The Geography of Wisconsin Territory

On July 4, 1836, exactly sixty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Territory of Wisconsin was established. The boundaries of this vast wilderness were far-flung, extending from Lake Michigan on the east to the Missouri and White Earth rivers in the west, and from Illinois and Missouri on the south to Lake Superior and the pine-clad borders of Canada at the north. Greater in size than the Old Northwest Territory, the Territory of Wisconsin embraced an area almost equal in extent to the thirteen original States when Washington was inaugurated President. The capitals of five States — Madison, Des Moines, Saint Paul, Pierre, and Bismarck — are now contained within the area of that forest and prairie empire. Madison, which in 1837 could count only a few log cabins, had been selected as the future capital of Wisconsin Territory but, pending the erection of public buildings, the straggling village of Burlington in Des Moines County served as the temporary capital of a region whose boundaries extended far beyond the military frontier of that day.

A pulsing drama had been enacted on this vast

stage of lake and forest, of lush prairie grass and wind-swept plain. At Green Bay in 1634 the landfall of the white man in Wisconsin occurred when Jean Nicolet discovered the dusky Winnebago Indians. Thirty-nine years later Joliet and Marquette shot their light canoe out of the Wisconsin River and gazed at the mighty expanse of the Father of Waters. From the banks of the Mississippi in what is now Minnesota, Michel Aco and Louis Hennepin viewed the Falls of St. Anthony in 1680 while being led northward as captives by the Sioux. In the Galena-Dubuque mineral region in 1690 the Miami Indians induced Nicholas Perrot to mine lead. On the shores of the muddy Missouri in 1742 the intrepid La Verendrye brothers visited the Mandans and buried a leaden plaque opposite present-day Pierre.

Indians still roamed unmolested over nine-tenths of Wisconsin Territory in 1838. Not a single cession had been made in Minnesota or the Dakotas. In present-day Wisconsin only the land south of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers had been opened for settlement. Most of the Winnebago Indians were still east of the Mississippi and north of the Wisconsin River although they had promised to cross over into the Neutral Ground where a school had been established for their children on the Yellow River. The Stockbridge In-

dians from New York were located around Green Bay and the Menominee were still harvesting wild rice north of them. The Chippewa Indians ranged between the Mississippi and Lake Superior and were constantly at war with their neighbors to the west, the Sioux, whose warlike tribes ruled the northern plains from the sources of the Mississippi to the village of the Mandans.

Across the Mississippi, in what is now Iowa, some 22,859 settlers had been attracted to the Black Hawk Purchase since 1833. Three additional areas — the Half-breed Tract, the Keokuk Reserve, and the Second Purchase — had opened about one-fifth of the Hawkeye State to settlement by 1838. The land to the westward was still the red man's hunting ground.

The Sauks and Foxes had raised their wickiups west of the Black Hawk Purchase and a few Ioways still camped on the Nodaway. The Potowatomi were straggling into southwestern Iowa. Other tribes were being moved west of the Mississippi. "The number of Indians which will be on our western frontier, when the scheme of emigration shall have been accomplished," declared the Fort Madison *Patriot,* "is estimated at about two hundred and fifty thousand, capable of bringing into the field fifty thousand warriors."

Throughout the year Indians paid frequent vis-

its to the white settlements. Black Hawk "honored" Fort Madison with his presence while Chiefs Whirling Thunder, Yellow Thunder, and Caramanee appeared at Mineral Point to consult Governor Henry Dodge about Winnebago annuity payments.

Military posts dotted this vast wilderness in 1838. Fort Howard was located at Green Bay, Fort Winnebago at Portage, Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien, and Fort Snelling stood on a towering bluff at the mouth of the Minnesota River. Only two years before, Fort Armstrong had been abandoned, while the troops had marched away from Fort Des Moines in 1837. Camp Kearny had been established in the Council Bluffs area in 1837 but was quickly abandoned. Fort Leavenworth was the only post on the Missouri River where troops were available to quell Indian troubles on the western border of Wisconsin Territory in 1838.

Wild game was abundant. Both Alfred Brunson and Theodore Rodolf spoke frequently of herds of deer. Sometimes they saw as many as fifty. Snakes were everywhere. When Cutting Marsh visited Poweshiek's village he found that that typical red man preferred hunting to agriculture. The fur trader was important in this wilderness: Joseph Rolette and Hercules L. Dousman

ruled with iron hands at Prairie du Chien, and Henry Hastings Sibley received many dusky visitors at his trading post opposite Fort Snelling.

The mineral resources of this region were well-nigh unlimited: copper and iron lay in the northland while valuable lead mines sprinkled the Galena-Dubuque area. The coal and gypsum mines of Iowa lay untouched, the latter actually unknown. Only the lead mines were important enough to have attracted settlers. Thus, in 1836 there were 10,531 settlers in the Black Hawk Purchase and 11,683 in the region east of the Mississippi. About half of these were located in the Galena-Dubuque mineral region. But avaricious land speculators ruined this area for legitimate settlers and between 1836 and 1838 most of the immigrants built their cabins in eastern Wisconsin or in the southern half of the Black Hawk Purchase. By 1838 there were only 18,149 people east of the Mississippi and 22,859 in the Iowa district.

There were many who thought highly of this region. "I consider the Wisconsin Territory as the finest portion of North America, not only from its soil, but its climate," Captain Marryat declared. "The air is pure, and the winters, although severe, are dry and bracing; very different from, and more healthy than those of the Eastern States."

Marryat described the country between Green Bay and Prairie du Chien as "alternate prairie, oak openings, and forest; and the same may be said of the other side of the Mississippi, now distinguished as the district of Ioway." Limestone quarries yielded abundantly. The land did not have to be cleared of timber, there being just enough for use or ornament. According to Marryat: "Prairie of fine rich grass, upon which cattle fatten in three or four months, lay spread in every direction. The soil is so fertile that you have but to turn it up to make it yield grain to any extent".

The rapid growth of Wisconsin Territory apparently elicited "jealousy and heartburning" from Illinois editors. "The tide of emigration stops no longer upon the banks of the placid Illinois, but rolls across the majestic Mississippi," chuckled the editor of the *Iowa News* gleefully. "In plain words, this is the point to which every man the moment he 'pulls up stakes' at home points his eye and hither he wends his way. The consequence is that Illinois is not now *going ahead as rapidly as in times past*. Her population does not increase as fast — her prairies are not settled as quickly and thickly, and her speculators in *'her hundred cities'* are not now amassing a fortune in a single day."

The editor of the *Iowa News* believed the cli-

mate of Wisconsin was extremely invigorating. The atmosphere was generally clear in fine weather and there were but few cloudy days. He believed such a healthful condition was in part explained by the fact that Wisconsin was a level country and had no hills or mountains. The prairie and high table land exposed the country to the wind and to the sun. The rich soil and the presence of Lake Superior and Lake Michigan were also believed to have an effect on the atmosphere.

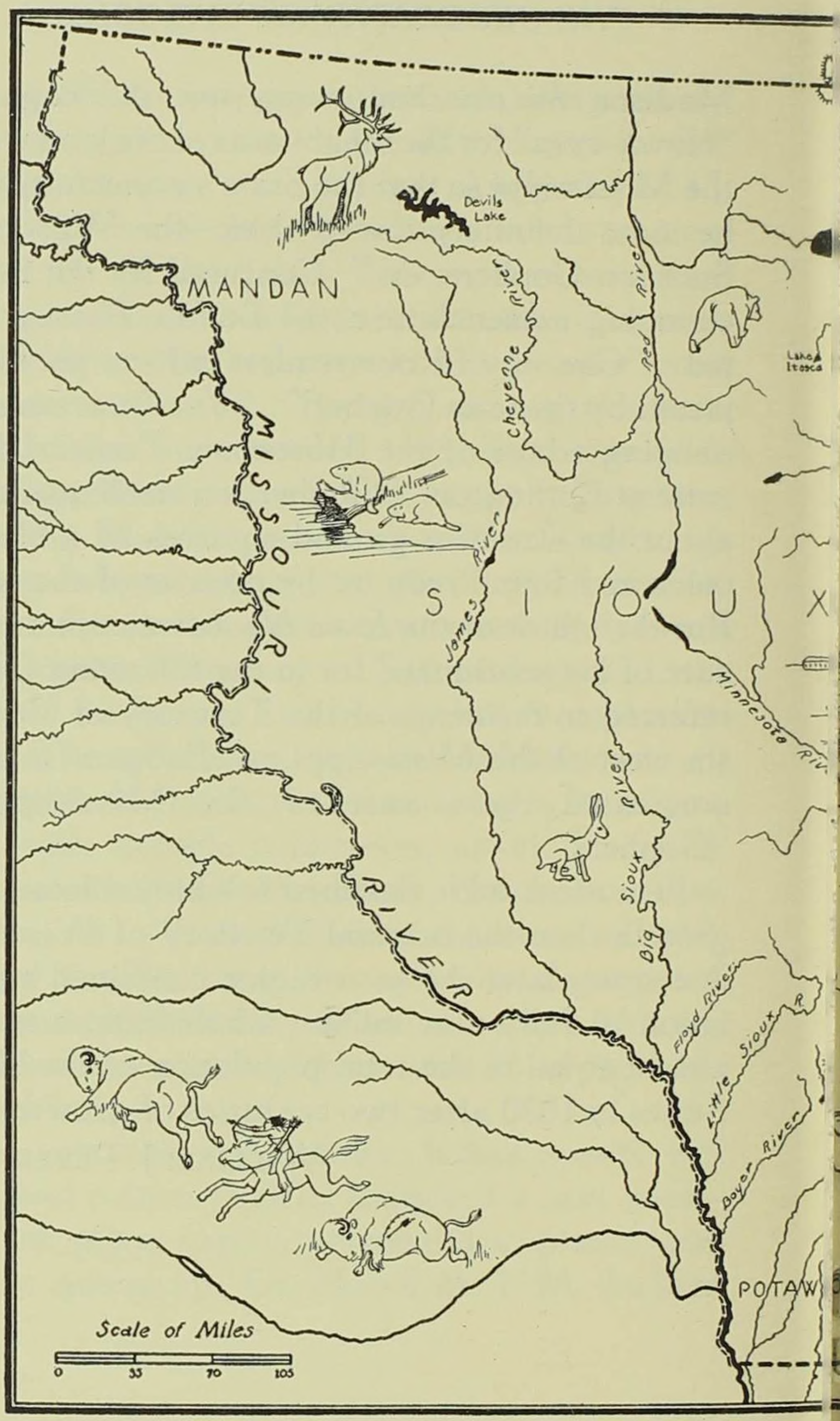
Cutting Marsh, missionary to the Stockbridge Indians, whose reports to the Scottish Society were rarely colored, gave a more conservative view of Wisconsin Territory. "The winters cold, the summers warm, not excessively hot & vegetation rapid. The soil clayey, and of a reddish cast, not remarkable for fertility, tho' sufficiently so to produce, with suitable cultivation, all of the necessaries of life." Of the Black Hawk Purchase, Marsh said: "It is doubtless the most valuable part" of the Territory "for agricultural purposes. For beauty and fertility of soil it is much of it unsurpassed by any that I have seen E. of the Mississippi."

As news from missionaries, Indian agents, soldiers, and editors trickled eastward a new vocabulary of place names, personalities, plants, and animals sprang up. On March 28, 1838, the Fort

Madison *Patriot* had suggested the cognomen "Hawk-eyes" for the inhabitants of the land west of the Mississippi so that the State's etymology could be more definitely traced than "the Wolverines, Suckers, Gophers, &c." Confused by the rapidly changing nomenclature, the Buffalo *Patriot* queried: "Can any of our readers inform us what is meant by the term Gopher!" "Yes," answered the obliging editor of the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette* at Burlington. "Gopher is a small quadruped about the size of a ground squirrel, of a blackish color and found only in the prairies of the west." But the editor of the *Iowa News* was not at all so sure of his sobriquets, for in the following June he referred to residents of the Territory of Wisconsin west of the Mississippi as "Badgers" and denominated those east of the Mississippi as "Gophers".

Few areas were destined to enjoy a more rapid growth than the original Territory of Wisconsin. A century later the same region contained a population of fully nine million inhabitants, a number almost equal to the total population of the United States in 1820 after two centuries of growth.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN


Devils Lake
MANDAN
MISSOURI
RIVER
Cheyenne River
Red River
Lake Itasca
James River
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Floyd River
Little Sioux R.
Boyer River
POTAWATOMI
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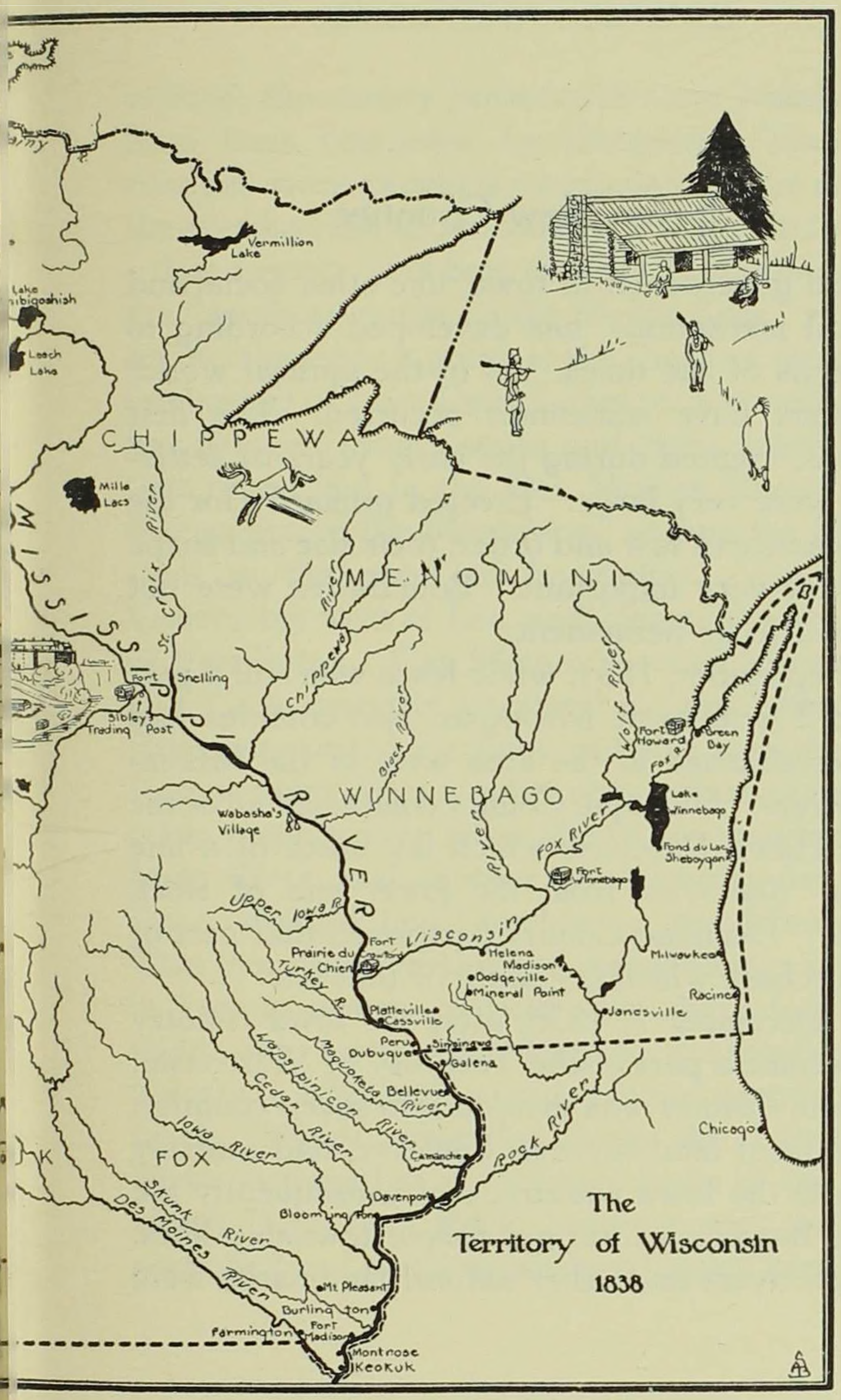

The
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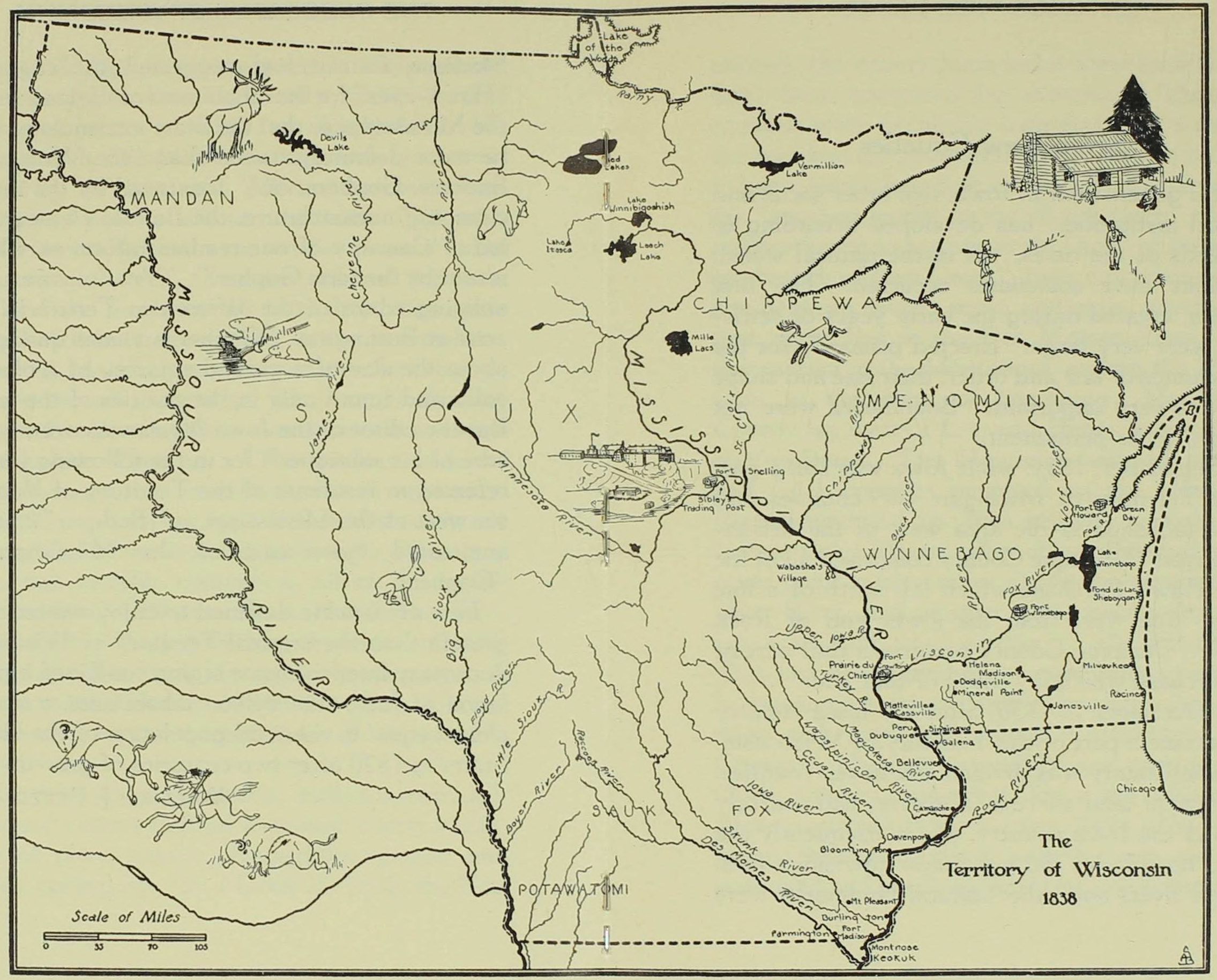
Lake of the Woods
Rainy R.
Devils Lake
Red Lakes
Vermillion Lake
MANDAN
Lake Winnibigoshish
Lake Itasca
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CHIPPEWA
Mille Lacs
MISSOURI
RIVER
James River
Cheyenne River
Red River
SIOUX
MISSISSIPPI
St. Croix River
MENOMINI
Minnesota River
Big Sioux River
Snelling
Fort
Sibley Trading Post
Chippewa River
Black River
Wolf River
Fort Howard
Green Bay
WINNEBAGO
Lake Winnebago
Fond du Lac
Sheboygan
Fort Winnebago
Fox River
Wabasha's Village
Upper Iowa R.
Wisconsin River
Prairie du Chien
Fort
Turkey R.
Helena
Madison
Dodgeville
Mineral Point
Milwaukee
Racine
Janesville
Platteville
Cassville
Peru
Dubuque
Galena
Sinsinawa
Little Sioux R.
Floyd River
Boyer River
Raccoon River
Maquoketa River
Bellevue
Scuer River
Wapsipinicon River
Iowa River
Rock River
Chicago
SAUK
FOX
Camanche
Davenport
Bloomington
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