

# “Early Experiences in Minnesota” (1923)

By

Knute Nelson

What follows are stories of the hardships Knute Nelson, a young lawyer recently discharged from service in the Army during the Civil war, faced when he moved with his family from Wisconsin, where he was a member of the bar, to Alexandria, the seat of Douglas County, Minnesota in 1871.

These stories were told by Nelson to an old friend, the editor of the *Alexandria Post News*. They were published in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* on April 29, 1923, the day after Nelson died at age eighty-one.<sup>1</sup> Nelson was United States Senator from Minnesota at the time he recalled these early years.

Nelson’s 42 page handwritten diary for the period 1843-1862 is in his paper at the Minnesota Historical Society.<sup>2</sup>

For articles on Nelson’s political career posted on this website, see Elmer E. Adams, “The Washburn-Nelson Senatorial Campaign of 1894-1895.” (MLHP, 2016) (published first, January 1924), and Elmer E. Adams, “Incidents in Knute Nelson’s Life” (MLHP, 2016) (published first, April 30, 1923).

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<sup>1</sup> *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, April 29, 1923, at 4.

<sup>2</sup> “Reminiscences, 1843-1862” in Box 75, Knute Nelson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

## Early Experiences in Minnesota

My first visit to Alexandria was in June, 1871. At that time I was practicing law in Wisconsin. My health had not been good since my return from the war. Old Dr. Fox, Senator Silas' father-in-law, frequently saw me. One day I told the doctor my story and asked his advice. He advised me to come to Minnesota. As a boy I had known Mr. Aaker, then living in Alexandria. He had been chairman of supervisors of the township in which our farm lay and had superintended the building of the road past our place. I came to Alexandria, and stayed a short time with Mr. Aaker's family. At the same time there was a man, and I have forgotten his name, who was also looking over the country.

### Drove to Riva Falls.

We both wanted to see as much as we could so we went to Tom's Sprague's livery and hired a team and a two seated rig to drive to Fergus Falls. That town had just been started. Mrs. Aaker had a sister living near there and she and her little daughter, Sophia, now Mrs. Steensland, accompanied us on the drive. On arriving at Fergus Falls we went to the hotel, a small frame building recently erected by "Uncle Bell," and unplastered. The only sleeping place was the second story, all in one room. In one corner was a bed, currently curtained off, which was assigned to Mrs. Aaker and her little girl. In another corner was a similar curtained bed which was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Bell. The remaining space was the school "school section," were there were other beds. On the

lower floor were the office, dining room and kitchen. We drove Mrs. Aaker out to her sister's in the morning.

After looking over the new town, we returned to Alexandria. I liked Fergus Falls very much and was undecided whether to locate there or at Alexandria. The land office was here, and that excited me. There was little law practice in those days and I thought I might get some work on land cases. I returned to Wisconsin, reaching home, I think the day before the Fourth of July.

### Sold Furniture.

I sold what little furniture we had and collected what money I could and took some notes. I had been fairly successful for a beginner. With my wife and son, Henry, was a baby, I started for Alexandria. Fearing that we might have trouble securing living rooms, we left our little daughter, Ida, with my mother. On arriving at St. Paul we were told that our best plan would be to buy tickets to Morris, then the end of that branch of the railroad, as that was nearer to Alexandria than St. Cloud, the end of the other branch. This we did. We found on reaching Benson that only a mixed train ran to Morris and that there was no stage from that point to Alexandria. We got our supper in Benson and boarded the stage for Alexandria. We drove to Glenwood that night and stayed at the old Pettijohn hotel until morning. We arrived in Alexandria the next morning about 11 o'clock. I think the eighteenth of August.

We stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Aaker for about two weeks before finding a house to move into. We then

secured the old Sang house, a little three room house, a mere shell, which stood just back of the present LeRoy hardware store. It later became known as the "Jack Plymat house." house. In the meantime I opened an office with old Judge Ruben Reynolds. The judge occupied the front rooms on the second floor of a building which stood about where the First National bank now stands. The rear rooms were occupied by L. K. Aaker, register of the United States land office. I had told Mr. Aaker that I should like to take a homestead near Alexandria, if possible. One day he came into the office and said that there was 120 acres of rather rough land just outside of town that was available. This was a claim which L. W. Kilbourn had taken and which, when final proof was attempted, and been cancelled, without any contest, for lack of improvement. I filed on the land.

### Right to Land Contested.

Mr. Kilbourn, who was away, returned and contested my right to the land. There was a small shanty, about 14 x 18 feet in size, on the place. This shanty was sided, with inch basswood boards, lapped like siding. It was boarded up on the inside with the same kind of lumber. This lumber had been put on green and had seasoned, leaving large cracks. We moved into this shanty in October, after papering the walls with old newspapers. Before moving to the shanty I had bought a big cook stove of Jake Austin, who was going to move to Fergus Falls.

That was a severe winter. Mr. Kilbourn had cut off a good many saw logs near the shanty and left the tops.

These were dried and not hard to make into firewood. As long as we could keep plenty of wood we could keep warm and many is the night I would sit up half the night firing, and my wife the other half in order to keep warm. In the spring I cleared a small piece southwest of the shanty and George Gardner broke it up with a big team of oxen. I planted a garden and raised some of the best watermelons, I ever saw. I also dug a well in the edge of a small slough southeast of the house and built a small log stable for a cow. The stable was just across the road which ran near the corner of the house.

### Winter Comes Early.

The following winter came early. That was the winter of the great January storm. I had been elected county attorney that fall and the day the storm commenced the county commissioners were in session. It was customary those days for the county attorney to sit with the commissioners. I brought a lunch with me and didn't get through to start for home until about six o'clock. The road past my shanty was only a winter trail cut through the timber and brush. It was piled two feet deep with snow and I was more than an hour getting home. After resting I dug my way to the stable and cared for the cow and then dug my way back to the wood piles and secured a good supply for the night, then closed up the shanty.

The next morning was intensely cold. I again dug a way to the stable, carrying in an abundance of hay. On making my way to the well, I found it drifted full and covered deep. I had to carry in and melt snow for the cow and for the house. I again cleared a way to the wood

piles and carried into the shanty a big supply. I did not get to town that day. The next day was very cold but the wind had gone down and I went to town.

### Pays Tribute to Wife.

I had planned to build on the claim the next summer, but the contest was not settled. Mr. Kilbourn took it before the land commissioner who refused to reopen the case. He then carried it to the secretary of the interior who, upon investigation, also refused to take the matter up. This all took time, and it was three years, before I built what is now the ell to my present house. Magnus Lungren of this city and Otto Dahl, formally of Carlos, did the carpenter work.

Well, there were some other advantages living in the shanty. I could not buy furniture because there was no place to put it. There was not much law practice but I got ahead a little. I promised Mr. Kilbourn to pay him one hundred dollars for the shanty if I won. Mr. Kilbourn came [with the] quit claim deed and [I] gave him his \$100. Our worst times were during the summer months. The brush came up close to the shanty; there were lots a little slough's and the mosquitoes and heat were terrible. There were only two little windows, the old-fashioned eight-by-ten half sash each. The only way to open them was to take them out. Many women would have found fault but my wife took all those hardships of the pioneer days a matter of course.