

MINNESOTA IN 1849: AN IMAGINARY LETTER¹

ST. PAUL'S LANDING, M. T., July 10, 1849

DEAR MARY:

It's a lively week I have had of it—no time to write. If I could have written the letter would be still here waiting for the next down boat. The trip from Galena up on the Doctor Franklin was truly delightful. I do not know how splendid the scenery along the Hudson and the Rhine may be, but it must be something exceedingly beautiful to surpass what I saw from Prairie du Chien (Dog's Prairie in English) to the Falls. At one place near here the Mississippi widens out into a broad lake, bordered by lofty cliffs or forested slopes. At the upper (northern) end of the lake is a lofty detached peak which looks so much like a barn that the early Frenchmen, who were here fifty years before the Declaration of Independence, called it La Grange. Close to these was a group of huts and tents in which I was told old Redwing's band of Sioux—they pronounce it Sue—Indians are living. If I may judge from the appearance of the individuals I saw as we passed the Indian is not an object of beauty in every day clothes.

The boat stopped but a few minutes at this place to discharge a few boxes and barrels of merchandize and went on a few miles

¹ This letter was written by Dr. William W. Folwell, president of the Minnesota Historical Society, to be read at the luncheon program of the society's seventy-sixth annual meeting on January 19, 1925, in place of a short speech which he had been asked to make. It is a valuable description of the Minnesota situation in 1849 and is based upon studies and an accurate understanding of early Minnesota history. The letter is so written as to be attributable to Richard Chute, one of the pioneer settlers at St. Anthony Falls. No intimation was given the audience that the letter was not an authentic contemporary portrayal of Minnesota conditions in 1849, and apparently most of those who heard it read considered it a genuine pioneer letter. The fact that Dr. Folwell had prepared several footnotes to correct "excusable inaccuracies" in the letter strengthened the impression that here was an original document. Indeed, a newspaper reporter actually described the non-existent original "yellowed with the years since 1849." *Ed.*

to New Hope on the St. Peter river just above its issue into the Mississippi. They are now trying to call the place Mendota. The big man of this little hamlet and indeed of the whole territory is Henry Sibley, who came there in the year 1834 as manager of the American Fur Company. He lives in a big stone house, near which is a huge warehouse. I found him busy taking in furs collected in the foregoing season by Indians, trappers and licensed traders. One of the traders, Renville by name, had come from a post two hundred miles away on the edge of the buffalo range. The furs when assorted and baled are shipped to St. Louis, the great fur market of the upper Mississippi. Mr. Sibley asked me to dinner, which was abundant with plenty of silver and linen and a bottle of good claret. As he was occupied with his traders he left me to be entertained by Mrs. Sibley; and I was entertained. Mrs. Sibley would be at home in any circle no matter how select. From Mendota it is only two miles or a little more to Fort Snelling, and the small village of St. Peter consisting of the dwellings and other buildings of the Indian agent, the post sutler and civilian employes around it. We had to be ferried over the St. Peter river in a flat boat. The post sutler is Mr. Franklin Steele who has been out here almost as long as Mr. Sibley. For years his general store served the whole neighborhood as well as the garrison of the fort. I found Mr. Steele a little less affable than Mr. Sibley but courteous and hospitable enough. I soon learned that Mrs. Sibley was Mr. Steele's sister and that he had two other very handsome sisters, one the wife of a doctor here in St. Paul's, the other engaged to a lieutenant of the U. S. Army named R. W. Johnson lately out of West Point and ordered to Fort Snelling. The situation of the Fort on a high and precipitous bluff was admirably chosen way back toward the beginning of the century by an army lieutenant sent up here with a small party to find the source of the Mississippi and if possible catch some Hudson's Bay traders carrying on an unlawful trade with Indians. The lieutenant—Pike was his name—without a scrap of authority bought of a small local band of Indians who had no right to sell a hundred thousand acres of land to include the site of the fort and the Falls for half a barrel of whiskey and a promise that some day the Great Father would pay them some money. I understand

that a little before the fort was built an agent came up here and paid the Indians 2 cents an acre and some more whiskey. Mr. Steele intends to lay out a city as soon as the Indians are sent off towards the Missouri, which all agree will soon take place. There is no real fortification — only rows of barracks inclosing a parade ground, and a rather formidable round tower at the gateway, loop-holed for musketry.

Of course my next place to see was the Falls of St. Anthony, only seven miles away to the north. Mr. Steele was good enough to send me on in a two horse spring wagon with a young man named Stevens, now in his employ.² He came up here after the close of the Mexican war in which he had been a quartermaster. I have not yet met with such a genial joyous fellow as this Stevens, who believes that the greatest city in the Union will grow up around the Falls. Of the Falls one may quote Dr. Johnson's remark on the Giant's causeway "Worth seeing, but not worth going to see." I was disappointed in the scant height of the Falls, and the small volume of water, it may be unusual in this dry season, but the wooded banks of the narrow gorge below and the prairie above sloping back in terraces made a charming composition.

The village of St. Anthony is on the east side of the river. It is divided by two islands which are so near together they come near being one. There was little to attract settlers there till about a year ago when Mr. Steele got a sawmill he had built into operation. It is a small affair with a flutter wheel on a horse dam in the smaller, east, channel. The local humorist says of it "the saw goes up in the morning and comes down at noon." Still in the course of the season it turns out all the lumber just now needed. A number of frame houses have been built out of it, the first one by Ard Godfrey who came all the way from the state of Maine to build the sawmill. I forgot to tell you that on the west side of the river there is what may be called an already old saw mill built by soldiers from the fort years ago. There is also a very small flour mill later built to grind feed for

² The Stevens mentioned was without doubt John H. Stevens, who built the first house on the west side at the falls. He was commonly called Colonel Stevens, because he was one of Sibley's militia colonels in 1858.

the animals of the garrison at the Fort.³ The only persons I fell in with at the Falls whom I would care to meet again were a storekeeper named William Marshall and his unmarried sister Rebecca. He is not especially handsome but she is. They live in rooms over the store on Main Street. Mr. Marshall is or has been a surveyor and some time last year he laid out for Mr. Steele a village called St. Anthony Falls. Miss Rebecca helped him make the map.⁴ Mr. Marshall tells me he thinks of moving his store to St. Paul, because it is the larger place. I did not venture to advise him, but if he had asked me to, I would certainly have told him to stick by the Falls. The enormous power running to waste in these falls will be captured and set to work some day and it will work day and night, year in and year out, and the great big, rich city of this region will be at the Falls of St. Anthony. A man who was far up the river last winter tells me that there is pine timber enough close to water to last this whole northwestern country for three hundred years, if not longer.

The stage from the Falls to St. Paul is a two seated open wagon, drawn by two horses, but it landed me safely, after the eight mile drive partly along the wooded bank of the river and partly over a stretch of prairie fairly ablaze with wild flowers. I found a room at the Central House partly log and partly frame on the edge of the high bluff near the steamboat landing, and set out to view the town. The site is about as unpromising as you could well imagine. After you climb a steep bluff from the riverside you have before you a series of humps running up to high hills a mile back. Between two of the humps there is a large duck pond. At several places the rock comes up three feet above ground. They tell me that the first settlement was made almost by luck. I will inquire about that and tell you more. A townsite has been laid out but the houses, some with bark or slab roofs, look as though they had been built wherever a level spot of land could be found. However there is plenty

³ The flour mill had been equipped with "bolts" for making flour.

⁴ Rebecca Marshall, as Mrs. Rebecca Marshall Cathcart, is still living in St. Paul. Her "Sheaf of Remembrances" in the *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15: 515-552, is full of details of life in "the little French and Indian village" of St. Paul, as she calls it.

of fine scenery, free to all who have eyes to see with. Please don't imagine that the people living in these humble shacks are all of them cave men. There are some men and women here you could hardly match in Fort Wayne or any other city. One of them is a Vermont Yankee named Rice. I don't know that I have yet met just such a personality. Courteous, suave, even gracious, he makes friends with everybody; but he's no sycophant. For some years past he has been associated with Mr. Sibley at Mendota. But they did not get along well together and Mr. Rice has just moved here. The expectation is that he will make things hum. He has bought a big piece of land and will put up a big hotel — big for the place. So far Mr. Sibley has had things his own way in politics, but I should not be surprised if Henry M. Rice should some day relieve Sibley with all his stately dignity, of his labors in public station. In one of his journeys to Washington Mr. Rice made the acquaintance of a young Southern lady. In another journey this very year there was a wedding and the happily wedded pair are now living in one of the better shacks of St. Paul's — I say happily wedded, because she seems to have the same social gifts as distinguish her husband. With her beauty and graces she will soon be the social leader of this capital city.

Yes this is the capital city of the Territory of Minnesota, made so by an act of Congress passed on the 30 day of March of this year. It seems like a joke that President Taylor has appointed as governor a Pennsylvania lawyer, an ex-member of Congress, named Alexander Ramsey when there were many men out here who would not have declined the honor. I doubt if there is much truth in the yarn I heard at the hotel table that Mr. Ramsey would not accept the appointment till he made sure that he would not have to go round the Horn to get here. The new Governor came up near the end of May. Mr. Sibley had written him to come on to Mendota and be his guest. He stayed with the Sibleys nearly a month before he could find a house to live in. But he was over here attending to business meantime. On the first day of June he proclaimed the Territory to be organized, and a few days later he issued a proclamation dividing the territory into three judicial districts. Three whig judges had come up with him. Now you will have to take my word that the

Territory of Minnesota is bigger than all New England, New York and Pennsylvania put together. In another proclamation issued three days ago Governor Ramsey divided up his immense empire into seven counties with Indian names. He also ordered an election of delegates to convene as a legislature early in September. From what I have seen of Governor Ramsey I like him. He has not the stateliness of Sibley or Steele, nor the genial voice and smile of Rice, but he is sturdily built, dignified enough, even-tempered and perfectly frank in expression. If he decides to burn his ships and stay here for good he may play a large part in the history of the territory he has come to rule over. But he will have to wait for he is the only Whig in the whole territory except the few federal officers who came up with him. In one respect Mr. Ramsey is very fortunate. Five years ago when he was 29 he married a Pennsylvania girl of 18. Although still young, she is really queenly in appearance, very well informed and altho' domestic is interested in her husband's public duties. Mrs. Rice may have to tolerate a rival as social leader in the Capital city. I have had a most interesting trip so far and shall have plenty of things to tell you about when I get back to old Fort Wayne.

Ever your faithful DICK.

P. S. The boat was late coming from Mendota and is delayed here. I will tell you about two or three notable characters I have met with or heard about. One of them is a young Presbyterian minister from Philadelphia who came this last spring. He is a man of talent, but somewhat erratic. He preached a sermon on the text "And he slew a lion in a pit on a snowy day." He has got a school started in what was a blacksmith shop. For seats they have ranged some planks on pegs driven into auger holes in the logs. He will build a small wooden church on a lot given by Mr. Rice.⁵ Another very notable personage is James M. Goodhue who came up here in the spring and started a weekly Democratic paper, called the Minnesota Pioneer. He is well educated a very facile writer, with a vein of sarcasm which shades off into gall. Of one visiter to the territory he

⁵ Dr. Neill did not start the school. Miss Harriet Bishop did that two years before he came.

writes, "He stole *into* the Territory, he stole *in* the Territory, and he stole *out* of the Territory." My guess is that Mr. Goodhue is likely to lead a stormy life here.

There is another man, whom I have not seen, but his name is more heard on the street and in the hotel than that of any other. His name is Brown.⁶ He came out to Fort Snelling with the first troops to garrison Fort Snelling. He was a minister's son somewhere in Pennsylvania, ran away from home when 14 years old and enlisted as a drummer boy in the Army. Some say he was rather a fifer, for he soon became principal musician and leader of the garrison band. After seven or eight years he quit the army and began a series of enterprises much too many to tell you about if the steamboat would wait till sundown. For a while he kept a grocery—that means grogshop in this region—on the east bank of the Mississippi. He did not "introduce liquor into the Indian Country," that would have been felony, but an Indian could slip over to his grocery in a canoe and get a well-watered drink of whisky. Brown—Joe Brown everybody calls him—has started a farm on Grey Cloud island in the river a little below this place, has been lumbering over on the St. Croix river, served a term in the Wisconsin legislature when this part of Minnesota was St. Croix County, Wisconsin. Last year there was a convention held over at Stillwater on the St. Croix river—folks there believe their town is to be the great city—as a starter towards getting the new territory set up. Brown was a delegate, and his experience in the legislature came in handy. He made most of the motions, and headed the important committees. It was on his motion that in the petition to be sent to the president the special request was made that the new territory be named Minnesota.⁷ Brown had been out here fifteen years before Mr. Sibley came and knows more of men and things here than . . .⁸

⁶ Joseph Renshaw Brown was his full name.

⁷ If Mr. Brown had known the Dakota language as well as Gideon or Samuel Pond he would have spelled the name of the territory *Min-ni-sota*. "Minne" is a mere nickname in English.

⁸ The letter ends abruptly without proper signature, apparently because of a lost sheet.



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