



# Minnesota's Heritage

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**Frontier Fears: The Clash of Dakotas and Whites in the Newspapers of Mankato, 1863–1865**

**Ba Be Wab: Substitute Solder, Minnesota Ojibwe**

**Captives Freed at Camp Release**

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# What a Difference a Year Can Make: Henry David Thoreau and the Grand Pleasure Excursion of 1861

**GRAND PLEASURE EXCURSION**  
**To the Sioux Agency.**  
THE TWO STEAMERS,  
**FRANK STEELE, Capt. HATCHER,**  
**FAVORITE, Capt. BELL,**  
Of Davidson's Line, will make an excursion trip to the  
**LOWER SIOUX AGENCY,**  
**ON MONDAY, THE 17TH DAY OF JUNE,**  
**LEAVING ST. PAUL AT 4 P. M.**  
And arriving at the Agency in time to  
**Witness the Payments,**  
**WHICH WILL COME OFF ON THE 19TH AND 20TH.**  
This will afford a good opportunity to persons wish-  
ing to visit this  
**SPLENDID REGION OF COUNTRY,**  
And of witnessing the ceremonies of the payment of  
nearly **FIVE THOUSAND INDIANS.**  
Staterooms can be secured of **TEMPLE & BEAUFRE,**  
Agents, on the **Levee.** Je9-dtd

*Corinne Hosfeld Smith*

Just one year before the embittered battles broke out between the Dakota and the white settlers on the plains, the Minnesota River played host to a very different scene. It was instead one filled with gaiety, music, food, and adventure. Participants included the state governor, various politicians, two dozen Union Army prospects, a few Englishmen, and among others, two travelers from Massachusetts: Henry David Thoreau and Horace Mann, Jr. The assemblage was a diverse grouping of personalities with widely varied backgrounds.

The occasion was billed as a "Grand Pleasure Excursion." Two steamboats had been hired to cruise up the Minnesota River from Saint Paul to the Lower Sioux Agency at Redwood. Passengers could accompany state and federal officials as they distributed the annuity payments to the Dakota, following the terms of the Treaty of

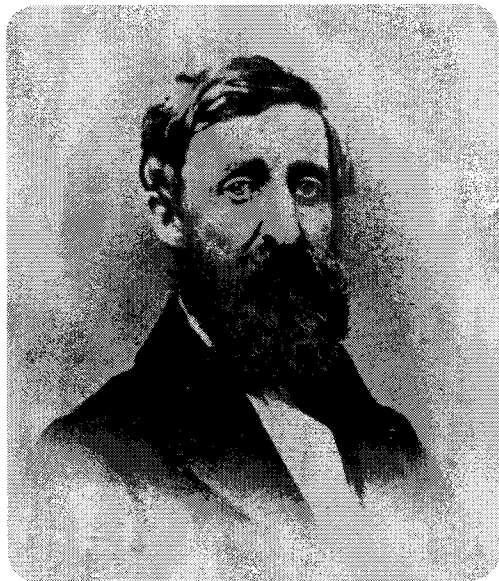
Traverse des Sioux and the Treaty of Mendota. A few years earlier, those agreements had transferred the ownership of almost 24 million acres of Dakota land to the territory of Minnesota, helping it to become the 32nd state in 1858. Members of the Mdewakanton and Wahpekute bands were due to receive a few dollars each year in return.

By the time this excursion was publicized, the states—"united" no longer—had been at war for two months. The telegraph had already brought news of the first sizable battle at Big Bethel in southeastern Virginia on June 10. The Confederates came out ahead that day, tallying fewer deaths and casualties. The details seemed to indicate much confusion among the troops, especially on the Union side. Some of their soldiers had been dressed in gray and had thus attracted what would later be called "friendly fire" from Union guns.

The 1861 "Grand Pleasure Excursion" was advertised in Saint Paul's *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat* of June 28, 1861. From the author's collection.

The report could not instill much confidence in Northern residents. It looked as though the struggle down south would not be quickly resolved. But at least it could be temporarily forgotten by the diversion of a pleasant riverboat trip.

Although the newspaper promotions did not disclose the organizers behind the excursion, the number and caliber of authority figures on board indicate at least some involvement by the governor's office. The generous prediction of seeing "nearly five thousand Indians" resulted in dozens of interested customers who were willing to come up with ten dollars to pay for the round-trip opportunity. The timing was right to attract the attention of two New England men who were wrapping up their third week of sight-seeing in Minnesota.



Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) and Horace Mann, Jr. (1844–1868) participated in the Grand Pleasure Excursion. Both courtesy Concord Free Public Library.

Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau may now be best known for choosing to live "deliberately" for two years in a small house perched at the edge of Walden Pond. Some will remember that he also spent a night in jail for non-payment of taxes. Still others may admire his pithy and quotable philosophies. The notions of following different drummers and marching confidently in the direction of one's dreams have helped to seal this author's literary reputation. Back in 1861, however, he had not yet gained widespread fame, even though his book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* had gotten some positive response when it was released in 1854. He and his traveling companion, seventeen-year-old Horace Mann, Jr. (son of the esteemed educator and a young neighbor with scientific interests) were able to embark on a "Journey West" in relative anonymity.

During the previous winter, Thoreau had caught a cold that further aggravated his symptoms of consumption (tuberculosis). Since medical knowledge of the

disease was then limited, his doctor recommended a trip to a different climate as a curative measure. With the uncertainty that the war had brought, it would have been inadvisable for a Northerner to travel anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon line merely in search of warm, moist air. Thoreau chose Minnesota as his recuperative destination. He may have done so not only to follow his doctor's orders, but also to finally realize his last chance to "Go West." Each one of his closest hometown friends—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and William Ellery Channing—had already visited the American Midwest.

Thoreau and young Horace Mann left Concord on May 11, 1861. They used the railroad to cross portions of Massachusetts, New York, Canada West, Michigan, and Illinois. Along the way, they spent extra time at Niagara Falls and in Chicago. When the rails ended at the Mississippi River, they boarded the steamboat *Itasca* and headed upriver. The craft docked at Saint Paul in the wee hours of May 26. The men spent about ten days exploring the prairie around the settlement of Saint Anthony, then moved to a boarding house along the Lake Calhoun shoreline on June 5. It was there that they heard or read about the upcoming Grand Pleasure Excursion. On Friday, June 14, the men took a stagecoach back to Saint Anthony and in turn, back to Saint Paul. They checked into the Merchants Hotel at Third and Jackson Streets and did some local touring as they waited for the river excursion to begin.

By this point in their journey, Thoreau and Mann were accustomed to "botanizing" at every opportunity. Horace had brought along his shotgun in order to collect animal specimens, in the tradition of the scientists of the day. Thoreau was prepared with his spyglass, his plant press, a few botanic manuals, and a 100-page field notebook for jotting down species names and for recording unusual sightings. He had already made dozens of observations and had created original lists of Midwestern flora and fauna. Both men also wrote letters home to let their friends

and relatives know that they were doing well, in spite of the strife down south and despite Thoreau's persistent illness.

Henry Thoreau had long fostered a fascination with Native Americans. He kept nearly a dozen journals designated as "Indian books," filled with passages he had copied from references he had read. His own interactions with such natives had been limited. He met a few individuals in eastern Massachusetts and in Maine; but those encounters had been rare and were generally with select members of the tribes. Now that he and Horace were on a western journey, they could see real Indians in their native environment, or at least, what was left of it. Having an opportunity to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Dakota was certainly one reason why the men joined the excursion.

If they had known more about the logistics of the endeavor, they might have had a few second thoughts. The Minnesota River meanders across the plains in many tight curves. Steamboat passengers could be frustrated by the circumstances the serpentine configuration caused. "The river . . . is distressingly crooked," wrote one early reporter. "Sometimes we go 6 to 15 miles to achieve one; and so frequent and aggravated are the ox-bows that we pass every house on four sides at least."<sup>1</sup>

The river is also dependent upon snowmelt and springtime flooding to create sizable depth. When steamboat excursions became popular in the 1850s, their captains learned that the earlier they could travel in the season, the better. In good years, river traffic could begin in March and last until the middle of summer. After that point, however, the chances of grounding a boat on a sandbar or an exposed snag increased significantly. Passenger and freight transportation on the Minnesota River would diminish until both finally had to be curtailed for the rest of the year. Only another winter could replenish the waterway.

The spring of 1861 had been a wet one. The Minnesota River "opened with a big flood."<sup>2</sup> The first steamboat to try her out was the *Albany*,

which reached Mankato on April 1. During the next two months, several companies sent boats steaming up and down the river. But the water level began to drop dramatically as time went by. The river was said to have "fallen some twelve inches" during the week before the Grand Pleasure Excursion was scheduled to launch.<sup>3</sup> If that statement was even partly true, then the success of the trip could be in question.

The *Frank Steele* was a side-wheeled steam packet that had been built in Kentucky in 1857. This was the fifth year that the boat had been on the Minnesota, and it was Captain N.B. Hatcher's second year on the river. He was no doubt aware of the risks of taking a steamboat all the way to Redwood this late in the season. The excursion had been widely advertised as a flotilla consisting of two steamboats, but someone made the decision to take just the single, larger boat. Perhaps ticket sales weren't as brisk as had been initially expected. Perhaps Hatcher issued his own ruling before the trip began.

The *Frank Steele* left Saint Paul on the afternoon of Monday, June 17, and began to steam up the Minnesota River. The Lower Sioux Agency in Redwood was 200 miles away by water. On board with Thoreau and Mann were some local celebrities. Most notable were Governor Alexander Ramsey and his wife, Anna Earl (Jenks) Ramsey. Additional politicians included Indian agent Thomas J. Galbraith, who was in his first month of work in that position; U.S. District Attorney George A. Nourse; Jared Benson of Anoka, who was then Speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives; and Alfred B. Brackett, Deputy Sheriff of Ramsey County. Four or five Englishmen—described by one observer as "well-behaved Cockneys"—went along for the ride.<sup>4</sup> About 25 "painfully dirty" Army volunteers were headed for Fort Ridgely.<sup>5</sup> At least 25–30 ladies were also in attendance. In all, the steamboat had around 100 passengers when it shoved off from Saint Paul, and the decks were

rather crowded from the beginning. But each time the boat stopped at a town, more people came aboard, and no one left in return. "It is a small boat," wrote Horace, "so that a great many of [the passengers] have to sleep wherever they can around on chairs, or on the floor, or on trunks, etc."<sup>6</sup> One estimate logged the riverboat's eventual load at 200 people.

Thoreau and Mann were lucky enough to have landed a stateroom. Those spaces were private but small. Everyone shared communal washing facilities, courtesy of the onboard barber shop. The crew provided three meals a day; but according to one customer, the food was "greasy and badly cooked."<sup>7</sup> Thoreau noted the presence of "a small cannon for salutes, & the money for the Indians (aye, and the gamblers, it was said, who were to bring it back in another boat)."<sup>8</sup> The promoters had also guaranteed live musical entertainment. "The Great Western Band will go up on the *Steele* and all can exercise themselves in dancing on the way, and be amused at the way the Indians do it when they arrive at Redwood."<sup>9</sup> With a saloon that took up most of the space on its first floor, the *Frank Steele* must have exuded a real party-boat atmosphere.

By 9 p.m., the steamboat reached the town of Shakopee. Twelve hours later—Tuesday morning at 9 a.m.—it was at Henderson. It took another twelve hours to reach Mankato. Progress was painfully slow, as Captain Hatcher and his crew steered the *Frank Steele* around the curves and made an attempt to avoid numerous snags in the water. Henry Thoreau later wrote about their challenges in an extensive letter to Concordian Frank Sanborn:

This is eminently *the* river of Minnesota, for she shares the Mississippi with Wisconsin, and it is of incalculable value to her. It flows through a very fertile country, destined to be famous for its wheat; but it is a remarkably winding stream, so that Redwood is only half as far from its mouth by land as by water. There was not a straight reach a mile in

