

## MOTHER NATURE SMILED

# *The Grand Excursion* of 1854

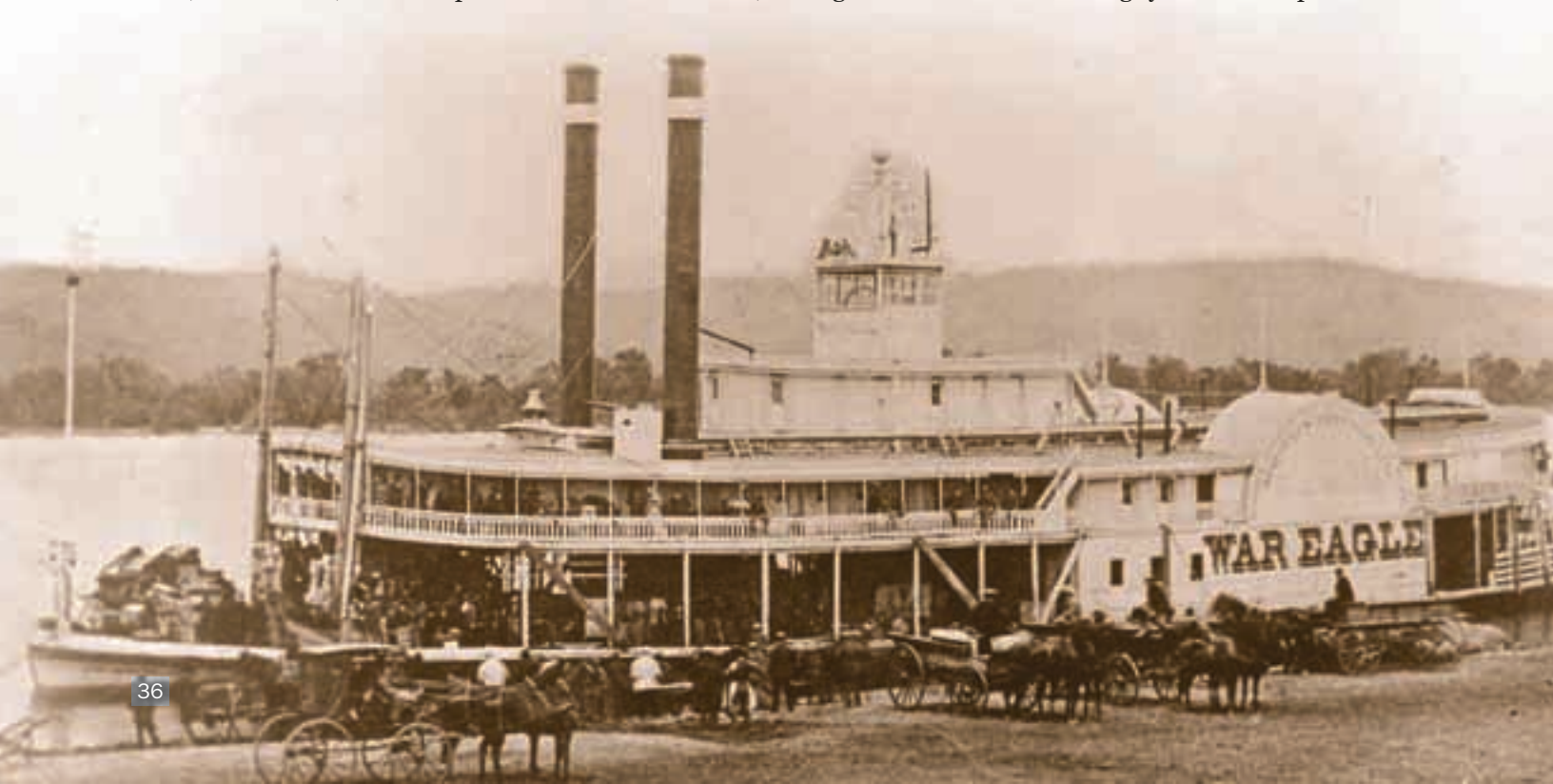
A HIGHLIGHT OF THE coming summer will be the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary and re-creation of the 1854 Grand Excursion from Rock Island, Illinois, to St. Paul from June 25 to July 5, 2004. The original trip took place June 5–10, 1854, to celebrate completion of the railroad from Chicago west to the upper Mississippi River and to tout the virtues and potential of the western territories that had been acquired by the Louisiana Purchase nearly a half-century earlier. According to the *Galena Jeffersonian*, the intent was “to make a thousand, more or less, men of capital

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and influence acquainted with the enchanting beauty, the boundless resources . . . of the Great West.” Former President Millard Fillmore (his term had ended in 1853) and more than 1,200 citizens—including politicians, artists, writers, reporters, and business leaders—took the railroad from Chicago to Rock Island, then boarded a small fleet of steamboats bound upriver to St. Paul.<sup>1</sup>

Though it is difficult to prove cause and effect, the region west of

the Mississippi River did grow enormously shortly after the Grand Excursion, attracting millions of dollars in investments and thousands of new immigrants. The majestic beauty of the river-valley landscape had a great deal to do with this success. In addition, an unusual and serendipitous episode of near-perfect June weather during the trip probably amplified the adventurous spirit, revelry, and enthusiasm of the excursionists, which was, in turn, reported in the press. Though the excursion occurred before any standard weather-observing system was in place in



Minnesota Territory, documentation of that June's weather can be found in the records of Ft. Snelling and the daily readings of Dr. Charles L. Anderson, an early citizen of St. Anthony and a weather observer for the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>2</sup> These data, when combined with comments in the *Minnesota Pioneer*, yield a very interesting picture indeed.

By 1854 Minnesota Territory had already acquired a reputation as the American Siberia.<sup>3</sup> Much of this reputation was staked upon the weather records and diaries from Ft. Snelling, established in October 1819. The first winter was so harsh that 40 soldiers perished, primarily from pneumonia and scurvy. Below-zero Fahrenheit temperature readings were the rule rather than the exception. And this was only a precursor to a number of severe winters with temperatures as cold as -41 degrees F. and abundant snowfall, followed by late springs and frequent flooding on the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers (in 1822, 1826, 1831, 1838, 1843, and 1849, for example). To excursionists preparing to visit Minnesota Territory for the first time, the stories and events from the previous year alone may have been disconcerting. Snowy conditions and cold spring temperatures dominated 1853. Snow and frost came on May 10 and May 18, followed by a very wet June, fully half the days being rainy. Travelers familiar with Minnesota's reputation through stories of weather extremes and hardships—and perhaps even a few tall tales—must have felt considerable apprehension concerning the weather they might face. Surely, most brought warm clothing.

FACING PAGE: *Steamboat War Eagle, one of the flotilla that carried excursionists upriver, at the St. Paul levee about 1865*

Following a lack of late-winter snowfall (3 inches for March and April compared to the modern average of nearly 14 inches), the spring of 1854 came in haste. Warmer-than-normal spells of weather were frequent in March and April, and ice on the Mississippi broke up early. The river was running very low and the landscape looking dry as a result of low precipitation the previous fall. Prairie fires were observed throughout most of March and again in early May. Snow flurries were reported on May 1. Then came a blessing in disguise. Heavy thunderstorms during mid-month with frequent winds ranging from 30 to 50 miles per hour brought the combined April and May rainfall to 7–9 inches, well above the normal of 5–6 inches, and produced a good deal of runoff. These conditions not only alleviated the threat of prairie fire but also caused a significant rise in the Mississippi River, probably eliminating concerns about snags, sandbars, or shallow waters. The needed rainfall also made the river valley abundantly green and lush by the time the Grand Excursion departed on June 5. Area strawberries were ripe and ready to pick by June 2, and weather observers noted that “all the common prairie flowers were in bloom.”<sup>4</sup>

IN THE WEEK BEFORE the riverboats left Illinois, the weather had been unsettled and sultry, with thunderstorms and three consecutive days of measurable rainfall totaling nearly an inch at Ft. Snelling. Weather records from both the fort and St. Anthony show overnight lows in the mid-to-high 60s on June 5, indicating an uncomfortably high dew point for early June. Despite the weather, “The boats, decorated with prairie

flowers and evergreens left Davenport at ten o'clock and sailed with music on their decks . . . saluted by the gay fireworks from the Old Fort,” according to historian William J. Petersen. He further noted, “Everyone was delighted with the bright moonlight and the refreshing river breeze” that provided a respite from the oppressive dew point. Shortly after midnight on their overnight trip toward Galena, the passengers witnessed a violent thunderstorm, with frequent lightning strikes illuminating the boats, bluffs, and riverbank vegetation. A short, rainy stop in Dubuque on the afternoon of June 6 would mark the end of their discomfort.<sup>5</sup>

Following the storms, a strong Canadian high-pressure system settled in overnight, bringing clearing skies, brisk northerly winds, low dew points, and cool temperatures—some 15-to-25 degrees below those of the previous day. The crisp air was probably invigorating. Though the overnight low of 40 degrees on the morning of June 7 was the coldest reading of the month at Ft. Snelling, air temperatures modified by the valley landscape were probably several degrees higher for the excursionists. Days were bright and sunny, with highs in the mid-to-upper 60s, about 6-to-12 degrees cooler than normal for that time of June.<sup>6</sup>

The Grand Excursion arrived Wednesday night on Lake Pepin, where four of the riverboats were

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lashed together to travel across the lake as barge tows now do. The high-pressure system provided a cool, calm, and beautiful night as the lights from the boats “danced and streamed on the waters.” The low dew points and cool temperatures likely prohibited much mosquito or pesky insect activity, while a nearly full June moon (waxing, 86 percent full until setting about 3:00 A.M.) lit up the surrounding bluffs. The night was spent in “dancing, music, and flirtations.”<sup>7</sup>

The boats reached St. Paul earlier than expected on Thursday, June 8. The weather was still magnificent, with morning lows in the 40s and highs in the mid-to-high 60s, moving the *Minnesota Pioneer* to comment on the pleasant contrast with the stormy, rainy period earlier in the week. Passengers were treated to visits to St. Anthony Falls, Minnehaha Falls, Ft. Snelling, and Fountain Cave, then to a gala dinner and dance. Excursionists departed shortly

after midnight on Friday, June 9, to return to Rock Island under the month’s full moon. Again, the weather on the return trip was near perfect, still dominated by Canadian high pressure. Temperatures were slightly warmer, with highs from 70 to 80 degrees and lows in the 50s under mostly clear skies.

JOURNALISTS AND GUESTS wrote wonderful stories of the beauty and majesty of the landscape, probably never realizing that they had traveled the river valley under perhaps the best weather conditions possible at that time of year. Thanks to the three-day dominance of a vast, cool, and dry Canadian air mass, temperatures were 10-to-12 degrees cooler than normal with comfortably low dew points, invigorating northerly winds, and beautifully clear skies. A check of June 6–8 climate records from 1891 to 2003 shows that comparable conditions have occurred only three times since: in 1897, 1937, and 1998. The river was deep enough but not too fast flowing for easy navigation, and the landscape was blanketed with lush vegetation and flowering plants.

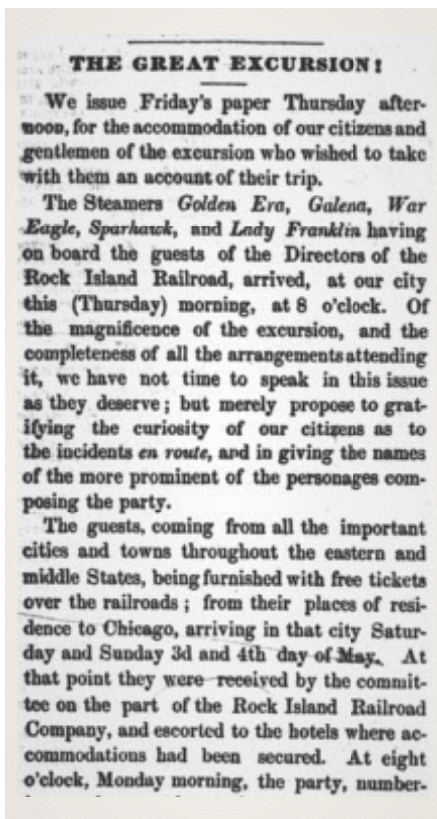
Had they stayed a bit longer in St. Paul, excursionists might have seen another side of the weather. A thunderstorm was noted again on June 11 and a Ft. Snelling observer reported on June 15, “The weather is awful hot these days, only good for growing crops and mad dogs.” (Dew points were in the high 60s to low 70s, with temperatures in the mid-to-upper 80s.) A severe thunderstorm on July 4 damaged trees and buildings in St. Paul.<sup>8</sup>

The Grand Excursion produced many accounts promoting the western territories, and money and people streamed into the region. One settler was Ira O. Seeley, who explored the Zumbro River Valley and settled in Wabasha County with his family in the fall of 1854, just months after the historic river trip. He founded the town of Mazeppa and was the first District 12 representative elected to the territorial and state legislature in 1857–58. He was my great-great grandfather. ☐

## Notes

1. For the *Jeffersonian* quote and an overview of the trip, visit the Grand Excursion 2004 website: [www.grandexcursion.com](http://www.grandexcursion.com).
2. Charles Fisk and Thomas St. Martin have painstakingly combed through these records and written histories of the Twin Cities’ nineteenth-century weather. Hereinafter, all interpretations of Ft. Snelling’s high and low temperatures are drawn from Charles J. Fisk, “Reconstruction of Daily 1820–1872 Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, Temperature Observations” (master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1984); all other weather data are from Thomas St. Martin, *Daily Climatological Record* (the author, 2001), vol. 1, n. p. Copies of both are in Kuehnast Climatology Library and DNR State Climatology Office, Soils Building, University of Minnesota, St. Paul.
3. William E. Lass, “Minnesota: An American Siberia?” *Minnesota History* 49 (Winter 1984): 149–55.
4. St. Martin, *Daily Climatological Record*, quoting Ft. Snelling records.
5. William J. Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1968), 274–76.
6. In fact, overnight lows on both June 7 and 8 were also close to 40 degrees at Ft. Snelling and St. Anthony Falls.
7. Petersen, *Steamboating*, 278.
8. *Minnesota Pioneer*, June 15, July 6, 1854, quoted in St. Martin, *Daily Climatological Record*.

*All images are from MHS collections.*



Minnesota Pioneer, June 8, 1854



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