A BRIEF OUTLINE OF WISCONSIN HISTORY

DR. JOSEPH SCHAFFER

The geologist, to whom a thousand years are but a day, tells us that Wisconsin is about fifteen million years old. But there is an older, mountainous formation in the north and a newer plain land in the south. The mountains, however, in the course of ages have been so denuded and worn down by erosion as to be now nearly a plain also, or what the geologist calls a peneplain. All portions of the land mass, except one, were modified by the invasions of the glacial ice sheet. The exception is a region in the southwestern and western parts of the state which, because it is pure erosion country, is known as the driftless area. The counties of Lafayette, Iowa, Grant, Crawford, Richland, Vernon, La Crosse, and Trempealeau, and parts of Buffalo, Jackson, Monroe, Sauk, Dane, and Green lie within that area. The driftless area is hilly, usually with deep level-floored valleys; the balance of the state, though agreeably diversified in its topography, is on the whole generally plain land, but rather rolling than level. The main watershed of the state trends north and south, with the Wisconsin, which is the master stream, and the Black, the Chippewa, and the St. Croix in the north, also the Rock River in the south, falling into the Mississippi; the Wolf-Fox system and numerous smaller streams fall into Lake Michigan. A subordinate east and west watershed in the far northwest divides the waters flowing into the Mississippi from the short swift streams entering Lake Superior. All sections of the state, save the driftless area, have lakes, but these are surprisingly numerous near the sources of the Wisconsin, in Oneida and Vilas counties, and along the course of the St. Croix River. Practically all are of glacial origin.

The mountain land, now the great northern peneplain, together with considerable areas of the crescentic plain adjoining it on the south, east, and west, was once heavily timbered, largely with conifers. This has been the lumbering region, par excellence, though other parts of the state, both in the southeast and in the southwest, had plenty of timber for the uses of the white settlers when they began to come in. Some portions of southern Wisconsin, however, were nearly destitute of timber save along the water courses. These were the "prairies" which seemed so bleak to the pioneers but proved exceedingly rich farming lands. Vast deposits of copper and iron ore are found in the archean rocks of the northern peneplain, while the galena limestone formation, in the south and southwest, is the source of the lead and zinc deposits for which Wisconsin, with adjacent parts of Illinois and Iowa, has long been famous.

The Primitive Human Background

Space will not permit an attempt to give an account of prehistoric man in Wisconsin, though very much of interest has been collected on that subject. From the advent of white men in the region, of whom the Frenchman Jean Nicolet, in 1634, was the first, the Indian life was modified by two great influences. (a) The first of these was the wars carried on beyond the eastern frontier, and sometimes in the territory itself, by the Iroquis Indians of western New York, who drove the Hurons and Ottowas into Wisconsin, also probably the Sauks and Foxes, and the Pottawatomies; while the Sioux on the upper Mississippi invaded from the west.
These combined pressures tended to concentrate the Wisconsin tribes, in historic times, along the great water-way of the state, the Fox-Green Bay and Wisconsin line, which gave safety from enemies by providing a way of escape under almost any circumstances. This distribution of the tribes also facilitated the work of the French missionaries who followed, as friends and protectors, the refugee bands of Hurons fleeing from the Iroquois enemy. (b) The Indian trade\(^1\) which was begun by the French and carried on by them at first through negotiation for furs to be brought to

Montreal, later through trading establishments placed at strategic points in the country itself. It was continued largely under a French personnel till the end of the fur-trading period, about 1834, although in 1763 the British took official control of the country and in 1783 it passed technically under the government of the United States. While British companies clung to the trade of the country for some years, and the American Fur Company later claimed its profits, it was mainly French-Canadian trappers and rivermen and also largely French traders who dealt at first-hand with the Indians. And it was the French-Canadians who formed the little trading col-

DISTRIBUTION OF RURAL POPULATION, 1830, ILLINOIS, INDIANA, OHIO, SOUTHERN MICHIGAN AND SOUTHERN WISCONSIN


onies at Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, and other points in the state which gave so picturesque a feature to early Wisconsin history and, on the entrance of the settlers from New England, made the first of our “race” questions. This trade brought the native tribes under the domination of white men, moderated their warlike spirit, and disintegrated their organization for offensive action. The absence of Indian wars, when white settlers entered—except the insignificant Black Hawk War—is largely attributable to the Indian trade carried on for two centuries by the tactful French. A pleasing reminder of the French régime in Wisconsin is the prevalence of musical French place names, rather numerous interspersed with names having an Indian origin and the more common English names.

Thwaites, R. G. Wisconsin, Preface.
American Beginnings

The fur trade, "managed by Americans but almost wholly manned by French" continued the principal industry of Wisconsin till 1834. In that year land offices were opened at Green Bay and at Mineral Point, and settlers began to pour in through the port at Milwaukee, also by way of Chicago, up the Mississippi, and overland from the settled parts of Illinois, Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio.

Wisconsin was so late in settling because the earlier westward migration had been largely directed and controlled by the Ohio River. The Erie Canal, opened in 1825, made a new line of emigration from the north-east, and in a few years northern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and also southern Michigan were receiving their thousands of immigrants yearly. Only the lead region in the south and southwest of our state had received considerable numbers before the Black Hawk War in 1832. That event, preceded and followed by Indian land cessions, opened the entire southern port-

---

3 Thwaites, R. G. Wisconsin, Preface.
4 The territory, when it was set off from Michigan, July 3, 1836, included the territory which afterwards became the states of Iowa and Minnesota, together with parts of the Dakotas east of the Missouri and White Earth rivers.
5,234 were in Iowa County (comprising nearly the entire lead region), 2,706 in Brown County (including Green Bay), 2,893 in Milwaukee County, and 859 in Crawford County (Prairie du Chien).

A Common School Course in Politics 1836-1848

In this period the population of Wisconsin grew rapidly, at first almost wholly by emigration from the older states and, in the later forties, by a constantly growing stream of emigrants from the Old World, particularly Germany, but also the Scandinavian countries and Ireland. The surveyed lands were settled in what were thought the most favorable districts both for farming and for marketing the products of agriculture; roads were opened in many localities and the Territory also built several main highways; canal projects—especially the Portage Canal and the Milwaukee and Rock River Canal—were promoted, and the first plans for railroads in Wisconsin broached. The Green Bay Intelligencer, established in 1833, was the first newspaper in Wisconsin (or west of Lake Michigan); schools were founded, and churches built.

But the dominant intellectual interest in territorial Wisconsin was politics, which is not strange when we recall the names of such public men of the time as James D. Doty, Henry Dodge, William S. Hamilton, Morgan L. Martin, and Thomas P. Burnett, to mention only a few of the leaders. These men kept public questions to the fore so successfully that private citizens could not avoid giving them some attention, and thus the foundations were laid for a society which in more recent times has been characterized as intensely political. Relations with the national government, land grants, internal improvements, the location of the capital, the fixing of the southern boundary, the numerous referendums on the question of a state government, the two constitutional conventions of 1846 and 1847—these were some of the concrete problems agitating the minds of voters during the period. When, on May 29, 1848, the bill granting statehood to Wisconsin was approved by President Polk, a complete state government, elected the same month, was ready to take up the reins laid down by territorial officials.

Expansion, Trade, War—1848-1865

Wisconsin began her career as a state in the union with a population of nearly a quarter of a million. By 1850 that number had increased to
305,391 and by 1860 to 775,881. In spite of the losses, and the general retardation of immigration, due to the Civil War, the census of 1870 shows 1,054,670. Our period was characterized by agricultural expansion. This was favored by the building of railroads through new regions and by the economic advantage (or necessity, it might be called) of pushing wheat culture into ever fresh portions of the virgin soil of the state as the older lands responded more and more grudgingly to primitive modes of culture. The business of lumbering, in the great "pineries" of the north, now became fully established also, and Wisconsin was ready to dispute with Michigan for the cream of the trade in the years immediately following the war, often called "the golden age of lumbering." Milwaukee flourished more and more as a wheat shipping port, her population rising from 31,077 in 1850 to 89,936 in 1870. Farming (which meant wheat-growing), lumbering, and general commerce, together with mining, constituted the industrial basis of Wisconsin’s prosperity.

Politically, the state of Wisconsin began with the Democratic party in control and it was not till 1856 that a split came. In that year the State Senate, elected in 1855, was Republican; and it was finally decided, after a fierce and vindictive struggle, that Governor Barstow, Democrat, who re-
sumed office on a certificate of election being issued to him, had not been
rightfully elected, whereupon Coles Bashford, Republican, became governor
March 24, 1856. That ended the control of state politics by the old pro-
slavery democracy. In 1860 Wisconsin gave the Lincoln electors a plu-
rality of 21,089. The war came on apace, but it found the spirit of Wis-
consin ready. "Wisconsin promptly and efficiently met every demand made
upon her during the gigantic struggle; her quota of troops was always
more than full; and although at times the fiscal situation seemed desperate,
no question arose as to the wisdom of making liberal provision for the mili-
tary chest."

This period is also noted for the building up of public institutions, the
state university, the normal school, the system of free elementary schools,
and the beginnings of our high school system. The management of the
university and school lands, and the loaning of the funds, constituted an
important and not altogether creditable feature of the state politics of the
time. These things had much to do with the anti-Barstow agitation of
1853 to 1856.

WISCONSIN'S RURAL POPULATION IN 1870

Detail from Statistical Atlas of the U. S. in 1874, Plate No. 2.

Progress and Readjustment—1865-1890

Wisconsin had furnished to the nation's armies and the navy a total of
91,379 men. Out of this number she lost, by death, 10,752. During the
progress of the war general immigration and especially immigration from
Germany, formerly so heavy, was largely cut off. So, the total gain in
population between 1860 and 1865 had been only twelve per cent. In the
next period of five years it was twenty-one per cent. This showed that with
the close of the war all the elements of prosperity became once more fully
operative, and now both European and eastern emigration were resumed
on a great scale. During the same time Wisconsin was sending thousands
of ex-soldiers and others into the prairie states of Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa,
and Minnesota, which enjoyed such a phenomenal growth during this in-
terval. It was these new settlements which were largely responsible for
ushering in the golden era of lumbering, and it was these same new states,
with their limitless expanse of fertile, unspoiled wheat land, which gave the coup de grace to wheat growing as a profitable branch of farming in Wisconsin. Consequently, the period under review is for Wisconsin a period of economic and social readjustment involving among others these several features: (a) A change in agriculture from wheat growing to dairying, and other forms of permanent (fertility renewing) agriculture. (b) A gigantic progress in lumbering, under the stimulus of ample markets and good prices, and the rise of the lumber kings as a power in the state, sometimes in alliance with the railway kings. (c) The rapid slaughtering of the forests and the necessity, in many lumbering centers, of organizing industries to take the place of lumber manufacturing. (d) The consequent diversification of manufactories, the growth of the capitalist and labor classes in industry as distinguished from that earlier society when "not only did everyone work, but almost everyone worked with his hands and almost everyone worked for himself." It is a new and different Wisconsin in 1890, with problems more complex, stubborn, and difficult even than those of Civil War days, but fortunately with a public spirit among its people just as earnest in seeking solutions for those problems and with a public intelligence no less adequate to the new tasks than it had been to the old.

The Age of Science

To different onlookers the history of the last thirty years will mean different things. One can but guess how the future historian will characterize it. But, whatever else he may say of Wisconsin society in this generation, he will not deny its tendency toward a scientific control of public as well as private business. This is, to be sure, a deep-running tendency of the age. Yet, it seems to me, that among democracies the people of Wisconsin—in their government, in their agricultural and other industries, in the way in which they have taken up the regulation of vast private concerns having public aspects; in their conservation policies both as respects human life, intelligence, and happiness, and as respects natural resources; in their educational systems, and the functions these are permitted to exercise in relation to practical concerns; even in their reasoned if not always reasonable and sweet-tempered politics—afford one of the best illustrations of a society which is swayed almost instinctively by the scientific motive. The dominant note, in Wisconsin politics, has been the attainment of social justice; and while we have by no means banished selfishness, greed, and corruption from our public and our private life as a people, nor the emotions of hatred and prejudice from our politics, yet on the whole it may be doubted if an equal number of voters anywhere will deal more disinterestedly or discriminatingly with public questions, employing in their solution not the unaided reason—merely, but the best knowledge that science, in its appropriate forms, can afford.

And, best of all, the people have the habit of looking forward to the attainment by these means of an ever more perfect social future.
