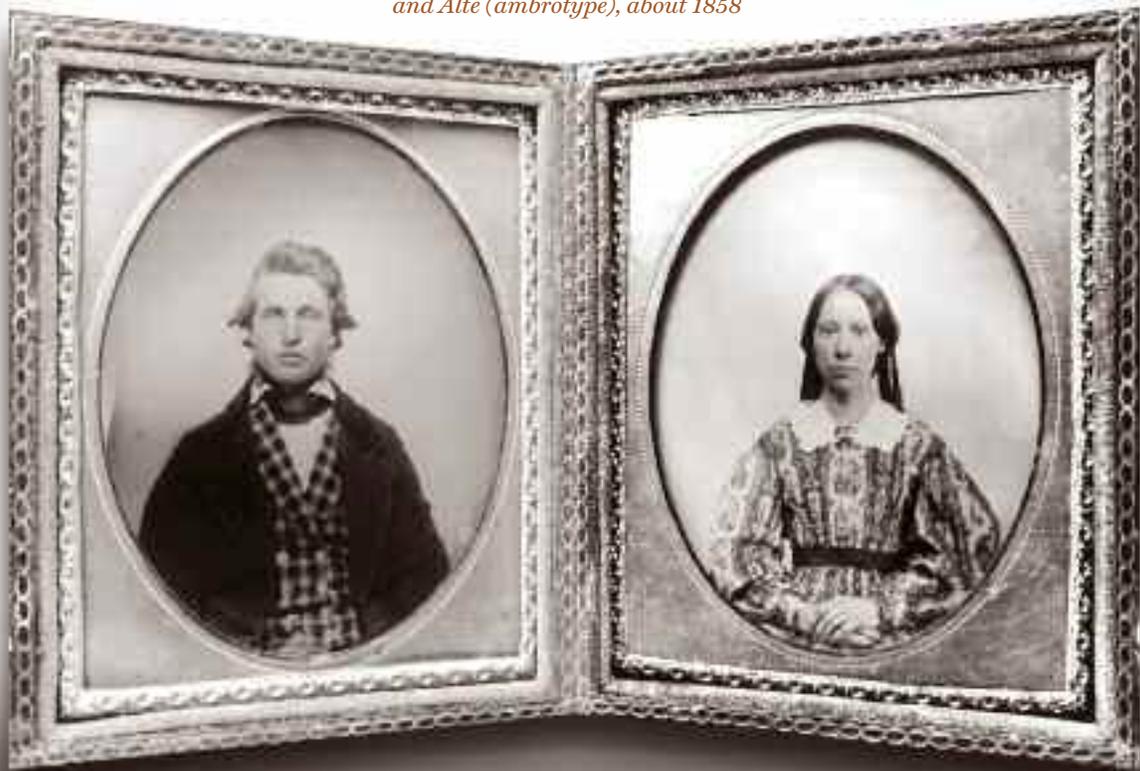


“To Secure a Home for My Family”

ANDREA R. FOROUGH I

ON A COLD AND WINDY APRIL NIGHT in 1859, Nininger Township farmer Levi N. Countryman summarized his family’s day in his diary: “We moved to day, and to night we are in a huddle, in the trash and dirt. It will take two or three days to get at rights again. I have now the work of two men to do for the next month.” Three days later Countryman reaffirmed his desire to establish his family on their new farm: “I work very hard now-a-days but I have a laudable object in view. I want to secure a home for my family so that I may attend more exclusively to the business of the Gospel.” These two entries suggest the underlying themes in Countryman’s diary and life: the centrality of work and family and the tension between religious aspirations and everyday realities. Also embedded

*Cased images of the young Countrymans, Levi (tintype)
and Alte (ambrotype), about 1858*





Ignatius Donnelly's 1856 pamphlet, Nininger City, included a map with Nininger as the natural hub of Minnesota Territory

in Countryman's diary, faithfully kept from July 1858 to November 1862, is the concept of social and economic exchange. In fact, the Countryman family's participation in this web of exchange is what made a new life possible.¹

Work is the common thread that connects most of the diary entries, and Countryman recorded his extensive daily labors carefully. He also noted the assistance of many others who helped him secure his home. He negotiated both land and mortgages with acquaintances, consulted with his wife, exchanged farm goods for carpenters' services, drew in long-held the debts to acquire supplies, borrowed implements from kinsmen, and depended on women to care for his children and create a comfortable home for visiting and transacting business.

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The exchanges required to sustain a household and farm in the Dakota County township would have been impossible for Countryman to accomplish alone.²

Countryman's exchange of labor and goods was typical in eastern Minnesota in the 1850s—and in every period of westward settlement since the colonial era. In fact, Countryman had already been through this process of migrating west and establishing himself at least once before. Born in 1832 and raised in St. Lawrence County, New York, Levi was the fourth of six children born to Daniel and Mary Fort Countryman. At age 16, Levi moved to Indiana; two years later he married Alte (Alta) Chamberlain and started a family while pursuing his education.³

In 1855, 23-year-old Levi arrived in Nininger Township, where he preempted, or registered his intent to purchase, 80 acres. He apparently moved to Minnesota as a health cure for "a severe attack of hemorrhages of the lungs."

It was no coincidence that Countryman chose Bluff Landing—later Nininger Township—west of Hastings and 15 miles southeast of St. Paul on the Mississippi

River as the place to recover his health. Three brothers, two sisters, and his father had already established farms there. Levi built a log cabin on his new claim, which was adjacent to his brother and brother-in-law's land. Here he and Alte, ages 26 and 25, lived with their two young boys, Amphius and Theophilus. By 1858 Alte's two brothers, Royal and Octavius Chamberlain, ages 23 and 14, and her sister Lizzie, age 11, were also living in the cabin and providing both farm and domestic labor. Perhaps to expand the family's living space, Countryman acquired land from another farmer in the fall of 1858 and began the arduous process of building a new house and farm in the winter and spring of 1859.⁴

Countryman's diary furnishes the rich detail necessary to examine the economic and social nature of exchange. While historians have examined his diary for information on agriculture and economic conditions in early Minnesota, few have waded through his everyday recording of the weather, work, agonized religious musings, and comings and goings to uncover the story of how these people established their community. Countryman's diary, written over four difficult years, records the buying, borrowing, trading, and visiting by himself, his wife, his in-laws, his nearby family members, and his neighbors. The routine entries demonstrate that exchange was commonplace and suggest the wide variety of participants and activities. Because the source is a male farmer's diary, men usually appear as the primary actors; unlike his female family members, Countryman spent much of his time in field and barn, in town at meetings and teaching school, and at neighbors' and relatives' farms.⁵

ACCORDING TO COUNTRYMAN'S FIRST ENTRY on his twenty-sixth birthday, he intended that the diary "fully portray, both what I have done through the day, and what I felt like doing." He accomplished this goal, and in addition he vented his feelings about his wife, his family, and his neighbors. The diary also reveals something about Countryman's character and personality, as well as his aspirations. He wrote about morality, honesty, and fairness, calling himself and others to account. Pious and intellectual, he hoped to become a minister, and the diary records his frequent lay preaching around Nininger. Farming debts and the financial Panic of 1857, however, frustrated progress toward this goal.⁶

While documenting his own life, Countryman recorded the activities of his wife and family as well. When he began, Alte asked him also to write about her life. Six weeks later he wryly commented, "Alte has repeatedly said that I should write *her diary* along with my own. I can hardly do it in the way she proposes but I can say something of her." This last phrase has two meanings. In that entry, Levi Countryman described Alte as "a good woman for one who has no religion at heart." She supported, with reservations, his desire to become a minister; she was fair and faithful. She was "a notable housewife: frugal and skillful: and lacks but that one thing needful to make her a complete wife," religion at heart. Levi also said "something of her" when he noted her activities in the diary—what she did, where she went, and with whom. When he did not record her activities, she was probably engaged in routine daily duties. When he did mention them, we learn that Alte busily visited, traded, and borrowed, contributing to a complex web of economic and social relationships between Nininger households and farms. A careful reading of the diary, then, suggests the gendered, yet complementary, nature of exchange in a farming community.⁷

As understood by historians who analyze economic patterns, "exchange" means material giving and receiving that involves money, goods, or labor. Certainly Nininger farmers and Nininger City merchants, craftsmen, and laborers all engaged in borrowing and trading. While many local business owners would have preferred that customers buy products with money, they usually accepted in trade items that residents had produced or gathered. This often meant that buying and trading blended together in exchanges. Depending on the season, Levi Countryman might exchange oats for lumber, potatoes for shoes, corn for rent, and wheat for groceries and dry goods. Exchange also meant trading labor, especially during intensive periods such as threshing and harvesting, as well as lending machinery. To acquire goods, households collected raw materials and transformed them into usable items. They looked for opportunities to exchange goods and labor to further their economic interests.⁸

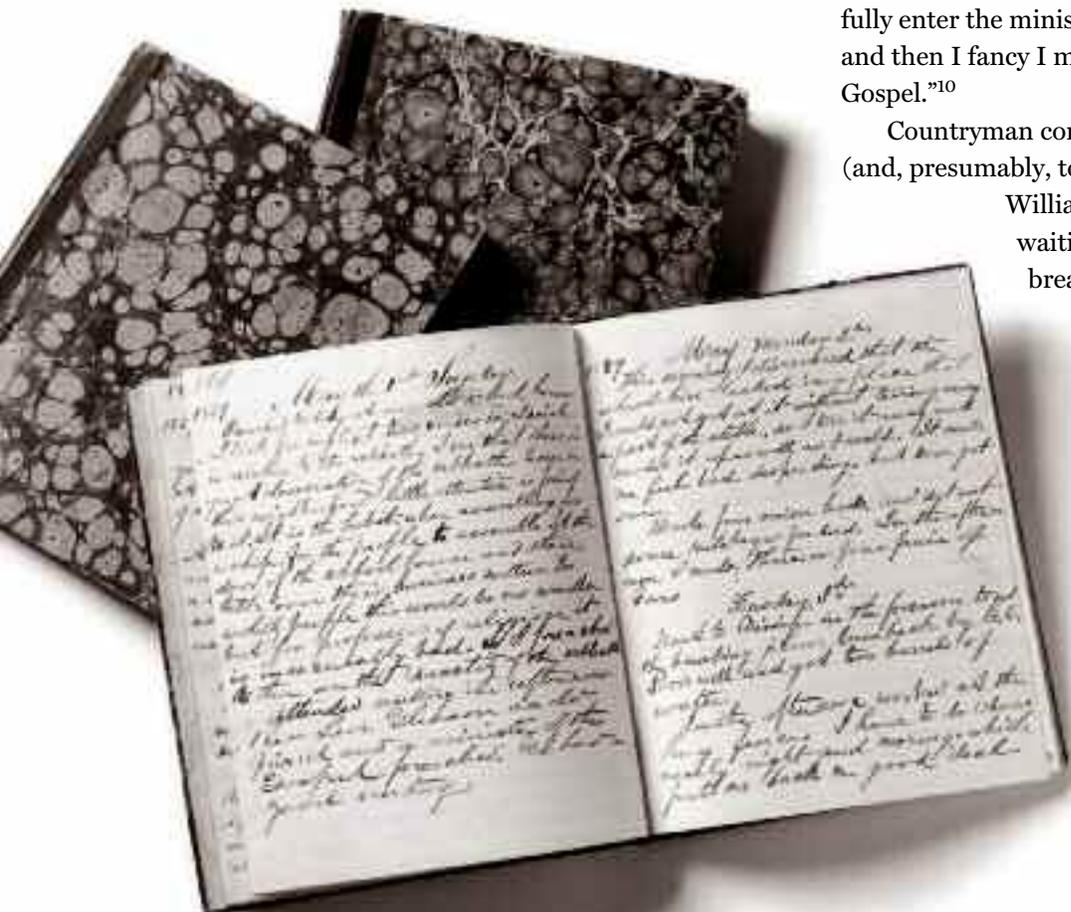
Nonmaterial interactions often accompanied the transfer of supplies or services, and these social exchanges were crucial to farm building. Visiting between house-

holds ebbed and flowed seasonally. In spring new immigrants arrived. This often called for a shared warm meal, a place to sleep, and information about the area; hospitality facilitated friendly relations with future neighbors. Summer brought visits to share watermelon and other fruits with family and friends. In fall, especially harvest time, extra-long work hours and physical exhaustion meant fewer strictly social calls but more regular contact because of labor exchanges. In winter, although cold weather kept people at home occasionally, visiting increased because farm demands were at their lowest. Visiting included the sharing of ideas, gossip, information, or companionship. While these social activities may appear less important than economic transactions, they “primed the pump,” making later economic transactions possible. Countryman’s written diary record of his land dealings, house construction, and farm development provides a valuable tool for understanding these

exchanges. The account also suggests the personal and financial conflicts that plagued the reluctant farmer.⁹

AT THE TIME COUNTRYMAN BEGAN HIS DIARY in the summer of 1858, he seemed determined both to attend seminary and build a new house and farm. But he faced challenges from a variety of sources—himself, his wife, and his creditors. First of all, he needed money. Like many settlers and speculators at the height of the land boom of 1856–57, Countryman was both a creditor and a debtor. He had borrowed money to buy land, but he had also accepted a buyer’s mortgage when he sold land. By mid-1858, the country’s deepening financial crisis made it difficult to collect or pay on the respective mortgages. Countryman experienced a particularly trying week, noting that his wheat was “very much shriveled” and his wife showed “scarcely any regard” for him. He continued on July 23: “I am more and more convinced to-day that I must go to school. I fancy that I must more fully enter the ministry, but must get more learning, and then I fancy I may be quite useful in teaching the Gospel.”¹⁰

Countryman confided his desire to study theology (and, presumably, to leave farming) to Hastings lawyer William K. Rogers in late August, after waiting nearly a month to see him. Over breakfast Countryman garnered a promise that Rogers would assume the \$1,000 mortgage coming due and assist Countryman in his quest for schooling. Not everything was settled, however, the diary reports, because the following day Levi visited neighbor Hugh Moore “to bargain for their lease of this farm of Rogers. Came to nothing definite.” Apparently, Rogers had



Levi Countryman’s diaries recorded the exchanges that helped build the family farm as well as his desire to become a preacher.

agreed to take over Countryman's mortgage if he could find someone such as Moore to lease the farm Countryman rented from Rogers. Levi hoped Moore would agree to this proposition, thus freeing Countryman to leave Nininger for seminary in Oberlin, Ohio, or Amherst, Massachusetts.¹¹

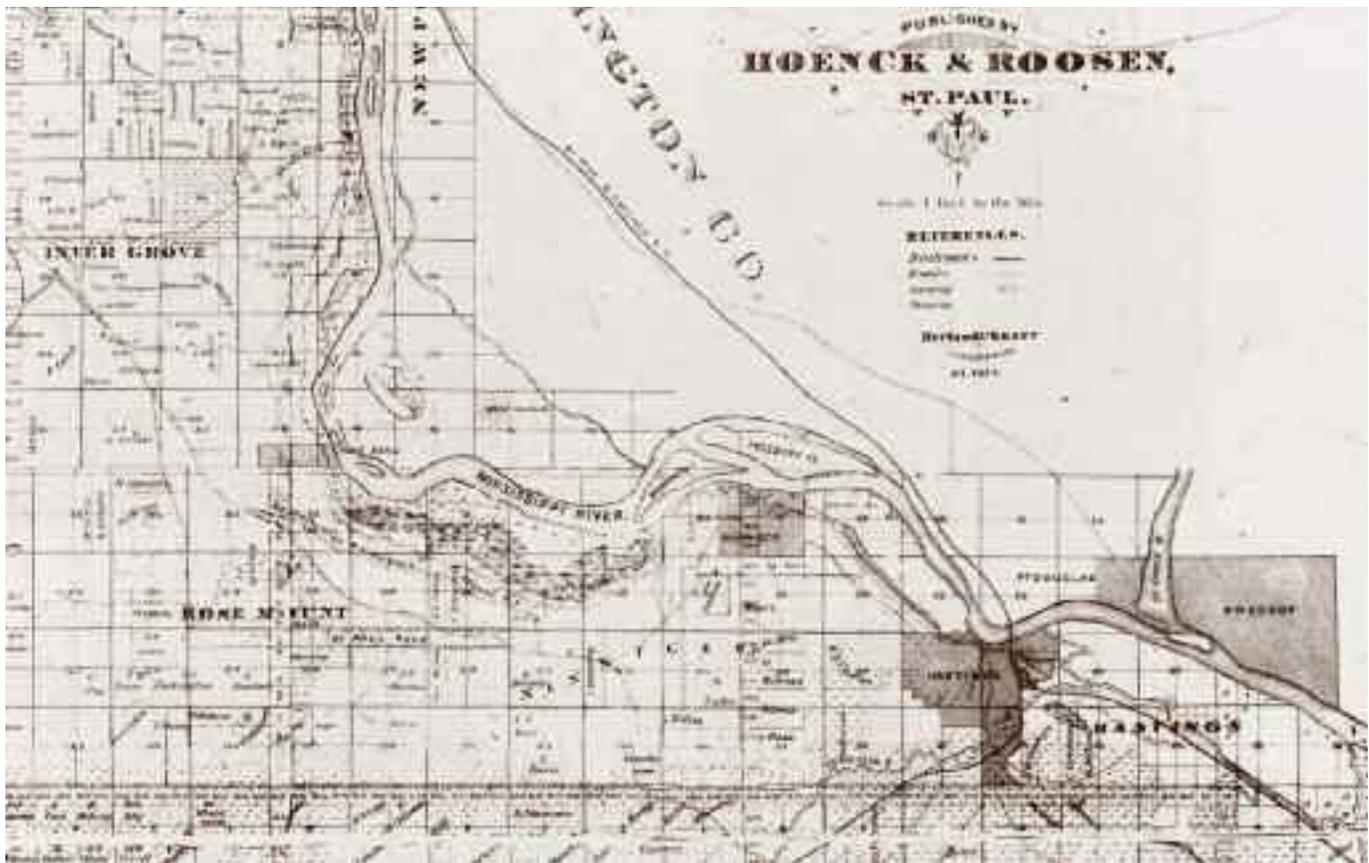
When Countryman returned from his inconclusive visit with Moore, Alte voiced her opinions on his plans, perhaps after hearing them for the first time. Levi then wrote: "I am destined to vexation. Alte is pulling in a contrary direction from me, and desires me not to go away. I can make no appeal that is satisfactory to her. She love[s] property much better than education or religion, and as long as she continues with an unchanged heart, it must be so. Oh that God would convict her!"¹²

Alte's lack of religion was a perpetual sore point for her husband, and he interpreted her resistance to his seminary plan through this frustration. But Levi's departure would have left Alte alone on the farm with their

two young children and her siblings, and her objection may have stemmed less from her irreligious nature than from her fear of how she would survive in his absence. She was probably relieved that Moore did not agree to lease the farm and Levi stayed at home.

Levi's timing for these negotiations could not have been worse. Many settlers' one- or two-year promissory notes were coming due, and property values had fallen precipitously. Money, always scarce in newly settled areas, stopped flowing in from the East, and creditors began to demand payment. Even as Countryman tried to marshal Rogers and Moore into supporting his plans for education, he heard rumor of an impending foreclosure on a neighbor's land. When he went to the neighbor to warn him, the neighbor was not alarmed. Levi reported, "He thinks he is safe. I hope he may come out right." Countryman lamented in his diary, "I hope I may soon be so situated that I can relinquish this hurry and bustle of life. . . . This scramble for gold will sell our souls into

1874 map of Dakota County showing proximity of Nininger to Hastings on the Mississippi River



the pit.” This entry is the clearest evidence of his hope to leave farming for the church.¹³

On September 1, Countryman received the bad news that one of his creditors was threatening to foreclose on his property. In response, Countryman prayed for himself as well as his wife, who “feels the blow worse than I do.” Countryman spent the next few days trying to prevent the foreclosure: he attempted to sell the property that was mortgaged for \$1,000; he went to Hastings to negotiate with creditors; he tried to collect debts owed him. Countryman did not blame eastern financial centers for his problems, however; rather, he felt that his own choices—valuing money more than religious devotion—had placed him in this uncomfortable position.¹⁴

In addition to financial worries and spiritual conflicts, Countryman realized his harvest was not going well. On September 8, the “company of threshers,” including his brother-in-law, arrived at Countryman’s fields at seven A.M. to harvest winter wheat and oats. The results were disappointing. Although the afternoon’s work yielded 250 bushels of oats, Countryman calculated the return on the morning’s harvest of winter wheat was a loss. The 32.5 bushels “is not scarcely fit for bread. . . . I have lost at least one hundred dollars by the operation of putting in 20 acres of winter wheat. I shall have to buy my bread after all. . . . It has never occurred to me that I shall not be fed.”¹⁵

The next day Countryman firmly blamed himself for his lack of success as a farmer. Phrasing it in terms of his dream of becoming a minister, he wrote on September 9, “I am satisfied that I am to blame for poor farming, and that if I should continue at it I could do better than ever I have done. But a higher sphere calls me. I often think that I shall study for the ministry, but not lose sight of husbandry in order that I may be of advantage to my fellow men in various ways.” Countryman was trying to reconcile his love for spiritual reflection with his responsibility to his family and financial obligations. Accordingly, working around harvest and the Sabbath, Countryman made visits to straighten out his affairs. In the week after the harvest, he had paid off “two or three debts, small ones,” but he worried that “the great one, of over a \$1000 will take me down may-be.”¹⁶

Luckily, Countryman was also a creditor who held a \$1,000 mortgage on land bought by a Minneapolis spec-

ulator, Hillary B. Hancock. Countryman appears to have wanted to trade this mortgage, either for cash to pay off his own debt or for land for his family, since it appears that he did not own the land on which they were living in 1858. A Mr. Lee came to look at the parcel but ultimately declined to buy it. Countryman walked to Minneapolis 13 days later to ask Hancock to pay on his mortgage but recorded in his diary that Hancock treated him “very ungentlemanly,” obviously declining to comply.¹⁷

Evidently, word traveled through the township that Countryman needed someone to take over the Hancock mortgage. Ten days after the trip to Minneapolis, farmer Albert C. Poor stopped by Countryman’s log cabin and “offered to trade land.” For many farmers, trading was a way to consolidate land into contiguous plots. Poor had begun buying land in section 24 of the township, which also held the Hancock land, as well as adjacent areas in the next township. Perhaps Poor thought if he took over the mortgage, he would have a better chance at buying it from Hancock. The land Poor offered in exchange for the Hancock mortgage was nearer to Countryman’s favorite sister, Lany (Lana); it also meant he no longer needed to hound Hancock for a mortgage payment.¹⁸

Countryman must have been relieved. The following day both he and Poor obtained the signatures to execute a deed for land “from A. C. Poor and wife to Alte, and write a transfer of the Hancock Mortgage to Caroline E. Poor.” The two men carefully put the land and mortgage in their wives’ names, not in their own, probably to secure their assets from future creditors’ demands. While completing the trade should have left Countryman happy, he wrote in his diary that evening that he was still troubled: “My mind is ill at ease. I know I am full of sin and iniquity, and yet I want to be holy. I want to do right.” It would be several weeks before he found peace of mind.¹⁹

Countryman confessed to his fault during a religious revival conducted by itinerant preacher Brother Wilford beginning in late November. He attended almost every day, writing in his diary that he yearned for salvation and freedom from his sins. By December 4, he was ready to take care of the business that had weighed heavily on him since the night of the land trade. He “[c]alled upon A Poor and confessed to him that I had done him a great wrong. I had deceived or more plainly



*A family album includes photographs of Levi's and Alte's neighbors:
Levi's favorite sister, Lany, and her husband Daniel B. Truax*

lied to him when we traded land. God, I felt, would not forgive me until I made confession.” Much relieved, Countryman participated in the revival through December, duly noting that his brother, Alte’s brother, and even Alte embraced religion.²⁰

In February 1859 the issue of the land trade arose again when Poor “came to see me to night. . . . He proposes to take me up to Minneapolis on Saturday to see Mr Hancock.” Two days later the men, in company with two others from Nininger, “started for Minneapolis on the ice.” Finally the men resolved the disagreement. Countryman explained:

I must here state that last Summer when I traded with A. C. Poor I had failed to acquaint [him] of a release of a certain 40 acre lot, and had Subsequently acknowledged it. I then promised to make it right. Taking advantage of my promise he came up to see me last Wednesday night, and wanted \$350. . . . I refused to have anything to do with [him] until seeing Hancock.

While the nature of Countryman’s dishonesty is not entirely clear, the settlement suggests he had released the lot’s lumber rights to someone else as part of the mortgage. To Poor’s disappointment, it was decided that Countryman should pay Poor \$100 and receive nearly that value in lumber from Poor. Countryman came out ahead.²¹

From the beginning to the end of this land transaction, Countryman’s diary illuminates at the personal level the multiple interactions required to relieve financial burdens and secure land. These were not merely business decisions or actions. Countryman involved a wide array of people in his economic goals—neighbors, male and female community members, a distant participant in the dispute, and his wife. He drew not only upon business principles to try to improve his economic position, but he relied upon his spiritual values to make worldly decisions. Finally, with the land dispute resolved, Countryman was free to begin building the family’s new house on 80 acres adjacent to his brother-in-law’s farm.

REPARATION FOR BUILDING THE HOUSE had started long before the resolution of the land dispute in February 1859. On October 11, 1858, less than three weeks after the mortgage-for-land trade with Poor, Countryman had begun hauling lumber from Nininger City. In a one-week period, he transported goods down the hill from his farm to the gristmill and sawmill and brought lumber back up the rutted road in his wagon five out of seven days. After plowing out potatoes all day on October 22, Countryman drove to town at night with “a load of rutabagas and some chickens and a hog down to the saw mill and got a load of lumber by moonlight. It was awful bad road and we broke our tongue in the wagon.” Countryman’s wagon

became mired three days later under a heavy load on the same road. This time, however, the load included fencing for his brother John and turnips for neighbor Hugh Moore, who worked at the lumber mill. Perhaps Countryman's brother John had requested the favor when he spent the night earlier that week; Countryman would count on John to reciprocate later on. In another kind of exchange, Moore accepted a wide variety of foodstuffs and products for the lumber cut at the mill. Countryman brought turnips, pumpkins, cabbages, rutabagas, chickens, and a hog in lieu of a cash payment. Mill owner Reuben Knapp preferred labor in exchange for lumber, it appears. On November 3 Countryman spent the morning piling 1,000 feet of lumber for Knapp.²²

Clearly, transactions in goods and services, and even the land exchange that set the house project in motion, did not involve money. Farmers rarely used it compared with the other types of exchange, especially in times of financial crisis. Like other settlers, Countryman spent and received money—gold or silver coins, banknotes, or scrip—infrequently. For example, he “traded for some shoes with Mr Tenney by giving him some City scrip at .50 cents of the dollar” and “sold Mr Robertson my school

order of \$70 for \$22.50 cash and 22.95 in lumber—a ruinous discount but I could do no better.” Most cash transactions were related to payment of debts on land.²³

COUNTRYMAN'S DIARY is filled with a wide variety of transactions: trading goods for goods, goods for services, and services for services. While the goods or services in these exchanges had agreed-upon value, decoding that value is difficult due to the informal way in which non-monetary exchanges were recorded. Even words associated with a cash transaction such as “bought” mean little within the context of Countryman's diary unless he specifically noted his means of exchange. During a trip to Hastings on February 26, Levi wrote, “Bought for my house, the nails, locks, hinges, glass, sash, paint &c, together with some groceries for family use” without listing whether he took money or products for exchange. Countryman never seemed to lack some medium of payment.²⁴

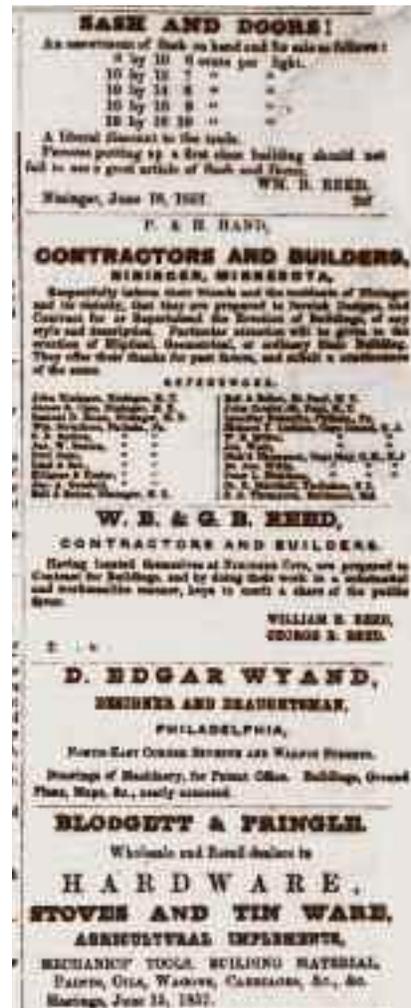
This trip to Hastings signified a new phase in his attempt to “secure a home” for his family. By late February and early March 1859, he went for lumber three and four times per week before and after teaching school in Nininger. Although teaching supplemented his family's

A busy market scene crowded with farmers, merchants, and goods on Red Wing's Main Street, about 1860



income with \$100 for the four-month term, it cut into the amount of time he could devote to building the new house. He therefore had to cast his exchange net wider in his quest for services and goods. On February 24 he wrote, “Messrs [Phillip and Henry (Harry)] Hands came on to do the carpenter work of my house and they have begun in earnest.” Although the terms of the work do not appear in the diary, there is evidence that Countryman exchanged agricultural products for the Nininger City carpenters’ skills. Countryman next called up an old debt to obtain roofing shingles. On March 2, 1859, after a visit to Hiram Frank, he wrote: “He is to pay me in shingles maybe—he is very slack. Commenced raining at 3 o'clock, and in the night commenced snowing. My flooring will get very wet.” Clearly the two men had agreed on a value of what Frank owed Countryman, but Frank had not met his obligations in a timely manner. Two weeks later, however, in the midst of hauling lumber over roads mired in mud, Countryman secured some of the shingles from Frank. By the end of March the exterior was nearly finished, the roof covered, window sashes in place, siding up, and the chimney flue nearly complete. Window glass would arrive a week after the family settled into its new home on April 1, 1859. In the meantime, the Hands continued their carpentry work on the house.²⁵

What began as a business transaction between Countryman and the Hands became a social relationship, as well. On April 16, Harry Hand was at the Countryman’s. Two days later he returned, with his wife, to build a ladder and closet door. The following day Hand helped finish the chimney flue and built a cupboard. The next day Countryman brought the Hands some flour, perhaps as a payment, and stayed for dinner. Within the week, “Alte & Lizzie & the baby went with me to P. Hands to make a visit. We all ate dinner there; after which I drew a bll [barrel] of water for the two Mrs Hands and one for Mrs Fish.” On April 30, Countryman got raspberry and gooseberry bushes from the Hands. As the summer progressed, the Hands fixed the eave troughs on the Countryman’s new house, and Countryman and his family took beans and potatoes and other crops to the two Hand families. Meanwhile, each hosted dinners or suppers cooked and served by the wives. Throughout the summer and early fall the families visited and exchanged services—drawing water, bringing flour, building ceil-



The Hand brothers were among the builders listed in the Emigrant Aid Journal, June 20, 1857.

ings. Clearly, social exchange rooted families in the growing community networks of Nininger in tangible ways. Countryman does not explicitly make the connection between social and economic exchange, perhaps because it was so ubiquitous.²⁶

TRADING AND VISITING also reinforced family ties. Many diary entries note Countryman walking to the homes of his brothers Henry and Peter and his brother-in-law Daniel Truax to sharpen an ax, read a paper, or share a watermelon. He took meals at his brothers’ and sisters’ homes, and his family likewise served meals to visiting relatives, including his aging father, a regular visitor. On one occasion Father Countryman, the seven Countryman siblings, and their spouses met for a New Year’s meal. It was not a coincidence that Countryman borrowed from, loaned to, and visited with his relatives with greater frequency than other community members. His relatives were his closest neighbors, his first source of information, and his constant means of support, economically and socially. Brothers lent tools; sisters-in-law



*A small family photograph album
with portraits of Levi and Alte, about 1860*

attended at births; nephews provided farm labor in exchange for tutoring. These interactions probably contributed to Levi's decision to settle and build in the area. Census lists between 1857 and 1865 confirm that residents who had extended kin in the Nininger area stayed, whereas those who moved into the community without family or did not become part of a family through marriage moved on fairly quickly, especially during times of financial stress.²⁷

Occasionally, however, close family relationships interfered with Levi's goal of making his new house habitable. On April 8, a week after the family moved in, he fumed about an unexpected visit: "Peter and his wife and Henry's wife with their children visited us: and I was kept from work. I love to see my friends, but I have much to do, and interruption is irksome." After the visitors left, Levi went with his brother-in-law to haul a load of beets and potatoes from "the old place" to the new one, and the following day installed window glass.²⁸

The house's unfinished condition apparently worried Alte. Although it had a roof, siding, glass in the windows, and a cellar to store vegetables brought from the "old place," Alte was unhappy. Levi cryptically narrates one incident: "Got up very late this morning. I was desponding, owing to a little difference between my wife and me. She is discontented because we are poor, and reflects

upon me. I could be contented in a mud hovel, if all around could be contented." The diary's next line suggests the uncompleted state of the house: "Went or rather wandered off to Nininger, to see about getting some lumber. . . . Saw Mr Jackson about getting some lime and lath, Saw Mr Hemphill about putting on the plastering." Lath and plaster would perhaps transform the "mud hovel" into a home for Alte.²⁹

Finishing it up was not easy, given the heavy load of routine farm work. As Levi noted on June 28, after neglecting to write in his diary for two days, "My time is all filled up" with hauling sand and water, preparing mortar for the house, lathing, and supplying hospitality on "a great day of company." After Levi missed another day's entry he wrote on July 1:

Have been excessively busy all day—lathed a little—hauled a load of water—a load of sand—took a load of rails and fixed the fence—hauled a load of wood—and besides a great many chores—all this with the general oversight puts a great deal on my hands. Alte has very hard work. So much company—six today in addition to our own. If any body would help her it would make a difference, but she does it all. She is really a noble woman—may God bless her!³⁰

Countryman's chores included coordination of the labor of his brothers-in-law and sister-in-law, who lived with the family, and basic tasks such as feeding and watering livestock and tending the garden. He also acted as host. Alte's work was also substantial. While caring for two young sons and an ailing brother, she had workmen and visitors added to her burdens. Her ability to provide hospitality in the midst of an already full household was essential to the farm and the community's network of social and economic exchange. A finished house would aid her in this endeavor.

Within five weeks of the Countryman's marital quarrel, a Mr. Hemphill arrived to plaster the house with Levi's assistance. On July 20, he noted: "To day we finished up the last coat of mortar on the house. . . . I did some painting in the chamber, cleaned up our sleeping room, &c, &c." The house's evolution continued, as Levi and Alte were "busy all day cleaning the sand and mortar from the floors and scrubbing them. Towards night I did

some painting in the pantry.” In subsequent days he continued to paint and whitewash the farm buildings, contributing to a prosperous appearance for the farm and creating marital harmony before winter in the bargain. By spring Alte had saved up enough rags to order carpets from Nininger weaver Sarah Stone, and by April 30, Levi noted helping his wife “to lay down the carpet.” On May 28, Levi dropped off more rags, and on June 6 he picked up “Alte’s carpet at Mrs Stones.” His entry of June 2 contains a possible clue to her payment: “After I got home I took the cow over to E. Stone whence I did not get back till very late.” (“E.” is probably Eugene, Sarah’s teenage son.)³¹

HARVEST SEASON REPRESENTED another exercise in economic and social exchange for the Countrymans. With limited access to threshing machines and few farm laborers around Nininger, farmers spent much of the season at each other’s farms to bring in crops.³²

Countryman’s diary account of who came and went on his farm and where he worked during the harvest season of 1859 suggests that he gathered his wheat and oats relatively early and then worked for others in exchange for their labor during threshing. Although this meant he could grow enough crops and produce to sustain his extended family through the winter, this labor

sharing claimed many hours. As he struggled with his own crops, Levi finally turned to his wife for assistance in the fields, the first and only time Alte did field work, according to her husband’s diary. On August 9, Levi noted, “Cradled oats all day. They are down very bad and it is very hard cradling. Alte helped me some.” The next day Alte helped in the fields again. The following day Levi again chronicled the intensive labor and its consequences: “Worked at the down oats all day. Most tiresome work Alte worked until 2 or 3 P.M. when she was attacked with a billious colic which appeared to threaten her life. I sent for Dr Thome, who arrived at about midnight. What with laboring hard all day, and being broken of rest at night, makes it hard work indeed.” As Alte slowly recovered, Levi called upon neighbor Peter Fitch for help. Then he spent the following week binding oats for his brother-in-law and brother, arranging for Hiram Frank to thresh the grain on the Countryman farm, and “hunting hands for threshing.” Levi remarked on August 30, “At 9. oclock Mr Frank came with his machine and threshed my grain to day. I had fourteen hands to help me.” These were probably neighbors, including his brother-in-law and brother. Throughout September, Countryman worked on nearby farms raking buckwheat, threshing, and stacking oats, labor that probably served as payment for the others’ help.³³

The riverfront town of Hastings, a few miles from Nininger, in 1862



Whereas the harvest of 1858 occurred during a period of soul-searching and intense financial distress for Countryman, the harvest of 1859 at his new farm found him able to reflect with relative contentment: “I had one hundred bushels of wheat and three hundred and eighteen of oats. Truly I ought to be deeply grateful to God for His many mercies conferred on me, but I fear that I am too indifferent, as to his kindness. I may look forward and see plainly that my family has provision for bread for one year at any rate.”³⁴

Instead of having to purchase food for the coming winter, the family would be provisioned from its own

stores grown on its own farm. Although Countryman had not yet been able to attend seminary, he continued to pray that he would achieve this goal. In the meantime, he drew upon his faith while toiling at an occupation he found physically exhausting, financially challenging, and emotionally unsatisfying. To establish a house and livelihood in a newly settled rural area, Levi Countryman crossed paths with men and women also involved in providing for their families through visiting, bartering, and trading goods and labor. In his efforts “to secure a home,” at least, he was not alone. □

Reaping with a horse-drawn Esterly machine in a St. Paul-area grain field, 1860



What Happened to Levi Countryman?

HOMESTEADER AND TEACHER LEVI COUNTRYMAN

frequently wrote articles on agricultural topics for several Dakota County newspapers. In 1861 the restless farmer planted his crops and then left for Red Wing's Hamline University, not an eastern seminary, as he had hoped. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree after a two-month course of study. Three years later he returned for several weeks to secure a Master of Arts degree. In March 1865 he enlisted in the Second Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, Company D (for which he received \$300), getting only to Washington, D. C., before the war ended.

In 1866 Levi and Alte, who had lost two young children, sold their farm and rented a house in Hastings. Here Levi taught school and hired out with his horse team to help build the railroad. Two more daughters arrived, including Gratia, who later became the city librarian of Minneapolis and head of the American Library Association.

Levi sold agricultural machinery for businesses in Hastings and then in Minneapolis, where the family moved in 1882 so that the children could attend university. In their last decades, Levi (d. 1924) and Alte lived with their children and other relatives in Minneapolis, Washington, California, Colorado, and Ohio.



SOURCES: Jane Pejsa, *Gratia Countryman*; *Hastings Gazette*, Apr. 4, 1924.

Notes

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1. Levi N. Countryman Diary, Apr. 1, 4, 1859, Levi Newton Countryman Papers, 1858–62, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul (hereinafter, Diary).

2. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who valorized the individual frontier farmer, acknowledged the importance of community and family in his famous 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." He wrote that the pioneer who made his own home and tools and planted crops also "gathers around him a few other families of similar tastes and habits"; American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1893, p. 199–227. On males' assumptions that they must provide for a family, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

3. Here and below, Countryman obituary, *Hastings Gazette*, Apr. 4, 1924; Jane Pejsa, *Gratia Countryman, Her Life, Her Loves, and Her Library* (Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 1995), 16–18.

4. Diary, July 11, Sept. 24, 1858. Lany Countryman Truax, 32, had moved with her husband, Daniel, in the fall of 1853; her younger brother Henry Countryman arrived the following spring. In the next 16 months three more brothers—John, Peter, and Levi—settled on claims in Township 115, Range 18. Their children's birthplaces suggest that Peter and Henry moved directly from St. Lawrence County to Bluff Landing, probably in response to reports from Daniel Truax's extended family. By 1857 Levi's father, Daniel Countryman, and an unmarried sister, Martha Countryman, had moved to Nininger Township. Alte's cousin Orlando Chamberlain also bought land in an adjoining township, and the families visited regularly. See Minnesota Territorial Census, 1857, Dakota County, Nininger Township, microfilm, roll 1, p. 277, MHS.

Levi's diary entries about land transactions are sketchy; so are abstract books and land-office records. For land-preemption information, see United States, General Land Office, Red Wing Land District, Register of Preemption Declaratory Statements, vol. 1, State Archives, MHS.

5. For analysis of a diary, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). On familial contributions, see John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

6. Diary, July 11, 1858.

7. Diary, Aug. 22, 1858. For an insightful analysis of the gendered aspects of exchange, see Ulrich, *Midwife's Tale*, and Merrill E. Jarchow, *The Earth Brought Forth: A History of Minnesota Agriculture to 1885* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1949), 80–119.

8. For others' work on exchange economies, see Susan S. Rugh, *Our Common Country: Family Farming, Culture, and Community in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 133; Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism*, 29–30. For the merchant's role, see Lewis E. Atherton, *The Frontier Merchant in Mid-America* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1971), 17–18.

9. Diary, Jan. 3, 4, Mar. 24, 25, 1859. For example, on Jan. 4, 1859, Countryman wrote, "Agricultural meeting to-day at Hastings.

But did not attend, as I could not get to ride down. Heard they elected another Secty. in my stead." This news was apparently brought by "Sisters Lany & Martha and Bro John, and John Bossart [who] were here to see us and take dinner with us to day." The news did not diminish his pleasure at the visit, however. He commented, "How sweet is the company of loved friends!" The next day, in the company of his brother, he traveled to Nininger and upon his return "found brother Peter and wife at my house to visit with us. Had a very pleasant time together."

10. Diary, July 20, 23, 1858.

11. Diary, Aug. 21, 24, 1858.

12. Diary, Aug. 24, 1858.

13. Diary, Aug. 18, 1858.

14. Diary, Sept. 1, 1858.

15. Diary, Sept. 8, 1858.

16. Diary, Sept. 9, 20, 1858.

17. Diary, Sept. 16, 20, 1858.

18. Diary, Sept. 23, 1858; Dakota County Abstract Book, Sec. 27, Township 115, Range 17, 18, Dakota County Government Center, Hastings.

19. Diary, Sept. 23, 24, 1858. Poor's wife acquired this land through a sheriff's sale in 1860, indicating that Hancock had defaulted on the mortgage.

20. Diary, Nov. 30, Dec. 4, 8, 1858.

21. Diary, Feb. 10, 12, 1859. Poor and Countryman again transacted land business two years later, with Countryman leasing land to Poor; see Diary, Mar. 5, Dec. 25, 1861.

22. Diary, Oct. 22, 25, Nov. 3, 1858, Jan. 15, 1859.

23. Diary, Sept. 11, Oct. 18, 1858, Jan. 8, Feb. 12, June 11, 1859. For an example of a cash payment, see Dec. 20, 1859, when Countryman paid taxes on the farm.

24. Diary, Feb. 26, 1859. For example, in April 1859 Alte made regular visits to Dr. Hanchett in Hastings for her infant son's badly infected eye. At the time Countryman recorded neither money nor goods exchanged, but in August, he delivered "12 dozen bundles of oats," perhaps as payment for Hanchett's earlier services; see Diary, Apr. 6, 9, 21, Aug. 25, 1859.

25. See Diary, Nov. 16, 1858, Feb. 24, Mar. 2, 15, 1859. While Countryman's diary does not associate monetary values with goods, services, or labor, a Nininger City dry-goods store's record book, possibly kept by James Case, contains the cash value of goods sold. A separate list shows how debts were settled, including labor performed or goods traded with a cash value; see unidentified store

record (Nininger, MN), 1860–68, MHS. For similar negotiations, see John T. Schlotterbeck, "The 'Social Economy' of an Upper South Community," in *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies*, ed. Orville V. Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 16–18.

26. Diary, Apr. 16, 18, 19, 20, 25 (quote), 29, 30, 1859. The business and social relationship might have continued had Phillip Hand's family not left for New Jersey in October 1859. Countryman remarked sadly, "They have indeed gone"; Diary, Oct. 30, 1859. By 1860 Harry (Henry) Hand's family must also have left Nininger; they do not appear in the 1860 census.

27. Diary, Aug. 8, Nov. 6, 1858; Dec. 31, 1859. Typical was Albert Truax, Daniel and Lany Countryman Truax's only son, who periodically stayed with Levi's family and assisted them. He went to get the "girl" to help during threshing on Sept. 14, 1860; he helped kill and dress hogs on Nov. 22, 1860. Meanwhile, Levi remarked, "During this time Albert H Truax is reciting, Chemistry, Grammar and Algebra to me"; Diary, Dec. 6, 1860. See also Andrea R. Foroughi, "Ephemeral Town, Enduring Community: Space, Gender, and Power in Nininger, Minnesota, 1851–1870" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1999), 16–54, 175–216.

28. Diary, Apr. 8, 9, 1859. Sally McMurry, in *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 63–64 and 85n19, comments that "the most commonly cited drawback of roadside life was not that company intruded upon the farmer's private life, but that casual visiting wasted his precious time."

29. Diary, June 8, 1859.

30. Diary, June 28, July 1, 1859.

31. Diary, July 20, 21, 22, 23, 1859, Apr. 10, 25, 30, June 20, 1860. Like most women, Stone, 68, who lived with her son, Eugene, was listed as a domestic in the 1860 census. Business conducted between the Countrymans and the Stones is the type of economic activity that often remains hidden; without Levi's participation, there would be no record.

32. The Minnesota state census of 1857 does not distinguish between farmer and farm laborer, but a rough estimate of laborers can be obtained by counting the number of farmers listed following the head of household. For Nininger City and Township, with a total population of 503 in 1857, only 33 men were farmers but not heads of household.

33. Diary, Aug. 9–22, 29, 30, 31, Sept. 2, 3, 7, Oct. 4, 1859.

34. Diary, Aug. 30, 1859.

The photos of the Countrymans and Truaxes are courtesy Virginia Buffington Shaw, Edina; all other images are from the MHS collections.



Winter in the farmyard, from American Agriculturist, December 1859



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