

**THE TRANSITION OF A TYPICAL
FRONTIER, WITH
ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE LIFE
OF HENRY HASTINGS SIBLEY**

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The Transition of a Typical Frontier, with Illustrations from the Life of Henry Hastings Sibley
by Wilson Porter Shortridge

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WILSON PORTER SHORTRIDGE

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The Transition of a Typical Frontier

with illustrations from

The Life of Henry Hastings Sibley,
Fur Trader, First Delegate in Congress from Minnesota Territory,
and First Governor of the State of Minnesota

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PREFACE

This account of frontier transition is a study in the history of the West. If the West be thought of as a period rather than a place, then the study of a limited area which passed through the successive stages in the evolution of society on the frontier should be typical of what was repeated over and over again in the conquest and settlement of the continent. And, in the same way, if a study be made of an individual who lived through and participated in, or at least witnessed, the various steps vivid illustrations of the significant features of the westward movement may be found. In the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century that part of the upper Mississippi Valley which became Minnesota passed through the evolution of society from frontier to statehood, and the most prominent man in that region during the period was Henry Hastings Sibley, fur trader, first delegate in Congress from Minnesota Territory, and first governor of the State of Minnesota. This region and this individual have been selected, therefore, as types in this study of frontier transition.

The Sibley family furnishes a good illustration of the migration of the New England element of our population. The story of this family takes its beginning in Old England, going back through the centuries almost, if not quite, to the time of the Norman Conquest. After picking up the threads of the story in England, certain members of the family will be followed across the Atlantic to the shores of New England, to what may be called the first American West. From New England the story will follow along the trail that leads to the first real American West, the region beyond the Alleghanies, first to Marietta and then to Detroit. In particular, this study will follow the fortunes of a younger son of the Sibley family in Detroit from his boyhood home to the Indian country of the upper Mississippi, where he lived through the successive

changes from fur traders' frontier, through territorial days and into statehood. Three different times did representatives of this family migrate to a newer American West and live through this evolution of society. Constant attention has been given in this study to the phases of development that were typical of what has taken place in different parts of the country. The problems confronting the settlers in new areas were more or less similar, and this makes possible a type study of this nature. The story of this family also illustrates the fact that, as a general rule, each area was settled by people who were born in an adjoining region, or an older region, to the East. Sometimes certain individuals or certain classes drifted along with the frontier, but the more ambitious pioneers went farther west to get a start in life, settled down, and waited for the later waves of civilization to overtake them. It is a very significant fact in the history of the West that one could go as a young man into a new region, as Sibley went into the upper Mississippi country, and live to see that region a settled area with a civilization and conveniences equal to those found in the older communities in the East, and it is still more striking that this change should have taken place in time for that same individual to be able to enjoy for many years the conveniences of city life. By centering our attention on a given region during the lifetime of a single individual it is possible, therefore, to see the various changes that came in rapid succession in the history of the West.

The material upon which this study is based is indicated in the chapter on bibliography, but special mention might be made of the Sibley and Ramsey Papers. This material consists of several thousand papers, chiefly correspondence, of the two men most prominent in the making of Minnesota. Sibley carefully preserved letters and papers from the time he first came to Minnesota and, after his death, most of these were turned over to the Minnesota Historical Society. They contain much valuable material on the early history of Minnesota and cover the period from 1830 to 1890. Since most of the correspondence

mentioned in this study has been taken from the Sibley Papers it will be assumed, unless direct reference is given to the contrary, that the material in question is found in them. The Ramsey Papers, while not so extensive as the Sibley Papers, also contain much valuable material, particularly on Indian relations and early politics. Many of Sibley's letters are found here. The Minnesota Historical Society has a very valuable collection of newspapers published in Minnesota, dating from the very year that the territory was organized, and these files have been used in gathering material for this study.

Since this work has grown out of the author's study of the history of the West, several friends have aided either directly or indirectly in its preparation. The author's interest in the history of the West was first aroused in the classes and seminary of Professor Frederick J. Turner, at the University of Wisconsin in 1909 and 1910, and the work was later continued under Professor Solon J. Buck, at the University of Minnesota. Especially the author desires to acknowledge his deep indebtedness to Professor Buck for the encouragement and valuable assistance which he freely gave at all stages in the preparation and publication of this work. Every chapter in the original dissertation was gone over with Professor Buck, and his criticisms and suggestions helped the author to avoid many errors which otherwise would have appeared. It is not assumed, however, that even so mistakes did not creep in, and for all of these the author assumes full responsibility. Acknowledgments are also due and are gladly given to the several assistants in the Minnesota Historical Society, and especially to those in the manuscript department, for the help which they gave. Entire justice in making acknowledgments would not be done without a statement as to the interest manifested in the author's work by Professor August C. Krey, of the University of Minnesota, whose encouragement helped the author over many hard places.

W. P. S.

University of Louisville
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