

Migration from Vermont

by Sarah Rooker

I have once more resumed my pen, though far away among strangers in a strange land, to let you know that I am well and have not forgotten you begins one of the many letters written home to Vermont and New Hampshire from the West. Sarah Town, from Franklin, Vermont, went on to describe her journey to Will County, Illinois, in 1846. That journey took her through New York by canal boat and then across the Great Lakes on a steamer loaded with 1,000 passengers heading west.

The 1830s and 1840s saw the first widespread "western fever" in Vermont and New Hampshire. Emigrants were moving to southern Michigan, northern Illinois, and southeastern Wisconsin—a "next step" from the 1820s migrations to New York and central and southern Ohio. One early New Hampshire emigrant, Eleazar Jewett, was the first permanent white settler in Saginaw Valley, Michigan. He ran a trading post for the American Fur Company and later kept a ferry. In 1831 he met and married Azubah Miller, who had traveled with her mother from Hartland, Vermont. They settled in Green Point, Michigan, in a very isolated log cabin.

What pushed so many west? In 1811 William Jarvis introduced Merino sheep into Vermont, leading to a fairly rapid change in farming practices: Many farms were consolidated as it became more profitable to raise sheep on a larger scale. This put smaller farmers out of business. By 1837 there were over one million sheep in Vermont providing wool to the large textile mills in Massachusetts and to over 100 smaller mills in Vermont. Windsor County was one of four in the state that counted 200 sheep per square mile. From 1829 to 1835, the average flock size throughout New Hampshire was 500-1,000 head. Walpole, N.H., recorded 20,000 sheep.

The booming wool industry created disparities in wealth as the demand for larger acreage increased land prices. Not everyone could afford a farm and the 1830s saw many young would-be northern New England farmers heading west. "Beware of the 'western fever' and above all, sell not your farms to your rich neighbors for sheep pastures," warned Windsor's newspaper, the *Green Mountaineer*, in 1834. While some Vermont and New Hampshire farmers prospered, the sheep and wool boom was short-lived and its longer-term consequences were damaging. Environmental degradation, primarily deforestation, and the collapse of the local industry in the 1840s as a result of cheaper western wool and the end of the tariff, both accelerated westward migration from the region.

While fluctuating land values and the difficulties of making a living at farming pushed people to leave, the lure of better economic opportunities out west and in regional textile mills pulled people from Vermont. The *Vermont Chronicle* lamented, "Within a few weeks the daughters of Vermont have passed by our doors by the score at a time, to be employed in factory work in another state." In 1846 there were 1,200 Vermont girls in the mills of Lowell alone. Letters from the mill girls describe their working and living conditions. Mary Paul wrote to her father in Barnard that all the girls living with her were from Vermont. She was enthusiastic about her new life, saying "I think the factory is the best place for me and if any girl wants

employment I advise them to come to Lowell." (Mary Paul to her Father, Bela Paul, 1845.) In New Hampshire, the Amoskeag mills also drew many farm girls. The many letters written home from the West were also enthusiastic, describing the climate as milder and healthier and the land as cheap, fertile, easy to clear, and, most important, flat:

I should think that a man in Vermont would be sick of home if he was to be here one season and work over the soil. we do not have to travel on side hills where we have get hold of the twigs of trees to hold footing-one mile here on the prairie is not so much to travil over as a half mile is there up and down the hills. (John Petrie, Greggsville, Illinois, to Eli English, Hartland, Vermont, 1838.)

It was not unusual for migrants from New England to move from place to place before settling down. The example of Heman Rice Gibbs, a native of Jericho, Vermont, and his family is instructive. Gibbs left Vermont for LaPorte County, Indiana, in 1837 at age 22, where he farmed and was a teacher. He then went to Wisconsin and worked as a miner for six years, eventually meeting his wife, Jane Debow, in Illinois. In 1849 Gibbs took his new bride to the Minnesota Territory, and they became the first white settlers in an area marked by crossing trails used by Dakotah Indians. They sunk their roots there and Gibbs became a successful farmer and leading citizen, serving in various local offices and writing for the newspaper. The house Gibbs built supposedly resembled the family home back in Jericho. Still sitting on its original site, the house is now the Gibbs Museum of Pioneer and Dakotah Life in St. Paul. Not coincidentally, one of Gibbs' brothers also settled in Minnesota, a sister settled in the same Illinois town where he had met his wife, and his own son married a woman from Vermont.¹ Chain migration and association with people of similar backgrounds were common features of the migration experience.

Gold also drew Vermonters to the West. By 1850, 11,000 Vermonters had reached California, many bound for the gold mines. Most of those headed to California to seek their fortune traveled in groups, often a dozen or more men together. It appears that most opted for the sea route around Cape Horn or the water-and-land journey across Central America at Panama or Nicaragua rather than the 3,000-mile trek across the continent-though those trips were considerably more expensive. Nearly a dozen such groups of Vermonters going to California from Caledonia County between 1849 and 1855 have been documented, numbering more than 200 men. In addition to searching for gold, they kept stores, ran hotels, shipped freight, and found other types of work that were often more profitable than mining. Some of them made good money, some of them failed miserably, some died out west, and a few of them stayed in California. But most of these men returned to Vermont. Interestingly, of three companies of these Caledonia men studied in depth by historian Lynn Bonfield, almost half of those who returned to Vermont resettled their families to the Midwest before the Civil War.²

Vermonters already living in the Midwest also moved on to California. Dennis Townsend had previously moved from Montpelier to Illinois but was not content to stay. In an 1852 letter to his sister Aurelia, he wrote:

I am bound for another country. It will take about three weeks for me to get ready and then "Ho for California." It is thought by some that there will be suffering on the plains this season

in consequence of the great tide of immigration to the gold region. I shall take my chance with the rest.

This leapfrogging across the country can make it hard to figure out how many from Vermont and New Hampshire were actually at the western gold mines. An 1870 census analysis of Montana revealed 227 men born in Vermont and New Hampshire with 42 living in Virginia City near gold mines. In Virginia City, 10 were married with children born in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Utah, revealing a typical pattern of multiple migrations. The slavery question also provided a pull for migration west. Kansas emigration societies were formed in Montpelier, Rutland, and Randolph, Vermont, as well as Sutton and Londonderry, New Hampshire. Rutland's Vermont Kansas Relief Company was formed "for mutual defense and protection" to aid emigrants to Kansas and funds were devoted solely to "men of good character." Money was raised as well as by the Vermont legislature, which passed an appropriation to help Kansas pioneers. Clarina Howard Nichols, editor of the Windham County Democrat and a vocal proponent of abolition and woman suffrage, moved to Kansas in 1853 to be on the front lines of the antislavery struggle. Some years later she was instrumental in Kansas becoming one of the first states to allow women to vote in local elections.

Other colonies and emigration societies were also formed. In the fall of 1835, the Rev. Sylvester Cochrane, a Congregational minister from Vermont, visited Michigan for the purpose of locating there permanently. Struck by the sparseness of population, he returned to Vermont to sell the idea of establishing a colony comprised of New England citizens within the township. He successfully convinced 42 families to join in, and in 1836 the first groups arrived, forming Vermontville, Michigan. Today, Vermontville is best known for its annual Maple Syrup Festival, the original maple sugar event in the state of Michigan!

By the 1880s, only 58% of native-born Vermonters actually lived in Vermont and the total population had grown only a little since the Civil War, with rural communities actually declining in numbers. This demographic stagnation, combined with increased numbers of immigrants in the more urban communities, raised anxiety among Vermont's leaders. The state Board of Agriculture published pamphlets aimed at attracting new owners for abandoned hill farms and promoted the idea of summer boarding at farms. New Hampshire's Governor Frank Rollins invented Old Home Week in 1899 as a way to rescue the state. "Come back, come back!" Rollins wrote in 1897. "Do you not hear the call? What has become of the old home where you were born? Do you not remember it—the old farm back among the hills, with its rambling buildings, its well sweep casting its long shadows, the row of stiff poplar trees, the lilacs and the willows?"

Hundreds of letters written home from the West survive in the Vermont and New Hampshire Historical Society archives as well as in the archives of local communities. They describe treks across the Panama Isthmus, encounters with Native Americans on the Oregon Trail, life at the gold mines, and breaking the prairie. Many of the letter writers encouraged their families and neighbors to join them in a land with a healthy climate, cheap real estate, abundant resources, easily plowed soil, and more profitable markets. Join them they did.

Footnotes:

¹ Charles Morrissey, "The Road West," *Vermont History News* 35 (September-October 1984): 103-105.

² Lynn A. Bonfield, "Ho for California! Caledonia County Gold Miners," *Vermont History* 74 (Winter/Spring 2006): 5-47.

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