

MINNESOTA AS SEEN BY TRAVELERS

AN ENGLISH STUDENT OF PRAIRIE FARMING

Sir James Caird, the author of the little volume from which the following excerpts are taken, arrived in America from England in the fall of 1858. His journey through Canada and the prairie region of the United States was in no sense a casual sight-seeing tour. He came to investigate and report on the opportunities that the cheap virgin lands of the upper Mississippi basin held out to the English tenant farmer.

Few men in England were better prepared for such a task. The loud complaints of the English agriculturists after the passage of the Corn Laws in 1846 had called attention to the adverse conditions under which they were operating. In 1850, Caird was commissioned by the *London Times* to conduct a survey of rural England. His letters to the *Times*, which were later published as a single volume, give the first adequate picture of English agricultural conditions after Arthur Young's famous reports, which appeared more than fifty years before.¹

From his study of the situation in England, Caird became convinced that only through the emigration of numbers of the tenant farmers could the economic well-being of those who remained be improved. "The time seems thus to have arrived," he declared, "when the farmers must thin the ranks of home competition by sending off the young and enterprising to countries where they may become the owners of a fertile soil, and profitably contribute to supply the wants of the old country, whose land can no longer meet the demands of her dense population. During the last year we have imported into this country at the rate of nearly one million quarters of grain each month. We have thus in addition to our home crop, consumed each day the produce of acres of foreign land, a demand so

¹James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-1851* (London, 1852).

vast as to offer to young men of our own country the strongest inducements to take their share in its supply."²

In Caird's opinion, the prairie lands of Illinois offered the best chance to the emigrant. Most of his book is taken up with a very complete and valuable description of the lands in that section, but lately made available by the network of railroads that had spread over the state in the railroad building era of the fifties. His journey in the autumn of 1858 from Prairie du Chien to St. Paul and back was in the nature of a side trip. Minnesota appeared to him to be too distant and the connection with Chicago and the eastern seaboard too inadequate to attract settlement.

Because he was conscious that the purpose of his journey was to give his English readers as accurate an account of American conditions as possible, he was careful not to overstate the case. He did not hesitate to comment on the poor quality of much of the farm land he saw in Ontario, a piece of impartiality that resulted in the publication in Toronto in the year following his visit of a pamphlet entitled *Caird's Slanders on Canada Answered and Refuted*. The account of this trained observer is, therefore, of particular value to the student interested in conditions in the Northwest in the fifties.

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[James Caird, *Prairie Farming in America. With Notes by the Way on Canada and the United States*, 102-111 (New York, 1859)]

At Prairie du Chien we found ourselves on the Mississippi, the Father of Waters, which at this point is nearly 2000 miles from the sea. This was formerly a French trading post, and more recently a frontier post of the Americans. There is here a loop-holed barrack capable of lodging 400 men. It was discontinued soon after the last fight with the Indians here in 1833, the frontier garrison having since that time moved many hundred miles

² *Prairie Farming in America*, 9 (New York, 1859).

farther west. It is now abandoned and going to ruin.³ The American system, as I was informed by an engineer officer of the service, is to spend no money in keeping up establishments after the object has been accomplished. Their surveying officers on the frontier are allowed only nails and glass, and with these they may erect quarters if they like. If not, they may live in their tents, — at all events, they are not permitted to spend public money.

We here embarked on the Mississippi for St. Paul's, a voyage up the river of 300 miles. The river at this place is about as wide as the Rhine at Cologne, but with a less rapid current and not so deep a stream. The west side is very picturesque; a series of limestone-bluffs, 200 feet high, covered on their face and summit with autumn tinted woods, and broken into irregular forms by little valleys branching off from the main stream. As we quietly proceed on our course, every new reach opens out a fresh scene of beauty, and we are soon shut in on both sides by lofty ridges of limestone rock. In many places this ridge retires a short way from the water, its sharp edge disappears, and a round grassy face, smooth and regular as a lawn, runs up within twenty feet of the top of the sharp peak or frowning rock which crowns the whole. Single trees are scattered like ornamental timber over the green hill sides, which presents the most charming natural sites for building. But houses there are none, except here and there at a landing-place on the river, where a wooden store and "office" invite the traveller to land and become an unit in the incipient "city." There are also huts on the edge of the water at convenient points for "wooding," occupied by wood-cutters, who prepare fuel for the steam-vessels. In summer the banks are infested with musquitoes, and the people live in the open air, round large fires, to protect themselves from the insect. The farther north you go in these latitudes, during the short but hot summer, the more you are liable to be tormented by musquitoes.

Our steamer, which draws only 28 inches of water, is a huge structure. The saloon is 200 feet long and 8 feet high, with Gothic roof painted white and gold. There are little sleeping cabins along both sides of the entire length, sufficient to accommo-

³ For the story of the post at Prairie du Chien see Bruce E. Mahan, *Old Fort Crawford and the Frontier* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1926).

date 130 passengers. The fare includes provisions, and an abundant table is served three times a day. There is hardly any difference in the meals in this western country, except that to breakfast and supper we are offered tea and coffee, while at dinner cold water is the only beverage. The manners of the people we meet with on the Mississippi are not a whit exaggerated by Dickens in "Martin Chuzzlewit." I have met with instances of every dirty habit which he describes, and any Englishman who desires to see the West must steel himself against disagreeable incidents of hourly occurrence. He will be amply repaid for any inconvenience of this kind by the vastness of the new scenes constantly opening before him.

The high-pressure engine every minute emits a melancholy sigh, but it drives us quietly along against the stream at a tolerable rate. A traveller on the shore holds up his umbrella; the huge vessel, as if watching him, sheers in towards the soft bank, runs her nose upon it, a plank is shoved out, and the "gent" walks on board: we back off and proceed. The ship is managed by a pilot, who has a glass-house elevated between the paddle-boxes, above the whole superstructure, and from this commanding position both steers the vessel and communicates his orders to the engineer by a signal bell. The captain's business seems to be to keep order in the ship, and to take the head of the table at the various meals. While standing beside him at the front of the elevated deck, our ship began to back in the middle of the river. "What's the matter?" said I. "Smelt a bar, I guess," said the captain, "and backing out in time." "These snags," said I, pointing to one, "must be troublesome at night; don't they take them out?" "No, we know about where they *are*, and keep pretty clear of them." "Any other danger on the river, Captain?" "No, only two, a sink or a burn up. We sometimes snag — not often — and sometimes go afire. But we seldom have an accident. In June last there was a burn up, — a few miles below; — seldom happens though!" "You have no heavy sea to trouble you, at any rate;" I threw in by way of comfort. "I guess not," said the captain, turning full upon me, "we build these steamers strong enough for their purpose, Mister, and as light as possible. They are for the river, not the lake. In a heavy sea they would double up in a clip; and that's a fact."

There are many sand-bars on the river, which, at this season are so near the surface that the vessel sometimes sticks. But in the bows two great legs or stilts are fixed, like little masts, with blocks and tackle, and when the steamer "bars," down go the stilts, the tackle is made fast to the capstan, the men pull upon it, and raise the ship a foot or more, clean off the bottom, at the bows. The paddles are then set on full steam, and the vessel is literally jumped over the bar. I asked the captain if by this means he could get over any ordinary bar. "I reckon I could lift her over the river bank, if she would hang together," was his reply.

We passed at night through Lake Pepin, an expansion of the river, from two to three miles broad and twenty-five miles long. The scenery is said to be very beautiful, but we could only catch a glimpse of the "Maiden's Rock," which rises sheer up about 200 feet from the water's edge. A romantic American, an individual rarely met with, told me its story in the starlight. Winona, the daughter of a celebrated Indian warrior, had been betrothed by her father against her wish. The wedding-day was appointed, and the feast was being prepared. She and her young companions went out to gather a berry that grows among the rocks. It was a summer evening, and, busied in their occupation, the rest did not observe that Winona had parted from them. Suddenly from the summit of the rock a low cry was heard. It was the death song of Winona, who, in a moment more, with one spring from the edge of the precipice, buried herself in the lake.

At a place called Prescott, at the junction of the St. Croix river, on the Wisconsin side, the country is remarkably pretty, wooded and park like, with rounded grassy knolls 100 feet high, which slope down towards the water, terminating in a precipitous limestone bank. Here, in some places, the prairie falls gradually to the edge of the river. The country for some distance back is all bought and occupied, but none of the settlers seem to choose a residence among the wooded glens. A few hours more bring us to St. Paul's.

St. Paul's, the capital of Minnesota, the last State admitted to the Union, stands very beautifully on a sloping limestone ridge of the Mississippi, upwards of 2000 miles from its mouth at

New Orleans. It may be regarded as the head of uninterrupted navigation, for the Falls of St. Anthony, only nine miles further up, close the passage. Above the Falls, however, steamers ply 150 miles still further northwest. From this highest point it is proposed to make a land connection with the Red River, which flows north, and is navigable for 300 miles before it enters the British territory at Pembina.

The new State of Minnesota has an area considerably greater than the British Isles. The southern part is chiefly prairie, very level for great distances west, as was shown to me in a section of the railway now being constructed. The soil is considerably more sandy than that of Illinois; the winters are intensely cold, but the summers, though comparatively short, generally mature the various corn crops which are cultivated. This State has its northern boundary along the British territory, at present possessed by the Hudson's Bay Company. The crops for the two last years have been threatened, and partially injured, by a plague of grasshoppers.

A bridge is in course of construction to connect the two banks of the river, on both of which the city is being built, the one to be called East, and the other West St. Paul's. The houses are solidly built of limestone, the material for the walls and mortar being found in excavating the foundation. All kinds of public improvement are rapidly carried into execution, city bonds being issued to defray the cost. These bonds can be purchased to yield 12 or 15 per cent., and may prove a good security if population continues to flock to Minnesota. Banks, land agency offices, and newspapers, are already numerous in the city. The newspapers are dailies, and in walking out early on the Sunday morning, before many people were stirring, I was surprised to observe the morning papers already laid on the handle of every door, or shoved in below it, ready for the owner's perusal as soon as he should make his appearance.

The market-place on Saturday was thronged with people buying and selling their various produce. The Irish had sacks of potatoes and other vegetables, the Americans dealt in beef; but the most remarkable looking merchants there were the Red Indians, who were selling wild ducks. They were in considerable num-

bers, both men and women, in their native costume, the men generally carrying good double-barrelled guns. There are still several Indian tribes at no great distance from St. Paul's, who live entirely by the produce of their guns.

I was introduced here to a state senator who, with basket on his arm, was making his morning's market. I was afterwards indebted to this gentleman for a presentation to the governor,⁴ whilst he was reviewing a corps of volunteers at the State-house. They were very soldierly-like men, their uniform more like the French than English, and they seemed to go through their evolutions very creditably. They had a brass gun, and three or four artillery men in the corps. The United States have an enrolled and organised militia of upwards of two millions and a half, from which a very formidable army might readily be selected. The people are fond of soldiering. In every considerable town, some volunteer cavalry or infantry corps will be found parading about, but I never saw a soldier of the regular army all the time I was in the Union. These are all posted in the interior of the continent on the Indian frontier.

In pursuing our course to the Falls of St. Anthony, we skirt along between the prairie country and the bank of the Mississippi. We cross the river by a ferry below Fort Snelling, one of the old frontier posts now abandoned.⁵ It stands on the point of the promontory, which juts out into the junction of the Minnesota River with the Mississippi, at an elevation of 150 feet, and must have been capable of easy defence against any sort of Indian warfare. Two miles farther we came to a little gushing stream, where is laid the most beautiful scene of Longfellow's Indian poem, "Hiawatha,"

"Where the falls of Minnehaha
Flash and gleam in shining reaches,
Leap and laugh among the woodlands."

⁴ Henry H. Sibley.

⁵ Troops were withdrawn from Fort Snelling on May 27, 1858, but the post was abandoned only until the outbreak of the Civil War. During that conflict the government used the fort as a training station, and later it was continued as a permanent post. Marcus L. Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858*, 52 (Iowa City, Iowa, 1918).

We dived into the little glen, admired the waterfall, drank of its fresh waters, and finally cut walking-sticks in remembrance of it. It is certainly pretty; but, as an American has described it, unusually "neat." The water pours over a rock through a groove which exactly fits it, and it runs away below with all the regularity of a mill stream. Nevertheless, for the lovely Minnehaha's sake, we did our best to admire it. There is a great distinction between American and European scenery in this, that in America there are few accessories to the scene. There is a waterfall, but no enclosing mountain — no dashing along over rocky bed before the final leap, and but a very tame gorge below. The face of the country is generally monotonous, — hundreds of miles of bare prairie, breaking down at its edges into natural troughs for the water. The traveller over the prairie comes upon the great river suddenly; and sees, perhaps a hundred feet below him, the vast stream flowing along the hollow trough which it has worn for itself in the course of ages.

A few miles farther brought us to St. Anthony, where the Mississippi makes a leap over the rocks of some twenty or thirty feet. The river was low; and as we were then nearly the whole length of Europe from its mouth, we did not expect too much. Moreover, both sides of it belong to Jonathan, and he is a deal too sharp to throw away so good a mill power. On each side, then, the main body of the water is caught, and turned to the servile purpose of sawing lumber. The surplus water is left to run off in the centre, where it forms a little green imitation of the Great Horse Shoe Fall of Niagara. We literally "hunted" this waterfall, for we were a good hour jumping across the floating logs, and along the various dam faces, before we reached the best point of view. The young American lumbermen employed here are fine stalwart men, extremely expert in the use of the axe, by which they earn several dollars a-day at piecework.

We returned by the other side of the river, which is crossed by a suspension bridge above the Falls. This brought us to the new city of St. Anthony, and its vast hotel, now seemingly empty, then past a college which has recently been built for higher class education.⁶

⁶ The hotel referred to was probably the Winslow House, which was completed in the spring of 1857, and was thronged each summer until

The eighteenth part of all the public lands in Minnesota is set apart for the support of schools; 46,000 acres more are appropriated for a state university; 6400 acres for the erection of public buildings at the seat of government, and 5 per cent. of the sales of all public lands are granted to the state, by Congress, for the construction of public roads and internal improvements. Besides this, every alternate square mile of land, for five miles on each side of the lines, is granted to aid in the construction of various lines of railway which are intended to traverse the state.

The system of credit established throughout the American Union, if very unsound in all times of difficulty, is certainly productive of many useful results. For instance, the State of Minnesota has fine unoccupied land, which is of no value so long as it remains inaccessible. It is determined to construct a railway, and the state finds the funds in this manner:—it issues bonds bearing 6 or 7 per cent. interest, which are handed over to the contractor as his work progresses. These bonds may not be very saleable out of the state, but the contractor lodges them with the State Treasurer, and obtains, in lieu, 90 per cent. of their amount in authorized notes of issue. With these he pays his wages and bills, finishes another section of road, receives a second instalment of State stock, makes a second issue of notes, and so the thing goes on until the road is made, the country opened up, and produce brought to market. The bonds are cleared off as the land is sold, and everybody is benefited.⁷

There is yet only one way of going to or returning from St. Paul's, and we therefore took steamer down the Mississippi over our former course as far as Prairie du Chien.

the outbreak of the Civil War with visitors from the South and East. The college was doubtless a building of the incipient University of Minnesota that was built in 1858 and formed the "west wing and extension" of the Old Main of the university campus. The building was used for a few months shortly after its erection and again during the winter of 1859-60, but it was unoccupied during most of the period that elapsed before the university opened its doors in 1869. Marion D. Shutter, *History of Minneapolis*, 1: 145 (Chicago, 1923); E. Bird Johnson, *Forty Years of the University of Minnesota*, 23-25 (Minneapolis, 1910).

⁷ A detailed account of this plan for the promotion of railroad building, which did not work out so successfully as Caird's statement would suggest, is given in a chapter on "The Five Million Loan" in William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2: 37-58 (St. Paul, 1924).



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