

# **The frontier holiday; being a collection of writings by Minnesota pioneers who recorded their divers ways of observing Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Year's**

***The* FRONTIER HOLIDAY**

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*Being a collection of writings by Minnesota Pioneers who recorded their divers ways of observing Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Year's*

*Edited & Illustrated by Glenn Henson Published by The North Central Publishing Company, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1948*

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Dedicated... ..to that forward-looking faith which motivated the early builders of Minnesota and which is a source of our strength today.

*The sketch above is based on an old wood engraving of the Chapel of St. Paul, first church in what is now Minnesota's capital city, the site of which is marked by a boulder on Kellogg Mall. Father Lucien Galtier described the building of the rule church in a letter of 1864:*

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*“...In the month of October, 1841, I had on the ... place logs cut and prepared and soon a poor log church that would well remind one of the stable of Bethlehem was built ... On November 1, I blessed the new basilica, smaller, indeed, than the basilica of St. Paul in Rome, but as well adapted as the latter for prayer and love to arise therein from pious hearts...”*

### **Foreword**

Christmas today is marked by lights which bubble nervously on the tree, near-human dolls with an impressive array of natural functions and egg nog delivered right to your door by the milkman. All of which may be nice, but the rash of gadgets, the neon-lighted commercialism which characterize the contemporary season too often make it difficult for us to remember the reason for Christmas.

Close upon two thousand years ago the birth of a baby brought to the world a message of Hope and Peace, a message which is as bright and meaningful today as it was to those waiting shepherds on the hills.

Perhaps a return to basic values, unfettered by the tinsel striving of business and society, is the best therapy for this confused and fearful world.

With this thought in mind, we have turned backward to discover how the early builders of our own state observed the holidays of Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Year's. Here is a collection of true stories written by Minnesota pioneers, stories which include doughnuts fried in coon's grease, a New Year's hymn sung by Indians in a lonely mission, hospitality accorded strangers from New England and Sweden and St. Paul, the thought-provoking proclamation of Minnesota's first Thanksgiving and dozens of other details which make warm the fabric of pioneer holidays.

This collection of pioneer stories is timely since 1949 is the territorial centennial of Minnesota when the entire state pauses to study the sturdy foundations of the state as

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built by our pioneering forefathers. The homely writings reprinted here reflect the spirit and faith which guided the founders of Minnesota.

The Frontier Holiday does not pretend to be a scholarly work with a preponderance of new historical material; indeed, much of the material has been reprinted before. But the publishers do hope that the writings, collected in this form, will provide a pleasant and informative hiatus in the work and worry of this jittery era.

If this book, with its simple narratives of holiday festivities often in a setting of primitive hardships, reminds the reader of the real message of the holiday season—and if it does awaken interest in the roots of our state, then it will have justified its publication.

### **Acknowledgments**

The editor of The Frontier Holiday wishes to express his sincere thanks to the staff members of the Minnesota Historical Society who helped him in his search for lore on early holidays in the territory and state.

Special thanks should go to Miss Bertha L. Heilbron, historical publications editor, Mr. G. Hubert Smith, curator of the museum. Miss Heilbron's article, "Christmas and New Year's on the Frontier," published in the December, 1935, issue of *Minnesota History*, plus her suggestions furnished many leads for material in this collection. Mr. Smith located some helpful pictures from the Historical Society's picture files and suggested sources for further illustrative background.

Featured articles in this book are reprinted from newspapers and manuscripts in the Historical Society's collections, and the source of each is noted in the prefatory copy preceding each article.

Background material for the prefatory remarks and illustrations is from various issues of *Minnesota History* quarterly magazine of the Minnesota Historical Society; *Minnesota*

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*Historical News*, monthly bulletin formerly published by the Society; *St. Paul, Its Past and Present*, by Frank C. Bliss, F. C. Bliss Publishing Company, St. Paul, 1888; *Minnesota As It is In 1870*, by J. W. McClung, published by the author, 1870; *Early Days and Ways in the Old Northwest*, by Maude L. Lindquist and James W. Clark, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1937; *The Pageant of America: The Lure of the Frontier*, by Ralph Henry Gabriel, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1929; *Album of American History*, volumes I and II, by James Truslow Adams, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1945.

The drawing on page eleven is based on an 1870 photograph of Duluth, while that on page 19 is from a photograph of St. Paul's Third Street from Market to Wabasha made in the 1860's. The drawing on page 36 is from an early sketch of Fort Snelling published in Germany.

The editor's work on this volume gave him a hint of the vast material open to the public in the Minnesota Historical Society and the Society's varied services to the citizens of the state. The territorial centennial year of 1949 will dramatize the importance of the Society among the institutions of the state. Minnesota citizens should be proud of its Historical Society, not only for its leadership in the field, but for the fact that the Society has literally grown up with Minnesota. The Historical Society was founded in October, 1949, only a few months after the establishment of the Territory of Minnesota and, as the oldest institution of the state, certainly stands as a tribute to the foresight of the pioneer founders of Minnesota.

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### **The FRONTIER HOLIDAY**

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#### **Christmas in Early Winona**

*Desolate Wabasha Prairie” served to describe for early St. Paulites the handful of houses on the edge of the Mississippi that later grew into the substantial city we know as Winona. Perhaps the St. Paulites of the early 1850's had a right—in their metropolitan center of a couple of thousands of hopeful pioneers—to look down upon the scant downriver settlement because Wabasha Prairie, soon to be renamed Winona, boasted then a mere handful of wooden homes and unprepossessing business houses. But what the embryonic Winona lacked in numbers was made up in old-fashioned, heart-warming hospitality. Winona's first community Christmas dinner was recalled in later years by an early settler,*

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*Catherine Smith, who leads us to believe that doughnuts fried in coon's grease can be a tasty holiday delicacy. This account is among the Orrin F. Smith Papers in the Minnesota Historical Society.*

In the early Winter of 1852, a sleighing party which had for its object the taking to ride in one sleigh, of every lady then a resident in Winona, was gotten up by two young settlers, Irwin Johnson and Edwin Hamilton. The former drove the team while Mr. Hamilton looked after the welfare of the ladies. Every lady resident of the prairie, as it was then called, except two, who did not care to go, but for whom there was ample room, participated in this sleigh ride. Mr. Hamilton, remarked, in delivering the invitations, that the 2 time was not far distant when one sled would not carry all the female residents of this growing town. Stops were made at all the "shanties" then on the prairie and where occupants were found at home calls were made, while at the vacant ones the names of the callers were written in lead pencil upon the door thereof by Mrs. "Elder" Hamilton.

The visits aroused considerable curiosity among the shanty dwellers, as lady visitors were quite unusual. The ride was much enjoyed and on its completion it was decided to give a public dinner on Christmas at which every resident should be present.

*We fried doughnuts in coon's fat.*

The Christmas dinner was given in the upper story of the Winona House on Water street, in which Edwin Hamilton was keeping what was called Bachelor's Hall. The young men set up stoves and Mrs. "Elder" Hamilton and myself looked after the culinary part of the dinner. In the absence of the bird that usually graces the Christmas dinner we were obliged to use coon, or rather several coons, with entrees of venison and wild goose. At the request of the young men, who said it would not be a Christmas feast without them, we fried doughnuts in coon's fat, and they were much relished.

By 11:00 o'clock every resident of Winona, old and young, big and little, except Mr. and Mrs. Henry Gere and Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, some thirty in all were present. In addition 3

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to these were several from Minnesota City, besides some St. Paul men who were hauling goods on the ice from La Crosse to St. Paul and who shortly before noon broke through the ice on the river opposite the business part of the town. These men were assisted in rescuing their teams and goods by our townsmen and invited to share the hospitalities of our Christmas.

It is needless to say that our guests were surprised at their reception. One of them in a short speech said that their knowledge of Winona was obtained from the St. Paul paper which usually referred to our little town as desolate. Wabasha Prairie. He also expressed his intention of seeing hereafter the town at which they partook of a public Christmas dinner and which included in its menu five kinds of cake, three kinds of pies and plenty of coon and venison.

The remnants of this dinner furnished us with a bountiful supper, of which all partook except one man who had gone over the lake in search of fish. While we were at supper this man came back and excitedly asked for a team and sled with which to haul his catch.

It turned out that this man found an air hole in the ice on the lake and he had but to dip into the water to get all the fish he wanted. This find proved to be of nearly as much benefit to the "Wabashaites" as it did the quails to the children of Israel when in the wilderness—and was the beginning of many fishing trips. I remember one trip on which my husband, accompanied by Edwin Hamilton, caught a great many fish. Mr. Goddard took for a net a woolen shirt that had been tied up at the neck and sleeves and taking a position where the stream was narrow held the improvised net in the creek, while Mr. Hamilton, who had entered the stream further up, drove the fish into the net held by Mr. Goddard.

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### **The Holidays of 1805 with Pike**

*The holiday season of 1805 was observed with few frills by Lt. Zebulon Pike and his small force of men who were exploring the limitless wilderness of the North that winter. Pike*

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*had built a stockade at Little Falls, limit of navigation for his boats which had carried the expedition from St. Louis, and struck northward to seek the source of the Mississippi. His Christmas entry in his journal is re-printed in toto.*

Wednesday, 25 th *December*. —Marched, and encamped at 11:00 o'clock: gave out two pounds extra of meat, two pounds extra of flour, one gill of whiskey, and some tobacco, to each man, in order to distinguish Christmas Day: distance advanced, three miles.

*A week later Pike was in the Pine River area where he observed New Year's Day by exploring ahead with a companion. The holiday was barely mentioned in his journal for the day, although the hazards of the day's discoveries are made vivid for the contemporary reader.*

Wednesday, 1 st *January*, 1806.—Passed six elegant bark canoes, on the bank of the river, which had been laid up by the Chippeways, also a camp which we conceived to have been evacuated about ten days. My interpreter came after me in a great hurry, conjuring me not to go so far a-head, and assured me that if the Chippeways encountered me without an 5

*I went on several miles farther than usual, in order to make discoveries...*

interpreter, party, or flag, they would certainly kill me. But, notwithstanding this admonition, I went on several miles farther than usual, in order to make discoveries, conceiving the savages not to be so barbarous or ferocious, as to fire on two men (I had one with me) who were apparently coming into their country, trusting to their generosity; and knowing that if we met only two or three we were equal to them, I having my gun and pistols and my companion his musket. Made some extra presents for new year's day.

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### **Minneapolis Christmas: 1866**



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*Blaisdell is a well known street in the Minneapolis of today, but in December of 1866 the name spelled Christmas fun to a homesick lad from New England. Many years afterwards Walter Stone Pardee recalled the sleigh ride, holiday food and kissing games which highlighted the Christmas party given by Mr. and Mrs. John T. Blaisdell. His sketch of the party, which is among the Pardee Papers in the Minnesota Historical Society, gives us a vivid picture of the rural landscape of the Blaisdell farm in the 1860's. The farm later became Blaisdell's Addition to Minneapolis, and land where wheat once grew is now crowded with the homes, apartments and business buildings of a great metropolitan center.*

Mr. John T. Blaisdell lived a few rods further south than we did, on Nicollet avenue, had an old style farm and old, plain building: a low, roomy house of New England type with many paned windows: had a big parlor, living room, kitchen and bedrooms all cozily grouped under a motherly old roof. About three Christmas afternoon 1866, the Blaisdell families of which there were three living on farms here and there in Minneapolis; met at Mr. John T. Blaisdell's house, together with invited guests from other families—the Lockwoods for instance our Buckmore farm neighbors. I as a boy must have been invited as a kindly act, for Mrs. Blaisdell, as I learn of late, was a dear woman, kindly and hospitable. Likely there were 20 children on hand. Long before dark Mr. Blaisdell got 7

*He took us for a ride to the back of his farm, and this was at Lyndale avenue of today.*

all who cared to go, into his big farm sleigh, that was bedded in straw, and he took us for a ride to the back of his farm, half a mile west, and this was at Lyndale avenue of today. The air was crisp, clear and cold, and boys and girls especially were wonderfully stimulated to enjoy the substantial food soon to be offered. The road was out of the common way — just a sort of what a New Englander of old would have called a cow path and regarded it as leading to the “back forty.” Not a house was to be seen along the route, very likely, in the region where there are hundreds of costly homes,—“Stanley Hall” a school for girls fine streets. Mr. Blaisdell's swamp that reached across Lyndale avenue, has been filled,

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the street raised and over all the former swamp are houses and lawns. But that 1866 afternoon our brisk team pulled us merrily along thru snow drifts on just a plain farm upon much of which Mr. Blaisdell raised wheat.

As to houses in sight even on Nicollet avenue, there were only two or three such as would be on 160 acre farms. A little white school houses some way out was the biggest building to be seen until far away at Lake street were two or three houses.

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Our ride was cold, the sun set early and soon we were back to a most hospitable home, permeated with good cheer as was Old Ward's home at Dingley Dell. Now the New England supper came on—or dinner as we call the night meal. The table was piled with the substantial and the fine. As at Dave Harum's Christmas dinner, "Sairy was for bringing in and taking out, but folks at table did their own passing."

What wonders there were in the way of boiled chicken for instance, the hearty vegetables, the appetizing jellies and the cakes, pies and puddings so dear to the heart and so satisfying to the stomach of the small boy, to say nothing of the likings of grownups.

And now came the jolly evening. The host looked after the interests of all; Mrs. Blaisdell was kindness and tact in essence. "Mammy" the darkey cook took part with the rest of us in the games. This was just after the Civil war when the darkeys had as many rights respected as did anyone.

*Then there were the usual kissing games.*

In the games, Mammy was kissed duly at the bidding of the distributor of forfeits, Mrs. Blaisdell doing the kissing; we children being a bit shy. Then there were the usual kissing games, Myra Lockwood and I being popular in those, and likely looked "easy." And after that everybody played in bigger games 9 in which there were sedate marchings about the

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big room and near-attempts at dancing. Tho we were so near the great conflict, and there had been so much sadness everywhere that most didn't care to dance.

This Christmas affair pleased me for it was New England again, or what I thot it should be. There was no style; the things were not so primitive as those of the hospitable Dutchman told of in the "Legend of Sleepy Hollow." The low-ceilinged rooms suggested coziness and comfort. The folks came from prosperous and peaceful homes and tho all worked hard, all were unselfish and so agreeable. I left late, and happy enough, none to anxious to go home to our humdrum and peculiar life. Most of those of that night are dead. Mr. Blaisdell, a good farmer was not equal to the work of handling his farm as a real-estate speculation, and tho the farm became Blaisdell's addition to the City of Minneapolis, and is worth, as improved city lots, hundreds of thousands of dollars yet his money troubles were many and he died a poor man. And his inability to care for so vast interests is quite understandable when we reflect that a farmer is accustomed to slow motions in body and mind; and perhaps is too tired to make good use of his imagination to develop a real estate undertaking of great size.

The Christmas party was a bright spot in my life, so bright that the picture is little dimmed after fifty-six years. I am grateful to the kindly folks who invited me to attend.

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### **Christmas at the Head of Lakes**

*With the first settlement of Duluth, its hardy citizens were convinced their sprawling community was a City of Destiny. Financial panics, railroad failures and busted mining bubbles hindered Duluth's early growth, but the dream remained—sometimes bright, sometimes tarnished.*

*In 1869, J. W. McClung, St. Paul author of the guidebook entitled Minnesota As It Is In 1870, sketchily reported on the pinebound potentialities of St. Louis County and Duluth. "In this county are the Vermillion gold mines," wrote McClung. "Since writing about them in*

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*Part First, further developments and tests of the quartz mills have not been encouraging, and the prospect for profitable mining is not brilliant. [But think of the later bonanza in iron that would make those dreams of gold pale by comparison.] Duluth ... has grown up within this year (1869) from 4 or 5 families to a population of over 1200 ... and will in time make a large city."*

*The census of 1870 recorded a population of 3,131 for the giant county, most of which was huddled under the cliffs at Duluth. But Christmas provided an hiatus in the struggle for greatness, and the columns of The Duluth Minnesotian for December 21, 1872, give us a hint of what was in store that year for holiday churchgoers.*

The annual season for merry hearts approaches, and already, the secret whisperings of the ladies, and the wisely knowing glances of the little ones, tells too plainly that Merry 11 Christmas trees will undoubtedly, mysteriously spring up in many parlors in the city.

Christmas is at hand. Unusual preparations are manifest everywhere. Among the public entertainments may be mentioned the following, as far as notice has reached us:

Presbyterian Church. —W. G. Dickerson, Superintendent. Christmas Tree on Tuesday evening at 6 o'clock, spreading its ample branches in the Sunday School, with apples of gold on leaves of silver.

An after performance will be given in the Church Room, where will be displayed the beautiful legendary drama, The Shepherds with allegorical tableaux, by the school.

Congregational Church. —W. S. Woodbridge, Superintendent. A Christmas Tree at 7 o'clock, Tuesday evening. By its fruits-ye shall know it. The evening will be further enlivened by the sweet songs of the children, and other highly entertaining exercises.

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Methodist Church. —J. H. Avery, Superintendent. On Christmas Eve a supper for the children at 6 o'clock in the 12 Lecture Room. Children, parents and congregation are expected to participate, and make merry over the feast.

Baptist Church. —W. W. Billson, Superintendent. A Christmas Tree on Tuesday evening at the Church, where sparkling eyes will wonder at the profusion.

Mission School, Minnesota Point. —J. L. Durant, Superintendent. On Christmas Eve a fine Christmas Tree will be displayed at six o'clock. Many hearts are panting for the moment.

Christmas trees will undoubtedly, mysteriously spring up in many parlors in the city, where it is expected their branches will draw the young tendrels in a closer bond of love.

*We can guess that the children had a good Christmas in '72 at the Head of the Lakes, but a short Apologetic in the skinny following issue of The Minnesotian suggests that Editor Thos. H. Presnell had his Yuletide troubles.*

For the first time since the establishment of the Minnesotian, in 1869, we are obliged to this week present our readers with only a half-sheet. The combination of circumstances which has impelled us to this course, briefly stated is this: 1st. The editor was confined to his bed and room with sickness from Friday of last week until yesterday—and in fact feels as though he should still be there. 2d.—On Monday morning our fastest compositor left us—which crippled us considerably. 3d.—On Monday we received the last copy for an unfinished Law Brief which had to be finished in time for the Wisconsin Supreme Court which meets next week—and to do which has taken the entire time and attention of our best hand. Add to all this the fact that this is Christmas week, and we think our readers will excuse the half-sheet.

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### **An Indian Agent's Christmas**

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*For two decades after 1819, the Indian agent at old Fort Snelling was Major Lawrence Taliaferro whose wisdom and honesty were an indelible influence on early Minnesota history. A warm sketch of Major Taliaferro by a pioneer Minnesotan who knew the agent as a child is available in Charlotte Ouisconsin Van Cleve's book, Three Score Years and Ten, Life Long Memories of Fort Snelling and Other Parts of the West, published in Minneapolis in 1888. She wrote:*

*“Major Laurence Taliaferro was for many years a member of our household, and we all loved and honored him. He was very entertaining in conversation and full of anecdotes of Virginia, which was his boyhood home. His father owned many slaves, and when he, as a student in an eastern college, was home for vacation, he delighted to amaze the Negro boys with his knowledge and excite their admiration. On one occasion he had been using some pretty big words in a speech for their edification, branching out now and then into Greek and Latin quotations, when one of them, overcome by his young master's proficiency, exclaimed: ‘Oh, Massa Laurence, you larn so much since you done been to college, you clar fool.’ He liked to tell this story of himself, and admitted that the boy had good ground for his sweeping conclusion.*

*“Dear Major Taliaferro, our happy-hearted, beloved and trusted friend, the faithful servant of the government and humble follower of Christ. His picture and an accompanying 14 letter, sent me from his home in Bedford, Pennsylvania, when he was eighty-two years old, are before me, and as I look on the well-known features, I repeat from my heart the testimony of his biographer: ‘For more than twenty years an Indian agent, and yet an honest man...’”*

*Taliaferro's Christmas of 1827 is described in his yellowed journal which is now in the Minnesota Historical Society.*

**Tuesday 25th Decr. 1827**

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Christmas Day: Serenade this morning at 3 oclk by the Musicians from Fort Snelling.—

*A few Yellow Kisses*

At Daylight 3 rounds by the French Inhabitants of the Post with the usual complements of the Season

Indians both Men & Women called at 11 oclk this day in considerable numbers to See & Shake hands & express the feelings of the day—which they appear to have taken up within the last Eight years from the Whites—the feelings of their hearts were expressed before I was aware by a few *Yellow Kisses*—& *amusing Scene*.—

I merely mention the fore going attentions as being continued after a residence of Eight Years in the Country.

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### **A Christmas Fair of 1851**

*St. Paul was host in October, 1850, to Miss Fredrika Bremer, a Swedish writer who subsequently wrote a book entitled Homes of the New World in which she described the rude territorial capital: "The town is one of the youngest infants of the Great West, scarcely eighteen months old, and yet it has increased in a short time to a population of 2,000 persons, and in a few years it will certainly be possessed of 22,000, for its situation is as remarkable for beauty and healthiness as it is advantageous for trade."*

*St. Paul in the census of 1850 counted 1,942, and the County of Ramsey—which then included St. Anthony—2,197 Males and Females. While the 1850's until the panic of '57 saw a remarkable growth in the capital, it was merely a toehold of civilization on the edge of a limitless wilderness. But even in those early days St. Paul society often showed evidence of "an easy elegance of manners and a pleasant tone of refined conversation, that was truly delightful." The Minnesota Pioneer of December 25, 1851, printed a report—*

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*written by a single man who spiced his facts with dry comments—on a Ladies' Fair which inaugurated the Christmas season in a genteel fashion almost out of place in a frontier village.*

The ladies of Rev. Mr. Neill's society—the 1st Presbyterian Society—a held a Fair on Tuesday evening last. The place of assemblage was Mr. Oakes' residence—a spacious and most commodious house, which he opened with a free heart. A 16 stock of articles, of the various descriptions usually got up for sale on such occasions, was disposed of at *fair* profit; and the tickets for supper were sold probably to some 150 persons at a living rate. The amount of the proceeds was about \$350.00.

The supper was excellent. It was made up of nearly every good eatable that the various tastes and abilities of the contributors may have laid store—there were at least seven baskets full left. Ninety plates were set on linen covered tables at one time. The ware was all white, as the fashion is. Let us consider some of the viands which one would scarce expect to see so far northwest, in the early times of St. Paul. There were oysters, and sardines, and turkey, and lobster, and ice cream, made without freezing—pastries, and the more staple meats, including buffalo tongue.

It seemed to have a salutary effect upon the feelings of everyone present. .. Indeed, one great good of churches to the community is the civilizing and refining effect upon the social feelings. .. Here applies the principle that man without the society of woman, is a barbarian. Now women in these late tunes, are in fact the motive power to the church. They, at least, suggest to the men the wants of the church, and devise ways and means to get the money for it. In these enterprises, they lay out upon their most effective charms, and so beguile us away from our idols, in groceries and saloons, that we haply forget what manner of men we have been; go it blind for the women, for society and the church, and perchance become tired of being a BACHELOR.



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### Christmas in a Sod House

*It must have been a thrill when that young people many snow-drifted miles beyond Litchfield opened their primitive half-ground house to Hugo Nisbeth, a visitor from home, who brought to them news from the old country and the sound of the old familiar tongue. Nisbeth was a visitor from Sweden who travelled widely across America, and in 1874 his impressions were published in Stockholm. Entitled Tva Ari Amerika, (1872-1874); Reseskildringar (Two Years in America (1872-1874); Accounts of Travel), his book presents a vivid picture of life here in the booming seventies.*

*The following account of the Swedish family which observed reverently and joyously the birth of Christ is from a translation of part of Nisbeth's book by Roy W. Swanson and is reprinted from the December, 1927, number of Minnesota History, quarterly magazine of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

After about a four month's absence from Minnesota—during which time I traveled through Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, and Wisconsin, and visited the larger cities' on the eastern coast of North America, as well as crossed Canada in different directions—I returned to “the land of ten thousand lakes” in the middle of December, 1872. When last I was there waving fields of grain greeted my eye, and green pastures, and a happy, industrious people who joyfully turned to account the rich harvest with which the state had been blessed. Now all was 18 changed. Winter had spread it white blanket over the fields, the trees had discarded their green dress and taken on their hoarfrost attire, sparkling in the sun. No more could the sailing clouds mirror themselves in the sky-blue waters; even the proud “father of waters,” the mighty Mississippi, had been forced to let himself be imprisoned by the conqueror who now wielded the scepter. That the winters are severe here cannot be denied, and the winter of 1872 could reasonably be counted as one of the coldest in the memory of man. But the air here is thin and clear, and when one sees the blue smoke rising in coquettish rings from the log cabins at the edge of some huge pine forest, and at the same time sees the *bond* out in the wood lot busy with the chopping, one thinks one is

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seeing again the fresh, charming picture that so often meets the eye of the traveler in our northland provinces in the winter. It is not the winter itself that the settler out on the thinly populated prairie looks forward to with dread, for the harvest has been lavishly supplied with fodder for the period during which they cannot go out. No, it is winter's companion, the terrible blizzard, that he fears. And, in truth, he has reason to. Death is the inevitable lot of him who is foolhardy enough to intrust himself to it. The blizzards here, as in other parts of America, are not to be compared with even the worst of our snowstorms at home, for they spring up more suddenly, and the howling storm, which with terrifying speed races across the endless plains, drives before it a whirling mass of fine snow particles that take away the breath, quickly cover up every track, and make it impossible to see even a distance of a few ells. He who permits himself to be surprised out on the prairies by such a storm is truly in a pitiable situation.

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Much activity prevailed in St. Paul when I got there. The handsome stores were filled with newly arrived articles, which were tasteful and often rather costly, intended as gifts for the coming holidays. There was a brisk sale of Christmas trees in the markets, and those streets along which the retailers had their shops were crowded with conveyances belonging to nearby farmers who were in town to buy gifts or delicacies for the Christmas table. It is not only Scandinavians who celebrate Christmas here in America in a true ancient northern fashion, but even the Americans themselves have a late years begun to give more and more attention to this festival of the children and have as nearly as possible taken our method of celebration as a pattern. For example, most of them use fir trees with candles,

*Much activity prevailed in St. Paul when I got there.*

20 confections, and other decorations, and so far as the number and costliness of the present are concerned they often display a liberality that would amaze us Swedes. These Christmas presents are given in various ways. In the public schools, especially for younger children, the school officials usually arrange a huge fir, which stands for about eight days.

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On this tree the children's parents and friends hang small presents, which are distributed by the school-teacher. In the home the presents are sent with a message if the giver is someone outside of the family, or they are distributed by a dressed-up Christmas mummer, who here goes under the name of "Santa Claus." Still another custom exists, although it is not used so commonly perhaps as the first two. If there is reason to expect presents, a stocking is hung up at bedtime in some convenient and well-known place and in it in the morning will be found the expected presents. Not a trace of our traditional *lutfisk* and rice porridge is found. There is no special menu for Christmas Eve. On the other hand there are few American homes in which the customary turkey is not served on the following, or Christmas, day.

As I had planned to spend my Christmas Eve with some of my countrymen out on the prairie, I left St. Paul a few days before Christmas and went by the St. Paul and Pacific one hundred English miles northwest to the Litchfield station. Here, after some trouble, I was fortunate enough to secure a sled in which I set out over the prairie to the west. There was no road, of course. The level country which I entered first lay like an enormous white cloth spread out before my eyes, and the only guide I had for the direction I was to take was a small pocket compass and the blue smoke columns that here and there at a considerable distance arose from the log cabins. <sup>21</sup> The way was not particularly difficult to traverse, for on the flat prairie the snow distributes itself comparatively evenly. But when, after twenty or thirty miles, I came out on the rolling prairie, I met with greater difficulties. In some places the snow had drifted in considerable quantities between the hillocks, and had it not been for the hardy horses and the extraordinary strong conveyances that they have in the West, I should have had extreme difficulty in making headway.

Toward nightfall on the day before Christmas Eve I perceived far off the smoke from a human habitation, which, from what I could make out at a distance, should be a sod house. I was soon there and found that this, in truth, was the case, although it was one of the very best kind. That is to say, in this case, the owner had only dug himself into the

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ground. Three tiers of thick timbers were laid above ground and over these there was placed a roof with a slight pitch. One lived, so to speak, half under and half above ground, and thus it became possible for the occupant to get daylight through a small window, which was sawed out of the south wall formed by the three timbers mentioned above. About twenty paces from the dwelling house was the granary and, annexed to it, the stable, also a half sod house, which was occupied by two oxen and a cow. Only a little grain was

*One lived, so to speak, half under and half above the ground.*

22 on hand; that which was not necessary for winter use had been sold, as usual, during an Indian summer. The sod hay barn, on the other hand, seemed to be well filled with cattle fodder. I had not steered wrong, for I had reached the house of the man I sought, Jan Erikson from Wermland, who had been in America for three years and for the last two years had been living on his large eighty-acre homestead. I was received by him and his friendly wife with that cordiality which I have been accustomed to find among my countrymen on the prairie. Nor did I need to put forth an request that I might stay over Christmas Eve, for I was anticipated in this by my friendly hosts, who simply but heartily bade me remain and help myself to whatever they had to offer. To the two children, a girl of seven named Anna and a boy of three, Erie, the visit of a strange gentleman seemed particularly surprising, but the sight of some packages I had brought along, which the dwelling's smallness made it impossible for me to hide, soon made us the best of friends.

Early in the morning of the day before Christmas my hosts were at work, and when I arose I found a huge ham already sputtering over the fire, while outside I heard my host's great ax blows, for he was busy sitting the necessary Christmas wood ready. I hurried out and was met with a picture that was for me entirely new and particularly striking. The sun was about twenty degrees above the wavy horizon of snow and from the snow-clad tops of countless hillocks the sun-beams were thrown in a dazzling bewilderment all around. Yet, except for this tiny world in which I now found myself, I could not discern another sign of human presence than two columns of smoke, which arose, nearly perpendicularly, from

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the horizon, one in the northwest and one in the southwest. The first, explained my host, came from a sod house that was 23

### *The head of the family read from the Bible and the Christ Child*

occupied the previous spring by the family of a German farmer who came from Illinois, where he had paid too much for his land and after two years of fruitless toil had been forced to leave everything with empty hands. In the other lived a Swedish family, a man and his wife and one child, who had lived there for a year and a half. After the wood was chopped and carried in, a task in which the two children took part with a will, the cattle were fed and watered, and a small sheaf of unthreshed wheat was set out for the few birds that at times circled around the house, in accordance with the lovely old Swedish custom.

With these and other chores the morning passed, and right after twelve o'clock we were invited in by the housewife for the midday meal. The cloth that covered the plain homemade table was certainly not of the finest, but it was whole and clean, and the defects of arrangement that a fault-finding observer would have been able to point out were plentifully outweighed in my eyes by the unfeigned, cordial friendliness with which I was bade to help myself to what the house had to offer. For the rest, one should have felt ashamed not to be satisfied. The bread that we dipped in the kettle was freshly baked and tasty, and the fat chicken was later served in a in a sort of stewed pie form, which awakened especially the children's delight, had clearly not fared ill during the short time 24 allotted him to live. And so came the afternoon with its small arrangements for the evening meal and the Christmas table, for this could not be omitted. There was no Christmas tree, for fir trees are not yet planted in this part of Minnesota, but two candles stood on the white covered table and round these were placed a multitude of Christmas cakes in various shapes.

The meal was eaten in the happiest of moods and afterward the few presents were distributed to the children. The gifts were neither costly nor tasteful, but they were *gifts* and that was all that was necessary. On the wooden horse I had brought, the little three-

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year-old galloped over the hardpacked dirt floor of the sod house with as much joy and happiness undoubtedly as the pampered child upon one polished and upholstered. All was joy and thankfulness, and when later the head of the family read a chapter from the Bible about the Christ child I am certain that from the hearts of these poor people there rose many warm thanksgivings to Him who smoothed their path and gave them courage and strength to conquer the hardships of the New World.

Outside the snow fell slowly and spread its white Christmas mantle over the endless prairie. Now and then a snowflake fastened itself on the single window of the sod house, its curtains faded by the summer suns, and quickly dissolved and disappeared as if its icy heart had melted with joy at sight of the peace that reigned within. And later, from the corner of the room where the housewife's kind hands had made my bed, I heard the small voice of the youngest child, still clutching his wooden horse, repeating after his mother, "Good night, kind Jesus." Then it was I realized in full God's infinite wisdom when He willed to apportion "the palace for the rich, but joy for the poor."

25

### **Christmas Tree in the Schoolhouse**

*Here is the chronicle of a community Christmas celebration of the early 1870's in a schoolhouse near Silver Lake in Martin County. Here is the essence of Childhood's Christmas in its purest form. This narrative is reprinted from a series of memoirs by Britania J. Livingston, edited by Nora Livingston Heermance, and appeared in the June 6, 1925, issue of the Fairmont Daily Sentinel.*

It was a very commonplace neighborhood. It was composed of the families of hard working farmers, and had hardly emerged from the chrysalis "frontier." Going to the school house on Sabbath afternoons to hear some minister from town preach upon the sins of Free Masonry or the evils of too luxurious living, was about their only recreation. As Christmas drew near, the little ones would canvass the prospect of getting their stockings filled by

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Santa Claus, and thrifty papas would remind the eager darlings that it had been a bad year for Santa Claus's business; that they had heard that he was near stopping his business and closing out at auction, and other nonsense of this same kind.

How it ever come about I am sure I cannot tell. It was arranged to have a Christmas tree at the school house.

The most of the children had never seen a real Christmas tree. The idea started between the teacher and two or three ladies—perhaps it was evolved by some sort of mental spontaneous combustion. It was spoken of only a week before 26 Christmas. The weather was so bad—snowy and blustering—that no committees could get their heads together for consultation; but during that week after school hours, the fine floury snow of Minnesota was melted off the trim overcoat of “our teacher” beside nearly every hot stove in his school district.

*The snow was melted off the trim overcoat of “our teacher” beside nearly every hot stove in his school district.*

And here I must explain who “our teacher” was, and then you will better understand his interest in the matter. He belonged to the neighborhood. He had grown up with the young people—had received his education at the school house where he was now teaching—barring a few terms away at college. He was much a favorite with the parents that he could have had the school whenever he wished it, at the highest price going. He petted the little boys as though every little cub was his brother, and he was the idol of the sweetest bevy of maidens under ten years of age, that ever graced a country neighborhood. Said he, in a general summing up of the undertaking: “We are all in the same boat, there will be no costly presents to disturb the harmony. If we can give the little ones a good time, the rest of us will certainly be happy. The large boys have chipped in to get a barrel of apples, and I think we are sure of pleasant evening.” When they struck that 27 barrel of apples

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they were sure of one element of success—a crowd. A “barrel of apples” is an inducement beyond the power of the average Minnesotan to resist.

So it was a settled thing about the tree. Then every mother laid her plans to help Santa Claus. As I said before, consultation was impossible, so Mrs. H. counted up the little children who sure to be there, and found that they numbered twenty. So that every child should certainly have something, she cut twenty stockings out of blue mosquito netting, made them neatly and wrote each child's name and fastened it to the stocking, and then made a few extra ones for any extra children that might happen to come.

Mrs. S., with the same thoughtful purpose, counted also, and made twenty little stockings and a few extra ones, and pinned on the names with only this different—the mosquito bar was pink. Mrs. P., not knowing the counting and planning going on at the snow-bound neighbors, counted also, and made neat little white bags with fancy strings for twenty. Mrs. L. did the same thing. So you can see for yourself that the thing was a success from the start. But wait, the teacher has not done all of his part yet. Fearing that some might be slighted or overlooked by the saint, in a crowded house, he went to town counting as he rode along, up to twenty, and he invested in twenty toys.

How many mothers set the children to popping corn, each one fancying she was the only one who possessed any, or the knowledge necessary to make it into balls. There were certainly bushels of it piled up under the tree in pans and baskets, in the shape of balls. When every available use had been made of the dry corn, even to filling new boots with it, the remainder was tied up in a cloth flour sack, the name of a very good 28 natured man written on it, and hung up to the stovepipe.

Christmas evening was clear and beautiful. All day long the teacher and his aids were at the schoolhouse arranging the tree, the evergreen decorations, and receiving those who came on business.



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Did you ever witness the delight of a lot of children on their view of a Christmas tree? If not, I am sorry for you.

At “early candle light” the sleigh bells began to ring up their merry loads. The schoolhouse was crowded to an overflow. Of course the tree committee had its heaviest work at the last minute. Then while the teacher ran home to wash off the perspiration and get on a clean collar, we had time to look around.

A brighter, prettier tree we never saw, although we have looked on thos of ten times the value. It was a graceful red cedar well lighted with candles and well loaded with presents, as was also a table nearby, and the floor at its roots.

On every suitable place upon the walls were pictures and sentiments suitable to the occasion, while over all were green

*At “early candle light” the sleigh bells began to ring up their loads.*

29 branches of the fragrant red cedar, and clusters of the pretty bittersweet berries in lieu of the sacred holly. We could not help but notice little Robbie W. His mama tried to keep him down, but up on the seat he would pop, like a Jack-in-the-box when the cover is off.

Who will be Santa Claus? was the all important query. No one thought of the teacher, for, have I said so? he was the most bashful man you ever knew. Why, when he was a great boy of 18 years, if you stopped to speak to him, his arms and legs would try to get out of sight, and he had every appearance of man trying to hide behind himself. Of course, he has gotten over all that, and stands straight as a liberty pole, and looks squarely at you with a firm blue eye. Yet he still prefers to do his good works in private—always pushing someone to the front, with half his brains and three times his brass, when a public stand is to be taken. But he has forgotten himself tonight—you can see that as he carefully picks his way through the crowd of little ones that clutch at his hands and his coattails as he passes, each one of them with some private word to whisper in his ear.

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When near the tree, he faced around and said: "I suppose you all know why we have gathered here," pointing to the beautiful tree. "The first exercise will be a little vocal music, after which some of the little ones will give recitations suitable to the evening."

That sweet hymn, "Peace Upon Earth, The Angels Sang," never sounded sweeter than in that little old schoolhouse Christmas night. The little ones spoke like the angels whose messengers they are. Then two little girls were chosen to carry the present to their recipients, and two young men took them from the tree and handed them to the teacher who read out 30 the name and gave them to the little messenger for the owners.

The "twenty" soon had received their pairs of pink and blue stockings which Santa Clause had filled with candies, nuts, maple sugar, etc., and the children that were unexpected had their names called and were served just as well as the others. Then if the tree had been emptied, I think those little ones would always have blessed it. But it was still loaded, such sights of pretty mittens, suspenders, leggings, neckties, slippers,

### *Jumping Jack*

dolls, drums, dolls' clothing, books, pictures, and several pair of small boots and hoods. O, I cannot begin to mention the things. Nothing costly, nearly everything useful, but so bright and handsome. Suspended by threads to the tree in such a manner as to keep quivering and dancing were two or three jumping jacks whose gesticulations attracted all eyes. As one of these was handed to the teacher, he pulled the string and made it dance worse than ever. "That is what I want," shouted four year old Robbie. "No, Robbie, you can't have this," said the teacher, "this is for our postmaster." The shouts of laughter didn't quite drown Robbie's disgusted "pshaw."

Pans of popcorn balls passed around and refreshments became the order of the evening. All this time the tree was being stripped of its precious fruit as fast as circumstances would permit. Robbie's happiness was complete when one of the committee on talking down a

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jumping jack, found his own name on it, slyly snipped it off and put Robbie's in its place. "Now let us go home," he said. "I'm all ready, I've got all I want."

31

### **"To Give No Countenance..."**

*The Chippewa Indians of the North observed New Year's Day much like their friends among the French-Canadians, and they called the holiday "Kissing Day." William T. Boutwell, who began his missionary work in Leech Lake in 1833, recorded in this diary what he thought of such going-on with an illuminating picture of the reaction of piety in the midst of pagans.*

Jan. 1. 1834. A cold morning for calico frocks, which new years has put on to almost every woman's back in place of the coarse and warmer dress, in my view, would be more comfortable, not to say becoming, a cold morning, New Years, notwithstanding. As Mr. D. sat making our breakfast of fish and potatoes, the first I knew, open came our door, and in came 5 or 6 women and as many children. An old squaw, with clean face, for once, come up and saluted me with, "bon jour," giving her hand at the same time, which I received, returning her compliment, "bon jour." But this was not all. She had been too long among Canadians not to learn some of their New Year customs. She approached—approached so near, to give and receive a kiss, that I was obliged to give her a slip, and dodge! This vexed the old lady and provoked her to say, that I thought her too dirty. But pleased, or displeased, I was determined to give no countenance to a custom which I hated more than dirt. Mr. D. ran a narrower escape than myself.

32

### **Cornbread is No Luxury Cold**

*The Reverend Mr. Boutell would have been pleased if he had been at a Red Lake Mission twelve years later where the Indians sang a hymn instead of kissing. Her varied duties, hardships and hard work are evident in the following excerpts from letters written by Lucy*

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*M. Lewis to relatives in Ohio. The old letters with their neat hand are preserved among the Lewis Papers in the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Red Lake, January 1 st , 1846

Dear Father Brothers & Sisters

I wish you all "*a happy new year*" I am sometimes astonished at the goodness of God in permitting me on so many successive New Year's to take my pen and give you a friendly greeting. Though I know not your particular circumstances, I rest assured that the hand of the Lord has been about you for good, and if afflictions have been mingled in your cup since I last heard from you I trust that the consolations of the God of Comfort have also abounded...

But I hasten to give you some account of the events of the morning, for death has entered our little community and my help may soon be called for. I rose before four, and put the breakfast in a state of preparation as that is my part of domestic duty in the family after which husband & myself spent a short season of sweet communion before the Mercy Seat. Breakfast & family worship over at early dawn the bell summoned 33

*The Indians assemble to give the greeting and receive a cake or two and a draught of sweetened water.*

us to Br. Ayer's the most convenient place to meet the Indians who assemble to give the greeting and receive a cake or two & a draught of sweetened water.

It is the custom through the country to make calls & receive cakes & to secure some part of the day for quiet we appointed a time and carried our provisions together though we shall have calls more or less through the day. The Indians were in readiness and some of the principal men honored the missionaries with a salute of two guns before the doors of the largest dwelling house, Br. Ayer's before the bell rang & during worship.

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The room was soon filled to overflowing. A New Year's hymn learned in school for the occasion was sung and some remarks made by Br A before the distribution....

34

3 rd I did not tell that as part of our New Years we assembled our school the evening before & distributed presents chiefly garments which I had been quite busy sometime in preparing. They came with cleaner faces & hands than usual as a little soap had previously been distributed. I often wish we had more soap to give them as it is impossible for them to be very clean without it. My box of soap is still at Crowing river.

Their black eyes sparkled on the reception of the garments though they were not what I could have wished for want of materials. I had no plaid or dark flannel for the girls short gowns except barely sufficient for two which sister Elisa sent me for aprons. Woollen is so much better for them than calico in winter. I have just finished letters to Austinburg & Freeborn Ladies societies who sent us donations and requested to know our wants. I presumed the wants of the school & I hope we shall be better provided for another New Year's...

*New Year's Day of 1849 furnished scant luxuries for the Red Lake missionaries and their Indian brethren, according to another letter by Mrs. Lewis. The following short excerpt suggests the physical privation and devotion to duty which motivated those early teachers.*

1 Jan —49. A happy new year to you all. The first company of visitors have called & received each their peace of corn bread & tumbler of sweetened water the best we could afford not having a particle of fine flour & but a trifle of graham of our own raising. We rose at three to prepare so that the bread might be warm it is no luxury cold you know. The bell was rung at seven and soon we were busy *bosho-ing* (our how ye do) & distributing...

35

### **Making the Rounds on New Year's**

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*New Year's Day in the remote frontier that was Minnesota in the early 1850's offered few of the refinements that we know today for celebrating the festive holiday. But those early Minnesotans did have the irreplaceable commodity of hospitality; their homes were open to citizens one and all—so much so that a program of holiday calling required a full measure of stamina.*

*In proof thereof, we offer the recollections of New Year's of 1854 as recalled by Charles E. Flandrau, in later life a prominent Minnesota jurist. His first New Year's in St. Paul was a ceaseless round of calls at open houses, and in the company of three other "young frisky fellows" made the almost unbelievable number of 150 calls that chill day—an unusual record when we recall that those calls had to be made in sleighs over a wide, sparsely settled area. His spirited memoirs of merry-making in early St. Paul are reprinted from a series of autobiographical sketches in the Minnesota Historical Society Collections.*

I am rather inclined to think that in the early days we had a good deal more fun than we do now, but perhaps our pleasures were not curbed with the same bit as they are at present. The early settlers brought out with them the old fashioned way of celebrating New Year's day, and when that event occurred, the whole town was alive with sport. Everybody kept open house and expected everybody else to call and see them. 36 No vehicle that could carry a party was allowed to remain idle, and from morning until late in the night the entire male population was on the move. The principal houses were those of the Ramseys, the Gormans, the Borups, the Oakeses, the Warrens, the Coxes, the Robertsons, and the Rices. The Reverend Dr. Andrew Bell Paterson, rector of St. Paul's Church, lived out where Hamm's brewery now stands. Mrs. Goodhue, widow of Minnesota's first editor, lived on the west side, about opposite the foot of Jackson street, and there were many others well worthy of mention who now escape me. We also had Fort Snelling with its Old School Army officers, famous for their courtesy and hospitality, and the delightful household of Franklin Steeled, the sutler; and there was Henry H. Sibley, at Mendota, to whom the

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finest amenities of life were a creed; all of whom assisted on New Year's day. There was a great strife

*We also had Fort Snelling with its Old School Army officers, famous for their courtesy and hospitality.*

37 among the entertainers as to who should have the most elaborate spread, and the most brilliant and attractive array of young ladies to greet the guests. A register of the callers was always kept, and great was the vicory of the hostess who recorded the greatest number.

My first New York's day in St. Paul was in January, 1854, forty-four years ago; it was my entrée to St. Paul society. Four of us, all young frisky fellows, started out together with a good team and made one hundred and fifty calls by midnight. The party was composed of Mr. Henry L. Moss, Horace R. Bigelow, who was my old partner, Mr. Charles H. Mix, and myself. Whether we drank at every foundation that gushed for us on that day, I will leave to the imagination, after saying that only the most delightful impressions of the event linger in my memory. The custom died out only a dozen years ago.

*A marked contrast in social affairs in Minnesota Territory is provided by Flandrau's comments on his experience with Indians on "Kissing Day" just three years later when he was a Sioux Indian agent.*

While speaking of New Year's day, I must not forget my first New Year's day among the Indians. It was in 1857. The Sioux know the day and celebrate it. How they discovered it I am unable to say, but probably they learned it from the French missionaries. They call it "Kissing Day." I was the United States Agent for the Sioux, and was detained up at the Yellow Medicine river for some reason, I forget what. I was informed that it would be expected of me to give all the women who happened to be about the Agency a present. So I had several barrels of gingerbread baked, and purchased many 38 bolts of calico, which I had cut up into dress pieces, ready for delivery. About ten in the forenoon the

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squaws began to assemble near the Agency, and I seated myself in the main room to await events. At first they were shy (I was not the grizzly old fellow then that I am now). Soon an old *wa-kon-ka* came sidling up like a crab, and gave me a kiss; then came another, and another, until, young and old, I had kissed and been kissed by forty-eight squaws. I kept an exact tally, especially of the young and pretty ones. They all got their gingerbread and dresses, and went away very happy; whether their joy rested wholly on the cakes and calico, I never was exactly satisfied in my own mind. So you see the civilized and the savage do not differ very much in their methods of amusing themselves. It is a serious question whether modern innovations will be an improvement over the past in such matters.

*No vehicle that could carry a party was allowed to remain idle.*

39

### **Proclaiming a Day of Thanks**

*Thanksgiving crowded Christmas when Alexander Ramsey, governor of the Territory of Minnesota, proclaimed, at the behest of a group of clergymen, Minnesota's first official day of thanks for December 26, 1850. The holiday was observed the day after Christmas for fourteen years until 1864 when President Lincoln set the last Thursday of November as the national Thanksgiving. The first territorial thanks day was marked by ringing bells at sunrise and sunset of the twenty-sixth. Special morning services were held in the churches. In the evening a "magnificent ball" was held in St. Paul at Mazourka Hall which a short time before had been equipped with "transparencies, paintings, pictures, and chandeliers in a style of superb elegance."*

*Our first Thanksgiving found a sparsely settled territory including all of what is now the State of Minnesota plus the Dakotas as far west as the Missouri River. The nine counties of the territory counted only a few more than 6,000 people. St. Paul was a frontier village with about 225 dwellings, while St. Anthony boasted only 115.*



**A PROCLAMATION, By ALEXANDER RAMSEY, Governor of the Territory of Minnesota.**

Whereas, It is meet that a people should acknowledge the protecting arm of the ALMIGHTY POWER that sways the Universe, it is proper that Nations should return thanks for blessings vouchsafed to them from season to season, and from 40

*Our fields have yielded a rich return. Our forests and mills have gathered for us an equal harvest.*

year to year, by Him who hath appointed seed time and harvest, who, from the clouds, waters the earth and with its teeming fruits feeds his creatures. It is wise for a community to thus bend in praise and thanksgiving to heaven for innumerable and precious gifts, in order that the liberal hand may still be outstretched; the hand of Power continue to preserve and defend us. It is noble to be grateful towards men—it is of a higher nobility to not omit gratitude, deep unutterable gratitude, towards the Creator of man and matter, who holds Nations in the hollow of his hand, without whose permission, we are told, not even a sparrow falls to the ground—not a blade of grass grows in the field.

Especially grateful, humbly, yet joyously thankful, should the people of this Territory be, for the prosperity which has smiled upon us, for the peace which has dwelt around us, for the past with its gifts, for the present with its blessings, for the future with its golden hopes. Young in years as a community, we have come into the wilderness, in the midst of savage men and uncultivated nature to found a new empire in aid of our 41 pursuit of happiness, and to extend the area of enlightened republican Liberty. Infant and feeble as our footsteps must at first be, an arm hath upheld us, an arm hath guided our tottering steps, an Almighty arm hath preserved and prospered us in all our enterprises. Our fields have yielded a rich return. Our forests and mills have gathered for us an equal harvest. Neither blast nor hurricane hath visited us—nor drought nor epidemic disease—while war and bloodshed among Indian races around us have been graciously averted. Let us therefore give thanks. Let us unite together in thanksgiving and praise to an Omniscient

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Providence for all his mercies and blessings to our youthful state. Let us in the public temple of religion, by the fireside and family altar, on the prairie and in the forest, join in the expression of our gratitude, of our devotion to the God who brought our fathers safely through the perils of an early revolution, and who thus continues his favors to the remotest colonies of his sons.

With these views, therefore, I have deemed it advisable to recommend, in this manner, that Thursday, the 26th day of December instant, be observed throughout the Territory of Minnesota as a day of Public Thanksgiving and Praise; in such manner and with such observances as shall be deemed by the people most suitable to express their feelings on the occasion.

Given under my hand and the Great Seal of the said Territory at St. Paul, this sixth day of December, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty, and of the Territory, the second year. ALEX. RAMSEY By the Governor: C. K. SMITH, Sec.

42

### **Excelsior Thanksgiving: 1854**

*The January 20, 1855, issue of the North-Western Democrat, an early Minneapolis weekly, featured a letter from an enthusiastic Minnesotan, late of New England, who was grateful for Minnesota hospitality and Minnesota climate.*

*The former is understandable, but the enthusiasm of the letter writer for Minnesota's winter is hard to accept. But in Minnesota's early days, it was known far and wide as a health resort. Horace Greeley, who spoke at the Agricultural Fair in 1865, later wrote this comment re Minnesota's health-restoring climate: "I knew that many had gone to her for health; I rejoiced to perceive that most of them had found it. In quiet homes, as well as the Fair, I found every one strong, elastic, active, vigorous, buoyant."*

Editor of the N. W. Democrat:—

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Sir— Rarely does it fall to the lot of a traveler, when far from home and among strangers, to have an invitation to attend the welcome anniversary of Thanksgiving among a large circle of friends; but such has been my happiness. As fortune would have it, being in the vicinity of Excelsior some three weeks since, and learning that the Rev. Charles Galpin, pastor of the church in that place, preached every Sabbath, I determined to hear him, especially as his notoriety as a preacher has become somewhat extensive. I did so, and not only was I much interested in his discourse, which was full of practical truth; but, alas, for poor human nature, I must own I was quite as much interested at the close of the service to hear the Rev. gentleman give out a public invitation to a Thanksgiving entertainment, to be observed on the 21st instant, at the Minnetonka House, kept by his brother, Geo. Galpin, in excellent style. I confess I was much pleased, considering my situation among strangers, to know that I was included in the invitation. I thought how unlike Minnesota is to even our own dear New England, for these entertainments of this character scarce ever embrace more than relatives and particular friends. You will not wonder that I made it convenient to be present at an early hour, as the dinner was to be served at two o'clock P. M. And now, Mr. Editor, permit me to say that my poor abilities of description are entirely inadequate to do the occasion justice, but I will make an effort. The good people of Chanhassan, a township joining Excelsior, were invited to contribute and partake of the delicacies for the occasion. There were present on this occasion from 80 to 90 of the most healthy, intelligent and enterprising people I ever met with, not excepting the most selected gatherings in many portions of the East. I was absolutely astonished to find myself so happily circumstanced, for any previous ideas of Minnesota had been anything but favorable for the encouragement of others who have enjoyed eastern privileges. Scarcely had I been introduced to the leading spirits of the company (I don't mean ardent spirits) when notice was given, by Dr. Snell, that dinner was ready. Without exaggeration, no epicure seated himself to a more sumptuous feast. I will not fill your paper with a full list of all the articles, but will notice some of them. Large plates of roast venison of the finest quality first met my eye, and in close proximity were several of the squealing, bristling tribe, stretched at full length and stuffed with condiments that

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pamper the appetites of the most dainty. Next came the pheasant and chicken pies, with grouse, and the more honored of the feathered tribe, served up in every variety of style. The more common dishes, beef and pork, I need not mention. I came near losing myself in the countless variety of pastry of every description, and here my eye rested, yes, Mr. Editor, it is even so, upon a school of good old New England pumpkin pies. So much did the sight of these affect me that for a moment I was almost overcome; but gathering strength a little, I proceeded to discuss the merits of the one nearest me, and must confess I would not be afraid to join destinies with the good dame who made it. Puddings and cakes brought up the rear in the deluge of luxuries. O, Minnesota, thou art a duplicate of that goodly land promised to father Abraham, flowing with milk and honey. After dinner we were conducted to the parlor, where we listened to a Proclamation, said to have been composed for the occasion by a member of the Excelsior Lyceum. Its merits would have done honor to any governor. Prayer was then offered by the Rev. C. Galpin accompanied by a short address appropriate to the occasion, in which he set forth the merciful dealings of God's providence with them. This was followed by music upon the piano accompanied by voices that truly reminded me of home, sweet home.

As evening drew her sable mantle over us the exercises were interspersed with short and spicy addresses by sundry gentlemen present, among whom was the landlord, Mr. G. Galpin, who being rather suddenly called to the floor, came down on his audience with a shower of mirth, and hearty congratulations, contrasting the abundant blessings we now enjoy with 45

*The exercises were interspersed with short addresses.*

the early experience of most settlers in new countries. I will not omit to mention the reading of interesting extracts from the *Evening Star*, a paper issued weekly in manuscript form by the ladies of the village Lyceum, which, by the way, is in a very prosperous condition. Also, many compositions from the ladies of Chanhassan, which were very ably written, and which reflected great honor on their authors and discovered an amount of talent and accomplishments found only among those who have been favored with the highest

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privileges. At a proper time a recess was given to partake of refreshments, which were those that usually characterize an evening soiree, not forgetting an abundance of apples of the finest flavor.

And now, Mr. Editor, I am not entranced, neither is my pen guided by some Fairie; but I am stating facts when I say, such a climate as Minnesota possesses is not to be found; no, not in the verdant glens of balmy Italy. So pure and invigorating, so calm and beautiful, with the thermometer even below zero, you are not sensible of its being cold, and indeed you do not suffer as much from the same exposure, even at this temperature, as at the east with the thermometer 15 Degrees above Zero. Some may be incredulous, but it is a fact. I learn by the settlers that the crops here far surpass, in quality and quantity, of any of the States, Illinois not excepted. As to health, the fact that not a single death has occurred in the whole township for nearly two years past, except one man 46 who was drowned, is enough to open the eyes of people in this respect. I have visited many western towns that were mostly built on paper; but here is a town indeed, based upon moral, religious and temperance principles, every inhabitant being pledged not to sell lots to, or in any way fellowship the patron of the whiskey bottle. Such principles as these carried out and I am told they are to the letter in Excelsior, coupled with the richest agricultural and mechanical facilities, promise to the settlers almost a paradise on earth. A steam mill is in process of erection here which will be completed in the Spring. The finest of timber only waiting the motion of the steam saw to supply the pressing demand for lumber. There are many elegant sites for building in the town, commanding a view of the lake, which is perfectly enchanting. Why so beautiful and desirable a place should have so long remained in obscurity I cannot divine; but for the merest accident I should not have found it. Come all ye invalids and seekers after health. Lay aside your pills, plasters and powders—come with me and settle upon the beautiful shores of lovely Minnetonka. Her charms are sung *Stay, sweet Minnetonka, among thy green trees; Stay while we sing thee a song in thy praise; Thy bright, crystal wave, how lovely it glides, And rolls near the cot where contentment resides. We draw from thy bosom the finest of fish, For a richer or finer a King*

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*could not wish. At evening we fain by thy green banks would stray, And lose in thy murmur the toils of the day.* VIATOR.

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