

*Grand Excursions on the Upper Mississippi River: Places, Landscapes, and Regional Identity after 1854*, edited by Curtis C. Roseman and Elizabeth M. Roseman. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004. xvii, 252 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper.

*Grand Excursion: Antebellum America Discovers the Upper Mississippi*, by Stephen J. Keillor. Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2004. 288 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$28.00 cloth.

Reviewer John Lauritz Larson is associate professor of history at Purdue University. He is the author of *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (2001).

Here's an anniversary I'll bet you forgot: 150 years ago in 1854 the Rock Island Railroad staged an extravagant "Grand Excursion" up the Mississippi River from Rock Island, Illinois, to the Falls of St. Anthony in Minnesota Territory. To commemorate that extraordinary event, a reenactment of the original trip was staged in 2004, an academic conference was held in 2002, and the two volumes here under review were produced. The first volume, *Grand Excursions on the Upper Mississippi River*, collects a variety of essays addressing the nature of the river and its place in the historical development of the upper Mississippi Valley. The second book, Stephen J. Keillor's *Grand Excursion*, exploits the documentary records of the trip itself to generate glimpses of America in the tumultuous years of booming growth and impending disunion.

The Grand Excursion was nothing less than an elaborate publicity stunt launched by the Rock Island Railroad to celebrate the arrival of American railroads at the banks of the "Father of Waters." More than 600 guests, including former president Millard Fillmore, accepted invitations to come to Chicago in June 1854, ride the Rock Island line to the landing, then cruise up the river on steamboats to the limit of navigation at the Falls of St. Anthony (now Minneapolis). Although it may seem odd to celebrate a railroad with a steamboat ride, a great time apparently was had by all, and officials of the railway corporation seemed happy with the results.

The essay collection edited by Curtis Roseman and Elizabeth Roseman opens with a delightful introductory piece describing the landscape of the river from Rock Island northward (the subject, really, of the entire volume), the indigenous people, the early European settlers, the invited guests on the excursion, and finally the trip itself. A brief account of building the railroad follows, then a reprint of "Steamboat Bill" Petersen's 1937 essay on the excursion. Two more historical essays look at mid-century eastern perceptions of this midwestern wilderness and at the steamboat business itself in the middle of the

nineteenth century. The balance of the volume—eight more essays in all—looks at the landscape itself and later developments along the river corridor, including pieces on logging, fishing, water and resource management, high-speed passenger rail travel, and the character of river towns. These essays are readable, if eclectic, and the collection serves best (as one blurb on the cover suggests) as “the souvenir book that passengers on the original excursion never got.”

Keillor’s far more ambitious volume, handsomely produced in an oversized format, tries to use the Grand Excursion as a focusing lens for exploring the tangled history of America’s geographical expansion, technological progress, and cultural turmoil in the generation that brought us the Civil War. Vaguely reminiscent of Bernard DeVoto’s famous *1846: The Year of Decision*, Keillor’s book portrays the excursion as a mural-sized canvas on which he paints portraits of individual participants and vignettes from the trip itself, interspersed with “excurses” on contemporary historical themes or issues: gender roles, antebellum politics, Mississippi steamboats, law, medicine, and the writing of history and travel literature. Unfortunately for Keillor, this 1854 steamboat ride holds none of the urgent narrative drama DeVoto found in the 1846 convergence of the Donner Party disaster, the Mormon Trek, the Oregon Crisis, the Mexican-American War, and the California Revolution. Furthermore, DeVoto’s readers in the 1940s were far more patient with literary scenery and long digressions, because reading was entertainment in those days. Twenty-first-century general readers (presumably the intended audience) may find that Keillor’s account of the Grand Excursion gets bogged down in minutiae the point of which is not immediately clear.

*Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul, 1849–1883*, by Jocelyn Wills. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005. ix, 290 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Bill Silag is an administrative consultant at the Iowa Department of Education. He has published several articles about the history of urbanization in Iowa.

In Jocelyn Wills’s *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators*, the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul follow the same model of commercial ascent as Peoria, Omaha, Sioux City, and dozens of other cities in the American heartland in the decades just before and after the Civil War. Economic progress in this part of the country occurred in fits and starts, and cautious investment and slow growth were dictated by unpre-

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