

DULUTH'S FIGHT FOR SUPREMACY

BY

JUDGE JAMES J. EAGAN

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FOREWORD

BY

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On Sunday, February 21, 1904, the Duluth *News Tribune* published an article by James J. Eagan about the city's struggles in the 1870s with neighboring Superior for control of the harbor, railways, a canal — in other words, for economic superiority of the region. To Eagan the triumph of Duluth was due to the efforts of a small group of able, ambitious, energetic and far-sighted men. He knew them all. In fact he was one of them.

James Joseph Eagan was born in Ireland in 1842, emigrated in 1848 with his family to the United States and arrived in Duluth in 1857. He fought in the Dakota War of 1862, then in the Civil War. Admitted to the bar on July 24, 1866, he was Duluth city attorney during the height of its battle with Superior. He served in the Minnesota House of Representatives, 1869-1870, and a second term, 1875-1876. He moved to St. Paul and was Ramsey County Attorney from 1879 to 1881. In 1890 he was elected to the Ramsey County District Court, but was defeated in a bid for re-election in 1896. His term expired in January 1897, and he returned to private practice. He died in St. Paul on January 9, 1911, at age sixty-eight.

Eagan's article on Duluth's successful "fight for supremacy" appeared on page 11 of the Sunday edition of the *News Tribune*. It is complete though reformatted.

DULUTH'S FIGHT FOR SUPREMACY

JUDGE J. J. EAGAN OF ST. PAUL,



Who Indulges in Personal Reminiscences of Duluth.

Judge J. J. Eagan of St. Paul Tells of the Early Days of the Zenith City and Those Responsible for Its Growth.
How It Got to the Front.

Come with me my friend from Old Superior across the bay to what is supposed to be Duluth. At the head of Minnesota Point we find Zac Brown, the sheriff of the county of St. Louis. He is married and has plenty of dogs and all the paraphernalia of frontier life of that time — 1868. We reach the United States land office about where Fourth avenue east now is. Hail, then, the foundation seat of your great city. Nettleton, Culver, Ray, Luce, Marvin, Carey, Saxton and Stuntz and one or two others constituted the entire population. They were all great men, plain men of iron constitution, good for a long and desperate fight.

The battle for Duluth supremacy was long and arduous. Superior was backed by Breckenridge of Kentucky, Steven (sic) A. Douglas, the Rices and others, influential politically and personally throughout the United States. Superior was to be the seat of empire. Duluth the voyageur planted his banner at the present site of your city and left it in the hands of the few stalwart warriors I have named. They fought the good fight, adding to their numbers soldiers long enured to battle, scarred with victories, such men as Jay Cook, Banning, Branch, James Smith Jr., and John M. Gilman. The arguments used then were about the same as used now.

“Build a city on that promontory? The swamp below is only fit to raise frogs. You have no harbor. Your railroad is not finished yet. You are dreaming.” These were the arguments used against Duluth.

Jay Cook came like an aetherial spirit from the clouds, went fishing down the North Shore, said that Duluth was to be the city and Duluth it was and is today.

Banning came next and the young Duluthian of today would have listened to Daniel Webster, Clay, James G. Blaine and other great orators, in hearing him portray the extreme riches of Europe landing at the docks of Duluth. The Pacific ocean was then drawn upon and the wealth of Japan and China landed at the Pacific end of the Northern Pacific railway and scattered in profusion among the millions of people in the great states and territories that lie in the intermediate country. Banning was a great man, afterwards Democratic candidate for governor.

The capability of the Suez canal were not fully dwelt upon. The contemplated road from Sault Ste. Marie to Hudson bay, the Canadian Pacific railway and other railways of Canada, the vast and more than vast riches in iron and the precious metals of the territory north of Duluth, were unknown and unheard of; the second railway to the Pacific coast, the Great Northern, not dreamt of.

The actualities of Duluth were being pressed with all the force and energy of the young and ardent soldiers of fortune who had come to Duluth to stay. Slate was being developed and sold at Thompson, Carleton county, to make it manifest that we could put slate roofing over the entire world. The lumber business to flow down the St. Louis river was made to guide itself in a canal or sluice-way down the waterway over and along the dales to Fond du Lac. A canal from Thompson to Frontenac was to be constructed and the wheat ground up for the people of the world.

Then one of the great iron kings, one of the Schoenburger's came to Duluth and started a blast furnace on Rice's point. Enthusiasm and glorification was at its height. Alex Barnum, brother of George Barnum, now of your city, had the contract of supplying wood. The blast furnace was in full operation, iron ore from Marquette, Houghton and Hancock came to be made into pig. England came to supply its quota. The Petries, descendants of Lord Petrie, started a sawmill on Rice's point near the entrance of Wisconsin point, facing the bay of St. Louis.

DeCosta, chief engineer of the Lake Superior railway, was in his glory, building the line from Thompson down to Duluth. It was a tortuous road to construct. Along the river banks of the St. Louis fronting the dales, with trestle work one hundred fifteen feet high, a small boat, with Canadian half breeds for oarsman, dressed in fantastic colors, moving up and down the bay with all the pride of an Asiatic race. DeCosta, sitting at the stern, seemed and was in truth, a monarch. A dark, stern, young man, tall and graceful in movement, wiry and active of limb, he seemed a second Pizarro or Cortez among the unwashed. He was covertly opposed to Duluth. He had a million contracts to let and built the Reading road.

When the road reached Rice's point he turned the tracks down the stretch of land to Wisconsin point for the ostensible purpose of receiving the engines for the railway. The ire of the people of Duluth was aroused, and hate and spleen manifested. The people claimed it meant Superior. DeCosta was removed and resigned.

These were perilous times, but the issue was watched by an intelligent people and Duluth stood forth triumphant. Duluth, the voyageur, left his name where it proudly stands today, Minnesota's monument to a united country.

The next greatest contention between the two cities was the canal. Wisconsin claimed she was aggrieved, that her property was, or would be destroyed, the property rights of her citizens impaired and her rival across the bay placed temporarily in control of what was destined to be the greatest city in the world. State courts held the litigation which compelled our citizens to go to St. Cloud, the

headquarters of the district. Then the state of Wisconsin showed her arms, and next came the United States of America to stop the city of Duluth from building the canal.

Duluth had to go to Topeka, Kansas, before Judges Miller and Dillon. For two weeks the battle waged in Kansas. A temporary injunction was allowed and Duluth received its first and severest knockout. J. J. Eagan, the then city attorney, came to St. Paul, and after a conference there, went to Washington. The plotting, counterplotting, the interviews with magnates of high and low degree, resulted here in an order from the department of justice to the Hon. C. K. Davis, United States district attorney, to dismiss the suit, on condition that the city of Duluth give a bond in the sum of \$100,000 to build a dyke across the bay of Superior to prevent the current of the St. Louis river going out the canal with a suitable passageway for vessels. Nettleton, Culver and others went on the bond, the dyke was completed and nothing serious has occurred since that time for fear or alarm.

Ray, Nettleton, Culver, Luce and Marvin, were the stalwarts behind your city in that terrible trying ordeal. J. D. Spalding, Hon. C. H. Graves, John C. Hunter, George G. Barnum, Hon. W. W. Billson, Judge Ensign, T. H. Paresnell and other whom I shall mention on some other occasion, gave sufficient aid. In conclusion, as an episode for young men:

“Dr. Foster was publishing the Minnesotian in Duluth. Nettleton agreed to give him to lots on Superior street as a bonus and donate to Ray and Luce other property, which was done. In the course of time, Foster turned against his friends politically. Then we looked around for another paper. We went across the bay and practically stole the Superior Tribune with its red-haired editor, and induced him to come over to Duluth. The entire outfit came in one night. In course of time, Mitchell, (by the way a good citizen) turned away from us and we had to look for another paper. DeUnger, of Delaware, or Maryland, came out with his whole family at our invitation and the Duluth Herald was started. That transferred its affections after a while, and one of the other papers turned around towards us. While the battle was raging and hard time reigned at Duluth, I moved back to St. Paul.”

The moral of this is: Look out for newspapers! Do not be owned any of them! Be liberal and judicious and the papers will take care of themselves.

Here's long life and prosperity to Duluth. Her greatness at the present time excites my admiration. The future with a prudent population is hers.

