

## MINNESOTA AS SEEN BY TRAVELERS

### AN ENGLISH VISITOR OF THE CIVIL WAR PERIOD

[*Concluded*]

George T. Borrett's account of a journey from La Crosse to St. Paul in 1864 was reprinted in the September issue of *MINNESOTA HISTORY*, and some information about the author and his American travels was published at that time (see *ante*, p. 270). A second letter, giving his impressions of the Twin Cities, which he visited early in September, 1864, is herewith presented.

[George Tuthill Borrett, *Letters from Canada and the United States*, 152-167 (London, 1865)].

Washington; October 10th [1864].

ST. PAUL'S is as yet in its infancy. But a very few years ago this precocious child of the prairie was not even thought of, and now she has not only assumed to herself the name of a city—every American town does that, whether it has any right to the appellation or no—but she has summoned together, while hardly into her teens, a population of twenty thousand inhabitants, and, when fairly of age, will rival in size many a European capital. At present her prosperity seems to be due to the fur trade, which is enormous. Every other shop is a furrier's. The streets are redolent of hides. Wolf, fox, bear, mink, wild-cat—every specimen of the genus "vermin"—is to be seen dangling in the windows. And, strange to say, even in the headquarters of the furriers there is carried on such a system of deception as I should have thought incredible, had I not seen it actually at work. Chicane, I suppose, like charity, begins at home; and so in the heart of the great fur country commences an elaborate process of dyeing, and staining, and veneering, which would astonish the belles of London and Paris, who flatter themselves that they pay for the genuine article. I do not believe one muff in a hundred is what

it purports to be. Sable is concocted out of anything, mink is cooked up out of the mangiest of mangy skins. Ermine is deliberately painted on the seediest of repulsive hides. The manufacture of ancient coins, Yankee shoddy, Lillo pickles, or London milk, could not reveal greater scholarship in the art of humbug. I wonder what proportion of the cloaks, muffs, boas and tippetts, that I see in London does really come off the backs of animals whose name they bear, seeing that the genuine thing is so extremely rare in the district of its native home. But the wreck of the Royal George has proved large enough to furnish a city of English mansions, the *santo sudario* or sacred winding-sheet of Turin has produced sufficient stuff to furnish sails for the fleets of Italy, the bullets picked up on the field of Waterloo would have slaughtered the whole population of Europe, and why should not the sables and minks of St. Paul's be numerous enough to satisfy the demands of all the toilettes of the civilised world?

But "fur" is not the only staff of life to the inhabitants of St. Paul's. Agriculture increases its area, and every day sees new settlers arriving and fresh lands subjected to the plough. Commerce follows in its wake, and being on the highway of the Mississippi, the great artery of the North West, the city must rise in importance with the development of the country, and the signs of its future rise are already visible. In itself it is by no means beautiful. It stands favorably on a chalky eminence above the river, and from a terrace upon the cliff there is an extensive view of the surrounding country; but there are no fine houses, as in Chicago, nor handsome streets and towering warehouses. The buildings are irregular and low, and almost as mean as in the western end of Oxford Street. I do not know that I can say anything of them more derogatory to their character than that.

The sun next day was equatorial. I am not quite sure that I know what that may be, but I know that the thermometer in the shade was up to 100°, and standing in the sun was an absolute impossibility. They say that nothing is ever seen in the daytime in the streets of Malta but Englishmen and dogs, and certainly there was nothing else that day in the streets of St. Paul's. But, protected as we were with umbrellas, and tolerably inured to

noonday roastings, we were totally unable to stand the blaze and glare. Less than five minutes in the open air (to be properly delicate) dissolved me utterly into floods of tears, and five minutes more, as I retreated home again, fried me dry and stupid.

But time was precious, and there was plenty to be seen in the neighbourhood; so, after a brief siesta, we determined to stand for neither sun nor ceremony, and, divesting ourselves of coat and waistcoat, took our seats in an open calèche and started out for a drive into the country. The afternoon was slightly cooler, but still uncomfortably hot; how the horses pulled under it I cannot imagine, but they travelled well, and we were soon eight miles from St. Paul's, crossing the Mississippi in a ferry-boat beneath the frowning heights of Fort Snelling. The ferry-boat was worked in the same way as those upon the Rhine, by the means of a rope and running wheel upon it, the boat being laid obliquely across the stream and left to the current to force it along the rope. A steep climb up the other bank landed us at the gate of the fort. It was a very shady specimen of a fortification, having no pretensions whatever to engineering skill, and less to comfort and accomodation. The only attraction it possessed in our eyes was the fact that it then contained some Indian prisoners lately captured in the frontier war, whom we were anxious to inspect. We stated our wish to the sentinel, which was peremptorily refused; but our driver, a capital fellow, was as anxious as ourselves that we should miss none of the lions of the country, and, hastily dismounting, tackled the bewildered sentry with such an ebullition of remonstrative volubility—the pith of which appeared to be that the colonel was a great friend of his and would let him in directly if he only knew he was there—that the sentry yielded in despair, and handed us to a corporal to be duly lionised round.

We were shown into a good-sized airy chamber, and there, at the further end, chained by the leg to a ring in the wall, sat the objects of our search, the two Indian prisoners. They were both princes of their tribe, very fine specimens of their race, the Sioux, large limbed, well proportioned, lithe and supple as tigers. One, who rejoiced in the name of "Little Six," was of great age, more

than ninety, but he seemed to lack none of his youthful vigour, and saving a few gray hairs upon his head, time had laid no finger-mark upon him. The other, "Medicine Bottle," was of middle age, of handsome cast of countenance, and splendid frame. He had lately been adorning himself in his war paint—which they both delighted in daubing on and washing off again two or three times a week—and had, in a fit of eccentricity, removed the whole of it except a bright vermilion streak down the middle of his hair, which parted in the centre of his forehead. They were both engaged in eating nuts, brought in by their friends in the neighbourhood, who seemed to be permitted access to them much more readily than I should have supposed expedient; and in this operation they slacked not for a moment all the time we were inspecting and making our remarks upon them, simply lingering in the mastication of every other nut to cool themselves with a fan that lay beside each; for they seemed to suffer from the heat as much and more than we did, though their dress was of the most unscrupulously meagre kind. They looked harmless enough as we saw them, and it was difficult to trace any evidence in their features of the ferocity which had characterised their recent deeds. And yet they had both taken the lead in one of the most barbarous massacres of whites that had occurred for years. Little Six was in the habit of boasting that he had on that occasion successfully scalped thirteen women and children, and as many men. What Medicine Bottle's particular feats had been we did not hear. They were both under sentence of execution, of course, but that did not seem to trouble them.<sup>1</sup> I suppose they consoled themselves with the hope that they were going to the Good Spirit, into whose presence the scalping of whites is, I believe, the surest passport.

I have often wondered at the almost paradoxical effect upon the aboriginal heathen races of contact with Christianity. I never

<sup>1</sup> Little Six, or Shakopee, and Medicine Bottle, both of whom were supposed to have played prominent parts in the Sioux Massacre of 1862, were arrested in the spring of 1864 and taken to Fort Snelling. They were tried for murder in the following November and December, were convicted on extremely doubtful evidence, and were executed on November 11, 1865. The story of their capture, trial, and execution is told in detail by Dr. William W. Folwell in his *History of Minnesota*, 2: 443-450 (St. Paul, 1924).

have been able to understand how it is that the religion of the Cross, as it sheds its warm light in the presence of the native mind, seems to call into life and action all the evil seeds that rankle there, and, once vivified and brought to the surface, choke both soul and body. Whence is this mysterious anomaly? I have asked a great many questions here with a view to get some clue to the secret of the notorious extermination that has been stealthily but steadily, like a hidden cancer, doing its deadly work upon the North American Indians, from the day that Columbus first set foot upon the soil. Well-informed people with whom I have conversed have their different theories, but no one of them appears to me satisfactory. Philosophers propound it as an established axiom, without a thought of the horrors of the principle it involves, that all aboriginal races are, by that very fact, doomed to speedy and inevitable destruction as soon as they come in contact with the people of European origin. They declare it to be only a question of time, and call it idle to admit any other basis of calculation when dealing with this matter in a practical way. And, sad to say, modern experience points to the truth of the philosophers' view. Notwithstanding the well-meant efforts of philanthropists to preserve and civilise the scattered remnants of the human family which the progress of enterprise brings to knowledge, sooner or later the same fate overtakes all savage races. Do what governments will to preserve the inferior race from the aggression of the superior, the natives "die in the white man's breath;" and contact with Christianity, which should, at least, confer a more extended knowledge of physics, if not a higher moral standard, seems to be to the aboriginal tribes the sure signal of present extinction. Various causes may be assigned which play their part in this wholesale murder. The importation of European diseases, particularly smallpox, a scourge which commits amongst the savage races such devastation as the plague-days of old London could not match for virulence—the introduction of "fire-water" and tobacco, to which they evince an unconquerable propensity—and the infusion of an unhealthy taste for all the worst practices of civilised communities—are powerful agencies in the dark work of destruction. Border warfare with the new comers and suicidal contests amongst them-

selves reduce their numbers, perhaps, more surely than the insidious agencies of civilised vice. But cruelty of borderers and international strife will not alone account for the prodigious revelations of statistics. What there is in the savage nature so abhorrent from the "white" that the two will not mingle, but must contend in antagonistic rivalry till the weaker is absorbed in the more powerful solvent, has never been explained. Various efforts are being made to induce the two opposite characters to assimilate themselves, but without avail. The Indians in Canada and the Northern States, who have their own allotted territory, cannot even be persuaded by the example of the active industry around them to till the soil which the respective governments reserve to them. They are content to inhabit a desert in the centre of a garden — to typify death in the midst of life. The phenomenon of the disease is still a mystery, and no treatment yet attempted can resuscitate the fast-failing patient.

Behind the fort was a large camp containing several thousand men, recruits, chiefly from the North Western districts. Their tents were mathematically set out — large, neat, and orderly. On the training-ground beside them the men were being put through their manual exercise. The exhibition was by no means perfect, but the performers were fresh hands, and the veterans who were instructing them did not seem to know much about it. They were to march shortly against the Indians.<sup>2</sup>

From the terrace on which the fort stands there is a fine view of the Mississippi, and the Minnesota, which falls into it at this point. We gazed at it for a short time, and then drove on to the falls of Minne-ha-ha, immortalised by Longfellow. I did not expect to come upon such a scene as the poet has idealised, nor an

<sup>2</sup> It is not likely that these recruits were being trained for service against the Sioux, since the frontier campaign of 1864 was nearly over before Borrett reached Minnesota (see *ante*, p. 273, n.). It is probable, however, that they had just enlisted in the Eleventh Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, a regiment that was organized and mustered into service in August and September, 1864. It left for the South on September 20, and for about a month previous to this time it was stationed at Fort Snelling, where the "men were exercised in the usual preliminary drills, etc." Rufus Davenport, "Narrative of the Eleventh Regiment," in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865*, I: 488 (St. Paul, 1890).

encampment of Indians on the margin of the stream such as he has pictured, which, however it might have added to the landscape, would in their present white-blood-thirstiness have much disconcerted our party; but I own I was not a little disappointed to find that the Falls of Minne-ha-ha were now little else than a tea-garden. Some enterprising speculator from the East has located himself on the roadside, and there has run up a small inn for the sale of spirituous liquors, and seems to find the custom of the numerous pilgrims to the scene pay him for his trouble. I thought that we should be the only visitors; in fact, I did not imagine that in this out of the way corner of the world there could be any extensive number of excursionists to a spot so retired from town or village. But an assertion of an intention on my part to bathe at the bottom of his garden made him very red and angry, and no assurance that I had not the smallest idea he had any visitors, or the slightest desire to insult them, nothing, in fact, but the purchase of "a drink" pacified his indignation.

The immediate vicinity of the Falls is one of the prettiest little glens conceivable; very narrow, very deep, charmingly wooded, and altogether lovely; at the head of it is a bold rock, and from the top of the rock *should* fall the cascade which we had come to see. But, alas, the thirsty sun, which had so sadly reduced the Mississippi, had unmercifully sucked out the vitals of the poor little stream, and instead of bubbling and frothing over the precipice in the sparkling, joyous fulness of heart which has given it its name of the "laughing waters", it was then all shrivelled and parched and could only drop a few silent tears of melancholy for its wasted condition. I really felt quite sad for the little rivulet, though inclined to doubt whether it ever deserved the eulogies which poets and painters have bestowed upon it; but there certainly was the sweetest little pool at the base of the rock, so dark, and deep, and still, that I almost forgave the stream for the disappointment it caused me at looking so insignificant.

We did not stay long — *pace* poet and painter — but drove on to Minneapolis, a very pretty town on the right bank of the Mississippi, and thence across by a suspension bridge to St. Anthony on the left bank, a similar town, and there we halted for a short time to get a peep at the Falls of St. Anthony. But the water was

too low, and all that was to be seen was a mass of tumbled rock of every size and shape, with here and there a little eddy in the gaps between the crags, indications of the terrible rapids that break and foam about them when the river is at its proper height. Thence we mounted the steep which leads to the summit of the bank, and so along the edge of the cliff, till the sun went down upon one of the prettiest scenes I have met with on this Continent. The river ran beneath us at the bottom of a narrow gorge, its banks wooded to the water's edge, and dotted with an occasional house that peeped forth from the dense dark foliage; and behind us, as we looked back, lay the broken rocks of the Falls, with the towers and steeples of St. Anthony, and the bridge and Minneapolis beyond. The sunlight hues were fairy-like, bright and diversified as those which I had seen on the Mississippi; and if anything rewarded me for the long weary journey I had taken to get to this, the farthest point of my North-Western excursion, it was this evening's drive.

Darkness soon set in, and we turned away from the river to make straight for home. The road was primitive and exciting, for it was traversed by numerous gullies, which were spanned by wooden bridges composed simply of a lot of loose planks, very uneven, and very rotten. Some of the planks were broken half off, some had great apertures in their centre, some had gone altogether. Why the horses were not thrown or killed, or why the carriage was not let through or upset, to this day I cannot satisfactorily answer. Our driver said the animals were used to the bridges, and so they seemed, for if they did get any one or more of their legs through the timbers, they did not appear to be the least disconcerted, but struggled methodically till they got them out, and resumed their course. At one chasm they took a fair leap, and the carriage followed them across it in splendid style. I think from my experience of this drive, that cross-country carriage practice would be much less difficult than you might imagine; and I should suggest to our Irish Turfites a steeple chase in chariots, as an extremely practicable, and I would venture to think sufficiently "sensational" termination of a day's sport.

A little incident occurred on the road eminently illustrative of the relative positions of master and servant in the model republic.

Some time after leaving the river we came to a small roadside inn, at which our driver pulled up to water his horses. This done, he called to us in the carriage —

“ Now then gentlemen, come on, guess we'd better have a drink; it's 'nation hot, and I feel a mind to throw myself outside a glass of something. What shall it be? ”

I thought it was a Yankee's cool way of putting to us the invariable suggestion of every English cabman with whom you are unlucky enough to fraternise, that “ you *might* stand him something ” (which something, by-the-bye, I have always found to be gin and water) and though a little taken aback by the apparent coolness of the demand, I felt myself the need of a little something, and acquiesced.

The something was duly ordered and demolished, no matter what it was; and before leaving the counter I pulled out and offered to the spiritual medium behind it sufficient paper to defray the aggregate cost of the party's drinks. I never made a more unfortunate mistake. My cousin, more *au fait* in the etiquette of this continent, knew the meaning of the driver's invitation, and smiled at my innocence; but how was any one who had experience of the exhaustive and expensive capacities of the British working man's throat, to divine that this driver was about to treat his fare himself? Imagine the satisfaction I shall have on my return home in explaining to the first cabman who insinuates that “ It's wery cold, sir,” if it does not rain, or “ Wery wet, sir,” if it does, in that thick and beery tone which is universally accepted as the British equivalent of the less scrupulous continental demand for *pour boire* or *trinkgeld* — imagine, I say, the pleasure of representing to such an one how the tables are turned here, and how grand a thing it would be if our working classes had a little of that independence and self-respect which forbids the American to demand, over and above his due wages, those extortional fees which in Europe must almost necessarily be paid to secure ordinary civility. It is one of the greatest charms, perhaps, of travelling in this country that fees are incidents of an advanced state of society at present here unknown. It would be almost as strange to a Yankee to be asked by a porter for a “ tip,” as it would be to an Englishman to get that individual to do anything without one.

It seems such a perfect Utopia of hotel life to be allowed to quit the establishment without "remembering" the boots, that I find great difficulty in keeping my hand from wandering to my pocket when I take my leave of that worthy at the door. But I make the most of the improved system, which saves the traveller so much small change, for I shall not get the benefit of it much longer. The New Yorkers, I understand, are progressively advancing into the mal-practices of the more perfect civilisation of the old world, and I know very well that the first thing I shall have to do on landing in England will be to "tip" somebody.

I do not think I have anything further to say about St. Paul's. My cousin and I considered that we had nothing more to see there, so the next morning we put ourselves on board the wretched little boat which had brought the up passengers the last twelve miles of their voyage from the South, and started back for Canada. I have no need to describe the down journey on the Mississippi. It was an exact repetition of our upward trip; the same tiresome change of boats, only this time reversed, each fresh boat being a size larger than the last, though the benefit of the change was always counterbalanced by an unaccountable elasticity in the persons of the passengers, which filled and crowded the largest of our boats to all intents and purposes as much as the smallest; the same monotony of scenery; the same kind of *compagnons de voyage* (barring the affable young lady, whom I missed sadly); the same conversations with the soldiers, this time *en route* for the scene of war, and not very well pleased about it; the same dreary railroad journey from La Cross, but in a more uncomfortable car, only that we left the main line 100 miles short of Chicago, and "slanted off" to the great city of Milwaukee on Lake Michigan.



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