January 31, 1892, in Robert Kerr and Family Papers in MHS. Weather figured in interstate rivalry.
prophesied at Furness colony meetings in England in 1873, for he had assured the audience that "the [Minnesota] atmosphere contained less moisture, and consequently was not so cold." He quickly became aware of the difficulties of tending a parish without a church. Services were held in a variety of settlers' houses, often reached only by a daunting trudge through waist-deep snow. Kerr had been crippled since a childhood accident and was unable to move around freely until a group of clergymen at Brainerd presented him with a horse and buggy. The winter of 1874–1875 was definitely pioneering with a vengeance, but common hardship did much to foster a sense of comradeship which the supporters of colony emigration had always claimed would provide protection for individual families. Kerr and his wife offered their home as an emergency barracks for stranded travelers, and at times it also served as a field hospital. On one occasion a visiting family contracted chicken pox, and Margaret Kerr had to nurse eight children.

The natural clannishness of the Scots helped them weather these early difficulties, and soon the leading figures of the Compton settlement were well established. They included James and Thomas Robb, farmers from Perth; James Stewart, an iron molder from Dumbarton; George Stewart, an engineer; James Strang, a baker from Dumbarton; James Anderson, a clothier from Motherwell; David Murray, a craftsman from Greenock; and others whose Scottish names littered the Minnesota countryside — among them, John Cameron, William Davidson, Alex McLean, and William Wilson. One or two Scots were even attracted to Compton at a later date. One such was Ebenezer Thomson who moved with his family from Canada in 1881, eight years after arriving there from Scotland. These people formed such a tightly knit community that in Wadena today the Furness colony is remembered as essentially a Scottish movement, its English roots all but forgotten. Certainly the English scattered over a wider area. Some took farms on what became known as England Prairie, while others like Alex Broadfoot and Joseph Askew moved farther afield to the east. William Hurst and William Rawson actually moved into the township of Wadena and turned their backs on a farming life. However, in the early years of settlement the great majority of the Furness colonists remained on their land.

The first attempts at farming involved much trial and error, even those with some experience in agriculture in Britain found the fresh demands of the western prairie a considerable challenge. Odd jobs such as lumbering in the winter, or fencing for wealthier farmers, or doing other types of labor helped a family survive those times when farm work was disrupted by unsound work oxen or lack of machinery. There can be no doubt that few Furness colonists made any advance in material wealth during the first five years of colonization. Those who adjusted most easily were migrants used to a low standard of living. Further setbacks came in 1876 and 1878 when swarms of locusts visited the region "in such deep, thick masses that they darkened the sun." Gradually, however, the farms were cleared and made productive. The agricultural extracts of the 1880 census record James Ashburner as having 90 acres of tended land, William Kissack 300 acres, James Robb 90 acres, and James Strang 113 acres. James and Thomas Robb and Kissack had farms valued at more than $3,000 each, based mainly on their crops of wheat, oats, and potatoes. The effort that went into such progress obliterated any concern for the broader needs of the community. As we have seen, when individual families were in trouble help was freely given, but as for social commitment, "nobody seemed to think they had any duties outside of their own homesteads."  

AMONG FURNESS COLONISTS who turned to agriculture was Stephen Ashburner of Barrow-in-Furness, England. This is a modern view of the farm he worked.


Barrow Pilot, January 25, 1873 (Kerr quote), undated obituary of Robert Kerr from Wakefield, Kansas, newspaper [1890] and Mrs. Kerr letter, in Kerr Papers, MHS; Brainerd Tribune, February 27, 1875. In Land and Emigration, vol. 11, July, 1872, an article on New Yeovil states that "the organised colony carries civilisation with it."

Furness colony membership list in Furness Colony (Wadena) Papers, MHS. The author got some of the information for this paragraph during a visit to Wadena in October, 1978, when he attended a meeting of the Wadena County Historical Society.

It was only when the hardest work was over that the colonists began to participate in public affairs. Kissack became treasurer of Wadena township, Joseph Askew was a road overseer, and James Ashburner was elected a town auditor. At Compton, James Strang was appointed town clerk, and James Robb was named treasurer. There was, however, no hope of the Furness colony being resurrected. An influx of other migrants in 1875-1876 produced a polyglot community of British, East Coast Americans, Canadians, Swedes, and Norwegians. Margaret Kerr found her new neighbors to be “perfect gentlemen — even the Scandinavians, to whom I could not speak a word, were good about making a place for me on their big sleighs.”

If the colony’s isolation had vanished, so had the colony leaders. Richard Bailey remained in England where he turned his attention again to teaching and religion. Despite fragile health, he remained active at Ulverston in Furness until a few weeks before his death in 1904. Robert Kerr soon decided that the Minnesota winters were cold after all and in about 1877 moved away to accept a ministry at Mitchell, Iowa. After holding several other church positions in Illinois and Kansas, Kerr died at Tomah, Wisconsin, on June 29, 1890. Hurst’s stay at Wadena was even shorter than Kerr’s, for he quickly moved to nearby Bluffton to take up a partnership in a corn mill. In 1878 he opened a post office at Bluffton, Otter Tail County, and then progressed to a banking business at Perham, Minnesota, before moving to Montana. Although his personal career was successful, there was no happy ending for Hurst. At Glendive, Montana, his eldest son, Joseph, who had come to America when only one year old, was hung in March, 1900, for the murder of the town sheriff.

In one respect, however, the influence of the colony leaders remained after their departure. The 1874 Fourth of July celebrations at Wadena were marked by festivities that were carried off with “no accidents, no disturbances, no whisky, but free lemonade until you couldn’t rest.” Regular temperance meetings were held in the winter months at the township’s schoolhouse, erected in 1875, and in the late 1870s a temperance Wadena Reform Club was established. A saloon did begin business in the town and quickly gained a reputation for rowdism and “hellish doings,” but at the annual town meeting in March, 1878, the assembly voted overwhelmingly not to renew the saloon’s license. Bailey and Hurst had been correct in their belief that the stability and challenge of farm life would create an environment sympathetic to temperance, but the 1873 crash effectively destroyed any hopes of achieving their ideal.

HOW LARGE was the Furness colony? Its exact size was never recorded, and a surviving membership list not only omits known emigrants but also includes members who never made the journey to Minnesota. However, by using the colony archives together with newspaper files, letters, and census extracts it is possible to provide reasonably accurate totals. In England and Scotland the colony attracted more than 200 men, women, and children, of whom about ninety were living in the Wadena area by 1875. This figure doubtless would have been higher but for the Jay Cooke crash. A young community naturally resulted in a high birthrate; this, together with an influx of other English and Scottish families, resulted in a population of some 130 Furness colonists by 1880.

One is left to consider whether the failure of the Furness colony was due to any specific defects on its own part, or whether its difficulties were part of a general weakness in colony organization. There certainly were other planned settlements in Minnesota that failed about the same time that Furness did. The Yeovil colony collapsed quickly in the summer of 1873, a victim of bad management, land speculators, unrealistic expectations, and clashes of personality. A group of New Englanders formed a colony at Detroit Lakes in the spring of 1872 only to find life there a constant and unrewarding struggle. Even the Furness colony people were warned by an emigrant writing to the press in Ulverston, Furness: “Paddle your own canoe. . . Join no colony, except for cheap transport.” And Sheppard himself repeatedly placed his faith as much in the individual migrant as in the organized colony. Yet “cooperative emigration” did cut costs and allowed neighbors to move to the New World together. Throughout the 1870s the northwestern states were filled with large groups of Scandinavians, Germans, and East Coast Americans, many of whom displayed a tendency to settle in communities as much like their homelands as possible.

What often destroyed colonies was a combination of fickle leadership, inadequate planning, lack of cheap land, and personal squabbles among the colony members. The Furness colony seemed in 1873 to have a better chance than most to overcome such obstacles. Sheppard had a poor opinion of English emigrants in general: “English emigrants are in many respects peculiar and troublesome.” He added: “They display an unwillingness to sink individual preference by uniting in a coloniz-

29Wadena Tribune, March 16, 1878; Mrs. Kerr’s letter to daughter, in Kerr Papers, MHS.
31Brainerd Tribune, July 11, 1874 (July 4 quote); Wadena Tribune, January 5, March 16, 1878.

24 Minnesota History
ing movement.” But he regarded the Furness leaders in a different light, a view shared by other Northern Pacific personnel. “The Furness Colony,” one official wrote, “are a very different set of men [from the Yeovil group] and are winning a better reception.”

The planning behind the Furness colony was adequate; there was enough land, all of it free from speculators; and Hurst was given charge of its sale. This was an unusual procedure but was allowed on the understanding that the profits realized would be used to construct a community church and school. Despite the obvious strains within the Furness colony — English and Scots, leaders and members — there is every reason to believe they could be overcome given reasonable conditions in Minnesota. The key to the collapse of the colony was the failure of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1873 and the consequent absence of financial and professional help on both sides of the Atlantic. As a result the emigrants fragmented and looked exclusively to their own needs.

Nevertheless, the Furness colony was not a total waste, for the great majority of members benefited from their move to Minnesota. Some became prominent members of the Wadena community. For example, William Anderson from Scotland became a justice of the peace, and there were others who achieved a more prosperous life in Minnesota than they could have expected in England or Scotland. Before his death in 1894, Thomas Ashburner "was looked upon as one of the largest and most successful farmers in the county.” James Ashburner opened a sawmill, Joseph Askew ran a hotel, and Thomas Robb became a grain buyer.

The dream of Bailey and Hurst of a temperance farming community may have been blown away in the aftermath of the Jay Cooke failure, but the colony brought many ambitious men to Wadena — emigrants who proved once more that the American frontier offered a chance to those who were willing to surmount early difficulties. Even when they moved to neighboring states, the Furness colonists did not forget their first home in their adopted country. Stephen Ashburner, for example, is buried at Mt. Nebo cemetery near Wadena although he died elsewhere. His grave marker bears simple testimony to the adventure which began at a crowded schoolroom in Barrow in 1872:

Stephen Ashburner
Born in Barrow-in-Furness, England
November 13, 1859
Died in Mandan, North Dakota
June 9, 1935

THE GRAVE of Stephen Ashburner, who made the move from Barrow, England, to Minnesota, is marked by this stone in Mt. Nebo cemetery near Wadena. As shown, he died in Mandan, North Dakota, in 1935.

THE PHOTOGRAPH of Richard Bailey on p. 17 and the posters on p. 17 and p. 20 are from the Furness Colony Papers in the Minnesota Historical Society; the pictures of Barrow on p. 18 and p. 19 are from Joseph Richardson, Furness Past and Present (Barrow and London, 1880); the reception house picture on p. 21 is from the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, Guide to the Northern Pacific Railroad Lands in Minnesota 1872, p. 49 (Boston, 1872); the pictures of Ashburner's farm and grave, p. 23 and p. 25, are by Bryn Trescatheric; the maps are by Alan Ominsky.