

THOREAU.. in Wisconsin.



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Madison Arborist*

Concord, Massachusetts was the center of the universe for the world's most famous naturalist, but he saw Milwaukee and Madison and was impressed by Prairie du Chien.

It is not generally known that Henry David Thoreau at the end of his life made a sad and desperate pilgrimage through Wisconsin. Thoreau came here seeking a cure, just before he succumbed to tuberculosis on May 6, 1862 in the same bed where his father had died of the same disease, years before. Though the trip was haunted by his impending tragedy, somehow it seems historically appropriate for Thoreau to have visited the land that nurtured Lapham, Muir and Leopold.

Thoreau was an originator of worldwide movements. The science of ecology, the British Labor Party and the ideas for civil disobedience that later freed India and inspired Martin Luther King all grew out of his philosophy. The story of its development is a tale of exacting scientific observation, moral courage and strong character.

His friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson described Thoreau this way, "He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the state; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. ...His senses were acute, his frame well knit and hardy, his hands strong and skillful in the use of tools. There was a wonderful fitness of body and mind... He was a good swimmer, runner, skater, boatman and would probably outwalk most countrymen in a day's journey."

Thoreau made judgments and expressed them, which was often disconcerting. Most were based on what he had learned at Concord and Walden

Pond. "I have traveled widely in Concord," he loved to say.

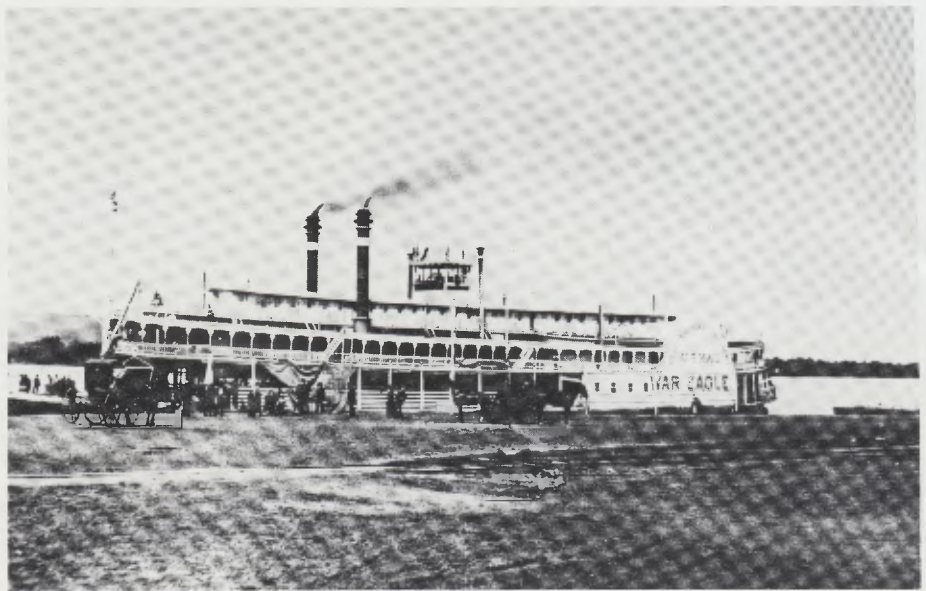
But when Thoreau came to the Midwest, it was on the advice of doctors who said his best hope for life was a change of climate. Although famous spas in this part of the country were to come later, the Upper Mississippi River Region had a reputation as health-giving and therapeutic.

Thoreau asked two of his best friends, Ellery Channing and Harrison Blake, to be travelling companions, but they were unable to accompany him. However, Horace Mann, Jr., 17-year-old son of the famed educator, was eager to accompany Thoreau, and did.

They set out by rail on May 11, 1861. First stop was at Niagara Falls, then Chicago. From Chicago they continued by train across northern Illinois to the Mississippi River town of Dunleith, now named East Dubuque. On May 23rd the pair boarded the stern-wheeler *Itasca* and headed upstream past Wisconsin's river towns to the St. Anthony-Minneapolis-St. Paul area. They spent about three weeks there exploring the prairies and woods, reading local histories in the Minneapolis libraries and making new acquaintances. From June 5th to June 14th they stayed at a private boarding house owned by a Mrs. Hamilton at Lake Calhoun, just west of Minneapolis.

On the 17th, they took a week-long excursion on the Minnesota River aboard *The Franklin Steele*. Upstream at Redwood, they observed the Sioux

This was probably the place Thoreau and Horace Mann stayed while in Prairie du Chien.



The river steamer *War Eagle*. After completing his journey through Minnesota and Wisconsin, Thoreau traveled from Red Wing, Minnesota to Prairie du Chien aboard this paddle wheeler.

Indian council, where native Americans gathered at the Indian Agency to receive the annual government payment. Thoreau and Mann then went back to St. Paul and headed down the Mississippi to Red Wing, Minnesota, where they stopped a couple days (June 25th and 26th) to identify plants along the river bluffs. On the 27th their river steamer, the *War Eagle*, arrived in Prairie du Chien.

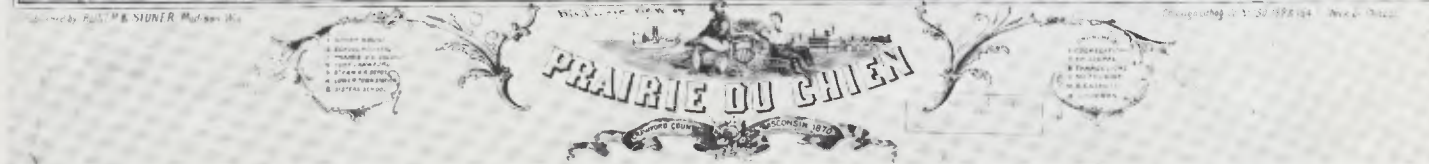
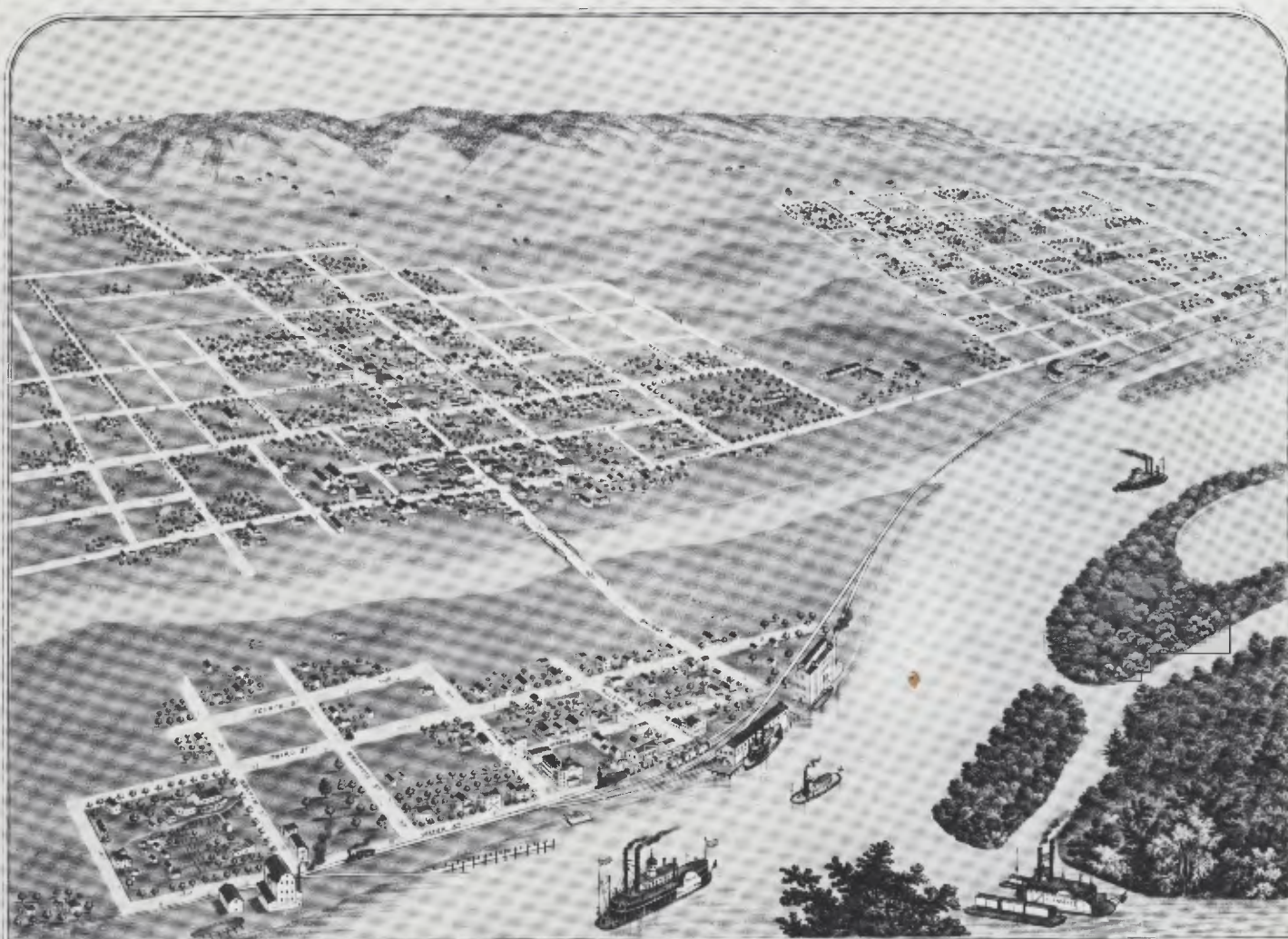
Next morning, the pair boarded a train for Milwaukee. Their route went along the Wisconsin River and through Whitewater and Palmyra. On the 28th they boarded the propeller ship *Edith*, made one more brief stop in Wisconsin at Sheboygan and then continued

home via Mackinaw City, Toronto and New York state.

Thoreau died within ten months of his return to Concord. He never had time to write up the Wisconsin trip for his journal. It has been left to scholarship to reveal his comments and speculate about his impressions of the great American interior. But Thoreau kept a notebook with the thought of later developing a complete account and in addition, Horace Mann, Jr. was prolific in writing home to his mother. From these two sources, edited by Thoreau scholar Walter Harding, we get a glimpse of Wisconsin and the Upper Mississippi as experienced by this most notable tourist.

The 93 pages of Thoreau's travel notebook are filled with observations of the natural world, plus occasional insightful comments about local people. When he first saw the Mississippi River on May 24th he wrote "Bluffs, say 150 to 200 feet high. Rarely room for a village at base of cliffs. Oaks on top (white?) ash, elm, aspen. Bass on slope by shore. Kingfishers, small ducks, swallows, jays, etc... Holes in side of hill at Cassville, Wisconsin, where lead has been dug. Occasionally a little lonely house on a flat or slope is often deserted. Banks in primitive condition between the towns..." While passing Prairie du Chien on the way upstream, he refers to it as "the smartest town on the river. Exports the most wheat of any town between St. Paul and St. Louis. Wheat in sacks.





A bird's-eye view of Prairie du Chien about the time of Thoreau's visit.

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Great heaps at Prairie du Chien, covered at night and all over the ground and only the seed wheat."

Of the local botany and birds, he noted "at Prairie du Chien, *Pulsatilla nuttalliana* (pasque flower) out of flower. Very large. *Viola pedata* (bird-foot violet) also. Possibly a white variety of same without marks on the petal. Hoary puccoon or alkanet (*Lithospermum canescens*) yellow flowered. Root used to dye red by Indians."

The only thing he has to say about La Crosse as the boat steamed by the next day, May 25th, is "white pine began half a dozen miles above La Crosse, a few." But rather than feeling slighted, La Crosse should take pride that Thoreau would associate it with his most loved of plants. He had an

almost mystical affinity for that species and once wrote, "It is as immortal as I and perchance will rise to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still."

Thoreau's notebook continues, "Fountain City about noon. Bluffs further apart and channels more numerous than yesterday. Two or three miles from bluff to bluff. Take wood boat along with us. Oaks commonly open on hills. Indians encamped below Wabashaw [sic] with Dacotah [sic] shaped wigwams. Loon on lake and fish leap. Every town has a wharf with a storage building or several, and as many hotels as anything, and commission merchants — 'Storage, Forwarding and Commission' — one or all of these words on the most prominent buildings close to the waterside. Perhaps a heap of sacks filled with wheat on the natu-

ral quay or levee close by... The steamer whistles, then strikes its bell about six times funerally [sic] and with a pause after the 3rd and you see the whole village making haste to the landing — commonly the raw, stony or sandy shore... The postmaster with his bag, the passengers, and almost every dog and pig in the town of commonly one narrow street under the bluff and back yards at angles of about 45° with the horizon. If there is more flat space between the water and the bluff, it is almost sure to be occupied by a flourishing and larger town."

Upon arrival in Minneapolis, Thoreau made good use of Wisconsin literature from the library. His notebook quotes articles from *Transactions of the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society*. Included is one by

Increase A. Lapham on the "Fauna and Flora of Wisconsin;" another by Joseph Bowron on native American use of wild rice; and a third by P. R. Hoy entitled "Notes on the Ornithology of Wisconsin."

While at Mrs. Hamilton's boarding house on Lake Calhoun, Thoreau searched diligently to locate a cluster of wild apple trees. He later wrote an essay titled "Wild Apples" in which he describes the plight of the wild apple struggling against the encroachment of civilization. As expected, the excursion to Redwood, where he saw the Sioux receive their government dole, aroused his compassion for the Native Americans. Though he mentions the event only tersely in his travel notebook, later commentary to his New England friend Franklin B. Sanborn, describes the Sioux gathering in greater detail:

"A regular council was held with the Indians, who had come on their ponies, and speeches were made on both sides thro' an interpreter, quite in the described mode; the Indians, as usual having the advantage in point of truth and earnestness and therefore of eloquence. The most prominent chief was named Little Crow. They were quite dissatisfied with the white man's treatment of them and probably have reason to be so."

A letter written to Sanborn after the trip lists government dignitaries aboard *The Franklin Steele*. There were "also a German band from St. Paul, a small cannon for salutes, and money for the Indians (aye and the gamblers, it was said, who were to bring it back in another boat)."

Another typical Thoreau note about the sternwheeler's name: "Franklin Steele in 1837, first white man that 'flashed his axe in the unbroken wilderness' and commenced improvements in Minnesota."

On June 27, Thoreau and Mann — having travelled down the Mississippi from Red Wing, Minnesota, in the steamboat *War Eagle* disembarked at Prairie du Chien. Thoreau is unusually terse, even for him, in describing his day-long train ride across Wisconsin:

"Reach Prairie du Chien about 9 A.M., the 27th.

"By cars to Milwaukee. 1st 60 miles up the valley of the Wisconsin which looked broad and shallow. Bluffs two or three miles apart. Great abundance of tall spiderwort, also red lily, *Rudbeckia* (cone-flower), blue flag, white and yellow lily and white water ranunculus

(crowfoot), abundance of mullein in Wisconsin. Madison, capital and its four lakes.

"June 28.

"By propeller ship *Edith* to Mackinaw City, Michigan. Milwaukee best harbor on lake of settled places and shoal and rocky at south end of lake... 28th at evening leave Sheboygan and steam northeast to Carp River."

Fortunately, young Horace Mann had a little more to say about their train ride across Wisconsin. In a letter dated "Milwaukee and Prairie du Chien Railroad, 3:40 P.M., June 27," he wrote:

Dear Mother

As I am writing while the cars are going, I cannot do it up very well, but I will try to make it readable.

We left Red Wing yesterday at about 2 P.M. on the steamer *War Eagle* and arrived in Prairie du Chien at 8 A.M. today. The train for Milwaukee did not leave till 10 o'clock so we had to wait a while. It is rather cooler today than we have had for some time so it is very comfortable travelling. We passed through Madison at 1:30 P.M. and shall arrive in Milwaukee at 6 o'clock this evening. If we can find a boat going to Mackinaw we shall take it immediately, if not, we shall wait till one does go, which will be in the course of a day anyhow, I suppose. There has been a riot in Milwaukee of which I suppose you have read long before this, but the Milwaukee paper says today that the city is quiet.* [Mann wrote in the margin beside this paragraph, "Stopping at Whitewater."]

For the first 60 or 70 miles of travel today we kept in the valley of the Wisconsin River, which we crossed three times. It is a broad, very shallow river, with a sandy bottom; full of sand bars, many of which are bare at low water as is the case now. The prairies in the river bottom where they were not cultivated were covered with flowers, among which were the spiderwort, the wild tiger lily, the yellow puccoon, &c The marshy ponds are full of white lilies in bloom. We have not come through any large prairies today, it being mostly marshy meadows for the low ground and oak openings for the higher ground. The red-wing blackbird is the most common bird there is all along the track in the marshes. You may think that I can write better, but I cannot, for this is one of the roughest roads I ever rode over. Madison is a very pretty place I should think and the lakes which surround it (stopping at Palmyra) are very beautiful. The state

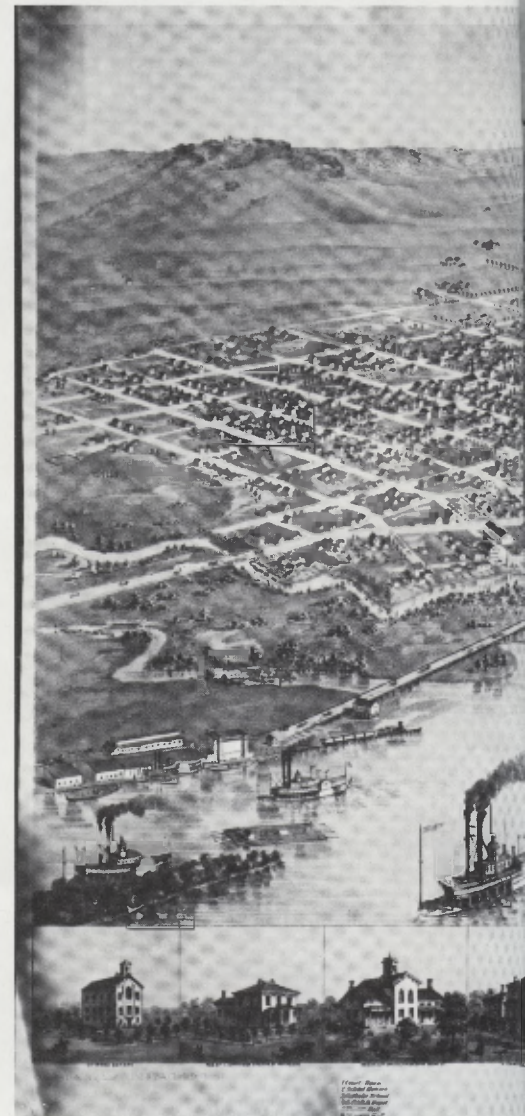
house is a large building standing on a rise of ground near the track as we enter the city; it is built out of dark, cream-colored limestone, which can be quarried all over that section of the state. I have nothing more to say now, so goodbye.

From your loving son
Horace Mann.

With a 17-year-old son so far from home, naturally Mrs. Mann worried. Young Horace's responses were typical teen. In a June 23rd letter to her, he wrote:

"I have received four letters from you today the first one being mailed on June 10 and the last on June 20.

In answer to your letter of June 10 I do not know as I have anything to say, it being mostly about the war. To your letter of June 15th, I will say that we have heard some account of the Big Bethel affair. Also that my hunting fibres will not get tired out while I am gone, nor



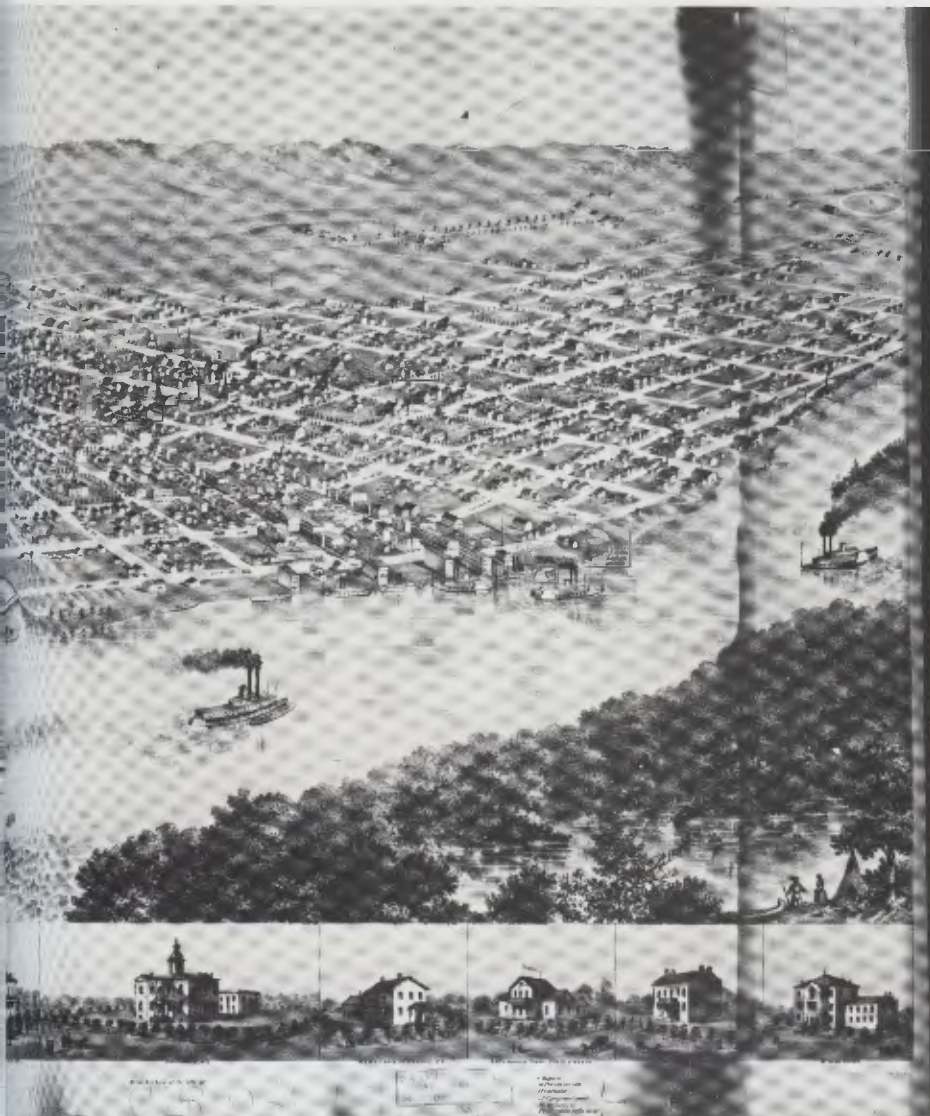
come any where near it; and next that I have not had time lately to study Greek, as I thought it was acting like a fool to travel round and go to new places and not see any of them or get any specimens from them on account of the Greek. And as we have not been stationery in any one place long, and while we were I wanted to be collecting Animals, Plants and Minerals, I thought I had better let the Greek go..."

By July 10, 1861, Thoreau was back in Concord having cut short his vacation by a month. His health continued to deteriorate. On his deathbed in the familiar surroundings of his family home in Concord, he greeted visitors who came to say their last goodbyes. When asked by the town minister if he had made his peace with God, Thoreau replied "I did not know that we had ever quarreled." He was buried with an eulogy by Emerson. Concord school



Of the local botany, Thoreau noted the pasque flower: "very large, without marks on the petal." Photo by Dean Tvedt

Thoreau fondly associated La Crosse with the white pine, his most beloved tree and one he saw as a symbol of eternity.



children strewed wild flowers on his coffin.

Horace Mann went on to attend Harvard College and graduated with a degree in Botany. He made some contributions to the science, but strangely enough, at the age of 27 also succumbed to tuberculosis to complete the tragic cycle of the Thoreau journey to Wisconsin. ☐

*The riots occurred when merchants and manufacturers paid workers with questionable currency issued by state banks. This money was backed by bonds from the confederate states and the Civil War had started two months earlier. Workers marched to the bank and demanded to know whether their money was good. Forty arrests were made. The payoff in questionable currency occurred after competing private bankers publicized the state bank bond holdings, and businessmen, worried they'd be stuck with worthless money, used it to pay employees.

Illustrations courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.