

THE HISTORY OF
TWO FAMILIES
AND THEIR
TIMES



CHAPTER SEVEN

MINNESOTA -- A LAND TO BE SETTLED ?

OR A LAND TO BE CONQUERED ?

A Place of Radical Change

What was it like when the Nelsons (Nilssons) and Chilstroms (Kjöllerströms) arrived in Minnesota?

In short, it can be said that two decades -- the 1850s and 1860s -- brought unimaginable change to this place and to the native Indians who had lived there for centuries . Though his people lived in the far West, Chief Seattle expressed the relationship of the Native people toward the land in words that are as relevant today as they were a century and a half ago:

This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.

While the Mid-West and the future Minnesota had undergone many changes over the millennia, including the icy glaciers that remade the landscape, nothing compared to what happened after



March 1849, the month when the U.S. Congress passed a bill creating “The Minnesota Territory,” an area that included not only what we now know as the State of Minnesota, but also all of the land east of the Missouri River in what is now part of North and South Dakota. There were less than 5,000 Europeans on the Territory at the time. By 1858, when Minnesota became a state, the population of European-background people had burgeoned to 150,000 -- 25 times what it had been only eight years earlier. In “O River, Remember” Martha Ostenson captures the transformation in a single paragraph:

The long grass, veering slowly away from the plowshare, sighed over and fell forever, and the earth came to dark and vivid life, the black top-soil breathing out toward the luminous arch of the sky its naked amazement. Thereupon the setting sun took the ragged, inky scars in the earth and joined them with the image of the oxen, the plow, and the man. All, now, were one.

The Native Americans

I've discovered that I can't understand my own people who came to Minnesota in the 1850s unless I understand those they displaced. For at least 10,000 years these native peoples had lived here. The Indian tribes evolved over time, fought over territories and established boundaries between themselves. Like their counterparts in Wisconsin, they were known in the north and eastern parts of the Minnesota Territory as "*The Woodland People*." Like them, many buried their dead in mounds of various sizes, some as long as 50 feet and 4-5 feet high. They organized as bands, made up of individual families; as clans, consisting of extended relatives; and as tribes, linking together the clans. Contrary to common assumption, the tribes were highly organized and politically autonomous.

They lived off the land, hunting for wild game and harvesting wild rice. In the far west, along the Minnesota, Red and Missouri Rivers, the Dakota or Sioux, as they were also known, developed agricultural practices, raising corn, beans and squash as early as the 1500s. Barbara Handy-Marchello captures the difference in perspective between the native Americans and their new neighbors:

For Indians, the land's value lay in its grass, which supplied food for deer, elk, bison, and horses as well as prairie turnips, wild fruits, and other plants for people to harvest. Europeans and Yankee settlers, however, believed the land's greatest potential could be released only by breaking it open with plow and planting in it the seeds of domesticated grasses.

"Women of the Northern Plains" p. 20

By the 1840s there were two major tribes in the Minnesota Territory: the Ojibwa or Chippewa in the north with about 5,000 members and the Dakota or Sioux in the central, west and south who numbered some 22,000. Combined with some smaller tribes, the Indian population is estimated to have been about 32,000. (The origin of the name "Indian" is uncertain. Some think it originated with Columbus when he landed in the West Indies and erroneously assumed he had reached "India." Another speculation is that the word comes from the Spanish "In Dios" -- the "Children of God.")

For at last 200 years before my people came to Minnesota there had been a vigorous fur trading business going on between the Indians and, especially, the French. The two peoples lived together peacefully. Many fur traders married Indian women. Some of the children of these mixed-marriages were incorporated into the Indian tribal community. Others, especially if the father was a wealthy fur trader, would be sent off to school in the east and would often return to take key positions in the fur trading business. Because of their unique mixed-blood coloring, the

children of these marriages were often referred to by the term *chicot* which meant “half-burnt stump.” Though figures vary, it is estimated that in the 1840s one of every seven Indians was a *chicot*.

Broken Treaties

In the beginning large areas were set aside for the Indians. The “Northwest Ordinance” of 1787 declared that

The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent.

In “His Excellency,” a biography on the life of George Washington Joseph Ellis writes that our first president’s vision was that huge areas of the frontier would be set aside for the Native Americans. But these visions, as well as the agreements were soon forgotten. Treaties were ignored. Wild enthusiasm to settle the land with newcomers overtook all sane and compassionate treatment of those who had lived here for centuries.



In the Midwest one of the worst crimes against the Indians was the Treaty of Traverse de Sioux (pictured at left), signed near St. Peter, Minnesota. (Where we now live for part of each year.) Minnesota historian Newton H. Winchell puts things into perspective:

From beginning to end -- the tactics used to get the Indians to accept the treaties in the first place, the bad faith of the [U.S.] Senate in amending them, the devices employed to force the Indians to accept the amendments, the whole nefarious business of the traders’ paper -- it was a thoroughly sordid affair,

equal in infamy to anything else in the long history of injustices perpetuated upon the Indians.

Frederick Johnson; “Goodhue County”; p. 29

Another example is what happened in the southern part of Minnesota. That area was not supposed to be occupied until 1853, a year after it had been purchased from the Dakota Tribes. But, as Rhoda Gilman describes it:

The tide could not be held back. As soon as the signing of the treaties had been announced late in 1852, a flood of trespassers surged onto Indian land.... The newcomers



hastened the departure of lingering Dakota neighbors by torching their bark houses that stood in the way.

“Minnesota History” p. 164

The Lure of the “New” Land

Amid all this ill treatment of the native peoples, the new Europeans and earlier residents of eastern U.S. were being encouraged to come to settle the land. In 1854 the North-Western Democrat heralded this announcement:

Come on then; there is plenty of room -- good prairie, good timber, good water and everything that an industrious and reasonable man could consider valuable, here awaits the careworn stranger from other parts of the world.

The Grand Excursion

It was also in 1854 that an event took place that fired the imagination of the whole country. With the completion of the rail line from Chicago to Rock Island, Illinois it was decided that a great promotional event was in order. It was called the “Grand Excursion”, a flotilla of five large riverboats that would steam up the Mississippi from Rock Island to St. Paul. Headed by former president Fillmore, 1200 travelers boarded the boats that reached St. Paul on June 8. The event was publicized far and wide.

The Chicago Tribune published this interesting note:

One of our party...had brought with him a bottle filled with water taken from the Atlantic Ocean. The contents of this bottle, with appropriate ceremonies, was emptied into the river, just below the Falls of St. Anthony, and thus the waters of the Atlantic and Mississippi were at length mingled together.

A Flood of Immigrants

In 1855 steamboat traffic to the upper Mississippi doubled. Like a tide moving upstream, washing over its banks and flooding the surrounding landscape, immigrants swarmed into the new land. In 1858, the year Minnesota became a state, more than a thousand boatloads of people and goods came to St. Paul. Prosperous folks from other parts of the U.S. came to the area to view its beauty and vacation in the new territory. The steamboats had provisions for the wealthy as well as simpler quarters for poor immigrants.

Rhoda Gilman describes the thirst of the new settlers for land:

Thousands of people were waiting for that land. There were those who lived on the rocky farms in New England and other eastern states. They dreamed of getting a new start in the West. And there were people in countries like Germany, and Sweden and Ireland who had no land at all. They were willing to leave friends and

country to make the long, risky trip to a strange place -- if it meant they could have a farm for themselves and their children. To people already living in towns like Stillwater and St. Paul, new settlers meant more business and more money for all of Minnesota.

“The Story of Minnesota’s Past” p. 93



Riverboats docked at St. Paul, 1850s.

Just as flyers and newspapers had attracted Swedes to come to Wisconsin, so those same inflated invitations flooded Sweden and other parts of the United States. Fredrika Bremer, a well-known writer in Sweden, visited Minnesota in 1850 and predicted that Minnesota would one day be

... a glorious new Scandinavia.... Here the Swede would again find his clear, romantic lakes. The plains of Scania rich in corn, and the valleys of Norland.... The climate, the situation, the character of the scenery agrees with our people better than any other of the American states, and none of them appears to have a greater or more beautiful future before them than Minnesota.

“Homes of the New World”

In his book “The Land Lies Open” Theodore Blegen cites a poem that was distributed widely:

*We have room for all creation,
And our banner is unfurled,
With a general invitation
To the people of the world.
Then come along, come along, make no delay,
Come from every nation, come from every way;
Our lands they are broad enough, don't feel alarm,
For Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm.*

p. 113

Then there were the so-called “American Letters.” These were the letters sent back to Sweden by those who had come to America. Though not all were glowing with optimism, the general tone of the letters gave a very positive view of life in the new land. These letters were circulated widely in Sweden and became another “pull” factor in encouraging Swedes to cross the ocean and come to Minnesota. By 1850 foreign born people made up more than 30% of the Minnesota population. Germans were the largest group, followed by Irish, Norwegians and then the Swedes.

The Railroads

The Civil War delayed construction of railroads in Minnesota. Just as river traffic spurred the initial settlement of Minnesota, land grants for the railroads was the most powerful impetus for settlement of the wilderness in the 1860s. The rail companies were given alternate sections of land up to ten miles on each side of the track. When the land increased in value with the coming of settlers, the income from land sales was more than enough to finance construction.

The railroads connected Minnesota with the East Coast, opening the way for people in that part of the country to claim land in the new territory. The railroads actively encouraged people to settle along the rail lines. Along with the passengers came lumber to build their homes. And as they settled and began to raise more crops than they could use for themselves, they now had an efficient way to sell their grain and other products to markets in St. Anthony (later Minneapolis) and to the East. The railroads offered that conduit for them. Hans Mattson served as an agent for several rail companies and actively recruited Swedes to settle along the line that led from Minneapolis to Willmar and beyond.

The Chilstroms (Kjöllerströms) and Nelsons (Nilssons)

Among the throngs who came to Minnesota in the 1850s were two poor Swedish couples and their children. Magnus and Katrina Chilstrom (Kjöllerström) and John and Christina Nelson (Nilsson) would become the seed for hundreds of descendants. Until now, the lives of these two families had been intertwined, possibly beginning in Sweden and then certainly in Waukesha, Wisconsin. Now they will separate for a few years as they come to Minnesota.

First, we'll follow the unexpected path of the Chilstroms (Kjöllerströms) to Morristown, MN. Then we'll pick up the story of their reunion with the Nelsons (Nilssons) near present day Willmar and Spicer, MN. And then their flight to Goodhue County in southeastern MN during the Great Sioux Uprising.

No Clear Answer

I began this chapter with two questions: "Minnesota -- A Land to be Settled? Or a Land to be Conquered?" As you will see in what follows, there is no clear and certain conclusion. It is both, depending on whose eyes we look through for an answer.