

BRUCE M. WHITE

# The Power of Whit

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## OR, THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSEPH ROLETTE JR.

**I**N MARCH 1857 A SHORT, merry, prank-loving member of the Minnesota territorial legislature made away with a recently passed bill in order to prevent it from going into law. For several days he stayed holed up in a local hotel where he ate sumptuous meals, drank fine wines and whiskies, played poker, and partied with his male and female friends. On the last day of the legislative session, just as the final gavel fell, he appeared, ready to report the bill, to the laughter of supporters and opponents alike. The following day he was paraded by torchlight through the streets of St. Paul. Within 15 years he died a pauper. Decades later a fellow territorial politician commemorated the events of 1857 by presenting two portraits of him in métis garb, one to the prestigious Minnesota Club, the other to the Minnesota Historical Society. For generations since, his exploits have been described in loving detail in books and magazines intended for adults and impressionable young people.<sup>1</sup>

The tale of Joseph Rolette Jr. is one of the key stories that Minnesotans of generations past have remembered about the territorial years. It was Rolette, also known as Jolly Joe, who “stole” the bill that would have moved the capital of Minnesota from St. Paul to St. Peter. It was also Joe Rolette—sometimes described as a “half breed”—who brought his dogs into the halls of the capitol, and about whom, when “a commotion was heard down the street,” early residents of St. Paul said: “Well, it is either a big fire or else Joe Rolette is in town.”<sup>2</sup>

What explains the popularity of Rolette—the character—and the endurance of the legend about the capital bill, an unusual one for a state that prides itself on clean politics? Perhaps it is simply a colorful, romantic legend, helpful in enlivening otherwise dry accounts of bills written, debated, and passed. Or perhaps the story provides a much-needed example of an individual making a difference in a world where committees and quorums govern. It could be that the legend of Joe Rolette is

**Dakota tipis surround the lone frame home of  
John H. Stevens near the Falls of St. Anthony, the future site of  
Minneapolis’s Bridge Square, in this 1854 daguerreotype**

like the trickster stories found in the literature of many cultures, designed to amuse and to provide children with examples of otherwise unacceptable behavior.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not these factors help explain the legend's endurance, the often-described incidents of Rolette's life—many of which seem to have occurred—are succinct records of important themes in the early history of Minnesota. The capital bill itself was the product of the conflict between political factions and economic interests in the territory, played out, in part, in terms of race. The events depend in part on Rolette's perceived status as a half breed, a category that many in the territory considered emblematic of the social, cultural, and political system they sought to remove or replace. Altogether, the legend of Joe Rolette is about culture, politics, race, and power. For these reasons it is worth remembering and reconsidering.

STUDYING THE PRETERRITORIAL PERIOD of Minnesota's history is a little like doing archaeology. Each generation creates a structure of belief and experience that covers up or reinterprets past experiences and past views of the world. This is especially true for generations that undergo great communal experiences such as mass movements, wars, and depressions. Such groups often reinvent the past as a tool for achieving social, political, and cultural change. In doing so, they make it difficult for later generations to understand the lives and experiences of people before the period of massive change. To imagine what life was like in the Minnesota region before 1849 and appreciate the nature of the drastic changes that took place in the 1850s, it is necessary to dig through the deposits of interpretation left by territorial Minnesotans.

In 1853 John Wesley Bond began his classic guidebook, *Minnesota and Its Resources*, with a description designed to reinterpret the region's culture and history: "A very few years ago and the present territory of Minnesota was a waste of woodland and of prairie, uninhabited save by the different hordes of savage tribes from time immemorial scattered through its expanse, with of later years a few white traders only intermingled. At intervals a zealous missionary of the cross, or adventurous traveller, by turns found their way to the Great Falls of St. Anthony."<sup>4</sup>

Found here are some of the basic themes of post-territorial Minnesota history: the region was inhabited by savage, uncivilized, wandering peoples who made wasteful use of the land and were occasionally visited by a few traders, missionaries, and daring adventurers. An early Minnesota politician, William P. Murray, provided an example of the way that these themes came to be

copied and embellished. In a 1904 speech to the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society, he described the territory in 1849 as "little more than a wilderness, a vast waste of prairie and pine lands," a region that was "more remote from settlement and civilization than the most distant part of our country today."<sup>5</sup>

A key concept in Murray's speech was "settlement," the term usually used to describe the process through which European Americans came to inhabit vast regions of the United States. Though the word can simply mean a place where people live and the process by which people move from one region to another, nineteenth-century European Americans used it to describe a culturally specific set of beliefs about proper land use and, more generally, what constituted civilization.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, settlement was not merely the presence of people but the introduction of various features that symbolized Euro-American society and provided the basis for an ordered way of life. Essential to the concept was agriculture, defined as planting crops on a large scale or raising domestic animals. The so-called settlers of the 1850s were, in their terms, engaged in imposing agriculture and the agricultural way of life on an orderless region that they believed to be wasted on its inhabitants.

These beliefs would later provide the basis for the frontier thesis of historian Frederick Jackson Turner. For Turner, settlement was a process of social evolution, of "progress from primitive industrial society without division of labor, up to manufacturing civilization." The frontier was "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," the place where an oncoming movement of people of mainly European origin encountered what was seen as a wilderness, an area of "free land"—that is, land occupied only by Indian people.<sup>7</sup>

While the characteristics used to describe settlement were essentially cultural, race was becoming increasingly important in defining American civilization. More and more Americans in the midnineteenth century believed that human beings could be categorized according to racial groups, not all of which had the same intelligence and capabilities. Those considered superior were described as Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Caucasian—or, simply, white. Indian people and blacks, as well as, on occasion, Irish, Italians, and others were thought to be inferior and without a part to play in the making of American society. In keeping with these new attitudes, settlement and civilization came to be described as the accomplishments of white people, even if other groups might live an orderly, cultured existence. From this point of view, the history of settlement in the Minnesota region, as described by post-territorial

historians, was essentially the story of how Minnesota came to be white.<sup>8</sup>

Murray showed this perspective in his speech when he sought to define which early non-Indian residents of the region were white and which were not. He noted that early in 1849 the “entire white population scarcely exceeded one thousand persons.” Later that year, when more immigrants had arrived, a census recorded 4,680 whites, but he stated that many of these individuals were not really white. For example, St. Paul “had a population of some two hundred, a majority of whom were Indian traders, French, and half breeds” and, of the 637 people of Pembina recorded in the 1849 territorial census, “only a small fraction . . . were white.” Murray wished to make clear that the people of European ancestry living in Minnesota in 1849—who had been in the region all of their lives and by many definitions would be called settlers—were not white, not part of the great movement of white settlers into the region. They were part of Minnesota’s past, not its future.<sup>9</sup>

FOR ALMOST 200 YEARS before 1849 the Minnesota region was the scene of a complex economic endeavor, the fur trade, that supported an interdependent social system in which Indian people and mostly French traders lived peacefully together, trading and intermarrying.<sup>10</sup> This system—which benefited both Indian people and the European trade—persisted through British and American control, mainly due to the social and cultural continuity in communities of people of French, Indian, and mixed ancestry, later augmented by some British and American fur traders.

The evolution of the social system through generations of the trade was equally complex. Far from being a homogeneous group, the children of intermarriage between European traders and Indian people exhibited a range of cultural possibilities, often related to economic class. Some children were fully incorporated into Indian communities. Others—particularly those of prominent traders—were sent east to be educated and continue in a trading role. Culturally, they were European.

Still other people of mixed ancestry created new identities apart from the context of the trading post or

the Indian village. Impetus for this creation came from the amalgamations of the XY and North West Companies in 1805 and the North West and Hudson’s Bay Companies in 1821. These consolidations put many people out of work, forcing them and their families to survive through hunting, gathering, and trading, following both European and Indian patterns. In places such as Prairie du Chien, St. Paul, Mendota, Pembina, and the Red River settlement of Manitoba, as well as in areas surrounding trading-post villages throughout the region, people of mixed ancestry and culture created autonomous, diverse communities.<sup>11</sup>

In the midnineteenth century a variety of terms described the new identities of these people of mixed ancestry and cultures. The German ethnographer and geographer Johann G. Kohl noted that the people of Ojibwe-French heritage on Lake Superior referred to themselves with a jesting term, *chicot*—a French-Canadian word for half-burnt stumps. Other phrases were *bois brulé* or *bois grillé* (burned wood or grilled wood), “in reference to the shades of colour that bronze the face of a mixed breed.” A newer term, originally used for specific groups of French-Indian people living



Settlers, possibly the Orrocks of Big Lake in present-day Sherburne County, dressed up and posed outside of their log cabin, about 1857



Census enumerator  
William W. Warren

on the northern plains and supported by the large herds of buffalo, was *métis*, which simply means “mixed” or “mixed race” in French.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the names that English-speaking Americans used for these people—“half breed,” “half blood,” and “mixed blood”—had racial implications. In some instances these classifications merely described the fact or degree of intermarriage. William W.

Warren, an educated man of mixed ancestry himself, wrote a fictional tale in the early 1850s of a fur trader among the Blackfeet, a “halfblood” with a Scottish father and Indian mother.<sup>13</sup> Increasingly, however, these terms, particularly “half breed,” were used as slurs, designed to suggest an alleged tainted nature.

The specific meaning of these various designations depended largely on context. The census of Minnesota Territory taken in 1850 provides an opportunity to examine the definitions of the terms “half breed” and “white.” Like the census of 1849, the 1850 count was designed to measure the population of non-Indian people. It yielded a total of 6,077 residents. If one accepts the U.S. Department of Indian Affairs’ estimates of 31,700 Indian people living in and near the territory in the early 1850s, these 6,077 represented only about 16 percent of the area’s total population (see Table 1).<sup>14</sup>

In addition to recording names, sexes, and birthplaces, census enumerators could also note what would now be called racial classifications such as white, black, mulatto, half breed, and Indian (although no Indians were recorded). Some enumerators, such as the fur trader Alexis Bailly, who recorded Wabashaw County, and William Warren, who did Mahkahta and Wahnahta, listed no one as a half breed. In fact, the only racial categories they used were “black” and “mulatto,” which meant that they classified all others as white. On the other hand, Jonathan McKusick, a 38-year-old lumberman who had arrived only the year before from Maine, listed a number of families as half breeds in his census of Washington and Itasca Counties. Probably few of the

individuals he identified by this term varied in degree of Indian ancestry from many of the individuals Bailly and Warren recorded as white. In the end, the published 1850 census used only two categories: whites—including all those specifically described by enumerators as half breeds—and free colored (see Table 2).<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, at the time of the 1850 census, the federal government was not concerned with identifying people

**TABLE 1**  
Indian Groups in Minnesota Territory, 1849–53\*

Group	Year	Population
<b>Ojibwe</b>		
Lake Superior (Grand Portage, Fond du Lac)	1850	500
St. Croix River (Namekagan, Pokegama, Yellow, and Rice Lakes, Snake River)	1850	800
Mississippi (Sandy Lake, Mille Lacs, Rabbit River, Gull Lake, and other locations)	1850	1,100
Pillagers (Leech Lake, Ottertail Lake)	1850	1,050
Northern or Red Lake (Red Lake, Pembina, Cass Lake, Lake Winnibigoshish)	1850	1,200
Bois Forts (Rainy Lake, Vermilion Lake)	1850	800
<b>Dakota</b>		
Mdewakanton	1849	2,200
Wahpekute	1849	800
Wahpetonwan	1849	1,500
Sisseton	1849	3,800
Yankton	1849	3,200
Yanktonai	1849	4,000
Teton	1849	6,000
<b>Ho-Chunk (Winnebago)</b>	1849	2,500
<b>Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara</b>	1853	2,250
<b>Total</b>		<b>31,700</b>

\* St. Croix Ojibwe, Teton Dakota, Ho-Chunk, and the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara were not contained entirely within Minnesota Territory.

Sources: Statistics compiled by Ken Mitchell and the author from estimates in U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1849, p. 79, 82, 84–87, 88; 1850, p. 53–59; 1853, p. 116. Groups are categorized as shown in the original sources. For the Wahpekute a range of 600–800 was given.

**TABLE 2**  
**Non-Indian Population of Minnesota Territory, 1850**

Birthplace	White Male	White Female	Free Colored Male	Free Colored Female	Total
Total U.S. excluding Minnesota	1,612	874	14	11	2,511
Minnesota Territory	776	796	7	7	1,586
Total Foreign Born	1,305	672	0	0	1,977
Unknown	2	1			3
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,695</b>	<b>2,343</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>6,077</b>

Source: *United States Census*, 1850, p. 993, 996

of European-Indian ancestry. How many were living in the territory? Without a detailed look at the genealogies of those recorded, an actual measure is not possible. Nonetheless, a majority of those listed as being born in Minnesota and the British Red River region may have been of Dakota, Ojibwe, or other Indian ancestry. The sum of these categories suggests that people of Indian-European ancestry may have numbered as many as 2,237, or 37 percent of the territory's population. This figure includes the children of new arrivals and missionaries who had been in the region for some time, but it leaves out residents of mixed ancestry who had been born in Wisconsin, Michigan, Missouri, and other locations (see Table 3). In fact, statistician Joseph A. Wheelock wrote that in 1860 there were 3,475 people of mixed-Indian ancestry in the state. Since the area of the new state was smaller than that of the earlier territory, his larger figure may be the most accurate for 1850. In that case, more than 57 percent of the non-Indian population of Minnesota Territory would have been of mixed-Indian ancestry.<sup>16</sup>

The ways that different enumerators categorized the population of Minnesota Territory shows the contextual nature of the terms "white" and "half breed" and the way in which they evolved. Beginning in 1849, population figures were used to argue for recognition as a territory and, later, as a state. Categorizing people of mixed ancestry as white helped make the case for the territory.

Later on, however, in describing how far Minnesota had come, people like Murray minimized the white population before 1849 in order to emphasize the vast strides made by later settlers. At the same time, it was useful to stress the wild, unusual, foreign quality of the place before large numbers of whites arrived. Territorial Governor Ramsey in an 1853 speech provided an early example of this retrospective view, describing what he

had seen when he first came to St. Paul four years before: "the motley humanity partially filling these streets—the blankets and painted faces of Indians, and the red sashes and moccasins of French voyageurs and half-breeds, greatly predominating over the less picturesque costume of the Anglo-American race."<sup>17</sup>

**TABLE 3**  
**Birthplaces of Non-Indian Minnesotans, 1850**

Birthplaces	Males	Females	Total
New England States	434	215	649
Middle Atlantic States	511	221	732
Middle Western States	507	366	873
Southern States	151	67	218
Other U.S.	56	34	90
Minnesota Territory	741	768	1509
British Red River	365	363	728
Eastern Canada	490	176	666
Other Foreign Born	461	140	601
Unknown	5	5	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,721</b>	<b>2,355</b>	<b>6,076</b>

Source: Statistics compiled by David Hacker from the original 1850 census for the Minnesota Historical Society exhibits program, forthcoming in Steven Rugles and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series* (Minneapolis: Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, 1998). This re-compilation produced a total population for the territory of one less than the published figure. This author categorized raw data in the database into the regional groupings shown above. New England states include Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Middle Atlantic states: Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. Southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Midwestern states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

The early histories of Minnesota's settlement described the many "firsts" accomplished by white people—the first town, church, school, and child born—allegedly producing an orderly region of uniform whiteness in which no racial mixing took place. In these accounts, the presence or accomplishments of people of mixed background were seldom considered relevant.<sup>18</sup>

In reference to such accounts of firsts, George Bonga, a fur trader at Leech Lake and the grandson of a black slave at Mackinac Island who had married an Ojibwe woman, explained how he fit into the world of people who were either white or not white. Bonga "would frequently paralyze his hearers," according to territorial legislator Charles E. Flandrau, "when reminiscing by saying, 'Gentlemen, I assure you that John Banfil [an early St. Paul businessman] and myself were the first two white men that ever came into this country.'" Bonga's witty remark suggests that the term "white" was a relative one, often contrasted with either

"black" or "red." In the Minnesota context, where the contrast between white and red was of prime importance, Bonga, a fur trader and, therefore, culturally non-Indian, had to be white.<sup>19</sup>

Other preterritorial residents of the region made other choices. Ethnographer Kohl noted that even "pure-blooded French Voyageurs" who had lived their entire lives among the Indians and intermarried with them sometimes identified themselves as *chicot* or *bois brûlé*. Further, he noted, they "identified themselves with the Indians against the Anglo-Saxons," giving the example of one man who spoke nostalgically about what life was like before *les blancs*, the whites—meaning British, Scottish, Irish, and Yankees—had appeared among them. He missed most, he told Kohl, the songs that people in these communities had known and sung. It was sad, he said, that few people knew them any more.<sup>20</sup>

For this French Canadian, being nonwhite represented a specific society of European and Indian background, one that depended on an interactive social and economic relationship, one that was becoming less and less possible with the changes taking place in the region. Perhaps most significantly, the fur trade itself, which had given birth to this society, was ceasing to exist in its traditional form.

BY THE TIME MINNESOTA became a territory, native Americans were under pressure from the movement to colonize the Great Lakes country. With colonization, Indian people, who had held real power in the fur-trade era, were marginalized, no longer crucial to the survival or profit of Europeans who entered the area.

This process of marginalizing was gradual, and it began with the signing of treaties turning over title to vast areas of land to the U.S. government. Essential to the process was the participation of fur traders and other opportunistic entrepreneurs who created a new form of economic enterprise. In what historian Robert A. Trennert called the "Indian business," Indian people were still the source of profit but received little long-term benefit in return.<sup>21</sup>

The link between the Indian-based fur trade and the Indian business was the traditional credit system wherein Indian people were advanced a variety of trade goods in the fall to be repaid in furs throughout the fall and winter. Short-term variations in climate and in animal populations meant that it was sometimes difficult to repay debts fully. On the other hand, traders had allowed for a certain amount of unpaid credit in the rates of exchange they negotiated. Traders often forgave Indian debts because they were seldom real debts. Nonetheless, in treaties for land signed with Indian people beginning in

Fur trader George Bonga



the 1830s, large trading companies were able to persuade the federal government to allow for repayment of a variety of these often-illusory debts.<sup>22</sup>

For traders—including some of mixed ancestry—these payments were a windfall, an indemnity for losing their business, and the basis of a new kind of endeavor. For the government these payments were essentially a bribe or kickback, a price that had to be paid for the cooperation of traders in negotiating the treaties. Some of the payments may have been justified, but the system spawned new kinds of traders who advanced goods to Indian people in anticipation of treaty signings for the sole purpose of later filing claims for inflated debts.<sup>23</sup>

Claims for debts were not the only ways in which traders profited from the government's system of paying Indian people for their land. Yearly disbursements of goods and money—called annuity payments—provided entrepreneurs with the opportunity to sell items to Indians. Being at the annuity payments also allowed traders to coerce Indian people into repaying debts. In addition, some traders and former trade employees were paid to be interpreters, farmers, or blacksmiths. Others were involved in government contracts to help resettle Indian people on new lands, as required by some of the treaties.

In Minnesota Territory, the Indian business was an industry that not only profited individual companies and entrepreneurs but also fueled the fledgling economy. It was for this reason that the new territorial assembly passed, during its first session in 1849, a resolution asking the government in Washington to remove all Ojibwe living in areas that had been ceded under the treaties of 1837 and 1842. The ostensible reason for this request was to “ensure the security and tranquillity of the white settlements in an extensive and valuable district of this Territory,” but the vast majority of these Ojibwe were actually living across the border in the new state of Wisconsin. Their removal would put them entirely within Minnesota Territory, up the Mississippi River from the commercial center of St. Paul.<sup>24</sup>

Comments by prominent participants in the Indian business make clear the hopes attached to this resolution. Former fur trader Henry M. Rice, who had made money in the late 1840s arranging for the removal of the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) to a reservation they disliked in central Minnesota, told Governor Ramsey in December 1849 that the Ojibwe who lived in Wisconsin and received their annuities at La Pointe

should be removed from the ceded lands. They should receive their annuities on the Mississippi River, say at or near Sandy Lake, at which place an Agency for the

whole tribe should be established. This would better accommodate the whole tribe and Minnesota would reap the benefit whereas now their annuities pass via Detroit and not one dollar do our inhabitants get altho' we are subject to all the annoyance given by those Indians.<sup>25</sup>

President Zachary Taylor ordered the removal of the Wisconsin Ojibwe into the Upper Mississippi region on February 6, 1850. A participant in the affair, Charles H. Oakes, a former American Fur Company trader on Lake Superior who was then setting up operations in St. Paul, wrote to business ally Henry H. Sibley: “I have received the appointment of removal agent for the Chippeways and hope to be able to make it profitable to the company as the employing of men, furnishing provisions and canoes &c. will necessarily be done through me.”<sup>26</sup>

Subsequently, the whole removal effort fell apart from mismanagement and corruption on the part of government officials, not to mention the fact that many Ojibwe died from starvation and disease because of late annuity payments. Finally, the Wisconsin Ojibwe simply refused to remain in Minnesota Territory. Even then, charges made back and forth referred to the loss of potential profit. William Warren, who lived in Benton County, Minnesota Territory, and had been hired to help in the removal, stated that had it been successful, the “money would naturally have found its way down



**Trade goods transformed:**  
Floral embroidery and blue silk ribbon on a woolen shirt, probably made from a trader's blanket

the Mississippi (the natural channel) and instead of hard times we should have had easy times, and money would have been plenty.”<sup>27</sup>

In economic terms, what Warren referred to was the multiplier effect, the widespread result of a government expenditure on the economy. Businessmen who contracted with the government or who dealt directly with Indian people used their money to invest in real estate, to build buildings and houses, to buy, sell, and hire. Each person they paid spread the money around to others, helping to create a Minnesota economy, though little long-term benefit accrued to Indian people themselves.

Understanding of this multiplier effect is evident in a local saying from the early 1850s. As the *Minnesota Pioneer* reported on August 8, 1850: “One would suppose by the promises about town, that the Indian payment would square every debt in Minnesota, but the ‘debt of Nature.’ Every reply to a dun is, ‘after the payment.’”

Alexander Ramsey, in an address to the 1851 legislature, put the matter succinctly: “The payments of the Indian annuities supply much the larger portion of our current currency, and through the various channels of trade contribute greatly to our prosperity.” Five years later the *St. Paul Advertiser* provided more detail:

A few years ago the Indian Payments were the great event of the year in Minnesota. Everything in financial matters dated from and was referred to the Indian Payments; almost our whole specie currency was derived from this source. Notes fell due and Grocer’s bills matured at the Indian Payment. The persistent dun, the wife’s new dress, the ball, the workman, and the new hat, were put off till “after payment.”

The article stated that annuity payments—regardless of the welfare of the Indian people who were supposed to benefit from them—were “one of the grand resources of Minnesota,” discussed along with “vague hints of exhaustless coal fields and rich lead mines on the Minnesota, and perennial supplies of imaginary pumpkins, two feet in diameter.”<sup>28</sup>

Statistics for the 1850s show the importance of Indian expenditures. In his 1860 compilation, J. A. Wheelock stated that from 1849 to 1859 the federal government expended \$4.2 million to “fulfill Treaty obligations with Indian tribes.” This amounted to more than \$380,000 per year, although particular treaties affected the amount each year in different ways. By comparison, expenditures supporting the territorial government, building military roads, and erecting lighthouses and military posts amounted to only \$1.2 million, or an average of \$120,000 per year, for the same period. No private enterprise in the Minnesota region at the begin-

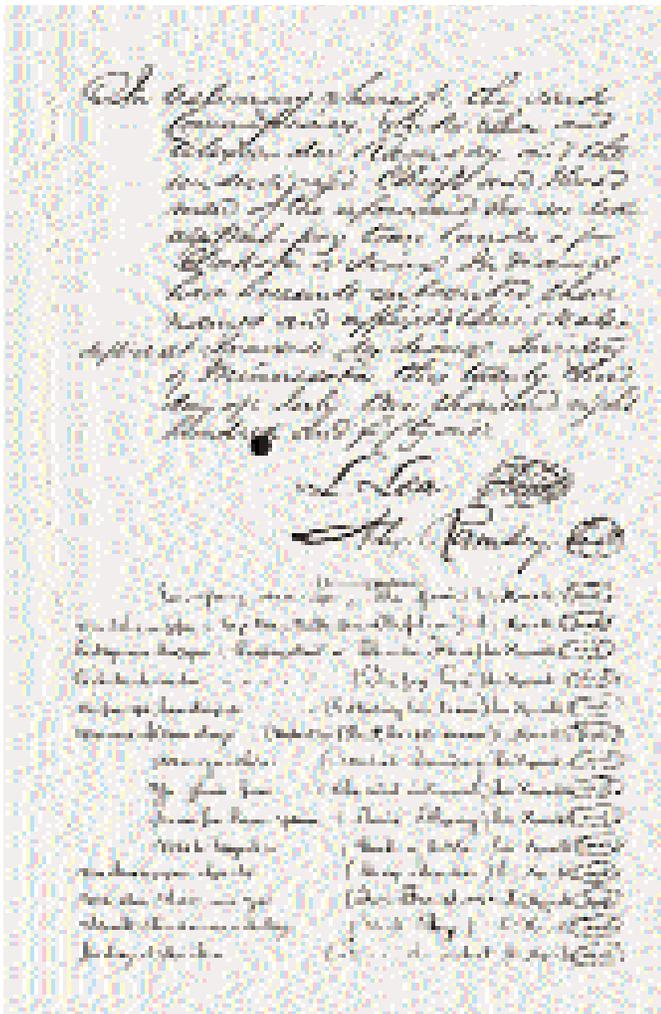
ning of the 1850s could match the value obtained yearly from Indian expenditures. In 1849 one of the largest of the new businesses, lumbering in the St. Croix River valley, produced logs worth an estimated \$150,000. It was not until 1855 that the annual production exceeded \$380,000 per year.<sup>29</sup>

By 1856, when other industries had come to rival Indian-related government expenditures, the *St. Paul Advertiser* noted that the expenditures had been important in a population of no more than 30,000 “nibbling for the most part on the edges of the Indian trade.” But now that the region’s population was 150,000 people involved in “agriculture, manufactures and commerce,” no one cared when or where the Indians were paid. According to the newspaper, a single week’s business in St. Paul exceeded the yearly payment in cash of \$90,000 to the Dakota.<sup>30</sup>

It is clear from this evidence that Indian people, through the money due them for their land, were key in providing an early boost for the Minnesota economy. Without them, economic development would have been greatly slowed. Besides this boost, Indian expenditures shaped Minnesota politics in the territory’s initial years. Its key figures—people like Sibley and Rice—owed their economic standing to the profits they made in the Indian business and their political power to their ability to deliver the Indian expenditures to the larger community. Most of the men involved in the Indian business and the political power connected to it were Democrats, as were most Indian traders, a result of the party’s long-term control of Indian policy in Washington.<sup>31</sup>

In the early 1850s in Minnesota the major political contests were between Democratic factions eager to have the largest share of the pie. An example was the recurrent competition between Sibley and Rice who, essentially, sought the same political results but differed as to who would receive the economic benefits. The *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* once commented that a controversy over Rice’s contract for the removal of the Ho-Chunk in 1850 did not warrant making political capital, since it was simply a “personal quarrel between two rival parties of Indian traders. . . . One party *wanted* the contract—the other *got* it.”<sup>32</sup>

Even non-Democrats such as Ramsey, the Whig-appointed territorial governor and superintendent of Indian affairs, participated tacitly, if not always eagerly, in this profitable relationship between politics and the Indian business. In January 1853 the *St. Paul Democrat* condemned the “conclave” of Ramsey and Sibley in the “Sioux Frauds,” the wholesale distribution of Indian money from the Dakota treaties of 1851 to a variety of traders.<sup>33</sup> Only with the appointment of Ramsey’s re-



Page of the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux with signatures of Indian commissioners Luke Lea and Alexander Ramsey and the marks of “chiefs and head men” of the Sisseton and Wahpeton Dakota

placement did successful opposition develop not only to the letting of particular contracts and the distribution of treaty money in certain ways but to the more general, widespread practice of mixing business and Indian policy.

THE 1853 ELECTION of a new Democratic president, Franklin Pierce, brought reform to many policies of previous administrations. Instrumental in carrying out these changes in Minnesota Territory was the new governor, Willis A. Gorman, a lawyer, former and future military officer, and congressman, who was appointed in March. From the beginning, Gorman made it clear that he was unhappy with the way in which Indian policy had been carried out in Minnesota. He sought to cut off the access by businessmen of his own party to federal Indian money.

In the summer of 1853 Gorman took part in a congressional investigation of Ramsey’s actions in nego-

tiating the Dakota treaties of 1851. On August 8, 1853, Gorman negotiated a new treaty with the Ho-Chunk that shifted their reservation to a location more to their liking and left out payments to traders for past debts. That fall he took steps to terminate remnants of the policy of forcing Wisconsin Ojibwe to move to Minnesota.<sup>34</sup>

Needless to say, by the end of 1853 Gorman had earned many enemies in his own party, particularly Rice, who had been elected in October to replace Sibley as territorial delegate in Congress.<sup>35</sup> Rice was able to block ratification of the Ho-Chunk treaty, and rumors were circulating in Washington that Gorman’s power over Indian matters would be curtailed by a separation of the duties of territorial governor and superintendent of Indian affairs, something that had been accomplished in other territories.

Gorman wrote to an official in Washington explaining the difficulties he had encountered in Minnesota due to his opposition to the people who had “fattened for 25 years upon the Indians and the U. S. Treasury.” He stated: “These men are evidently in hopes of getting some one here who can be used by them. Now I need not tell you that there is or has been more fraud and cheating in the Indian trade in the Territory than it has been my lot to see or know of any where else on earth.” This “interest,” he explained, was represented by Rice. When he first arrived in the territory, Gorman had supported Rice’s election as territorial delegate because they were fellow Democrats. But Rice had claims against the Ho-Chunk that he sought to have included in the treaty, and Gorman had not backed him. Gorman stated: “I don’t suit him. I have declined his overtures in Indian matters.”<sup>36</sup>

Changes in the territory’s population provided more backing for Gorman’s positions. Between 1855 and 1857 the population grew from 40,000 to 150,000. These new settlers came primarily from the Middle Atlantic states, New England, and the



Former Territorial Governor Willis A. Gorman, about 1866

Midwest. While figures from the pre-statehood census of 1857 have not been compiled, the influx from these regions is apparent in the 1860 federal census, taken after an additional 22,000 people had arrived in Minnesota. At that date, individuals from the three regions (excluding Minnesota) totaled 75,499, or 44 percent of the state's population (see Tables 4 and 5). These individuals settled in large numbers in southeastern Minnesota and became the base for the new Republican Party, begun in the state in 1855. Despite being a Democrat, Gorman aligned himself with the Republicans in a major debate of the time concerning the ultimate borders of Minnesota, the state-to-be.<sup>37</sup>

The impressive growth in Minnesota's population created an impetus for statehood. In pushing for it, congressional delegate Rice favored a new western boundary roughly like the current one. In the territory, however, there was a strong sentiment, especially among southern Minnesotans, in favor of dividing it along an east-west line around the 45th (just north of the Twin Cities) or 46th parallels (just north of Little Falls).<sup>38</sup>

Economic interests shaped the opposing positions. For businessmen based in St. Paul with backgrounds in the Indian trade, like Rice and his supporters, the north-south state would include a vast northern region where the trade that had brought them money and power could continue. To keep profiting from the intersection of business and Indian money, Rice himself needed to have political power in the same governmental entity in which he carried on trade.

The many newcomers and Republicans in southern Minnesota, who believed the future lay in agriculture, saw that a horizontally shaped state would isolate St. Paul near the northern border and strengthen the

**TABLE 4**  
**Birthplaces of Minnesotans in 1860 Census**

Birthplace	Population
<b>U.S. Outside of Minnesota</b>	
New England	18,822
Middle Atlantic States	30,075
Middle West	26,602
Other U.S.	3,491
<i>Subtotal</i>	78,990
<b>Minnesota</b>	34,305
<b>Total Born in U.S.</b>	<b>113,295</b>
<b>Foreign Born</b>	
Canada	8,023
British Isles	17,798
Europe	32,788
Other Foreign Born	119
<b>Total Foreign Born</b>	<b>58,728</b>
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>172,023</b>

Sources: *United States Census, 1860, Population*, 253, 254, 261, 262. Figures are for all so-called races and colors.

hand of agricultural interests. Governor Gorman aligned himself with the Republicans on this issue, a logical extension of his opposition to the corruption endemic in the Indian business.

These new political interests did not seek to eliminate any role for federal government in fostering private enterprise. Rather, they sought their subsidies in different ways such as railroad grants, another important issue at the time. The capital-removal bill that Rolette confiscated was still another example. Not content to wait for action in Washington, Gorman and the Republicans sought to further their position by moving the capital of the territory to a town more centrally located in the state they hoped to create: St. Peter, on the Minnesota River. Gorman himself invested in the company hoping to develop the new capital—a form of graft and a conflict of interest or simply an indication of the depth of his feeling, depending on how one looked at it. Gorman was quoted in the *Daily Minnesotian* as saying that he hoped to see “grass grow in the business streets of St.

**TABLE 5**  
**Racial Categories of Minnesotans in 1860 Census**

	Native Born		Foreign Born		Totals
	Males	Females	Males	Females	
White	60,176	52,872	32,782	25,934	171,764
Black	39	51			90
Mulatto	80	77	7	5	169
<b>Totals</b>	<b>60,295</b>	<b>53,000</b>	<b>32,789</b>	<b>25,939</b>	<b>172,023</b>

Sources: *U.S. Census, 1860, Population*, 253, 254, 261, 262.

Figures for the white population include 2,369 Indians, who were elsewhere located by county of residence, though not identified by place of birth. Of this total, 1,274 were living in Pembina (later Kittson) County. They were not Indians on reservations but, rather, people of Indian ancestry—whether considered full or mixed blood—living in white communities.

Paul in two years.”<sup>39</sup> The bill passed both houses of the assembly and seemed poised for signing. It was then, according to the legend of Joe Rolette, that the “jolly half breed” performed his heroic acts.

THE MANY AND VARIED VERSIONS of Rolette’s adventures bear the mark of continuous telling and retelling during the late-nineteenth century. There are so many versions of the story that it is difficult to know what actually happened in 1857 and what was embroidered by later storytellers. It is also not always clear whose purposes were served by the various versions and emphases on particular aspects of the legend. It is worthwhile examining some of the patterns to see what was included as well as what was left out.

A major feature of some accounts is the suggestion that Rolette was a rough frontiersman. This is hard to match with the actual experiences of his life. His father was a successful and well-educated trader from French Canada, responsible for the American Fur Company’s entire upper Mississippi region in the 1820s. As a boy, Joseph had been educated at a private school in New York City, under the protection of American Fur Company president Ramsay Crooks. Whatever the details of his experience in New York, it is hard to believe the accuracy of the legend that describes Rolette arriving there dressed in a full suit of buckskin and carrying a rifle over his shoulder.<sup>40</sup>

An equally misleading part of the Rolette legend is the suggestion that he was a half breed or mixed blood. Political journalist and historian Harlan P. Hall noted that, though he was “commonly supposed to be a half or quarter breed Frenchman,” he was instead a “full-blooded French Canadian.” More recently, historian Rhoda R. Gilman wrote that Rolette’s heritage was almost entirely French and British, his “only traceable Indian ancestor being an Ottawa great-great-grandmother.”<sup>41</sup>

Rolette’s association with the Pembina community began in the 1840s, following the completion of his education, when he went to work for Sibley in the crucial northern border region along the Red River where the American Fur Company competed with the British Hudson’s Bay Company. Rolette appears to have done his job well and was instrumental in initiating the commerce involving Red River oxcart trains bringing furs and buffalo skins from the northern plains to St. Paul. It was this commerce that essentially made St. Paul the key commercial center of the region.<sup>42</sup>

Rolette’s tie to the Pembina community came about in part through his marriage to a métis woman, Angélique Jerome, following a pattern traditional for



Joseph Rolette Jr., portrayed as a métis in this pastel by an unknown artist, about 1890

## THE JOSEPH ROLETTE PORTRAITS



THE MOST FAMOUS IMAGE of Joseph Rolette Jr. is a pastel showing him in métis garb, wearing leggings, a blanket coat, and a decorated bandolier bag or shoulder pouch. There are two copies of this portrait, presented by fellow territorial politician Charles E. Flandrau to the Minnesota Historical Society and St. Paul's Minnesota Club in April 1890. Flandrau later wrote: "As I admired the plucky manner in which my friend had stood by St. Paul in this the hour of her danger, I conceived the idea of preserving the event to history by presenting his portrait to the Historical Society . . . and hung one in the Minnesota Club. It is a capital likeness, representing him, full-life size, in the wild and picturesque costume of the border. A brass tablet on the frame is inscribed with the following legend: 'The Hon. Joe Rolette, who saved the capital to St. Paul, by running away with the bill removing it to St. Peter, in 1857.'"

Flandrau may have commissioned the pastels around 1890 as part of his attempts to memorialize Rolette, who died in 1871. The image may have been copied from an earlier photograph; one showing Rolette, seated and wearing a blanket coat and bandolier bag (though of different design), is in the historical society's collections (detail above). A woodcut from this image was used to illustrate several accounts of the Rolette legend (*Northwest Magazine*, Feb. 1888; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Feb. 10, 1894). The photograph bears a handwritten caption, probably from the nineteenth century, identical to the words on the portrait's brass plaque.

traders interested in carrying on business with native communities.<sup>43</sup> Associated in business with Sibley, Rolette was in a good position to be a broker, delivering benefits from Sibley to the métis and political support from the large métis community to Sibley.

The 1850 census gives some indication of the size of the métis population, showing 1,134 people living in Pembina County—almost 19 percent of the territory's entire population. Not all county residents were métis; while some were listed as being born at Pembina, many others were natives of the British Red River colony or eastern Canada. One way or another, by the standards of Johann Kohl's Lake Superior informants, they appear to have identified culturally and politically with the interests that Joseph Rolette represented.<sup>44</sup>

From the beginning of the territory, the métis sought to influence the new government. A petition from the "Half-Breeds of Pembina," sent sometime in 1849 and signed by a number of people including Rolette, asked Governor Ramsey to use his influence to establish courts and civil officials in the region, to exclude British subjects from hunting there, to erect a fort to protect the border, and to arrange for the sale of land from Indians to the métis so that residents could obtain clear title to their land.<sup>45</sup>

Despite their interest in government, not all of the people of the Pembina region were able to participate in the initial elections of territorial legislators. The congressional act providing for the organization of the territory stated that voters in the first election were limited to "free white male inhabitants" over the age of 21 who had lived in the territory when the act was passed and were citizens of the United States. The territorial legislature was empowered to determine voter qualifications in later elections. In the fall of 1849 a bill passed that provided that "all persons [men] of a mixture of white and Indian blood and who shall have adopted the habits and customs of civilized men, are hereby declared to be entitled to all the rights and privileges" of voting.<sup>46</sup>

If not immediately represented among the white voters of the territory, the métis were also not categorized as Indian people able to participate in treaty-making. As a result of the prompting in the métis petition, the federal government, in 1851, authorized Ramsey to negotiate the purchase of land in the Pembina region. When he arrived there he discovered that the métis wished to be signatories of the treaty, alleging, according to Ramsey, "that it was they who possessed the Country really, and who had long defended and maintained it against the encroachments of enemies." Ramsey wrote that "on the policy of the government and the impracticability of its treating with its own



Métis drivers and their oxcars, pictured as one of the “gems of Minnesota scenery” by Whitney’s Gallery, St. Paul, 1860

quasi citizens being explained to them, they were satisfied that their demands could not be complied with.” Nonetheless, Ramsey saw that the treaty included a provision allowing this “interesting and peculiar people” in a “peculiar situation” to receive \$30,000. Unfortunately for the métis, the Pembina treaty failed to pass Congress in 1852.<sup>47</sup>

Ramsey’s dealings with these “peculiar” “quasi citizens” is in keeping with the general inability of other European Americans to know what to make of the métis but to make use of them when needed. This may explain why the law was passed in 1849 allowing people of mixed ancestry to vote. The Pembina district, represented by Joseph Rolette and his fellow trader Norman

Kittson beginning in 1852, provided support to Sibley's "conclave" in the territorial legislature. In 1853, for example, Rolette took pleasure in reporting to Sibley's brother Frederick that he had prevented Rice from receiving many votes in Pembina.<sup>48</sup>

Rolette's legislative career between 1852 and 1857 has never been explored in much detail. One memorable anecdote is Murray's account of Kittson's and Rolette's first trip to the legislature in January 1852, an 18-day journey by dogsled. "For the first few days of the session it was hard to tell whether it was the dogs or the honorable members who represented Pembina, as the dogs were the first in the legislative halls and the last to leave, and it was only when the sergeant at arms was ordered to put the dogs out and keep them out, as Pembina was not entitled to double representation, that the two houses were relieved of their presence."<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to this light-hearted story, some of Rolette's actions as a territorial legislator suggest that he tried to further the interests of people of Indian ancestry in the region. On January 18, 1856, for example, Rolette introduced a memorial to Congress calling for changes in federal laws in order to extend citizenship to Indian people who had altered their "habits and mode of life." Written in the rhetoric of the time, which equated patterns of subsistence and types of clothing with civilization, the resolution stated, "By granting the right of citizenship . . . a great step would be gained in the progress of the tribes around us, in the path of civilization." The memorial noted that although an Indian person "assumed the dress of the white man, and by his industry has opened himself a farm," as he might have been urged by missionaries and other whites, he could not under current law own the land on which he farmed or "enjoy any of the many franchises [*sic*] and privileges which his mode of life and knowledge of our institutions should secure to him." It is not known how much of the resolution Rolette actually wrote, but the memorial, which passed both bodies of the territorial legislature, clearly reflected the belief common among people of mixed ancestry that cultural attributes were more important than so-called racial background.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, Rolette did not initially agree with Rice's 1856 proposal for the north-south shape of the state-to-be. His reaction was based on his relationship with the community he represented. At the beginning of 1856 he introduced a resolution calling for a division of the territory on an east-west line, apparently on the theory, as chronicler Arthur J. Larsen wrote, that this "would place his district in a commanding position in the northern half." The measure was defeated.<sup>51</sup>

Exactly how or in what way Rolette came to change

his position on the borders is not clear. His motivation for carrying off the capital bill is left vague in most accounts. This ambiguity is a necessary part of the legend.

CONTRARY TO MANY VERSIONS of the story, Rolette did not actually steal the bill, since, as chairman of the Territorial Council's Committee on Enrolled Bills, he had rightful possession of it after it passed. His duty was simply to certify the text so that it could be sent to the governor for signing. When the bill came into his hands on or before Saturday, February 28, 1857, Rolette simply stayed away from the proceedings. While he was gone, a call of the Council was issued, requiring the presence of all members. Since Rolette could not be found, the Council was prevented from taking further action unless a two-thirds vote dispensed with the call. Since this vote fell one short, the Council was required to remain in session during the call, day and night, until 1:00 P.M. Thursday, March 5—a total of 123 hours. The journal of the final session on March 7 contains a report stating that the Committee on Enrolled Bills had been unable to report back the bill "owing to the absence of the Chairman," that is, Rolette, who was one of the report's signers. Further, the committee related that "numerous errors" were found in comparing copies of the bill. The committee therefore retained the bill in its possession "subject to the order of the Council."<sup>52</sup>

Some variations in the versions of the legend concern minor details, such as which hotel and in which room Rolette stayed during the 123 hours. More significant were the disagreements about the degree of planning and purpose he exhibited and whether or not other powerful people in St. Paul were involved in his actions. Usually this part of the story is murky.

Clearly, what Rolette did was in the interests of St. Paul. During the time he was missing, a duplicate copy of the bill was passed and signed by the governor. Later on in the year, a St. Paul judge ruled that the bill had not properly passed. It is probable that, had it passed in the normal manner, grounds would have been found to overrule it for other reasons.<sup>53</sup>

Nonetheless, most versions of the legend insist that Rolette acted spontaneously. Hall declared, "It is due both Rolette and the citizens of St. Paul to say that no previous or corrupt arrangement was made with him to perform the role which was enacted." Charles Flandrau—despite his description of Rolette's "free and easy, half-savage characteristics"—made clear that he acted in his own interests as well as those of the business community of which he was a part: "It was at this point in the fight that Rolette proved himself a bold and successful strategist. He was a friend of St. Paul, and was deter-

mined that the plan should not succeed if it was possible for him to prevent it.” J. Fletcher Williams suggested that for Rolette, who had seen the opposition to the bill in St. Paul, “a wink was as good to him as a nod.” Historian William Watts Folwell, on the other hand, implied that Rolette was put up to his actions by influential people: “Of a romantic and jovial disposition, he was not at all averse to playing the part assigned him in this little drama.” It is unclear whether Folwell was writing in a flowery manner or meant that the events had been scripted by someone else. In any case, although the accounts differ as to the degree of planning or participation, it is clear that many people in St. Paul knew what Rolette was doing while he was doing it.<sup>54</sup>

One way or another, the emphasis in all these stories is that Rolette was an unreflective, humorous, fun-loving, carousing, rough frontiersman—occasionally a half breed or mixed blood. These are the crucial details that help explain the Rolette legend and its hold on post-territorial Minnesota history.

WRITING OF CLASSICAL LEGENDS, Henry David Thoreau stated, “To some extent mythology is only the most ancient history and biography. So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and essential truth, the I and you, the here and there, the now and then, being omitted.”<sup>55</sup>

For each generation, legends based on real and invented historical figures serve particular truths and memorialize particular views of the world. More than simply the story of a trickster, the Rolette legend describes a culture hero of the kind found in the literature of many societies: one who performs significant deeds out of hunger, curiosity, or recklessness; a primitive entrepreneur who makes possible the world as it is known and then obligingly disappears.<sup>56</sup>

The truths that Rolette serves come out of the historical context of territorial Minnesota: the replacement of one cultural system by another, rival politicians seeking to capture Indian payments for the local economy, attempts by later reformers to close off this mixture of money and politics (in order to replace it with other forms of business-government collusion), and debates about the shape of the state-to-be. The Rolette legend is, largely, nonpartisan. It serves the purposes of both sides, providing each with a vehicle to record its own views of the world and the nature of territorial Minnesota.

For legislators and St. Paulites who wanted the city to remain the commercial center of the state and who owed their success to the Indian business, the legend’s characterization of Rolette is a useful one. Perhaps most significantly, it absolves influential and ordinary people



Duplicate bill to remove the capital to St. Peter, certified a “correct copy” and approved by Governor Gorman

from any accountability for a reckless, illegal action that deprived a democratic majority in both legislative houses of the right to pass a bill that the governor was ready to sign. While it would have been better for the drama had Rolette actually been a half breed, it was enough for him to play the part. This identification provided a cultural or racial cover for the actions that Rolette took, in the same way that a group of English colonists in Boston in 1775 dressed as Indians to protest the stamp tax while throwing tea into Boston Harbor.

It was equally useful for those who opposed the role of the Indian traders in Minnesota Territory to categorize Rolette as a reckless half breed. Half breeds symbolized the society that had existed before 1849, as well as the power of the businessmen associated with the Indian trade. One opponent of this power structure later wrote: “Such was the mixed character of the population at the time that a large proportion of the citizens were either by ties of consanguinity, or trading interest,

allied to the Indians and their interests; and these were known and designated as the 'Moccasin Democracy or Indian Dynasty.'" Thus, opposition to a certain set of political positions became associated with race and an assertion of white identity. It was easy to blame "half breeds" like Rolette, even though his action benefited mixed bloods less than it did powerful figures in the community, people like Rice and Sibley whose corruption was anything but fun-loving yet who would go on to become revered founding fathers in the story of Minnesota.<sup>57</sup>

**Henry H. Sibley, who had just completed his term as governor when painted by T. C. Healy, 1860**



Another event of 1857 shows how the so-called half breeds were both used to further the assertion of white identity and blamed for actions that, in fact, benefited the territory's elite. In October 1857 Sibley, running against Ramsey, was elected the first state governor. Commentator Hall noted that the election was extremely close; the many contested ballots in the southern part of the state, as they were counted, put the result in doubt though suggesting strongly that Ramsey would win. When the election results were received from the Cass and Pembina districts, "where Joe Rolette reigned supreme," the tally was "very unanimous for Sibley, giving him in Pembina 316 votes and in Cass 228, while Ramsey did not receive a vote in either county." This helped provide the final majority of 240 for Sibley.<sup>58</sup>

Hall implied that these results were fraudulent, not because they were tampered with, as the unanimous result might suggest. Rather, he explained, the territorial election law, providing that people of mixed white and Indian ancestry "who shall have adopted the habits and customs of civilized men" would be allowed to vote, "practically conferred the right of suffrage upon all the [male] half-breeds in the territory." Hall alleged that this provision was interpreted by election judges to mean that "half-breeds wearing pantaloons filled the requirement. A tradition has come down to later generations to the effect that one pair of pants would do service for a swarm of half-breeds. One would don the trousers and go out and vote, and, soon coming back, passed the garment over to the next man, while he resumed his breech clout and blanket."<sup>59</sup>

Despite his intended slur on people of mixed ancestry, Hall suggested that allowing them to vote was a necessity: "But what else could you do? We had to have a governor, and inhabitants of Scandinavian countries had not then moved into Minnesota.

Consequently, somebody had to do the voting, and in the emergency the half-breed, if he could borrow a pair of pants, was as good as anybody else.” Hall’s implication was that, by 1904 when he was writing, the emergency was past. Scandinavians were achieving political power. Minnesota had become “white,” a region with a reinvented past that did not include Indian people or the Europeans who had lived with them in an era of interdependence. Race had become all-important. In this new Minnesota there was little room for the complex identity of people of mixed ancestry. Instead, the half breed would become a historical character, a transitional figure in the evolution of



the frontier, a creature of legend, a symbol of a time when Minnesota had not attained its later state of whiteness.

Rolette personally shared the fate of the preterritorial Minnesota he symbolized. Having served the purposes of the rich and powerful, he died in 1871 without political power, in obscure but colorful celebrity. From the revisionist point of view of those who have written much of Minnesota’s history in the last 150 years, Joe Rolette, like Indians, half breeds, fur traders, voyageurs, and other beings of the mythic prehistory of Minnesota, lives forever, but only in stereotype and legend.<sup>60</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Alan Woolworth for help in researching this topic, Rhoda Gilman for her help and encouragement, and Ken Mitchell, Brian Horrigan, Andrea Cutting, and David Hacker for their help in compiling the statistics.

Major versions of the Rolette legend based on the memories of his contemporaries include Manton Marble, “To the Red River and Beyond,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 21 (Oct. 1860): 582; T. M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota* (St. Paul: the author, 1886), 683–85; “Joseph Rolette,” *Northwest Magazine*, Feb. 1888, p. 22; “Jolly Jo Rolette,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, Feb. 10, 1894; H. P. Hall, “Observations,” *Minneapolis Journal*, Apr. 13, 1896, and *Observations: Being More or Less a History of Political Contests in Minnesota from 1849 to 1904* (St. Paul: n.p., 1904), 28–36; Charles E. Flandrau, *The History of Minnesota and Tales of the Frontier* (St. Paul: E. W. Porter, 1900), 358–64; William B. Dean, “A History of the Capitol Buildings of Minnesota, with Some Account of the Struggles for Their Location,” in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 12 (St. Paul, 1908): 9–15; “Bill for Removal of Capital,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 3, 1911. One version for young people is Roy P. Johnson, “Joe Rolette and the Capital Scandal,” in *Gopher Reader*, ed. A. Hermina Poatgieter and James T. Dunn (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], 1966), 263–65. Newspaperman Merle Potter included the Rolette legend as the first in his well-known *101 Best Stories of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: Harrison and Smith Co., 1931), 1–3.

<sup>2</sup> *St. Paul Dispatch*, Feb. 10, 1894.

<sup>3</sup> On the educational functions of such stories, see Thomas W. Overholt and J. Baird Callicott, *Clothed-in-Fur: An Introduction to an Ojibwa World View* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 25–26, 145–46; Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 319, 386.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley Bond, *Minnesota and Its Resources* (New York: Redfield, 1853), 1.

<sup>5</sup> William P. Murray, “Recollections of Early Territorial Days and Legislation,” in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 12 (St. Paul, 1908): 103. Many travelers’ accounts emphasized the dangers posed by Indian people, often greatly exaggerated. See Bruce M. White, “Encounters with Spirits: Ojibwa and Dakota Theories about the French and Their Merchandise,” *Ethnohistory* 41 (Summer 1994): 387–89.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Ramsey, in an 1853 speech to the legislature, made the common assumption that settlers were farmers: “The whole country . . . has the deepest interest in increasing the amount of this cultivation; and the most effectual way of doing this would seem to be by gratuitous grants of land in limited quantities to actual settlers”; Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the House*, 1853, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920), 3.

<sup>8</sup> On the cultural attributes of the term “white” and its mean-

ing in nineteenth-century America, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 154–55, 189.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, “Recollections,” 12: 103–04. Murray’s claim of 4,680 whites does not match the commonly accepted total of 4,535; see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul: MHS, 1956), 1:351–52.

<sup>10</sup> On such intermarriage, see Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 51–110; Sylvia Van Kirk, “Many Tender Ties”: *Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 74–94; Bruce M. White, “The Woman Who Married a Beaver: Trade Patterns and Gender Roles in the Ojibwa Fur Trade,” forthcoming in *Ethnohistory*. For the history and origins of the mixed Indian-European society in the Great Lakes, see Jacqueline Peterson, “The People In Between: Indian-White Marriage and the Genesis of a Métis Society and Culture in the Great Lakes Region, 1680–1830” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> The term “freemen” was used to describe former fur-trade employees not under contract to large companies who continued to reside in Indian country; see Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), 81, 176.

<sup>12</sup> Johann G. Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway* (1860; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1985), 260. For one of the earliest uses of “métis” in this context, see Edmund C. Bray and Martha C. Bray, eds., *Joseph Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies: The Expeditions of 1838–39 With Journals, Letters, and Notes on the Dakota Indians* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1976), 187–89. See also John Francis McDermott, *A Glossary of Mississippi Valley French, 1673–1850*, Washington University Studies, New Series, No. 12 (St. Louis, 1941), 103. “Métis” is now sometimes used to refer to all people of mixed Indian-European ancestry.

<sup>13</sup> William Warren, “Adventures among the Blackfeet Indians,” *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* (St. Paul), Feb. 23, 1850.

<sup>14</sup> For estimates of Indian population, see Table 1. For the non-Indian census, see Patricia C. Harpole and Mary D. Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850* (St. Paul: MHS, 1972), viii–ix. In 1862 statistician Joseph A. Wheelock explained, “The United States census does not regard the Indian tribes as a social constituent of the nation, and therefore takes no account of them in their tribal or savage state”; Minnesota Bureau of Statistics, *Minnesota: Its Progress and Capabilities* (St. Paul: William R. Marshall, 1862), 106–07.

<sup>15</sup> Harpole and Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census*, viii, 71–99; *United States Census, 1850*, p. 993, 996.

<sup>16</sup> Minnesota Bureau of Statistics, *Minnesota*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the House*, 1853, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Edward D. Neill, *History of Washington County and the St. Croix Valley* (Minneapolis: North Star Publishing Co., 1881), 255. Neill also describes a “settlement of half-breeds,” all unnamed, at Lakeland.

<sup>19</sup> Charles E. Flandrau, “Reminiscences of Minnesota during the Territorial Period,” in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 9 (St. Paul, 1901): 199, which states that Bonga was unaware of any categories except white and Indian, suggesting that his statement was naive. It is hard to imagine this to be the case. Bonga was not an ignorant man; like other children of North West Company traders, he was educated in Montreal. As a trader, he sought to imitate the lifestyle of a North West Company bourgeois.

<sup>20</sup> Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 260–61.

<sup>21</sup> Robert A. Trennert Jr., *Indian Traders on the Middle Border: The House of Ewing, 1827–54* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 205–10.

<sup>22</sup> Royce Kurtz, “Looking at the Ledgers: Sauk and Mesquakie Trade Debts,” in Jennifer S. H. Brown, W. J. Eccles, and Donald P. Heldman, eds., *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 143–59; Trennert, *Indian Traders*, 110. Under the 1837 treaty with the Ojibwe, \$70,000 and “other just demands” for claims were included to be paid to traders William A. Aitkin and Lyman M. Warren. A schedule of 55 claims totaling \$75,000 was included in the 1842 treaty, some \$24,000 of this for John Jacob Astor and another \$13,000 for the American Fur Company; Charles J. Kappler, comp., *Indian Affairs. Laws and Treaties* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 2: 482–85, 542–45.

<sup>23</sup> For commentary about the newer traders, see, for example, Samuel W. Pond, *The Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota As They Were in 1834* (1908; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1986), 173.

<sup>24</sup> Minnesota Territorial Assembly, Resolution, Oct. 11, 1849, in Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, Minnesota Superintendency, National Archives microfilm M234, Roll 428, Frames 124–128, copy in MHS; Bruce M. White, “The Regional Context of the Removal Order of 1850,” report prepared for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe for *Mille Lacs v. Minnesota*, Dec. 1993, forthcoming in James McClurken, comp., *Fish in the Lakes, Wild Rice, and Game in Abundance: Testimony on Behalf of Mille Lacs Ojibwe Hunting and Fishing Rights*.

<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Rice was campaigning to remove the Menominee as well; Rice to Ramsey, Dec. 1, 1849, in Alexander Ramsey Papers, microfilm edition, Roll 4, Frame 284, MHS.

<sup>26</sup> White, “Removal Order”; Kappler, comp., *Indian Affairs, Laws and Treaties* (1941), 5:663; Charles Oakes to Henry H. Sibley, June 14, 1850, in Henry H. Sibley Papers, microfilm edition, Roll 7, Frame 379, MHS.

<sup>27</sup> *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), Dec. 9, 1851.

<sup>28</sup> *St. Paul Advertiser*, Dec. 6, 1856.

<sup>29</sup> Minnesota Bureau of Statistics, *Minnesota: Its Place Among the States* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Co., 1860), 168. These values are based on William H. C. Folsom's estimate that timber cut in the St. Croix valley was worth \$3 per thousand feet of logs; see Folsom, "Lumbering in the St. Croix Valley, with Biographic Sketches," in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 9 (St. Paul, 1901): 321–23.

<sup>30</sup> *St. Paul Advertiser*, Dec. 6, 1856.

<sup>31</sup> Charles D. Gilfillan, "The Early Political History of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 9: 177.

<sup>32</sup> *Minnesota Chronicle and Register*, June 10, 1850.

<sup>33</sup> *St. Paul Democrat*, Jan. 12, 1853.

<sup>34</sup> Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:462–70, 478–82.

<sup>35</sup> Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1: 373.

<sup>36</sup> Gorman to unnamed, Dec. 17, 1853, in Willis A. Gorman and Family Papers, MHS.

<sup>37</sup> Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1: 360, 375; Arthur J. Larsen, "Admission to the Union," *Minnesota History* 14 (June 1933): 159; John G. Rice, "The Old-Stock Americans," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1981), 59, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, Larsen, "Admission," 157.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Minnesotian* (St. Paul), Mar. 3, 1857.

<sup>40</sup> Rhoda R. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman, and Deborah M. Stultz, *The Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement, 1820–1870* (St. Paul: MHS, 1979), 18; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Feb. 10, 1894.

<sup>41</sup> Hall, *Observations*, 28; Gilman et al., *Red River Trails*, 18. For a description of Rolette as a mixed blood, see Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1: 386.

<sup>42</sup> Gilman et al., *Red River Trails*, 11; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Feb. 10, 1894; J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875* (1876; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1983), 160.

<sup>43</sup> Although her obituary, *Kittson County Enterprise*, Feb. 16, 1906, and many other sources list her name as Angelie, the parish register of Assumption Church, Pembina, N.D., (original in possession of church) consistently spells it Angélique. See, for example, the entry for the baptism of her son Henry, Sept. 19, 1857. A note on her photograph, donated to MHS in 1909,

states that her first name was Angeline and that she was of Cree and French blood.

<sup>44</sup> *U.S. Census*, 1850, p. 993.

<sup>45</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the Council*, 1849, p. 197–99.

<sup>46</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Acts, Joint Resolutions, and Memorials*, 1849, p. 6. For the act creating the territory, see Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the House*, 1849, p. 188–93.

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Ramsey to A. H. Stuart, Nov. 7, 1851, in Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, Minnesota Superintendency microfilm M234, Roll 428, Frames 371–80; Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1: 290–91, 305.

<sup>48</sup> Gilman et al., *Red River Trails*, 18; Joseph Rolette Jr. to F. B. Sibley, Sept. 20, 1853, Sibley papers.

<sup>49</sup> Murray, "Recollections," 118–19.

<sup>50</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the Council*, 1856, p. 72, and *Session Laws*, 1856, p. 354.

<sup>51</sup> Larsen, "Admission," 158. The title or text of Rolette's resolution has not been found.

<sup>52</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the Council*, 1857, p. 176–84.

<sup>53</sup> Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1: 386–87.

<sup>54</sup> Hall, *Minneapolis Journal*, Apr. 13, 1896; Flandrau, *Minnesota and Tales of Frontier*, 359–60; Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 370; Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1: 384, 386.

<sup>55</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (New York: Signet Classic, 1961), 60.

<sup>56</sup> On culture heroes and their roles in Indian creation myths, see Thompson, *Folktale*, 305, 307–08, 310–18.

<sup>57</sup> [James A. Starkey], "Reminiscences of Indian Depredations: The Sunrise Expedition," *North-Western Chronotype* (St. Paul), 1 (July 1873): 50. A statue of Henry M. Rice was enshrined in Statuary Hall at the capitol in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 8, 1916; see *Minnesota History Bulletin* 1 (May 1916): 339–40.

<sup>58</sup> Hall, *Observations*, 50; Bruce M. White et al., comps., *Minnesota Votes: Election Returns by County for Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and Governors, 1857–1977* (St. Paul: MHS, 1977), 153.

<sup>59</sup> Here and below, Hall, *Observations*, 51–52.

<sup>60</sup> On Rolette's celebrity status after 1857, see *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, Oct. 4, 1859; Marble, "Red River," 582. His death date is reported in *St. Paul Dispatch*, Feb. 10, 1894.



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