

The Many Worlds of District 1, Part VII: Pride and Prejudice

Pride

The American Dream grew out of an abundance of cheap land, more than had ever before been available to large numbers of ordinary people. In Europe, a man and his family were born to a life that led nowhere, dependent on their “betters” for subsistence work and charity. In America, especially as he left the cities of the east and ventured west, a free man could go anywhere. With a modicum of savings, he could become a landowner and Master of his Fate and pass on to his children the fruits on an independent life. Even second-generation immigrants, who saw in the east too much of Old Europe, turned their gazes to the empty lands of the West.

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.

~ Frederick Jackson Turner
The Frontier in American History

Space, the first frontier

The sprinkle of newcomers who settled in and near District 1 during the second half of the nineteenth century liked wide, empty spaces, so they did not want others close, though distant neighbors were fine. Many looked for higher, non flood-prone land behind the bluffs, though a few settled on the rich bottomland near the river. They kept away from those they considered inferior—“half-breeds,” “half-blood” or “mixed race” people. They especially kept away from the French-Indian families who had nestled their houses within shouting distance of each other along the marshland at “Pig’s Eye Flats.”

As early as the summer of 1841, these French-speaking families, heir to the culture of the Canadian voyageurs, staked out bottomland near the river where they built small houses, claiming squatters’ preemptions. Boisterous and close-knit, they kept rum at the ready for impromptu fetes and partied for days on the occasion of weddings or New Year’s. As their numbers increased, they seemed to be everywhere—including downtown and north of the river in places like “Little Canada” and “New Canada.”

It was said that a French household might be short on furniture, but the ladies would always have at least one silk dress for the dances and enough flour and sugar to make little French cakes by the dozens. Desiring to keep their language “pure,” French Canadians likewise kept away from English-speakers, especially the “banquet and champagne crowd” of “hereditary St. Paul,” those snobbish elite whose doors were equally closed to “plain people,” that is, the poor immigrants and tradesmen who were busy building a stake to buy their own land.

In the presence of St. Paul’s booming growth, promoters boasted about the number of women already settled there. They called it “women power.” By July of 1849, there were already 300 females in St.

Paul, according to a 1906 history of the city. “The fact was loudly proclaimed as giving an air of permanency to the growth of the city.”

From *Old Rail Fence Corners*

“All the food we had was game, pork and buckwheat cakes. The buckwheat they had brought from their home and it was all ground in the coffee mill than sifted through a horsehair sieve before it could be used. There were seven in the family to grind for, so it kept one person grinding all the time.”

~ Mr. D. E. Dow, arrived in territory 1850

“On our farm was a thicket of plums which probably came up from the stones from one tree. Some were blue, some red, others yellow and red. Some were sour, some bitter, others tasteless, while others still, were sweet and of an exquisite flavor. These trees soon ran out and I think all of this best variety are gone. I remember picking raspberries, blackberries and wild strawberries in quantities.”

~ Charles Bohanon, arrived 1851

“I was only nine years old and my brother thirteen, but we made all the furniture for that cabin out of a few popple poles and a hollow basswood log. For beds, beams were fitted in between the logs and stuck out about a foot above the floor and were six feet long. To these we fastened cross pieces of “popple” and on this put a tick filled with wild hay and corn stalk leaves. It made a wonderful bed when you were tired as everyone was in those days, for all worked.”

~ Austin W. Farnsworth, arrived 1851

“I remember that our first crop...was corn and pumpkins....There was an eight acre patch of wild strawberries. They were as large as the small cultivated berries with a most delicious flavor. Everyone that we knew picked and picked but wagon loads rotted on the ground.” J

~ James M Gillespie, arrived 1853

“In the early days, ammunition was very expensive for the farmer boys who loved to shoot. They found that dried peas were just as good as shot for prairie chicken, quail and pigeons, so always hunted them with these.”

~ Issac Layman, arrived 1853

“My husband went up to our claim and broke from twenty-five to forty acres and sowed rutabagas. It was on new breaking and virgin soil land and they grew tremendous. We moved there and bought stock. They seemed never to tire of those turnips and grew very slick and fat on them. We, too, ate them in every form and I thought I had never tasted anything so good.”

~ Mrs. Mary Weeks, arrived 1853

“We built a log cabin with “chinkins” to let in the air. We filled in the cracks except where these chinkins were, with mud. The roof was made by laying popple poles so they met in the middle and fastening them together. Over this we laid a heavy thickness of wild hay and over that the popple poles again well tied with hand twisted ropes of wild hay to those below. It was a

good roof, only it leaked like a sieve. The floor was just the ground. Over it we put a layer of the wild hay and then staked a rag carpet over it.”

~ Mr. Martha Thorne, arrived 1854

“We were much troubled with what the settlers called ‘prairie dig.’ It was a kind of itch that seemed to come from the new land. It made the hands very sore and troublesome. We did everything but could find no cure. The Dakota Sioux were our neighbors and were very friendly. They had not yet learned to drink the white man’s firewater. A squaw came in one day and when she saw how I was suffering, went out and dug a root. She scraped off the outer bark, then cooked the inner bark and rubbed it on my hands. I was cured as if by magic. She buried all parts of the root, so I think it was poison.”

~ Mrs. Thorne

The new New England

The well-heeled elite, dubbed “Yankees,” were often bachelors from prosperous New England families, young men told to go out and make their fortunes. And so, with dynastic intentions, they took a steamboat to that last beacon of civilization on the Upper Mississippi: St. Paul. Their plans were threefold: 1) invest in land, as much and as cheaply as possible; 2) build a respectable house in the town; and 3) send for a well-bred young Eastern acquaintance to journey west and become a frontier bride.

For most settlers, a respectable house meant a log building containing two tiny rooms: an unheated bedroom and a kitchen with a stove that was banked at night. With some extra money, the outside could be lathed and the inside plastered, perhaps an extra bedroom added and a parlor. With a lot of extra money, a mansion could be built. But mansions were not built in District 1. The purchase of land 3 miles from downtown---accessible only by rutted trails that turned to mud in spring and tundra in the long winter---made good Yankee sense only if the buyer thought the price would go up.

Between 1850 and 1880, several thousand New Englanders moved to St. Paul. From the beginning, French-Canadians “had a proper regard for the sharpness of Yankee speculators,” as they called them. Whenever the land offices were open in 1853 and 1854, Frenchman and Yankee stood with shoulders pressed tightly, filling the room to overflow and sometimes engendering fear of a riot.

Go-aheadativeness

The Frontier, a northwest literary magazine printed in Missoula, Montana, described St. Paul during the 1850s as “the fastest and smartest city of its size in the world.”

“You see it in every man, woman and child,” one article effused. “They have the appearance of heroes...property owners here are men who possess the elements of go-aheadativeness in its highest form. Bold, resolute and determined...”

But men, “bold, resolute and determined” were coin of the realm.

If a young man of ability migrates to a country over which no government has yet extended, he finds himself confronted with the solution of large issues. Fundamental and philosophic problems force themselves upon him; he becomes an original thinker himself and finds a virgin field on which to test the experimental creations of his genius.

~ Alexander Ramsey, age 34

One aspect of the American character, in particular, served as the foundation of “go-aheadativeness.” It was, and is, the emphasis on the individual as opposed to the group. The American experience puts great store in the liberty of each person. Tension between one man’s pursuit of happiness and the well-being of the community has always run high in the United States, especially on the frontier.

In 1849 St. Paul incorporated as a town, Ramsey County was established with St. Paul as the county seat, and 3 public schools were set up, initially open to children of all races. In 1851, the momentous land treaty was signed with the Dakota, opening both sides of the river for settlement. Newcomers poured in, spurred by enthusiastic reports in the eastern press. The St. Paul Pioneer enthused, “We behold now clearly the red savages vanishing, and, in their place, a thousand farms, waving wheat fields, villages and cities...” A letter that same year, written in St. Paul by a young woman to her parents, informed them, “There are people from all parts of the world here and still they come in hundreds on every boat. Rent is very high.” Everyone wanted the best land--- before it was gone.”

Patents

Legislation authorizing federal grants specified that the land be divided into townships six-miles square, then subdivided into 36 one-mile square sections, each of which could be subdivided another 36 times. A one-mile square section amounted to approximately 640 acres. The initial survey of the District 1 area was done about 1847 and showed subdivided sections. Before the land could be sold by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, following the initial survey, the law required that it be “patented.” A patent is an instrument by which the U.S. Government conveys public property to an individual. Its first owner could keep the land for himself and his heirs or resell it with a deed as proof of title.

Most of District 1, officially known as “McLean Township No. 28 North, Range No. 22 West of 4th Meridian,” was divided into sections on its first plat map. McLean Township was bounded on the west by a line that became the future McKnight Road. Township 28 land east of the section line that became McKnight Road was excluded. The District 1 sections were: #2, #3, a small part of #4, most of #9, all of #10, #11, #14, most of #15, a small part of #16, about 1/3 of #22, and all of #23. District 1 also contains section #35 of Township 29, Range 22, as well as most of section #34. Township 29 was part of “New Canada” and is the area due north of Township 28.

Today, the I-94 freeway runs through sections 34 and 35 of Township 29, but in the 1850s there were only rutted dirt roads, like Point Douglas, following Indian trails that were hard to traverse even in a heavy wagon or big-wheeled cart. At that time, the land north of District 1 looked much like the land south of it. The Dakota had called the area “White Cliffs.” There were rolling hills and lots of high

prairie grass, “good for haying.” The land had never been tilled and was open for settlement and, as settlers poised to stake their claims, it was \$1.25/acre.

[first plat map showing sections and creeks]

Patent holders

Minnesota land was technically available for sale in 1849. Cheap land, a form of power that can be leveraged in many directions, acted as a magnet, drawing ambitious individualists to places where personality and ability could alter the world in their favor. An individual could make “empty” land into something else: a wheat farm or a pastureland or a commercial enterprise, nurtured over a long period of hard work. Or, the land could be sold immediately for a quick profit in a time of rising prices. Another option was to keep it untouched for a future time in which land had become dear. Once District 1 was open for patent application, land sales began with deeds legally recorded. Much of the land in District 1 was patented and sold for the first time beginning in the fall of 1854 and continuing through 1855. Minnesota was still a territory, local government was still in its infancy, and Washington D.C. was a long way away.

On October 8, French-Canadian Louis Jabatte received a patent for 34 acres in section 15 of Township 28. The French Canadians had staked out their claims in 1841 and held “preemptions,” essentially squatters’ rights. They were awarded patents and formally bought their land in 1854 and 1855 at the going price of \$1.25/acre. There were substantial French-Canadian plots, like that of Charles DeRocher, who bought 55 acres in section 4 in October 1854. Others were small, like the mere 9/10 acre in section 15 purchased by Addis Messenger on October 16, 1855.

Several names appear frequently in the purchase of 40, 80, even 160 acres. Thomas Odell bought numerous parcels. So did George Washington Howard Bell, William Irvine, Amos Widcliff Hall, Thomas B. Campbell, Lydia Griswold Wilder, Peter Perrier, Sydney Decker Jackson and Joseph Lynch. The Irish were well-represented among patentees: Luke McGann, John Devlin, Dennis Ryan, Daniel O’Flynn, Dennis O’Neil, Maurice Thaddeus Murphy, Thomas McNamara, Bernard McCabe. But other nationalities also appear, as well as transplanted Americans from the east, men like Charles Stevens White, Jacob Sturzman, Moses Bixler, Favius Roberts, Bernhard Schulte, Gerhard Henry Blase, Peter Reichelsberger and August Fredrick Korflage.

Henry McKenty bought land in District 1 at \$1.25 an acre. A year later he sold it for \$5/acre.

Thomas Carver, descendent of the explorer Jonathan Carver, became one of the area’s first large-scale farmers in 1852, after acquiring section 13, just outside District 1, on the original plat map of McLean Township 28 North, Range 22, West of the 4th Meridian. Today’s District 1 comprises (roughly) sections 2,3,4,9,10,11,14,15, 16, 22 and 23 of that area.

Carver rode the crest of a boom. The publicity following the Grand Excursion of 1854 brought immigrants eager to buy land, and the cost of real estate soared, interest rates went to the unheard-of

level of 5%, fancy people arrived with “high-stepping horses” and they all wanted to invest in the newly-established city of St. Paul.

But the bluffs of “Highwood Heights” were not St. Paul; they were three miles of dirt/mud/sand from St. Paul city limits. In winter, the river became frozen tundra and cut off communication for long periods. The resulting sense of isolation in the meandering fields and forests drew a certain kind of person.

The majority of transactions occurred on or after August, 1853. The first day of that month saw Pierre Crevier claim and purchase 80 acres in section 11; Georges Cornoyer, 99 acres in one part of section 3 and another 40 acres in another; Charles Mousseau 110 acres in section 4; Francis Denton, James LeForce and Joseph LeForce, 40 acres each in section 14; and Joseph Moshier 24 acres in section 15.

On the Yankee side, Franklin Steele, the brother-in-law of Henry Sibley, came from Pennsylvania to Minnesota as a soldier in 1837 and quickly understood the profits that could be made. He staked the first claim on the east shore of the Mississippi at St. Anthony Falls, understanding that whoever controlled that land controlled half the power of the falls. Among other investments, Steele bought 73 acres of District 1 bottomland on August 1, 1853 in section 15 along Pig’s Eye. On the same day, Charles M. Borup (possibly a son of the “cultivated” Danish doctor, Charles Wulf Borup, a prominent resident in St. Paul from 1849 and the city’s first banker, and his wife, the daughter of a French-Canadian and an Ojibway woman) bought 40 acres in section 10, not far from Steele’s purchase. Also on that day, John Irvine, who arrived in St. Paul from Prairie du Chien in 1843, bought 40 acres with a partner Alpheus G. Fuller, in section 23. John Holton, a farmer from Pennsylvania whose total real estate holdings were valued at \$2,000 in 1850, bought 80 acres in section 23. Taken together, patent holdings in District 1 left most of the land still untouched, as it would remain for decades.

Market timing

1853 through early 1855 was the ideal time to buy, since desirable land was still widely available and the government rate was only \$1.25/acre. But the best land was going fast, and only the first buyer could obtain the government price. After the Grand Excursion in the summer of 1854 revealed to the East the wonders of Minnesota, the rush was on. “Everyone in the Far West is hospitable,” declared one reviewer, while adding that the work required on the frontier left “little time for idle ceremony.”

“A cultured young woman, among [more than] 1000 guests on the Chicago/Rock Island Excursion, enquired about the freshly whitewashed birch/bark trees she saw [along the riverbanks] in St. Paul. A Reception Committee member, without moving a muscle of his eye and in a most meek manner, replied, ‘Lady, those are the virgin muses of the primeval forest.’”
~ From the St. Paul Shopper, a look back by reporter Mark Fitzpatrick in July 1944

Another excursionist was pleased to be “roused to the labors of the day by a boisterous gong---at six in the morning.” Food at the hotel was plentiful: “hot rolls, soaked toast, buckwheat cakes, hominy and iced milk.” Alas, there were spittoons in every dining room, and savages were allowed to roam the streets in garish costume and face paint. But resolution and faith were strong: “The numerous churches are well filled and St. Paul is rather celebrated for a more universal profession of religion than ordinarily characterize[s] western towns.” And the climate was healthy: Alexander Ramsey himself declared the territory free of fevers and ague.

Wild game was abundant, and the landscape serene, except when the low-flying wild pigeons, sweeping down in V-formations, almost touched the bluffs every spring. The timber wolves, howling on a summer's night, kept the deer population to a minimum, but a farmer with a gun handy could pick one off for supper. Paper money was worthless, since only gold was accepted as payment in transactions. Then the Grand Excursion of 1854, with its romantic stories of lush beauty on the Upper Mississippi and great fortunes to be made, brought an influx of additional settlers.

As the land boom continued, prices rising all the way up to the national panic of 1857, the cost of working capital rose to 42% a year. Then, suddenly, cash disappeared, land speculators who had not yet sold out, bankers who had loaned money for speculation, merchants who depended on a general prosperity, settlers who had bought land on a promise to pay at the end of the year---all were ruined. Ramsey County was forced to issue scrip at a time when paper money invited distrust.

“In those days, whenever anyone bought a piece of land, he had to pay for it in gold pieces. A sack of gold was kept in one corner of those 2-room houses and during the day the children played with it and at night the men fondled it as they sat about talking. They thought the sack of gold made up for the hard life.”

~ Recounted in The Pioneer Press, May 1930

In 1854, Henry McKenty purchase several thousand acres of land for \$1.25/acre, including land in District 1, and sold it the next year for \$5/acre.

& Prejudice

Among the many reasons not to come to St. Paul circa 1850 were the following: sudden epidemics of smallpox and cholera, the high risk of trickery in financial transactions, the long months of raw, life-threatening, below-zero cold in the winter, the prohibitive cost of living, especially for food and shelter, and, tragically, the extent of prejudice in everyday encounters outside of one's group.

Hatred of the stranger is humanity's original sin, born of a time when outsiders brought death and disease to ancient clans huddled around a fire. The challenge in washing away such hatred has been met unevenly, or not at all, over millennia in societies around the world.

If you belong to another group, goes the internal argument, and you've just arrived in my vicinity, then you must be considered a grave and present danger to me and my family and the people who are part of my group. Even if you're not a physical danger, I don't want to have to compete with you for resources and employment. Therefore, begone.

It was noticed as an oddity during pioneer days that the French were generally more tolerant of others, their Native American spouses a common feature of life. But if French racism seemed mild in the Americas, the Spanish variety was often virulent, according to accounts at the time, and the Yankee strain varied.

Prejudice often traveled across the sea as part of an immigrant's luggage: class disdain based on education and wealth; old-world resentments and grudges, like the Norwegian distaste for Swedes; anti-Catholicism of the Know Nothing variety; antisemitism in schools, churches, and social structures; and, most prevalent, deep racial animosities born of historic exploitation and the guilt that ensues.

Such malevolence is magnified on a frontier, used as an excuse to vent fear and stress, engrained in children and passed on to children's children. Sometimes, the victims of prejudice, if integrated over subsequent generations, may feel similar prejudice toward more recent arrivals. In the best case scenario, prejudice might subside as groups come together to make common cause and begin to intermarry. In the worst case, if a group is never accepted, the pain becomes a wound that will not heal—in both oppressor and oppressed.

However, even where prejudice persists and even on a frontier, there are usually cultural restraints in play, such as a respect for the rule of law, lines of decency that most people will not cross, the moral imperatives of religion, the common sense of the wisest heads, a concern for a city's reputation beyond the frontier itself, and the idea of being all in this together.

The Pre-emption Act

In 1841, Congress had passed a bill allowing settlers to claim land before it was put up for sale by the government, sort of a squatter's rights permit. But the privilege was restricted. All a *white man* had to do to exercise the privilege of preemption was to put stakes in the ground defining the location of his land, build some sort of shanty or cabin on it and file a preemption claim. (In rare instances, a widowed or otherwise single woman who could prove "head of family" status was allowed to preempt a claim.) The Pre-emption Act rewarded individuals who got there first. In District 1, those individuals were French-Canadian.

The Territory of Minnesota needed as many citizens as it could muster, so any mixed blood man who wore trousers and otherwise acted white was considered eligible for the rights of citizenship, even though, as tongues wagged, many of them were "not really white." Prominent "half-breed" citizens argued vehemently that character and culture should matter more than race, but "really white" people disagreed.

Pioneers were often blunt in their assessments. A white woman, Mrs. Caleb Dorr, spoke in her later years about an encounter with "a numbers of Red River cart men" at a gathering. "As they were part Indian and part white, I looked down on them," she recalled, "One of them challenged me to see who could dance the longest. I would not let him win on account of his color, so danced until my teeth rattled and I saw stars."

~ from Old Rail Fence Corners: Frontier Tales told by Minnesota Pioneers

The Irish

Considered troublesome, and an exception to the "white" of "white supremacy," were the Irish who settled in St. Paul. Commonly regarded as "rough-mannered heavy drinkers," they suffered frequent insult regarding their religion, their poverty, their lack of formal training in skilled professions, their illiteracy, and, in general, their financial desperation.

According to the 1850 census, greater than half worked as unskilled laborers, often in the construction trade, warehousing or menial jobs downtown. Their numbers kept increasing as young men and women were driven out of Ireland by the Great Potato Famine. A majority remained on the east coast, eking out a living as best they good in unwelcoming port cities, but some ventured west where they hoped not to see so many "Irish need not apply" signs.

They arrived without much money and during the territorial years found little opportunity to make enough to better themselves. The Irish were generally considered as poor as French Canadian families and as subject to outspoken disdain. “My mission is among the dirty little ragged Canadian and Irish boys,” wrote a St. Paul seminarian in 1852. “To take charge of these impudent and insulting children of unthankful parents was the greatest mortification I ever underwent.”

Governor Alexander Ramsey and the area’s first teacher, Harriet Bishop, openly worried that Irish Catholicism would undermine the “Protestant ethic” meaning the Presbyterian ethic, so dear to the first families of St. Paul. Miss Bishop was also concerned that her Sunday School, which led to the establishment of the First Baptist Church, lacked students because Catholic children were told by their “Romish priests”---and “emissaries of Papacy”---to “avoid [her school], as a pestilence.”

Most of all, she abhorred “the bottle” for its nefarious effects on all ethnic groups, especially the Irish, and worked hard with such leaders as Alexander Ramsey and Edward Duffield Neill to legally enforce temperance.

White Supremacy

The idea of “white supremacy” was widespread among white settlers and encompassed a social pecking order that passed from each generation to its successor. According to St. Paul historian Henry A. Castle, writing shortly before the outbreak of the World War I, the “superior” immigrants were the “old” ones, i.e. the first to arrive, people from England, Germany, France, the Scandinavian countries, Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland. He called them “welcome kinsmen from northwestern Europe, whose transition [to American culture] was readily accomplished.” More troublesome to Castle were the later “inferior” immigrants, such as the Irish, or the largely unskilled, usually illiterate workers from southern and eastern Europe and Russia, often men who came first without family, leaving wives and children back in the old country and sending them as much of their American wages as they could until there was enough for them to make the journey. At the bottom of the social totem pole were native Americans and black people, free and slave.

Whether alone or in groups, blacks came up the river looking for any kind of work to survive. Since the Irish were mostly unskilled jobseekers, they saw the incursion of blacks as unwanted competition with a depressive effect on wages. In 1850, there were only 39 free blacks in the entire territory of Minnesota, which at that time included lands that would later become North and South Dakota.

But, as threats and rumors of war grew, more escaped slavery and found their way up the river every year. Irish laborers monitored the boat landings and sometimes rioted as black men appeared with Southern masters on vacation, as servants to military officers at Fort Snelling or as fugitives seeking freedom. Racial tensions grew everywhere as the nation argued the issue of slavery. In 1854, Minnesota’s Territorial legislature defeated a proposal to require “all persons of negro blood to give bond of \$300 to \$500 as a guarantee of good behavior.” The rejection of the proposed law did not change attitudes. Macalester professor Early Spangler described the black population as “physically present, politically an issue and morally a problem.”

Democrats charged that there was a secret Republican plot to gain suffrage for Negroes and thereby steal control of state and national political office. In 1863, as the Civil War raged, newspapers reported that 125 Negroes and 150 mules had just arrived in St. Paul. Shortly afterward, reporters observed that 218 more Negroes had arrived. A contingent of black men who had hopped onto a boatload of plowshares headed for St. Paul was met at the dock by Irish workers armed with clubs.

Birthday present

At the time of statehood, on May 11, 1858, Minnesota received a birthday gift from the federal government: title to all overflow or swamplands within its borders. There was only one string attached, namely that the proceeds of sale of these lands be used to make them arable. The state of Minnesota, in turn, decided to grant most of the watery land to railroad companies, since presumably the railroads would have an interest in making the property dry and useful for their own purposes and would increase the prosperity of the state by building railroad networks that would bring in thousands more of the industrious people who had already arrived. Thus did a remodeled landscape emerge in District 1: the original Native Americans were (almost) gone, white settlers were building farmhouses and putting the first shovel into soil (though much of the land remained untouched), there was talk of the railroad coming and many saw the glimmer of a marvelous new prosperity.