

THE ENGLISH COLONY AT FAIRMONT IN THE SEVENTIES¹

On February 26, 1875, I left Liverpool on board the Cunard steamship "Java." Some friends who lived in Chicago were also sailing by her. I was going to see some land which my father had bought on speculation. He had heard that there was a great future in store for Minnesota. We had a very bad voyage, which lasted over fourteen days. The winter of 1875 was severe, and we arrived in New York with the decks slippery with ice and the riggings festooned with icicles. Our appearance was so unusual that pictures of the ship appeared in the illustrated papers.

¹The author of the present article is an Englishman who now lives in London. In 1876 he joined the English colony that had been established three years earlier in the vicinity of Fairmont, Martin County, Minnesota, and he remained there until 1883, when he returned to England. Some time ago the Minnesota Historical Society, while searching for historical materials relating to the Martin County colony, was given the name of Mr. Moro, and the article herewith printed is his generous reply to a letter of inquiry concerning his Minnesota experiences. The notes that follow have been supplied by Miss Bertha L. Heilbron, research assistant on the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

In 1872 H. F. Sherman, the promoter of the Martin County colony, secured railway lands south of Fairmont on which to settle the colonists and in 1873 he brought out the first installment of settlers. The English colonists hoped to make Martin County a center for bean-growing. "They at once began to break land for a crop and used a great many teams, and began to do business on a scale surprising to our people, from 50 to 100 teams being employed in breaking," writes William H. Budd in his *History of Martin County*, 90 (Fairmont, 1897). A carload of beans was shipped out from Brockport, the New York "bean center," which Sherman had previously visited, and it is estimated that more than a thousand acres were planted. In the locust invasions of 1873 and 1874 the bean gardens were ravaged. Of the first invasion Budd writes, "In 24 hours it is estimated that there was not a bean stalk left." Though the fields were replanted, it was late in the season and the crops were caught by early frosts. The promoter established an office in England for securing recruits for the colony and large accessions came out in July, 1874. Again the locusts did great damage to the crops in the vicinity of Fairmont. The author of the

After seeing acquaintances in New York and in Chicago, I proceeded westward. At that time there was no bridge across the Mississippi River to connect the railroad at La Crosse, in Wisconsin, with the Southern Minnesota Railway. I crossed the river on the ice in an open sleigh at 5:00 A. M., a bitterly cold wind blowing and the temperature below zero.

The terminus of the Southern Minnesota Railway was then at Winnebago City, in Faribault County. We reached it towards evening. "City" was a euphonious appellation for a limited village of wooden houses. After a night spent in a most elementary hotel, I took the stage for Fairmont. The stagecoach consisted of an open wagon on runners, as the ground was covered with frozen snow. It took considerably more than half a day to run the twenty miles — for the stage carried the mails, which had to be delivered here and there on the way, and the horses had to be rested. The prairie between Winnebago City and Fairmont is undulating, but there are hardly any steep hills.

On reaching Fairmont I discovered that it was indeed a very small village, much smaller than Winnebago City. All the present account takes up the story in 1875 and gives an interesting picture of the conditions in the English colony after that date.

Maurice Farrar, an Englishman who lived in the state in the late seventies, devotes a chapter to the Fairmont colony in his volume entitled *Five Years in Minnesota, 67-90* (London, 1880). He discusses at some length the sports of the transplanted Britons, who brought with them many of the customs of the homeland. "One young Englishman," he relates, "keeps a small pack of foxhounds at his own expense, and a large 'field' is sure to be attracted by the 'meets.'" Among the horses "there is, now and then, a suspicion of having seen some of them in front of a plough or hitched up to a farm waggon, yet it is presumed by a polite fiction that every gentleman 'keeps his hunter.' Red coats (made of flannel by the village tailor!) are de rigueur; and a sprinkling of ladies comes out on fine days, among whom are one or two capital horse-women, who don't want a 'lead' over a fence." Farrar declares that at the state fair of 1878 the "'Britishers,' in their red coats and top-boots, flying amid clouds of blinding dust over four-foot hurdles, divided the honours with President Hayes and the celebrated trotter Rarus, who did his mile in 2 min. 13½ sec." These Britishers were hailed in the newspapers of 1878 as the "Fairmont Sportsmen."

buildings were frame ones, except the court house, which was made of logs. There were two or three stores, the chief one being a general store kept by Messrs. Ward and Cadwell. There was also a firm of lawyers, Messrs. Ward and Blaisdell. Humphrey M. Blaisdell had served, when a youth, in the Civil War. He had been wounded and had spent many months in Libby prison. His wife was the daughter of Senator Crosby of Maine. She was a graduate of Vassar College.² A friendship with them and their family commenced then, which has stood the test of all these years.

Although the land was covered with snow, I found that the scenery was very beautiful. A chain of sixty lakes, which were fringed with trees and shrubs, passed through Martin County. Fairmont was situated on the banks of one of them. I was told that much land had been bought by Englishmen who were expected to arrive, with their families, during the spring and summer months. At that time Fairmont which had been built up along the shores of Lake Sisseton was about the length of the lake. I bought a well-wooded village lot on the banks of that lake. I was greatly attracted by its beauty, especially during the glorious prairie sunsets which were reflected upon the frozen lake and frosted trees. I spent several months in various parts of the United States and then returned to England.

In the summer of 1876 my parents and their five children went to Fairmont. The change that had taken place during my absence was remarkable. The beauty of the district in summer was still more striking. The village was lively with farmers' teams and pedestrians.

² Reuben M. Ward and A. D. Cadwell were the pioneer merchants of Fairmont; Ward's younger brother, Albert L. Ward, was associated with Humphrey M. Blaisdell in a law firm until 1874, when he withdrew to establish the Martin County Bank. Sketches of the careers of these early American settlers of Fairmont may be found in the *Memorial Record of the Counties of Faribault, Martin, Watonwan and Jackson, Minnesota*, 9-18, 156-158 (Chicago, 1895). According to a sketch in this volume, Mrs. Blaisdell was educated at Antioch College.

In 1874 there had been a serious visitation of locusts which had impoverished many of the settlers. The government had supplied some relief and much seed grain. Things were improving and the farmers came in to sell produce and to make purchases. Many English families had arrived and houses were being rapidly constructed. We built one on the lovely lot which I had purchased.

Among the English families with whom we became acquainted were Mr. and Mrs. Percy Wollaston, who came from near Liverpool. They had a large family of twelve or fourteen children.³ They were refined, educated people, and so were many of the other English families, notably the Thirwell and the Ramsdale families.⁴ John Thirwell was a nephew of the late Bishop Thirwell. He, too, had a large family. They settled on land some few miles north of Fairmont.⁵ They brought

³ Percy Wollaston first visited Fairmont to examine the country and buy land and then returned to England for his family. With his wife and thirteen children he settled permanently in Fairmont in the summer of 1876. From the first, he was prominently identified with the life of the new settlement, and in 1878, when the village was incorporated, he was elected its first president. A number of the English settlers became interested in politics, according to Farrar. He records that "Englishmen 'run for office' as eagerly as any true-born Yankee. One is president of the village council; another is a justice of the peace; a burly young ex-lieutenant R. N. is village marshal; while another young gentleman, whose position at home was behind a counter, aspired here to parliamentary honours." Budd, *Martin County*, 104, 109, 111; *Memorial Record*, 43-47; Farrar, *Five Years in Minnesota*, 83.

⁴ Farrar comments upon the fact that the Fairmont settlers were superior to the usual English immigrants in culture and refinement. "There are, of course, many English colonies in the States, but they are mainly composed of the class of English labourers," he writes. "The colony at Fairmont prides itself on being, on the whole, a colony of gentlemen. . . . Oxford and Cambridge are each represented by a graduate. There are officers of all branches of the service. . . . Among the ladies are a Bavarian countess and an Austrian baroness, who hold brevet rank among their English sisters." *Five Years in Minnesota*, 80.

⁵ John Thirwell seems to have returned to England, but some members of his family appear to have remained in Martin County. The population schedule of Fraser Township, just northwest of Fairmont, for 1885 includes a family of Thirlwalls consisting of six members — three, aged

with them a considerable number of books from the bishop's library. The Ramsdales, with many children, settled on the banks of a large lake, a little south of our village. Among the other settlers about whom I remember were a young married couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Holcombe and one of Mr. Holcombe's brothers; Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Caffall with several children; Captain Whirland of the British navy and his family; and Mr. and Mrs. H. Perrin and several children. Then there were also a good many single young men, namely: Captain Bellairs, Harry W. Sinclair, Percy Sinclair, H. M. Searle, A. G. T. Broun, Cecil Sharpe, Lieutenant Clement Royds and several more. As the years went by many marriages took place among the younger members of these early English settlers.⁶

thirty, twenty-six, and sixteen, born in England; and three, aged twenty-seven, four, and two, born in Minnesota. These might well have been three children of John Thirwell and the American wife and two children of the eldest son. The manuscript schedules of the state census of 1885, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, contain the names of numerous English settlers in and around Fairmont, including many of the individuals mentioned by Mr. Moro.

⁶ Many of the names here mentioned by Mr. Moro are to be found in a list given by Budd of British families that arrived in 1876. "The English additions this spring," he writes, "were: Percy Wollaston and family, Joseph Ramsdale and family, R. M. Cafall and family, C. Popple and family, Mr. Bishop and family, Mr. Holden and family, John Thirwall and family, Mr. Jones, L. Burton, John Lock, F. Townsend, H. W. Sinclair, J. W. Sinclair, and Capt. Wherland and family and C. Royds. . . I think G. G. Mayne and Capt. Turner came later." After some further comments the author remarks that "the English settlers were added to by G. D. Moro, H. Perrin, Arthur Moro and others." K. F. F. Bellairs and family, Captain Bellairs and family, and Cecil Sharpe were among the English settlers who arrived in 1874, according to Budd. H. M. Searle, who was born in India, became route manager for the stage line between Fairmont and Winnebago City in 1877, when Lieutenant Royds purchased a half interest in the line. Budd, *Martin County*, 101, 105, 109; population schedule, census of Martin County, 1885.

The marriages among the members of the English colony are of interest. Cecil Sharpe, Clement Royds, Henry W. Sinclair, John A. Sinclair, and A. G. T. Broun of Sherburn each married a daughter of Percy Wollaston; and three of the latter's sons married daughters of Joseph Ramsdale. *Memorial Record*, 44.

Streams of American pioneers passed along the prairie tracks and through Fairmont. It was a time of pioneer settlement on virgin land. They came with caravans of carts known as prairie schooners. A prairie schooner was a roomy wagon covered with arched waterproof material colored a gray white or a dull red. It was drawn by two or sometimes three horses or mules or oxen. These wagons contained the furniture, goods, and possessions of the settlers. The women and children often sat in them when they were tired. The men walked by the horses' heads. Most of the pioneers brought with them extra horses and much cattle, also many dogs. Some of these men were by no means impecunious. They had been successful small farmers further east, who were tempted to sell their improved farms at high prices and to move westward where land was still very cheap or could even be preempted for nothing. They usually had large families of sturdy children, and they had hopes to possess farms of many acres.

There was excellent sport in and around Fairmont. The prairies abounded in game — prairie chickens, sandhill cranes, wild geese, wild ducks, and some rabbits and hares. There were also many small birds. Of these there was a great variety. Their colorings — red, blue, green, or yellow — were most attractive. So were their songs. But these gentle and beautiful little birds were gradually driven away by the more sturdy, quarrelsome, voracious, combative, and ugly sparrows. Sparrows move westward with the current of migration and the resultant cultivation of virgin soil. Wolves, skunks, snakes, and huge mosquitoes were not lacking. The lakes were full of fish. Turtles — snapping variety — were often seen. As far as I can remember, the fish were perch, bass, and a large type of buffalo fish. In the summer there was great sport in spearing fish as they sped through the inlets and outlets of the chain of about sixty lakes which commenced in Minnesota and ran southward into Iowa. Fish are attracted by artificial light. It was usual, when fishing at night time, to go two in a boat with a lantern hung out at the stern or on one side. One man rowed

slowly, the other stood, spear in hand. The fish would rise to the surface to look at the light and to ascertain the cause of such strange happenings. It required skill and practice to throw a spear so as to keep one's balance and yet to pierce the fish as they flashed by. In the winter months fish could be caught by cutting an opening in the ice. The thickness of the ice varied from two or three up to even twelve inches, according to the severity of the winter. A lantern held over the opening would bring the fish to the surface. During the winter months there was much skating and sailing in ice boats.

It was remarkable how quickly a town increased in size in those days of immigration. Martin County was being occupied and developed not only by American and English settlers. Strong and useful immigrants came from Norway, Sweden, and Germany. They were excellent types of farmers.⁷ Hardy, industrious, and thrifty, they bore well the intense severity of a semi-arctic winter and the considerable heat in summer. They faced with courage the hardships and privations attached to pioneering.

The value of land increased; an extension of the railway to Fairmont seemed imminent; the crops were excellent; and all promised well; when suddenly there alighted in the autumn a vast cloud of winged locusts. They covered the land. They immediately laid their eggs, enclosed in minute rubber-like pouches, deep into the ground. Then they died. The soil was full of these eggs. A panful of earth placed by a hot stove and kept there for a few days as a test soon proved what must be encountered when summer came. Gradually the earth in the pan seemed alive with tiny, jumping grasshoppers. It was,

⁷ The number of English settlers in Martin County never was very large. In 1880, when the English colony was at its height, out of a total population of 5,249, only 219 were natives of England and Wales. The foreign population of Martin County in that year included 234 from Sweden and Norway, 178 from Germany, 177 from British America, 86 from Ireland, 39 from Denmark, 24 from Scotland, and 7 from France. *United States Census, 1880, Population, 515.*

I think, in 1877 that the locusts hatched out in millions. They did not develop wings for some time, but they ate up everything that was tender and green, stripping even the leaves off the trees. Then they commenced to move, all in one direction, northward, in search of food. They increased in size rapidly. Farmers who had experience of the previous visitation four years before dug trenches round their vegetable gardens and burnt hay or twigs in them all day long. The locusts either avoided the trenches or swarmed into them and were burned. The armies of locusts rested on their march during the night but recommenced it as soon as dawn came. Another method employed to save vegetables was to make what were called hopperdozers. They were huge trays of sheet iron with iron backs and sides about a foot high. This implement was coated with tar and was dragged along the ground by means of ropes pulled by two men. As soon as the tar was thick with locusts, it was scraped off with spades and burned. This process had to be kept on without pause all day long until dusk. By such means small patches of gardens could be protected, but acres of crops and trees could not be safeguarded. Gradually the locusts seemed to be everywhere. They even got into the houses and onto one's clothes. Chickens found them to their taste. The fowls ate so many that we could not eat them nor their eggs owing to the strange and repugnant flavor in both. This devastation lasted, if I remember rightly, about a fortnight and then, when the locusts were one and a half to two inches in size, they developed wings. The wings were a transparent white, but the locusts varied in color. Some were of a yellowish red, and some of darker tones. Suddenly one day as if by word of command, they all rose and flew to a great height. The sun was shining brightly, and their long white wings glistened in the light. Their numbers were so enormous that they looked like a snowstorm bathed in sunshine. The question was anxiously asked, where would they alight, lay more eggs, and cause fresh devastation and suffering? Providentially, their flight took the direction of the Great Lakes, many, many

miles away. They must have tired when immediately over them, for they were drowned by millions and their bodies lined the shores.⁸

This plague caused much disappointment and misery. The settlers who depended upon the sale of their crops to pay interest upon mortgages and to live upon until another year's crop could be harvested, made sad losses. Some of the farms and homes had to be abandoned. But the courage under adversity of both men and women was admirable. Relief was sent from many parts of the United States. Farms were again seeded with grain supplied by the government, but with grave misgivings that perhaps some of the locusts had not been drowned in the lakes and that they might return. Happily they never did return.

In a year's time the railroad reached Martin County. Building increased rapidly, crops were more easily marketed, and prosperity came to the sorely tried settlers. I was instrumental in starting the first cheese factory in Martin County. Reuben Ward became the chairman. The idea was to run the business on coöperative lines. The profits were to be divided among the shareholders and the farmers who brought in milk daily. The milk was paid for at a given price when it was delivered. The milk owner was then credited with having supplied so many measures of milk. At the end of the season the profits were divided. The cheese was really excellent, but the profits were not in proportion to the work which this system entailed, although I, and several others, had given secretarial work gratuitously in order to start the industry. A manager and a small staff had had to be employed. After they were paid the surplus was not sufficiently large for wide distribution. The factory and plant were sold and were run as a private concern. The purchaser bought the milk from the farmers at the market price and kept all the profits for himself.

⁸ The story of "The Grasshopper Invasion, 1873-77," is told by Dr. William W. Folwell in his *History of Minnesota*, 3:93-111 (St. Paul, 1926).

I was also instrumental in starting the first public library in Fairmont. The president was Humphrey M. Blaisdell, and I was the secretary. We both loved books and we enjoyed making the selections. There was a law under which a town was empowered to levy a small additional amount to the rates for library purposes. The library prospered.

As regards the happenings of the English settlers, their intermarriages and varying fortunes, information could be gleaned from the files of the *Martin County Sentinel*. It was published by Mr. Frank A. Day, who is still I believe, the editor and owner.⁹ The *Sentinel* kept an almost parental record of all our doings, with a minuteness quite remarkable.

ARTHUR REGINALD MORO

LONDON, ENGLAND

⁹ Mr. Day settled in Fairmont late in June, 1874. He formed a partnership with C. H. Bullard, and on July 3, 1874, they published the first issue of the *Martin County Sentinel*. See Budd, *Martin County*, 97. The paper, which is now known as the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, is still owned by Mr. Day. A file of the paper, beginning with the issue of January 1, 1875, is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.



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