

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Of Adele Guerin

THAT YEAR OF 1850 Adele Guerin, at the age of 24, was comfortably situated. Her husband, Vital Guerin, had built a new house for them and their five children—David, age eight, Emily, age seven, Lucy, age six, Alfred, age five, and William, age three. At the corner of Wabasha and Seventh Streets in St. Paul, their new dwelling was a one-and-a-half-story frame structure quite unlike the place that she and Vital had occupied as newlyweds on January 26, 1841. That had been a 16-by-20-foot cabin built of oak and elm logs. It had a bark roof and a puncheon floor but a real door and a window that Michel LeClaire, their neighbor, had made for them. There were only eight other cabins in St. Paul at that time.¹

Adele had known Vital for most of her life. He had joined the American Fur Company in 1832 at the age of 19, leaving his home in Quebec for the life of a voyageur in the Upper Mississippi River region. The territory must have been to his liking, for he fulfilled his three-year contract with the company and then found work with other traders in the area. In 1839 he located on a claim in St. Paul.

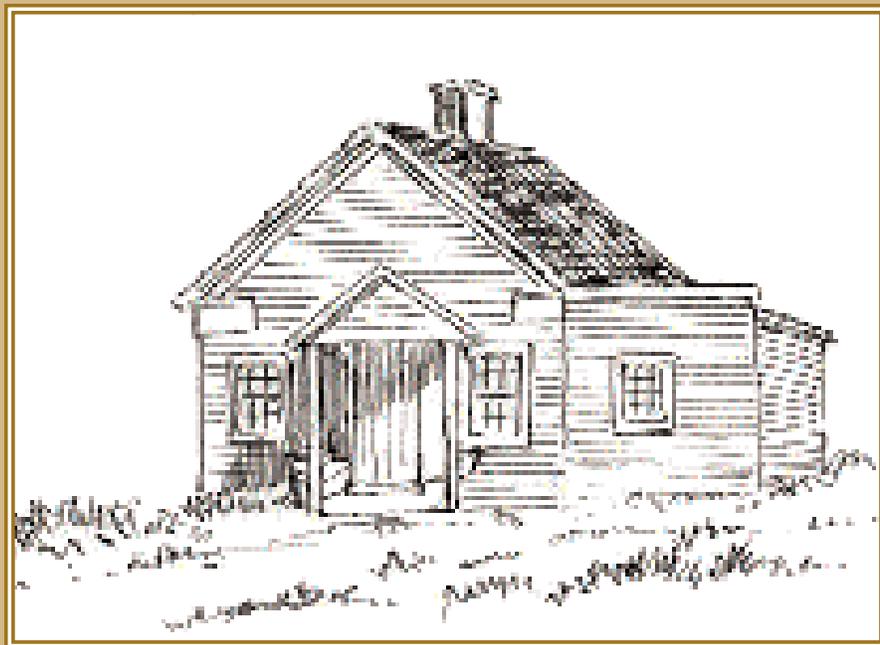
Adele and her family had been among the first residents of St. Paul. She was only 10 months old when she arrived in 1827 at Fort Snelling with her parents, brother, and three sisters as refugees from the Selkirk Settlement in the Red River Valley north of Pembina. Her father, Abra-

ham Perry, had immigrated with his wife, Mary Ann, son, and two daughters from Switzerland to the Canadian wilderness in 1820. Having relocated again, they lived on a farm near the fort until 1838 when the commandant forced them off the military reserve, distressing the ladies at the fort because Adele's mother was a respected midwife. The Perrys and their neighbors had then moved downriver to a convenient landing where Pierre Parrant had already established a grog shop. All the inhabitants of this little settlement spoke French. The next year, 1839, Adele's sister Rose married James Clewett, a native of England. He had learned French when he worked as a trader for the American Fur Company; as the only one who could read and write, he had kept the books.²

Now St. Paul was growing rapidly. New settlers arrived almost every day on the riverboats. Just a couple of years earlier there had been only 15 families in the little village. Adele reflected on the sharp contrast with the crowds of immigrants that poured off the boats docking at the levee. There had been five hundred passengers on the *Highland Mary* alone when it docked April 19 to open the shipping season. As much as the boats and their cargoes were welcomed after the long winter, it was a mixed blessing; many of the newcomers were sick with cholera. As a mother of young children, Adele worried about their health. Even with four doctors now practicing medicine in the town, an epidemic could swiftly overtax their capacity to deal with illness.³

Many residents must have wondered whether there would be any shipping season on the Mississippi

Adele and Vital Guerin's new house, sketched by St. Paul pharmacist and artist Robert O. Sweeny, 1852





Water crashing over the Falls of St. Anthony, about 1855. The beginnings of Minneapolis are visible across the river.

River in 1850. The spring flood had been the highest ever recorded. The winter's heavy snows had been followed by equally heavy rainfall, especially in June. To make matters worse, the ice had not yet gone out when the water rose, sweeping large ice floes downriver and threatening riverbanks and the structures built on them. Adele and other St. Paul residents could hear the ice as it crashed over the Falls of St. Anthony eight miles away. Having her new house situated farther from the shore was a comfort.

Adele also reflected on her family's status in this village that was the capital of the year-old Minnesota Territory. Her husband had been one of the delegates to the Stillwater Convention in 1848 when the major work for organizing the new territory

had been carried out. He also donated land for the courthouse, which the town needed. And her brother-in-law, her sister Anne's husband Charles Bazille, had donated land for the new territorial capitol. Just recently Vital had been elected a school trustee of District Number 2, along with Joseph R. Brown and Rev. Edward D. Neill.⁴

As St. Paul grew, Adele saw it lose its French character. Most of the new immigrants came from the eastern states, founded Protestant churches, started an English-language newspaper, and taught in the English language. But a growing town had more shopping convenience to offer. She was pleased that the city market usually had fresh beef for sale, and an ice cart and a milkman now made regular rounds. The prices had gone

up, however; what used to cost 10 cents now cost a quarter. While it was pleasant to have new neighbors close by, Adele sensed that her less than perfectly kept yard did not meet with the full approval of the newcomers, whose yards displayed a New England primness. Yet when she recalled the time that she and Vital could find neither a market nor a gristmill for the grain they raised and had seen it rot in the storage bin, she took comfort in the more settled and prosperous life St. Paul offered in 1850.⁵

VITAL GUERIN DIED *November 11, 1870, at the age of 58. His funeral was well attended, and the St. Paul Common Council ordered a monument for his grave.*⁶

Adele Guerin died December 20, 1914, at her home at 353 Rice Street in St. Paul. She was at that time the city's oldest woman resident. She was survived by three sons and two daughters, all residents of the St. Paul area. 🌸

—Sarah P. Rubinstein

NOTES

¹ Here and below, J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875* (1876; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983), 96–98, 105, 107; Patricia C. Harpole and Mary D. Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1972), 52.

² Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 101; Edward D. Neill, "Fort Snelling from 1819 to 1840," in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 2 (St. Paul, 1890): 137.

³ Here and below, Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 246, 258–59, 262.

⁴ Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 101, 107, 144, 182, 278–79.

⁵ Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 106, 201, 265.

⁶ Here and below, Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 107; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Dec. 21, 1914, p. 10.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).