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## Northern Wiskonsan. 1843

Brunson, Alfred, 1793-1882

Madison, Wisconsin: Executive Department, 1843

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## NORTHERN WISKONSAN.

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*To the Legislative Assembly.*

Mr. Alfred Brunson has transmitted to me a description of the northern part of this Territory, with a request that I will submit it to the Assembly, in the hope that it may be useful, in the location of roads through that country, as well as for other purposes. I very cheerfully comply with his request, and have no doubt that his observations if communicated to the public would be highly beneficial to the Territory.

J. D. DOTY.

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT,  
Madison, December 15, 1843. }

*J. D. Doty*

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## COMMUNICATION FROM MR. BRUNSON.

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PRAIRIE DU CHIEN, Dec. 6, 1843.

*His Excellency J. D. Doty, Governor of Wisconsin,*

SIR—Having travelled about *three thousand* miles, within the past year, within this Territory, north and north west of this place, I have thought it propable that the Legislature and people of the Territory would be pleased to see the results of my observations in these journeys. And being requested to do so by an Hon. member of the Council, I respectfully tender to the Assembly, through you the following description of the country through which I have passed.

In my first journey from this place to La Point in Lake Superior, I ascended the Mississippi to the mouth of the Chippewa; thence up that river to Courteoreille Lake, the head of one of its branches; and thence across the country, through a dense forest to the Lake, making the distance, by the course of the rivers, about 530 miles; returning by the same route.

In returning to the Lake last spring, at the request of several enterprising miners from Grant county, who wished to try their fortunes in the copper regions, I went through by land, acting as guide, in which we opened a road from this place to the Lake shore; much of the way over ground, on which white men never before set their foot, making the distance, as we estimated it from day to day, about 400 miles. But from the knowledge we acquired, from once travelling over the distance, we were satisfied that a road can be made from one point to the other in less than 300 miles: the geographical distance not being over 260

miles. I also coasted the Lake up and down, over 100 miles, being nearly the whole extent of the south shore of that inland sea which comes within this Territory. And in returning to this place I ascended the Lake—the St. Louis and Savannah rivers; portaged over to the Mississippi and descended that river, making the distance about 1000 miles.

The entire country south of Lake Superior is now ceded to the United States, and open to settlement, and believing it of great public service to have a road opened through it, not only to facilitate its settlement, but also to connect those settlements already made on the principal rivers, and to open a direct communication by the nearest and best route between the lead and copper mines within our limits; I consented to guide the enterprising company, before mentioned, in their arduous undertaking.

*Three ox wagons with nine yoke of cattle, three horses, and fourteen men, in all, composed the company.* We had with us tents, provisions, axes and other tools necessary to cut our way through the wilderness.

In leaving this place we ascended the bluffs, and took the dividing ridge between the waters of the Mississippi and the Wisconsin. On this we continued about eighty miles, over as good natural ground for a road, as that leading from Fort Crawford to Winnebago, through Grant, Iowa and Dane counties. And from this main ridge a spur of it runs to the Falls of Black river, between two of its branches; making the distance from this place to those falls about 100 miles, and over an entire ridge, not divided by a single stream of water. It is true, for the want of a perfect knowledge of the country we missed the ridge leading to Black river falls, and spent ten days in one of the most dismal pine and tamarack swamps that teams ever undertook to pass, when we afterwards discovered we might have travelled the distance on dry land in two days.

The country thus far is broken on each side of the ridge, and

full of deep ravines formed by the numerous springs with which the country abounds, and the rivulets which run from them. These rivulets afford abundance of water power; and the springs being so strong as to prevent much freezing; mills, when erected thereon will seldom be obstructed by ice. They abound with speckled or mountain trout, especially those running into the Wisconsin, and the bottom lands upon their banks often spread out so wide that excellent farm sites can easily be obtained.

The ridges are on a general level, about 500 feet above the Mississippi, and spurs from the main ridge divide the waters of the smaller, as well as the larger streams, the tops of which often spread out into excellent farm sites; and the whole face of the country bears strong evidence of the existence of mineral, and some fine specimens of copper and lead have been found. And near Black river falls we saw several natural mounds, from 100 to 300 feet high, apparently composed entirely of *iron stone ore*, and none of them to exceed five miles from one of the best water powers in the world.

The soil on this high ground is rich; it has a good supply of timber principally oak; and is well supplied with beautiful, rich, rolling prairie. For the first thirty miles from this place they are small, for the next fifty miles they spread out, in places, beyond the reach of the eye. There is, however, a sufficiency of timber for agricultural purposes. Near to Black river the country spreads out into large plains, on the water courses, and between the ridges, of pine forests, tamerack swamps, and cranberry marshes; the soil of which is sandy and poor.

The scenery from these high ridges is the most picturesque imaginable. Natural columns, pillars, towers, mounds, and the appearance of ancient castles, are frequently seen by the curious traveller, varying in height from twenty to one hundred feet. Near to Black river, the spurs of the ridges are thrown out into the plains just described, in the most singular and in-

teresting forms. Scores of mounds, and peaks, with summits oval, spiral, or inclining and with more or less of perpendicular sides, may be seen ; all of which show more or less of the lime, sand and quartz formations with which the whole country from the Wiskonsan to Black river abounds.

Throughout this region of country there are large quantities of quartz formations, so hard as to cut glass and so connected with flint as to form the best materials for burr mill stones. A gentleman of fifteen years experience in mills, told me he never saw better blocks come from France.

Black River Falls, are about 50 miles from its junction with the Mississippi, and with a little improvement at its mouth, this river would be navigable to the falls for small steam boats. At the falls it is about 100 yards wide, but will probably average 200 from thence to its mouth. These falls are 22 feet, in the distance of 100 yards ; and appear to be covered by a chain of primitive and sand stone rock, running from south east to north west : and to appearance is the same chain as that which crosses Neenah river at the Kaukaulau—the Wiskonsan at the dells, and the Chippewa, St. Croix and Mississippi at their respective falls.

Several branches of this river empty into it below the falls, on which mills have been erected, as well as at the falls ; from all which about 3,000,000 feet of sawed lumber, and Shingles, Lath, and hewed timber in proportion are annually taken down the Mississippi to market. But its immense pine forests cannot, even at this rate, be exhausted for ages yet to come.

From Black river falls, our course was up a valley of open timber and Prairie land, about eight miles to a gap in the ridge which divides the Black and Mount Trompe a l'eau rivers ;—thence through a level Prairie and open timber country in the valley of the latter stream for 20 miles. We then crossed the ridge, at easy ascent and descent, dividing the latter from the



L'eau Claire branch of the Chippewa, and down its valley 35 miles, and crossing this river, about ten miles from its junction with the Chippewa; and the ridge which divides this stream from its branch, we reached the falls of the Chippewa in about 75 miles from Black river.

The country between the Black and Chippewa rivers is mostly Prairie on the route we travelled. But on the north and east of this route Pine forests extended beyond the reach of the eye, from the highest ridges. The soil is generally sandy and poor, though many excellent farm sites may be found, and water power is almost without limits. The ridges are much narrower than those south of Black river, but throw out into the extensive plains which border upon the rivers, similar picturesque knobs, mounds and peaks, from which the most charming landscape views may be taken.

It is singular and worthy of note, that on both the Black and Chippewa rivers, after ascending them about thirty miles, the general face of the country is some 300 feet lower than the bluffs of the rivers, and the ridges which divide their waters. These low lands as they may be called, though 200 feet above the rivers, are generally level, or gently rolling, of a sandy soil, with but little timber, and have the appearance of being once the bottoms of large Lakes, formed by the rivers shut in by the Mississippi bluffs from that noble stream, but cutting their way through the bluffs, and a channel through their sandy bottoms, left the plains as above described. If this was ever the case, the Lake formed by the Chippewa, must have been some three hundred miles in circumference, following its zigzag shore round the points of ridges which now divide streams, and up the beds of those streams to the high grounds from which they take their sources. And that formed by Black river could not have been much less.

Within this district of country, and near the L'eau Claire is the old boundary line between the Chippewas, Sioux and Win-



nebagoes, and during the prevalence of the late war between them, neither tribe dare hunt upon that river, and the consequence is, game has greatly increased. Elk, moose, deer, bear, Beaver, &c. are plentier than in any other portion of the country. Indeed, the only signs of Beaver we saw in 400 miles travel were in this region.

The Mount Trompe a l'eau river, is about ten yards wide where we crossed it; and at that time, the water being high, about four feet deep, with steep boggy banks. It empties into the Mississippi at Mount Trompe a l'eau. The L'eau Claire will average fifty yards for thirty or forty miles from its mouth, and has a fall, twenty miles up it, of 15 or twenty feet, caused apparently by the same chain of rock forming the falls of other rivers in its vicinity. It has immense forests of pine on its north eastern banks, and up its eastern branches, but has not, as yet, been improved for lumbering, because its waters are too shallow for that purpose, except in time of freshets. It empties into the Chippewa, about 50 miles from the Mississippi, by the course of the river.

The Chippewa is a noble stream, decidedly larger, in my opinion, than the Wiskonsan, and affords more water, has less Islands, and a better channel. It varies from 200 to 500 yards in width, from the falls to the mouth, 75 miles; and can be navigated by small steam boats, except in the lowest stage of water or when frozen. The Eau Gallais and Red Cedar branches of this river, which come in from the north, the first 18 and the last 36 miles from its mouth, afford fine mill powers, and a good supply of pine timber, all which are well improved; yielding, probably 3,000,000, feet of lumber, and shingle, lath and heavy timber in proportion.

The Chippewa falls about 24 feet in half a mile, and its water powers may be judged of from the volume of water which passes over them. At present there is but one mill with two

saws, with shingle and lath machines, which furnish 2,000,000 feet of lumber, and shingles and lath in proportion. All the mills upon this river and its branches make about 5,000,000 feet of lumber annually, and shingles and lath in proportion. And hewn timber and saw logs are sent also to market, probably equal to 3,000,000 feet more.

The St. Croix mills are said to yield about 5,000,000 feet of lumber, with a due proportion of shingles, lath and timber, and the Wisconsin as much more: making in all about 18,000,000 feet of lumber, besides shingles lath and timber to an equal amount furnished by the Territory for the Mississippi markets. With the amount of lumber furnished by the eastern portion of the Territory, I am unacquainted.

In ascending the Chippewa by its course, (the route I took last winter on the ice) 100 miles above the falls, we pass five different falls, over which boats and rafts cannot pass in safety: besides numerous rapids. The Indians pass up and down the rapids in their canoes, but are obliged to portage round the falls. These falls and rapids afford great water power, and the surrounding country affords inexhaustible pine forests. But the impracticability of rafting it away, will prevent their use for lumbering purposes, except floating the logs singly down the stream, until the navigation is improved, or rail roads are made to connect them with the river below the falls.

The *Munioish*, (Devil's river) or main branch of this river, (which is said to pass through greater and finer Pine forests than any other branch of it, and as well supplied with water power) interlocks with the Ontonogan of Lake Superior, by means of small Lakes and low swampy lands; and could easily be connected by a canal on a summit level less than 400 feet above the Lake and the Mississippi, the two great waters being nearly on a level with each other. The Ottawa branch of this river might be easily connected with Bad river, of the Lake,

through a chain of some 20 small Lakes, on a level not exceeding 350 feet above the two great navigable waters, within a distance of 250 miles, and through a more feasible country than the Ontonogan route.

At the falls of the Chippewa river, and up that stream, Virgin Copper has been found; and the soil and rock formations indicate its existence from thence to Lake Superior a distance of about 150 miles, by the most direct rout, though probably at some depth below the surface. The strata of White Sandstone which shows itself at Prairie du Chien, and may be traced in the sides of the bluffs of the Mississippi and its branches, to their respective falls changes its color, after passing these falls, to that of redish brown; and continues to show itself in all parts of the country, on the sides and in the beds of the streams, till it breaks off in the iron bound shore of Lake Superior.

From the falls of the Chippewa to the Lake, by the road we opened and travelled, the country is generally rolling; has a good soil and thick timbered. Above the strata of red sand rock, just described, the soil is full of primitive boulder rocks, generally of a roundish or oval form, and varying in size from a pebble to that of a mill stone, of which good common mill stone could be made. Every stream, soon after leaving the highest ground, cuts a bed through this strata of rock, and tumbles the boulders from above, into its bed, where they form the usual and most common obstructions to navigation.

The timber, which in most places is very thick, with a thick-under brush, is White and Yellow or Norway Pine, Oak, large quantities of Sugar Maple, Soft Maple, Elm, Lynn, Aspen. Balsom Fir, Spruce, Red and White Cedar, some Hemlock, large quantities of White Birch, some Black and Yellow Birch, &c. But I saw no Beach, Chesnut, Hickory, Poplar or Sasafras.— Some Iron-wood, or Horn-beam, is seen, and more Tamerack in swamps, than the traveller desires to see or pass: tho' the

number of these swamps is not as great as I expected to find from the representations of the country I had seen. The truth is, one Tamerack swamp, of but limited extent, in ten or twenty miles travel, unimproved by bridges and causeways, would be sufficient to frighten any common traveller. Those accustomed to them, and the country, however, think but little of them.

The country along the south shore of Lake Superior, as far as I have seen it; that is from Bad river to Fond du Lac, over 100 miles, presents much the same appearance as did that on the south shore of Lake Erie, when in its wilderness state, except in the *kind* of timber, and the *color* of the soil and rock.—At the mouth of each river and in some places along the coast, Sand Beaches may be found. But the greatest portion of the coast is Iron bound, so called, having perpendicular rock and clay banks from 30 to 50 feet high.

At the mouth of each river is a sand bar, inside of which is more or less swamp or marsh extending, generally as far into the country as the back water of the Lake sets. These rivers are numerous, though not large; not having over 50 miles of country in a direct line, to meander through. The length of them however, by their courses, is usually three times as great as the direct line.

The St. Louis river, is an exception to the above rule, and is the largest stream emptying into the south west portion of the Lake. By its course it is about 300 miles long: taking its rise in the North-West near the Rainy Lake. It will average, probably, 100 yards in width, for the first 70 miles above slack water, at the foot of the falls, and from that point to its mouth, 22 miles, it gradually widens, and deepens, until in places the Bays are several miles across, having a channel sufficiently deep for vessels of the largest size. Two bays near the mouth, separated by a narrow land peninsula, the passage through

which seems to have been originally the mouth of the river, forms a harbor, excelled by none in the world for safety, sufficient for a thousand ships to ride at ease in the heaviest gale.

The outer peninsula, composed entirely of sand, evidently thrown up by the action of the Surf and winds from the Lake, is about 12 miles long, and from a quarter to a half a mile wide, forming a bay within of the same length, and from one to three miles wide. There are Pine trees upon this peninsula, apparently 200 years old, indicating the existence of the land for a considerably longer period. A gap through this peninsula, half a mile wide, is now the mouth of the river; which, at the time I was there, and owing to the extreme high waters the past season, had a channel 30 or more feet deep: but in the Autumns of dry seasons, it is said to only afford about *eight* feet water over the bar usually thrown up by the surf of the Lake. But by the aid of piers could be kept at its greatest depth.

On this peninsula, at the mouth of the river, is the best place for a Fort on this frontier, which is now much needed, and where, it is hoped, Government will soon build one. On the opposite side of the bay, on the main land, the land is 20 or 30 feet above the water, covered with thick timber and underbrush, somewhat broken and wet on its surface, but can be improved into an excellent town site. This point is only about 150 miles from Mendota or St. Peters and the country between, is said to be of the first quality for a road, being mostly Prairie and Oak openings. A Railroad across the country at this point, would connect the heads of navigation on the great chain of Lakes, and the great Mississippi, and would run through a country second to none in the world in the same latitude, for beauty of scenery, and for rich agricultural purposes, and farmers and mechanics, as well as miners, will no doubt soon find their way into and settle the country.

The falls of the St. Louis river, amounting to about 300 feet,

in the space of 20 miles, would afford a great extent of water power, if within the ceded territory. A portion of them, however, including about fifty feet of perpendicular fall, is inaccessible, except at great expense, on account of the perpendicular character of the banks, the channel being cut through a high ridge of rock.

The Maskau (Swamp) river, commonly called Bad river, is the next in size emptying into the Lake within this Territory. Its mouth is about 15 miles east of La Pointe; it is about 100 yards wide, within the bar and for five miles up and very deep. But, except a narrow sand bank which runs along the Lake shore for some twenty miles, the country for that distance and for five miles up the river is one continued marsh or swamp: which must forever be a draw back, if not an insuperable barrier to its improvement, and especially as La Point, an excellent harbor, of easy access and great safety is so near at hand.

This river has two principal branches, both of which have a succession of falls and afford great water powers. Its banks and adjoining country are well supplied with pine and other timbers suitable for lumber, and its bottoms above the swampy region, offerd great inducements to agricultural settlers.

The other rivers, generally from three to ten miles apart, furnish harbors for boats, and by the aid of piers would, most of them, furnish harbors for vessels. There are none, however, over fifty yards wide at their mouth, and most of them much less. Those of them which rise in the dividing lands between the Lake and the Mississippi having about three hundred feet to fall in their short descent, furnish great water powers, and the adjoining country being well supplied with timber and a good soil, they must at no distant day be employed to good advantage. The mountain or speckled trout abound in all of them, and are very large. I measured one taken in the Brule which was *twen-*



*ty-one* inches long. They vary from the Lake trout in form and flesh, so as to distinguish them.

La Pointe, a place of the most importance on this Lake, is situated on the south east end of Magdaline Island. The Island is twelve miles in length, and thirty in circumference. The soil on it is poor, being a stiff red clay, upon a red sand rock. The settlement was first formed about 100 years since, by the French traders, and has slowly, but gradually increased, by the settlement of voyagers, traders, &c. who took wives of the daughters of the land: and by their half breed descendants, and some Indians who have adopted civilized habits. In 1834 it was made the principal depot of the American Fur Company, and since then, the Cleveland Company made an establishment there for the purpose of fishing and trading. The whole population composed of whites, mixed bloods and civilized Indians, amounts to nearly 500. The A. B. C. F. M. has a successful mission, and a church here. The Catholics have a church, and these, with the stores of the Fur Companies and other buildings give the place quite the appearance and business of a town. Each of the companies have a vessel which plies upon the Lake during the season of navigation, the business of which has been increased in the past season, by the operations of the copper miners. In the vicinity of La Pointe is a group of twenty-two islands on several of which virgin copper has been found.

For several years past the Fur Companies at this place, have carried on an extensive business by fishing. But this, as a matter of commerce, is, for the present, at an end. The *hard times* so affected their sales and reduced the price, that it became a losing concern, and has been abandoned. This unhappy change has thrown several hundred people out of employ, who derived their support therefrom, and as the fur trade is rapidly declining and the number of voyagers and laborers required consequently lessened, almost the entire population are reduced to abject want. Some



of the most enterprising and persevering have gone to the lumber region on the St. Croix and Chippewa, in hopes to avoid starving; but the majority have to submit to their fate and subsist upon fish, the only use the numerous finny tribes of this Lake, are, at this time, to the inhabitants of its shores. It is to be hoped that the introduction of miners and farmers to the country, will turn the attention of these inhabitants to those branches of business, of which, hitherto, they seem not to have had a competent idea.

Some fine specimens of virgin copper and silver have been found within this Territory, but no beds of ore, except copper on the Montreal river, the present line between the Territory and Michigan. Several important discoveries have been made east of that river; and also on Isle Royal, which unfortunately proves not to have been included in the treaty last fall, as was supposed. But no doubt exists but that within this Territory both copper and silver will be found in great quantities. On the north west coast of the Lake, copper is said to be more abundant than on any other part of it. And on the St. Louis river, about the falls, virgin copper and copper ore are easily obtained. And above the falls for twenty miles inexhaustible quarries of the finest of Slate lie naked and invite the enterprise of man to supply the nation, or the world, from its abundance.

The country immediately on the margin of the Lake, is, for a short distance, flat and wet. But in receding from the Lake it soon rises, gradually, the timber is more open and of better quality, the soil improves in character, and is more inviting to agriculturists. A little west of La Pointe, and ten or twelve miles south of the Lake shore, the prairie country commences, which extends to and beyond the St. Croix and Mississippi, and offers great inducements to agriculturists, who like such a high north latitude. The winters, however, are much milder here, than in the same latitude east of us.

East of south from La Pointe, and extending into Michigan the country is thickly timbered, more broken, and offers less facilities for farming purposes: but at present holds out the greatest inducements for copper mining.

In reference to the road we opened, I may say, that in thirty years extensive travels in the west, I have never seen so good ground for a road, in a state of nature, and so few streams to cross, for the same distance as that between this place and La Pointe. The latter place is not five miles either way from due north from the former, and in a direct line only 260 miles. A road can be made, probably in three hundred, and if necessary a branch of it can diverge either way from the dividing ridge, to Montreal river, or Fond du Lac. A wagon with one yoke of cattle, travelled through the whole distance in 20 days after we had opened the road.

I am satisfied that it is the best route for a road from the lead mines to the Lake, and that if Congress would appropriate \$10,000 for that purpose, the road could be made fit for post coaches, which could run it in five or six days. I respectfully submit it to the Legislature, to petition Congress for such an appropriation.

Respectfully your obt. servt.

ALFRED BRUNSON.