

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE DRAMA AT OLD FORT SNELLING

The drama is a form of amusement popular in long-established and sophisticated communities, but not often associated with the frontier. Yet as early as 1836 the officers and soldiers and the few civilians residing at the remote post of Fort Snelling were entertained by the production of two plays. "Monsieur Tonson," a popular farce of the day centering about a French barber, and "The Village Lawyer" were acted by a group of soldiers in October of that year.

Two faded entries in a journal written ninety years ago by Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at the fort, contain the record of one of the earliest dramatic productions in Minnesota. In the first entry, dated October 1, 1836, Taliaferro tells that he "Attended to see the soldiers perform Monsieur Tonson & the Village Lawyer," and adds that the plays also were witnessed by the "Ladies & gentlemen of the Post" and that "M Nicollet attended with me." Joseph N. Nicollet, the explorer, had returned to the fort the previous day after spending the summer in the region around the headwaters of the Mississippi River, where he had been gathering material for his famous map. "The whole went off well," is Major Taliaferro's comment on the dramatic performance. A few days later, on October 6, another distinguished visitor appeared at Fort Snelling, Colonel George Croghan, inspector general of the army. The soldiers, in order to show this official that they could do more than drill "in fine order," repeated the plays in his honor, and, according to Taliaferro, they were "very well carried out by the Thespians."

One of these plays, "Monsieur Tonson," which was written by W. T. Moncrief in 1821, was woven around a romantic plot. "The French barber, Morbleu, is greatly troubled by a steady stream of visitors who come to make inquiries regarding

a certain fictitious Mr. Thompson, hoping thereby to gain information regarding Adolphine de Courcy who has been traced to his door." Mr. Marcus L. Hansen, in his volume on *Old Fort Snelling*, draws an interesting picture of the circumstances connected with the presentation of this farce: "Here, far from city streets and French barbers," he writes, "on a rude stage, Jack Ardourly fell in love with the beautiful Adolphine de Courcy — who probably only a few hours before had been hurrying to finish a task of cleaning guns so that she could call on the generous women of the garrison and beg from them capes and bonnets and hoop skirts!" Undoubtedly the resources of the entire Fort Snelling population were drawn upon in order to locate suitable stage properties for the production.

The "Thespians" of 1836 evidently were not the only actors to perform at old Fort Snelling. Colonel John H. Bliss, who spent several years of his boyhood, from 1833 to 1837, at the fort while his father was commandant, recalled that the soldiers "would get up theatrical performances every fortnight or so." He records that "those taking female parts" borrowed dresses from the soldiers' wives, and he adds that they made a "generous sacrifice to art of their cherished whiskers and mustaches." Such amateur theatricals seem to have helped to while away many hours of the long and tedious upper Mississippi winters, when work out of doors was impossible and time hung heavy on the hands of both officers and privates.

B. L. H.

LOCOMOTIVE ICE TRAINS

In the article on "Minnesota Pioneer Life as Revealed in Newspaper Advertisements," published in the June number of *MINNESOTA HISTORY*, attention was called to an advertisement in the *Minnesota Pioneer* for November 15, 1849, of two "Locomotive Ice Trains prepared expressly for travel on the ice of the Mississippi" between Galena and St. Anthony, "with ten cars in each train besides the engine and tender cars, with



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