

# THE INFORMATION BUREAU

## THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE TELEGRAPH IN MINNESOTA

Would you be able to give us information relative to the early history of the telegraph in Minnesota, that is, the date of its first entrance into the state, the first telegraph office, etc?

THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY, Minneapolis

In the manuscript collection of the Minnesota Historical Society is a letter from William R. Marshall, who later became governor of the state, to H. T. Welles of Minneapolis, dated at St. Paul, March 18, 1859, relating plans for the construction of a telegraph line from Minneapolis and St. Anthony to La Crosse. Marshall was a member of a committee of the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce for the furtherance of such an enterprise and he gives a list of names of St. Paul subscribers. The purpose of his letter was to secure the coöperation of Minneapolis people. A note attached shows that Welles brought it to the attention of the Minneapolis Board of Trade on March 21, 1859.

Dr. William W. Folwell in his *History of Minnesota*, 2: 65, gives the following information concerning the beginnings of the telegraph in the state:

Early in the summer of 1860 the St. Paul newspapers announced the rapid construction of the electric telegraph line which was to put the capital of Minnesota in continual association with the great world. In June the public was informed that the poles were nearly all set between Winona and St. Paul and that the workmen had been much annoyed by rattlesnakes. It was not until August 29 that the opening of the St. Paul office was celebrated by the dispatch of a message of salutation, at 1:45 P.M., from Morton S. Wilkinson and Aaron Goodrich to William H. Seward. Seward's reply was received at 8:30 P.M. The delay in the installation was due not so much to rattlesnakes and foul weather as to the consumption of time in extracting bonuses from the municipalities along the route. Minneapolis was so tardy with her subscription that it was not until November 14 that the first dispatches appeared

in her newspapers. St. Anthony, even less prompt with her bonus, did not get her local office until December 4. For many months newspapers were compelled to apologize for the absence of telegraphic news because the wire was down or because there had been a thunderstorm or a sudden thaw, and in one instance because of some mysterious influence of moonbeams on the electric current.

The first telegram sent from St. Paul, published in the *Pioneer and Democrat* for August 30, 1860, reads as follows:

To Gov. SEWARD, Auburn, N. Y.

Through the courtesy of Mr. Winslow, proprietor, we are enabled to send this, the first message ever transmitted by lightning from St. Paul to the East, as complimentary to you. Signed

M. S. WILKINSON  
AARON GOODRICH

To this message Seward sent the following reply: "You have grappled New York — now lay hold on San Francisco." The Minnesota Historical Society has in its possession a dispatch received by Charles D. Efelt on August 29, 1860, which is said to be the first business dispatch sent over the line of the Minnesota State Telegraph Company.

James D. Reid, in *The Telegraph in America*, 283 (New York, 1879), says:

In 1865, the Wisconsin State Telegraph Company purchased the lines of the Minnesota State Telegraph Company which was also a combination of lines built under the Morse patent, and in which Mr. O. S. Wood, of Montreal, had acquired a large ownership. On the purchase of the Minnesota State Telegraph Company's lines, it was resolved to sink both names, and under a general state law to reorganize under the title of the North-Western Telegraph Company. This was accordingly done.

Methods of receiving telegrams fifty years ago when telegraphy was still in its infancy are described by a pioneer operator, Charles E. Hughes, in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* for December 16, 1923. Mr. Hughes tells of receiving the news of the Custer massacre at the St. Paul office of the Northwestern Telegraph Company on July 5, 1876, and of working for forty-eight hours taking in longhand the reports of the disaster.

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