

## BACKGROUNDS OF MINNESOTA<sup>1</sup>

There is an old saying that one should not look a gift horse in the mouth. I suppose that that saying is especially applicable during the holiday season. But I must confess that this subject, "Backgrounds of Minnesota," was given to me. I must confess further that I have looked this gift horse in the mouth — in fact I have looked it all over. And the more I have looked it over, the more hopelessly large it has become as the subject of an address. For more than seventy-eight years the state historical society has been collecting material on Minnesota history. The source material on this subject constitutes a large library. So it is obvious that in this presence, before a body of men and women who have for a lifetime shown an interest in Minnesota history, a busy man like myself cannot hope to pose successfully as a teacher. I cannot expect to add to your knowledge; I shall try not to subtract from it. Perhaps all we can hope to do is to gather up a few casual impressions, and find some joy and perhaps a little profit in glancing over the foothills of the topic.

While this theme has the defect of being too comprehensive, it certainly has the merit of allowing a man to talk about almost anything he cares to. So I am going to commence by calling your attention to the fact that by using the word "backgrounds," we are borrowing a term from the field of art and applying it in the field of history.

In art the purpose of the background is to bring out the salient points of a picture, the essential character of the object or person portrayed. In a good picture the background is secondary. It never receives the emphasis. In fact, it is always

<sup>1</sup> This address was delivered by the Governor of Minnesota at the seventy-ninth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul on January 9, 1928. *Ed.*

purposely subdued in order that the subject of the picture may stand out in bolder relief. It is not considered good art to make a picture an exact reproduction of the person or thing portrayed. Exact reproduction is left to photography and there is a great difference between photography and art. And lest this statement should bring a storm of protest from those engaged in the business of photography, let me hasten to say that the photographer of today has added art to photography. He has learned to correct, to subdue, to idealize — to accomplish on sensitized paper what the painter achieves on canvas. His product is no longer a true photograph — it is an art with a photographic basis. Exact reproduction is not sought by the true artist. In the Louvre is a canvas by Denner, who took four years to paint it in order to make it microscopically exact as to every line and wrinkle and in every detail. Artistically it is a failure. A broad sketch by Van Dyck is a hundredfold more powerful than Denner's detailed portraiture.

As a people, we in America have never been very strong for backgrounds. We have not asked about a man's descent nor inquired into his lineage. In fact, it has not always been safe to inquire too closely into antecedents. Pioneer conditions have made us, and thus far have kept us, democratic. Blue blood has meant nothing here. Most of our leaders have come out of log huts and the wilderness, with racial strains so completely mixed as to puzzle and confound the eugenist.

However, it should not be supposed that the biological background has no meaning. Mendel, by the breeding of peas, established a law of heredity. By artificial selection Luther Burbank wrought wonders with flowers and fruits. The breeder of livestock every day places his faith in the biological background. The same divinity which in baffling and mysterious ways discloses itself in fruit and flower and beast, works out its purpose in human life and character as well. History, no less than biology, is replete with facts establishing the significance of backgrounds.

In discussing the backgrounds of Minnesota, it is perhaps not necessary to stress the geologic and physical factors. Nature built the great divide upon whose surface Minnesota rests. If today we plan and dream of a Great Lakes-St. Lawrence waterway to the Atlantic Ocean and a navigable channel to the Gulf of Mexico, it is because Minnesota forms a part of a roof from which water flows northward to Hudson Bay, eastward to the St. Lawrence, and southward by way of the Mississippi. Two-thirds of the state is a rolling plain consisting of fertile soil easily cultivated. That fact has had large influence in making Minnesota one of the granary states of the Union.

From the days of La Salle to the present revival of river traffic the Father of Waters has had a mighty influence on the history of this region. If today we welcome thousands of tourists who come here to find recreation and health, it is because glacial drifts gemmed the state with ten thousand lakes. Likewise the pine forests, which have played so prominent a part in our history, were the gift of nature. Soil and climate, water power and lakes, forests and mineral wealth, these are the dower of ages. A hundred million years, the geologist tells us, have gone into the trappean rocks and Cambrian sandstone of the St. Croix gorge. The fossiliferous limestone about the Twin Cities is said to be at least two-thirds as old.

Anyone may call Minnesota young if he wishes; but in doing so, he should be careful to define his terms. For he refers to Minnesota as a state, and not to the backgrounds of the commonwealth.

What about the human backgrounds of Minnesota? In this connection also, it is important to get the perspective, to keep the proper focus upon our state's history.

I suppose the average man who lives here thinks of Minnesota as being about seventy years old — a comparatively young state, as states go. To most people, I believe it is safe to say,

the history of Minnesota presents a very limited picture: the front ranks are formed of little children new to earth and sky, behind them come the bright faces of youth, then the men and women in middle life, and finally the old people who symbolize the beginnings.

But not these, nor even the earlier pioneers whose dust is now mingled with that of the prairies, represent the real beginnings of Minnesota. It is important to bear in mind that back of the state, even back of the territory, are two centuries of exploration by the French and English. This period is worthy of study, for it is filled with romance and with heroic and daring figures. And beyond these two centuries, are thousands of years in which the savage held universal sway.

One of our historians — I do not recall whether it was Thwaites or Fiske or Parkman — observed that in a sense the history of the United States is a replica of the history of Europe, and the history of each state is a miniature reproduction of the history of the nation.

In this connection some writers upon Minnesota history observe that it too has an ancient, a medieval, and a modern period. The ancient might be said to comprise the ages of undisputed Indian occupancy; the medieval, the period of French and English discoveries and explorations, culminating in a contest between the two powers for possession of the region; the modern, a century of settlement and permanent occupancy by the white man.

Books and books have been written about the Indians, whose possession of this region was for thousands of years unchallenged. Among them were stalwart characters who belied the saying that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." In contesting the westward march of the white man, they were not only within their rights. They followed the "rules of the game" which had prevailed among white men and all other men in all the ages since man became the fighting, exploiting, conquering animal that he is. In refusing to adapt

themselves to the ways of the white man's civilization, too, the Indians were within their rights. Assuming that European culture was superior, there was no duty on the part of the Indian to accept it. There are points in which the philosophy of the nonresisting Oriental is superior to our own, at least if we are to use the principles of the founder of Christianity as a measuring stick. But that does not lead the Oriental to seek to force his philosophy upon us, because, unlike us Europeans and Americans of European descent, he has the tolerance and the decency to let every people choose its own way of life.

As a result of the white man's insistence on attaining what he, not modestly, calls his "manifest destiny," the Indian was driven to less desirable hunting grounds farther west; but before he left he wrote his name upon the map of Minnesota. Anoka, Chaska, Eyota, Isanti, Mankato, Mendota, Minnetonka, Owatonna — all bear witness that our state was once the home of the red man. Indeed the name of the state itself, "Cloudy Waters," is still written in the Indian language, a tell-tale record in the chain of title proclaiming for all time to whom Minnesota originally belonged.

The French explorers and priests who first came here were daring, adventurous men, "made of whale-bone and dynamite." Radisson and Groseilliers were probably the first white men known to the Indians. They held councils with the Sioux and the Chippewa, and appear to have been on Prairie Island in the Mississippi, near where Red Wing now stands. In 1680 Father Hennepin descended the Great River and named the falls he found after his patron saint, "St. Anthony." He had been dispatched by La Salle to explore the upper part of the Father of Waters.

This period of the French explorers is a great epoch. It thrills by its daring explorations and entices by its discoveries. Destiny greatly turned upon the fact that these bold adven-

turers did not bring wives and families. In most cases they had no wives. They had no ambition to establish settlements. They were motivated mostly by the desire to explore, to trade, and to take possession of the country in the name of the king of France.

But, failing to establish homes, they also failed to take root. In this they were in striking contrast to the home-building, domestic Englishmen, who, when they came to America, settled and remained. In our day of much questioning relative to domestic relations and home life, does not this historic contrast suggest that civilization and survival inhere in the home as an institution rather than in the individual, no matter how daring his exploits may be?

Although they did not stay, the French explorers left a rich heritage of accomplishments in the discoveries they made and in the names they wrote into the history of the state. Groseilliers and Radisson, Du Luth and Hennepin, Le Sueur, La Perrière, and La Vérendrye — these are only a few at random among many others that should be cited and long remembered.

Finally followed the period of settlement, of territorial organization, and statehood. First came the descendants of the original English colonists, with their wives, their children, their horses, cattle, and equipment. Then, in the forties and fifties, came the first Germans and Scandinavians, to be followed by great numbers of their countrymen after the Civil War. In the southern part of the state they broke the prairies, built villages, and established cities. Up north they felled great forests of white and Norway pine.

Minnesota was the meeting-place of the Puritans of two continents. For the Yankees from New England and the immigrants from Scandinavia had much in common, which probably accounts for the ease with which these two strains of Nordic stock have fused and blended here. The Scandi-

navians were easily assimilated because they found in the earlier settlers of English stock their own folk, people having the same puritanical conceptions and outlook, the same piety, the same frugality, the same habits of industry, and the same terrible earnestness.

It now seems probable that Scandinavian explorers penetrated this region before the French came, even before Columbus discovered America. Into the question of the authenticity of the Kensington rune stone I cannot enter. I must leave that problem to the archeologists, the linguists, and those who have access to the old manuscripts and the time and opportunity to study them. I have read Mr. Hjalmar R. Holand's argument, and as a layman have been impressed with it. It appears that as early as 1362, a hundred and thirty years before Christopher Columbus sighted the shores of San Salvador, eight Swedes and twenty-two Norwegians penetrated far into the interior of the continent, into the heart of what is now Minnesota, and left their record on a stone, which more than five hundred years later was dug out from under the roots of a tree on Emil Ohman's farm in Salem Township, Douglas County.

I believe the stone is genuine. But whether it is genuine or not, we owe Mr. Holand a debt of gratitude for his patient researches; we owe him moral and financial support in his efforts to pursue his studies further in order that the truth may be established. He has at least shown that there is opportunity to find historic facts no less in the soil of Minnesota than in the ashes of Pompeii and Ninevah. His deciphering of the old runes of the Nordic people is just as fascinating and even as profitable to those who are interested in the past of this region as the discovery of the Rosetta stone was to the students of Egypt's hieroglyphics. If Mr. Holand's contentions are confirmed, there will be added another chapter to Minnesota's story, already replete with daring adventures, heroic episodes, and noble characters.

The people of Minnesota should know its history; not only the chapters which bring pride and reassurance, but the darker chapters as well, even those which tell of political trickery, false leadership, and the ruthless exploitation of a rich domain. There are important lessons and priceless values in that story.

The fact seems to be that New England has captured American history. The Massachusetts tradition too long has permeated our national life. The year 1620 has become a mystic date and the "Mayflower" the nation's argosy. Puritanism has been our baptismal cult.

It is well, of course, that we should know as much as possible of America's origins. But is it not true that America had its beginning no less upon the western prairies than along the Atlantic coast? In a broader sense is not our history the record of a continuing beginning? In this country, almost every decade has begun a new epoch, so many have been the events that have profoundly influenced the nation's destiny. And no episode has done more to make America typically what it is than the winning of the West.

Here is where we live. Every day we walk these streets. Most of us will ultimately lie in this soil. Our children will inherit this land. Why should we not know, and teach our children, its history? I am not one lightly to urge that subjects be added to the curricula of our schools and colleges. But it does seem to me that somewhere in our school courses, room should be found for an adequate presentation of Minnesota's history.

Here, for example, is Wabasha Street, on which many of us walk every day. How much of richness it adds to one's thoughts and daily life to know that Wabasha Street was named after a prominent Indian chieftain. How much interest it adds to one's daily life to know that Robert Street is named after one of the pioneer merchant traders in the state. How much it adds to one's motor tours in the southern part of Minnesota to know that Olmsted County recalls the name



of David Olmsted, who long traded with the Winnebago Indians, was the first mayor of St. Paul, and a charter member of the Minnesota Historical Society.

It is worth hours of any one's time and study to become acquainted with Joseph Renshaw Brown, who was an Indian trader, one of the founders of Minnesota territory, and at all times a man of great native ability and commanding influence. Henry H. Sibley, Henry M. Rice, Alexander Ramsey, among many others who might be mentioned, should be known intimately to every school child in the state, for they were men well worth knowing — strong, clear-headed, patient, fruitful in accomplishment.

How much it adds to one's pleasure in showing guests and tourists about to know what an important place Fort Snelling was in this region in an early day. It was a military fortification, a trading post, the center of a settlement, a rendezvous for all, and a place where the authorities had to deal with illicit sale of liquor to the Indians. And so one might go from point to point in the state and find a wealth of material.

These facts are well known to you who have had a special interest in Minnesota history. They should be better known to the average citizen, to the man on the street. James Harvey Robinson has told us that our special knowledge today needs to be brought to the people, to be humanized and democratized. We should do for every historic spot what the poet Longfellow did for Minnehaha Falls. Longfellow never saw the place, but by letting his imagination play upon it, by putting it into song, he universalized it. The historic record is so rich in daring, in heroism, and in human interest, that it awaits the poet, the dramatist, and the romancer to lift it into the light and to color it with feeling and imagination.

How can we expect this to be done if we ourselves remain ignorant of our state's history, and if we allow our children to grow up unmindful of and indifferent to Minnesota's

builders? Only those who know the privations and sacrifices of the pioneer men and women who made Minnesota what it is today can appreciate its genius and foresee its greater future. Only those who know something of our commonwealth's past can sincerely enter into Sidney Smith's echo of Ovid when he sang :

The good of ancient times let others state,  
I think it lucky I was born so late.

THEODORE CHRISTIANSON

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



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