

The Nicollet Boundaries

When the Bureau of Topographical Engineers in the War Department undertook the preparation of an accurate, large-scale map of the upper Mississippi Valley in 1838, an eminent French geographer, Jean Nicholas Nicollet, was engaged to do the work. Unusually well educated and further qualified by having already spent five years exploring the Mississippi basin, he was regarded as the best man for the job. Nicollet was ably assisted by Lieutenant John C. Frémont and Charles Geyer, a "practical botanist". J. Laframboise acted as interpreter.

The better part of two years, 1838 and 1839, was consumed in making the survey. Exact astronomical and barometrical observations were taken throughout most of the region now included in Iowa, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Nebraska. Geological formations were studied and careful notes were taken on the flora and fauna of the country.

After the survey had been completed, headquarters were established in Washington and work on the map was begun. Western Congressmen, army officers, and others familiar with the upper Mississippi Valley, like George Catlin, became enthusiastic over the project. Nicollet had a faculty of interesting people in his work and winning the

lasting friendship of his associates. But progress was slow, due chiefly to the chronic ill-health of Nicollet. Eventually, however, the map was completed. In 1843, accompanied by a long report, it was published as a Senate Document, No. 237, of the Twenty-sixth Congress, Second Session. For many years Nicollet's map and his report were regarded as the best description of the trans-Mississippi region of the northwest.

Nicollet was philosophic as well as scientific. In describing the resources of the country he could not refrain from speculating about the future development of the upper Mississippi Valley. Like other travellers, he visioned conditions in the near future when settlers would be pouring across the Mississippi to convert the prairie into fields. New States would soon be carved out of Iowa Territory. The question of boundaries would then arise, and Nicollet had some opinions on that subject. Being a geographer, and not a partisan for any particular part of the region, he proposed to apportion the natural resources and navigable rivers so that each of the new States would be as well accommodated as possible. Let him speak for himself.

At the conclusion of the hostilities between the United States and the Sac and Fox Indians, in 1832, they were required to surrender a strip of country along the right or western bank of the Mississippi, extending from the northern boundary of Missouri

on the south, to what are called the neutral grounds to the north; averaging about one hundred and eighty miles in length by fifty in breadth, and containing about nine thousand square miles. Major General Winfield Scott was the principal agent of the United States in acquiring this portion of the Indian lands, and hence it was often called "Scott's Purchase;" and also the "Black Hawk Purchase," after the name of the Indian leader during the outbreak alluded to. But, in 1836, my friend Albert M. Lea, then a lieutenant of dragoons, published a map and description of the country, which he called the "Iowa District"—a name both euphonious and appropriate, being derived from the Iowa river, the extent, beauty, and importance of which were then first made known to the public.

A few families settled upon spots within this district immediately after the purchase; but they were ordered off by the United States troops, as the time that the Indians were allowed to remain did not expire until the first of June, 1833. After this, the population went on steadily and rapidly increasing. In 1834, Congress passed an act attaching this district to the then Territory of Michigan, for judicial purposes; but other relations being established between this last mentioned Territory and the general government, it was not until the 4th of July, 1838, that the Territory of Iowa was organized, with a population of 30,000 souls. It may be well to remark, that additional tracts of land

having been subsequently purchased from the Indians in 1836 and 1837, the district was increased, so as to cover an area of 11,000 square miles.

The whole amount of the territory then, including what was separated from it on July 4th, 1836, for political purposes, to organize the Territory of Wisconsin, had its limits from the Mississippi on the east, to Missouri on the south, the Missouri River on the west, and extending to the British possessions in latitude 49° north.

These limits are surely very extensive; but, as the question of the proper limits of this prospective State, destined soon to take its place in the Union, is important in its relations to other States yet to arise, and there being but few persons acquainted with the interior of the broad region embraced by the map, it may not be inappropriate to suggest, in conclusion of a short account of this region, some views as to the most eligible limits to be given to these several States.

In a few years more, the fertile country along the borders of the present settlements will have been occupied by civilized men, cultivators of the soil. It will then be divided into new States; but, as it is known that a broad belt of uninhabitable flat country lies between the borders just mentioned and the Rocky Mountains, it becomes a difficult and yet necessary problem to divide this portion into the most convenient forms, variously to accommodate the States that will gradually arise.

But I may remark, in the first place, that two States may be formed west of the trans-Mississippian States of Arkansas and Missouri; and then, by taking about equal portions of each side of the Missouri River, embracing the mouth of Platte River, we have a third State, with a good and well-watered soil. This latter division would still leave sufficient space for the State of Iowa, by extending it as far north as the St. Peter's. Now, north of the two last-mentioned States might be formed another, embracing all the remaining tributaries of the Mississippi on its west side, as well as those of the Red River of the North, and as far north as to the British possessions.

Thus it appears, that, by a judicious division of the remaining country along the borders, taking in a small portion of the more barren region beyond it, there is sufficient space for five new States of large size, compact in their forms, and having a good portion of fertile soil; most of them possessing convenient navigable streams, with a fair prospect of mineral resources.

According to this division, the State of Iowa should be bounded by the Mississippi on the east, by a parallel of latitude passing through the mouth of the Mankato or Blue Earth River, by a certain meridian line running between the 17th and the 18th degrees of longitude on the west, and by the northern boundary of the State of Missouri to the south. These limits would embrace about forty to forty-

two thousand square miles, with a proportionable capacity to sustain a corresponding population. It would give to the State a depot on the St. Peter's River, whilst the Des Moines and Iowa rivers, running through its more central southern parts, would make the whole territory, excepting the small portion drained by the tributaries of St. Peter's River, assume the character of an extended valley, with nearly all its streams flowing in one general direction, to contribute their share to the mighty Mississippi. As the population would be composed of emigrants from all parts of the civilized world, by not extending the boundary so as to estrange one portion of the people from the other, on account of a difference of origin, or a different course of trade, they would be brought to live contentedly under the same laws and usages; whilst the uniform direction of the waters, together with the similarity of climate, soil, resources, and avenues to market, are well calculated to give to the inhabitants of this State a homogeneity of character and interest highly conducive to their well-being, both morally and politically.

J. N. NICOLLET