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BISHOP IRELAND'S Connemara Experiment

JAMES P. SHANNON

IN THE DECADE immediately following the Civil War, leaders in Minnesota who hoped to attract new settlers to the young state had the advantage of knowing in detail how states farther east had managed to control and direct the westward migrations of the 1840s and 1850s. Hence in the 1870s when Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul proposed the opening of several Catholic colonies on railroad land in western Minnesota, he was in reality following a plan which had already been tried and proved by the state of Wisconsin and by such enterprising railroads as the Illinois Central and the Northern Pacific.¹

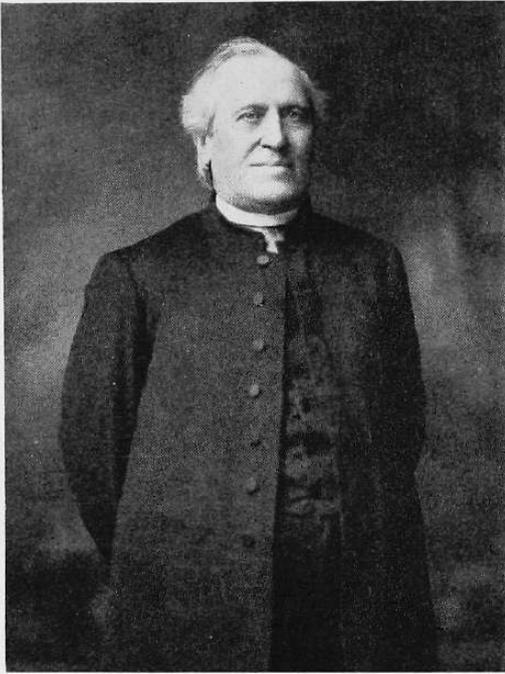
Ireland's settlement program, begun in 1875 and concluded in 1881, was the most extensive and successful wholesale Catholic colonization effort in American history and deserves comparison with the more famous Mormon project in Utah. Unfortunately, that portion of Ireland's program which has been most discussed and publicized—the failure of the Connemara group at

Graceville in Big Stone County—is in reality an insignificant part of the story of Catholic colonization in Minnesota.

It is, of course, undeniable that the twenty-four families of destitute peasants brought directly from Connemara in County Galway, Ireland, to Minnesota by Bishop Ireland in the spring of 1880 were almost complete failures on the land. It is regrettable, however, that the dramatic overtones in the failure of the Connemaras have proved too great a temptation to many writers. There is something peculiarly attractive about the narration of misfortune. When it is used in the writing of history, this human fascination with calamity has often produced startling but distorted and inaccurate portrayals.

One recent example of this type of history erroneously calls the Connemara incident typical of the "failure" which marked all the Catholic colonies in Minnesota, but does not indicate that the Connemara group constituted only a tiny fraction of the four thousand families who settled in the Catholic colonies of Minnesota and stayed to become successful farmers. The work in question dismisses the entire Minnesota project of Bishop Ireland in three sentences: "John Ireland . . . did not get very far [in the work of colonization], be-

¹ Paul W. Gates, *The Illinois Central Railroad and Its Colonization Work, 188-194* (Cambridge, 1934); Theodore C. Blegen, "The Competition of the Northwestern States for Immigrants," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 3:4-13 (September, 1920); James B. Hedges, "The Colonization Work of the Northern Pacific Railroad," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 13:311 (December, 1926).



BISHOP *John Ireland*

cause by then it was too late. . . . In 1880 he induced three hundred fishermen from Donegal to migrate to Minnesota, where it is hardly surprising that they proved failures as farmers. What should have been done was not to bring over more immigrants from Ireland but to induce those already in the great cities to settle on the land." The true story is quite different from this account.²

EARLY IN 1880, when the effects of the crop failure of 1879 were beginning to be felt in the poorer districts of western Ireland, one Irish pastor in Galway wrote to Father James Nugent, a prominent social reformer and Irish leader in Liverpool: "This locality is not fit for human habitation. Not more than a third of the present population can live in any sort of comfort on the land." In answer to this and similar pleas, Nugent solicited contributions from his friends in Liverpool and crossed over to the West of Ireland to distribute the alms thus collected. Unfortunately, his resources were not sufficient to relieve the distress

he found there, and "He decided that something radical was needed, that the country was growing less able year by year to support its population."³

He found some Irish families paying an annual rent of five pounds for three- or five-acre plots so wretched that they afforded the tenants nothing more than a place to live. He reasoned that if means could be found to evacuate a hundred of these families, the remaining residents of the Connemara district of Galway would be able to survive by dividing the meager land holdings of those who had emigrated. He wrote to Bishops Ireland of St. Paul and James O'Connor of Omaha to ask if fifty such families could be sponsored in Minnesota and fifty in Nebraska. O'Connor replied that he could not accept destitute families in his Nebraska settlements. Ireland wrote Nugent that it was contrary to all the rules of successful colonization to accept indigent settlers and doubly dangerous to accept persons who were not accustomed to farm life in America. Before refusing Nugent's request, however, he appealed to the people of Minnesota, through the columns of the *Northwestern Chronicle*, for financial help to underwrite the cost of bringing fifty Irish families to western Minnesota. This appeal brought in five thousand dollars.⁴

With more optimism than this modest sum warranted, and assured by several railroads that his Connemaras would be transported without charge from Boston to St. Paul, Ireland cabled Nugent to send fifty families to Boston. In 1879 the Catholic Colonization Bureau of St. Paul, the organization administering Ireland's settlement project, had secured an option on

² Theodore Maynard, *The Catholic Church and the American Idea*, 121 (New York, 1953).

³ Humphrey Moynihan, "Archbishop Ireland's Colonies," in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:221 (October, 1934); Edward K. Bennett, *Father Nugent of Liverpool*, 101 (Liverpool, 1949).

⁴ *Northwestern Chronicle*, March 20, 1880. The *Chronicle* was the official paper of the diocese of St. Paul from 1866 to 1900.

fifty thousand acres of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad's land grant in Big Stone and Traverse counties and a promise of lenient credit terms from James J. Hill. Ireland was thus in a position to promise each of the Irish families a generous credit plan for the purchase of its own farm at an average price of four dollars an acre. The bishop instructed Major Ben Thompson, his agent in Big Stone County, to reserve fifty farms of 160 acres each for these settlers, and to build a small frame house and break five acres of sod for each farm.⁵

THE CONNEMARAS, "three hundred and nine in number, not one of whom probably had ever put his hand to a plough, embarked on board the 'Austrian' at the port of Galway," on June 11, 1880, and landed at Boston on June 22. Dillon

⁵ Catholic Colonization Bureau of St. Paul, *Catholic Colonization in Minnesota*, 45 (Revised Edition, St. Paul, 1879); *Northwestern Chronicle*, January 15, 1876; John P. O'Connor to M. J. McDonnell, March 29, 1889, St. Paul Chancery Archives, Diocesan Letters, 1888-89, p. 105; Sister Mary Evangela Henthorne, *The Irish Catholic Colonization Association of the United States*, 109, 111 (Champaign, Illinois, 1932).

⁶ Moynihan, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:221; Thomas D. O'Brien, "Dillon O'Brien," in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:50 (October, 1933). This account was written by O'Brien's son and was based on family reminiscences of the older man's private remarks on the settlers from Connemara.

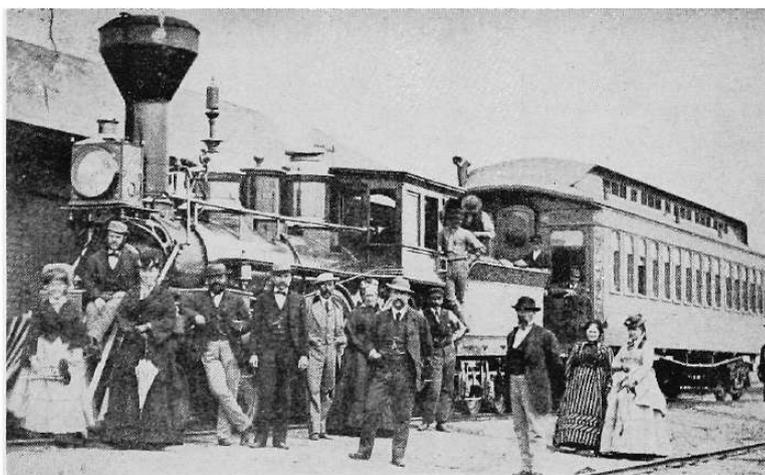
⁷ Henthorne, *Catholic Colonization*, 110.

O'Brien, executive secretary of the colonization bureau, met the ship at Boston and escorted the group to Minnesota. At the sight of the destitute emigrant band, his worst fears were confirmed, and his son later wrote that "the kindly but visionary Father Nugent . . . [had chosen] from the most congested districts not the competent but the incompetent; not the industrious but the shiftless; a group composed of mendicants who knew nothing of farming, and were entirely unfitted to cope with life upon the American prairie."⁶

O'Brien was careful, however, not to express his fears about the group's future, and he confidently predicted to a newspaper reporter, "It does look bad, but I'll wager a new hat that before twenty years some of these same people will come to Boston dressed in broadcloth; that they put up at your best hotel and eat at the best table in the house." In spite of his confident prediction, O'Brien's fears were to be realized within twenty months, not twenty years.⁷

In Chicago, O'Brien and his charges were met by William J. Onahan, secretary of the St. Patrick's Society in that city, who provided them with warm meals and some new clothing. Onahan was appalled at the poverty and suffering which were evident in these people: "The famine was visible in their pinched and emaciated faces, and

OPENING the Morris line of the St. Paul and Pacific, 1873



in the shriveled limbs — they could scarcely be called legs and arms — of the children. Their features were quaint, and the entire company was squalid and wretched. It was a painful revelation to all who witnessed it.”⁸

In a private letter to Bishop O’Connor, Onahan promptly voiced his doubts about the fitness of the Connemara group for western settlement, and warned the bishop to be prepared for further pleas from Father Nugent on behalf of other such contingents from Ireland: “Father Nugent is not content to rest with the one experiment of fifty families of the Connemara people he lately sent over.⁹ He is eager to send the other 50 to Nebraska and he writes me pressing strongly for cooperation. I had my share of trouble with the Minnesota contingent, nearly 300 in number, last week, and though I would not shirk any duty in regard to aiding my poor countrymen I most sincerely hope I shall have no such task again. A more wretched lot of people I never saw, and their condition at home must have been deplorable. I would not care to say publicly but I am convinced they would ruin the prospects of any colony into which they would find an entrance. I do not wish to give the reasons for this opinion — they would not be to the credit of the Connemara Emigrants. Despite these convictions I applaud Fr. Nugent for his work and Bp. Ireland for his cooperation. For these people any change is a boon and a blessing and it is God’s work to help them. If land can be obtained for them apart from the colonies and aid given them as in the late experiment, well and good. I write this as likely Fr. Nugent will address you on the subject. We can get plenty of emigrants from Ireland . . . who, besides possessing means, will also have the other necessary qualities — which I am sorry to say the late emigrants seem to be wholly lacking.”¹⁰

DELEGATIONS of citizens met O’Brien and his band of immigrants in St. Paul, and

Bishop Ireland secured employment in the city for forty-five young men and thirty-five young women. Very likely the latter were mostly employed as domestics. When the main body of the settlers reached Graceville, Bishop Ireland instructed each of the families already established in the colony to take one immigrant family into its home until all the new homes were completed. There the friction started. Several of the earlier colonists objected to the dirty clothes, rough speech, and offensive manners of the newcomers. One prominent lady in Graceville announced bluntly that she would not receive such people in her home. Fortunately, most of the new houses were soon ready, and the Connemaras moved into their own quarters.¹¹

At the expense of the colonization bureau, each of the new families was given a supply of clothing, the necessary articles of house furnishings, farming implements, a year’s supply of seed, and credit at Graceville for a year’s supply of food. They reached the farms in 1880 in time for spring planting, and the prospects for a heavy grain crop were good. There was also at that time ample opportunity for the men in the newly arrived families to secure employment as day laborers. Prosperous farmers among the earlier arrivals were paying hired men wages of one dollar and fifty cents to two dollars a day. The western extension of the St. Cloud and Lake Traverse Railroad from Morris was coming closer each day. The farmers had the assurance of a rail terminal and grain elevator in their colony before harvest time in 1880.

⁸ *Catholic Review*, January 1, 1881, quoted in Henthorne, *Catholic Colonization*, 110.

⁹ Exactly how many Irish families arrived at Boston is not known. Some settled in St. Paul, and only twenty-four families actually reached Graceville.

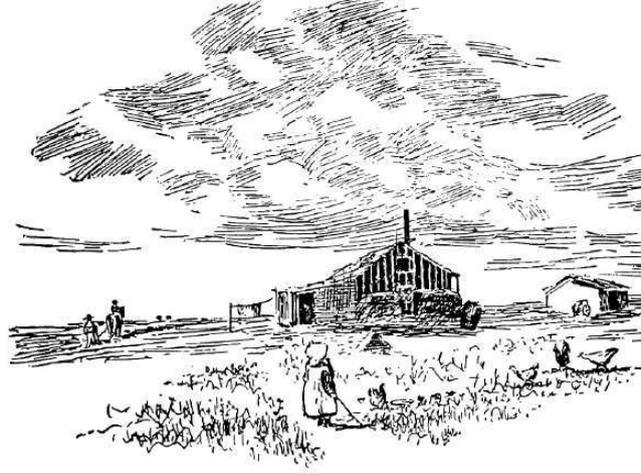
¹⁰ Onahan to O’Connor, July 1, 1880, Chancery Archives, Omaha, Nebraska.

¹¹ Henthorne, *Catholic Colonization*, 111. Mrs. Maurice Greene was so disturbed by the sight of the Connemara people “fighting like animals” that she refused them admission to her home. Interview with Sister Grace Aurelia, C.S.J., a daughter of Mrs. Greene, September 5, 1953.

Moreover, construction on the new line offered additional opportunities for employment for those new settlers who needed ready cash. Nearly every family among the newcomers had at least one member working in St. Paul and earning enough to be able to send home some money each month. All in all, the prospects for the little band looked very good.¹²

As might have been expected, Bishop Ireland was not at all disposed to hear any criticism of these Irish settlers or pessimism about their prospects as farmers. He urged O'Brien and Major Thompson to do all they could to make adjustment easier for the settlers, and promised the people that he would be most patient with them in any difficulties they might experience in their new homes. The bishop looked on the Irish settlers as a test of his grand plan of colonization. He knew that their backgrounds as fishermen and garden farmers handicapped them for large-scale farming in the West. Nonetheless, he fondly hoped that they might, with his extensive aid, become successful farmers and thus silence any nativist critics who held that foreign-born settlers made second-rate citizens or third-rate farmers.¹³

DURING the first summer no signs of trouble appeared among the Connemaras. Day-laboring jobs were plentiful, and a good growing season promised an abundant harvest. In September, 1880, Ireland and John Lancaster Spalding, bishop of Peoria, toured the Minnesota colonies and inspected the Graceville settlement with particular care. Ireland later recalled that he personally visited more than a hundred of the four hundred homes in the colony. He found no evidence of any want or suffering but he did sense an uneasy atmosphere of discontent in the conversation of some of the Connemara people.



A home on the prairie

He was displeased to discover that some members of this group did not look forward to a life of farming, but were content to take their places as day laborers in the community. And what was worse, several of them indicated that they were not satisfied with the treatment they were receiving from their employers, particularly with the "low" pay scale of one dollar and fifty cents to two dollars a day. Ireland's answer was prompt and effective. He immediately inaugurated at Graceville a system of public works, financed by the diocese, offering day-laboring jobs to all comers at a dollar a day. He also announced that any man who could not find employment to suit him in the public works program or on the colony farms would have his credit for provisions in Graceville cut off.¹⁴

It was obvious to the bishop, if not to his protégés, that day-laboring jobs would never bring in enough money to enable the colonists to pay for their farms. And at the basis of the entire colonization program lay the assumption that individual ownership of land gave a man status and security. For Ireland, it was unthinkable that any colonists could seriously consider living on farms without working the land. Earlier settlers in the Graceville colony, displaying the energy and industry characteristic of frontier areas, were at this time quickly paying off the debts incurred by their purchase of railroad lands. The average price of hard Minnesota wheat during these years was a dollar a bushel, and it was not

¹² Henthorne, *Catholic Colonization*, 111-113; *Northwestern Chronicle*, September 11, 1880.

¹³ Henthorne, *Catholic Colonization*, 113.

¹⁴ *Northwestern Chronicle*, September 11, 1880.

unusual for the Graceville lands to yield twenty bushels to the acre. This meant that in an average year the yield from an acre of wheat sold for nearly five times the original cost of the land. The arrival of the railroad and the erection of a grain elevator in Graceville assured the farmers that this happy state of affairs was likely to continue in the future.¹⁵

The Connemaras, however, had never learned to think in terms of future crop prospects. During the summer of 1880 they were content to hire themselves out to other farmers, satisfied with a small cash income at the end of each week, and possibly reassured by the underlying conviction that if they came on hard times Bishop Ireland would support them. It was this readiness on their part to receive relief that alarmed the bishop. Other colonists noticed the same traits and "the improvidence of the Connemaras quickly aroused the ire and indignation of the Graceville colony and alienated sympathy from the newcomers."¹⁶

IN PARTIAL EXPLANATION of the failure of this group, it should be observed that no farmer showed a profit during his first or second year in these colonies, because it took at least two years for him to break up a reasonably extensive portion of the unusually hard and tough prairie sod. "Breaking" was a most arduous process. Sometimes it was done with huge breaking plows, drawn by four oxen, or with heavy stoneboats, equipped with steel prongs to break up the sod. Several trips with these implements were required before a given patch of sod turned over. It was then necessary to leave the upturned sod exposed to the elements for a whole year before it would rot and break up. If a man could turn and break ten acres a year, he was doing well.¹⁷

But time, of course, was working for the settlers. Minneapolis had already become an important milling center, and it had been discovered that Minnesota hard

wheat, a particular type grown most successfully in western and southern Minnesota, produced a superior grade of white flour. Wheat buyers, as early as 1876, had announced that premium prices would be paid for all Minnesota hard wheat delivered at the Minneapolis mills.¹⁸ This rising market, the arrival of the railroad, the increased export of American grain, and the improvement of bonanza farming equipment—all augured well for the future. In the meantime, however, it took years of patient labor to get the western soil in condition for intensive farming. But even when this important qualification is taken into account, the performance of the Connemaras as farmers still leaves much to be desired.

Some sold the seed given to them by the colonization bureau. Others kept the seed but did not plant it. Still others picked up cash by selling the farming tools they had received. It is small wonder that they were totally unprepared for the unusually early and severe winter of 1880. On their arrival the previous spring, they had been warned by O'Brien of the severity of Minnesota winters and had been instructed by Major Thompson that it would be necessary to sod the exterior foundations of their frame houses as a protection against the cold. This many of them neglected to do. Once winter was upon them, it was not long before reports of great suffering began to emanate from the Connemara section of the Graceville colony. Bishop Ireland appealed to his people in St. Paul, and managed to send the settlers about six hundred dollars each month during their period of

¹⁵ Henrietta Larson, *The Wheat Market and the Farmer in Minnesota, 1858-1900*, 161 (New York, 1926); *Catholic Colonization in Minnesota*, 45-47; O'Connor to McDonnell, March 29, 1889, St. Paul Chancery Archives, Diocesan Letters, 1888-89, p. 105.

¹⁶ Moynihan, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:221. See also James J. Reardon, *The Catholic Church in the Diocese of St. Paul*, 242 (St. Paul, 1952).

¹⁷ *Benson Times*, June 5, 1876.

¹⁸ Letter of Dillon O'Brien in the *Anti-Monopolist* (St. Paul), reprinted in the *Benson Times*, February 23, 1876.

greatest need. He also dispatched O'Brien to Graceville to administer these funds and to advise the Connemaras what was expected of them under the terms of their agreements with the colonization bureau.

O'Brien later publicly expressed his disappointment with the Irish settlers: "Last winter when the snow was too deep for horses and sleighs, the other farmers in the colony bought flour . . . and drew it by hand on sleds over the snow to their homes. The Connemara men would not take the flour away, although to them it was a free gift. Some of the farmers, when a sum was offered them to carry the flour to the homes of the Connemara men, said they were willing enough to make a dollar, but that they would not turn their hands to benefit such a lazy people."¹⁹

Writing on the same topic in the *Chicago Tribune*, Onahan also complained of the improvidence and laziness of the Connemara crowd: "If their shanties were cold, it was because they neglected to sod them as they were advised to do. If their pota-

toes were frozen, they had plainly omitted to dig cellars for their protection. If, perhaps, they suffered from the lack of fuel, it must be remembered that they suffered in common with the prairie population of the extreme northwest generally."²⁰

WHEN officials of the colony chided the Connemara settlers for spurning the means of existence offered by Bishop Ireland, the offenders replied, "the Bishop brought us here and he must care for us." Reports of suffering within the colony began to multiply. Soon a group of citizens from Morris, a small town twenty-five miles east of Graceville, charged Ireland and O'Brien with neglecting the Irish immigrants. Public sympathy for the settlers increased when similar charges were made by the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. It was especially painful to O'Brien, whose death was to occur within a year and who had given his life to the cause of Irish immigrant aid, to realize that his countrymen could display such ingratitude for the favors they had received.²¹

Bishop Ireland quickly convinced the editor of the *Pioneer Press* that his credence of the Morris reports was not justified. The issue of the *Press* for December 22, 1880, carried an explanatory letter from Ireland and a carefully worded editorial on

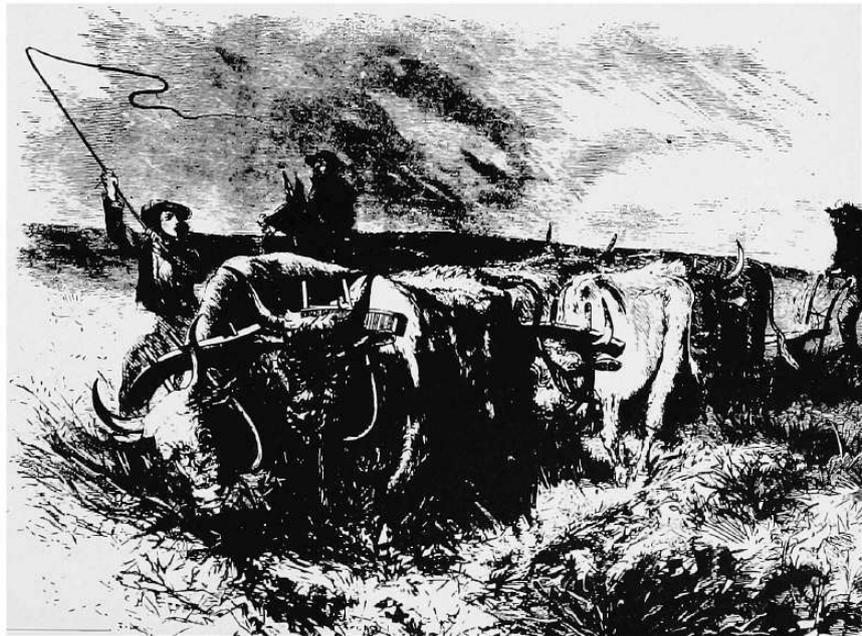
¹⁹ *New York Sun*, quoted in *Catholic Review*, March 26, 1881. See also Henthorne, *Catholic Colonization*, 113.

²⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, quoted in *Catholic Review*, January 1, 1881.

²¹ Moynihan, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:222; Henthorne, *Catholic Colonization*, 113; *Pioneer Press*, December 21, 1881; O'Brien, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:51.

FROM HARPER'S WEEKLY, MAY 9, 1868

BREAKING
the prairie sod



the whole affair: "Bishop Ireland's letter on the subject of the Connemara colony will be read with great interest. He freely admits that he has got an elephant on his hands in these twenty-four families. In transporting them as an act of charity, from the wild mountains of Galway to homes on the prairies of Minnesota, he supposed they were, like most of the Irish emigrants to this State, an industrious and thrifty, though in this case a poverty-stricken people. He found that they were mostly paupers and beggars. . . . He had a tough problem before him. . . . A little reflection on the nature of the materials the bishop has to deal with, and on the methods absolutely necessary to convert them from incorrigible beggars into industrious, self-supporting men and women, will enable their American neighbors at Morris to understand that they have not been so cruelly dealt with as was imagined."

Investigation in Graceville showed that some of the complaining settlers had hidden extra food and clothing in a vain attempt to prove to the investigators that they were suffering acutely. The *Northwestern Chronicle* for December, 1880, and January, 1881, carried extensive reports on Graceville and cleared the colony sponsors of any responsibility for the hardships suffered by these few families.²²

Having cleared his name with the general public, Ireland turned to the task of providing further help for the Connemara settlers. Since these unfortunate people had shown some eagerness to work for daily wages, and since the city of St. Paul was growing rapidly, it was agreed that they should give up their farms and look for work in the city. The bishop paid their transportation to St. Paul, and secured jobs for some of them with the railroad companies which were then hiring many workers. Most of these settlers took up residence in what came to be known as the "Connemara Patch" in St. Mary's parish on the flats along Phalen Creek under Dayton's Bluff. Back in Graceville, "Bishop Ireland

finally arranged to distribute among neighbors the cattle assigned to the Galway immigrants." With the departure of the Connemaras, peace returned to the Graceville colony, and it went on to become one of Bishop Ireland's most successful Catholic settlements.²³

IN SPITE OF the small numbers involved, the adverse effect of the Connemara experiment on the entire colonization movement was nation-wide. In a letter to Bishop O'Connor of Nebraska, one eastern sponsor of the colonization movement remarked, "I see the Connemara colonists have badly repaid the trouble taken to provide them comfortable homes. Bishop Ireland must feel a good deal disheartened about the work." At the same time one Father H. A. O'Kelly, who was touring the parishes of New York City in search of settlers for the Catholic colonies in Nebraska, wrote to Bishop O'Connor: "Since my coming I have secured about nine or ten families and I feel confident I would have double the number were it not for that unfortunate Connemara affair. It completely demoralized many who were contemplating emigrating to the West. I have spoken in most of the Churches of New York [City]. I am inclined to think my labors will bear more fruit a year hence than at present."²⁴

Onahan also told O'Connor of the bad press caused by the Connemara affair: "I was last week in Minnesota. . . . I saw Bishop Ireland. He has recovered from the Connemara events and thinks that cries will be heard no more. It was a bad business here and elsewhere for colonization—though I think the effect will not be permanent, except possibly as affecting immigration to Minnesota."²⁵

²² Moynihan, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:222; *Northwestern Chronicle*, December 18, 25, 1880, January 8, 15, 1881.

²³ Reardon, *Catholic Church in St. Paul*, 242; Moynihan, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:222.

²⁴ Mrs. E. A. Quinn to O'Connor, January 12, 1881, and O'Kelly to O'Connor, January 8, 1881, both in Omaha Chancery Archives.

THE
Connemara Patch,
St. Paul, 1925



Dillon O'Brien's son believed that the strain and disappointment resulting from the Connemara incident contributed greatly to the sudden death of his father in 1880. Monsignor Humphrey Moynihan, who in later years served as Ireland's secretary, summarized the effect of the affair on the archbishop: "In the undesirable prominence attained by this insignificant group of born beggars the public at large seemed to overlook the existence of hundreds of happy homes dotting the prairies for miles around Graceville. That the disastrous record of the Connemaras caused untold pain and humiliation to the best benefactor Catholic colonists had in America, need not be emphasized. Indeed, Archbishop Ireland confided to Mr. William O'Neill, one of the most prominent members of the Graceville community, that the incident was the greatest grief of his life."²⁵

WITHIN the Minnesota colonies established by Ireland, the sharp contrast between the failure of the colonists brought directly from Ireland and the success of

other Irish settlers who went to Minnesota by stages after earlier periods of residence and farming in New York, Ohio, or Indiana, suggests that the very process of migration, especially of repeated moves, has been in itself an important factor in determining the character of the American frontier.

It is worthy of note that the Connemara settlers at Graceville went to Minnesota not primarily because of any particular good foreseen there, but rather to escape an evil at home — in this instance, famine. And since they did not immigrate in search of a particular advantage to be found in Minnesota, it made no appeal to them on their arrival. They were in no way prepared to appreciate the opportunities which the western region then offered. The same possibilities awaited the Connemaras which had already enriched many enterprising farmers, but the Irish settlers in this group were unable to respond to the challenge of the almost free land on the frontier. Their conduct would seem to confirm the opinion that the frontier does not have the same effect on all, but that its much-emphasized "influence" depends upon the specific conditioning and the receptivity of the settlers who come within its environment.

²⁵ Onahan to O'Connor, February 24, 1881, in Omaha Chancery Archives.

²⁶ Moynihan, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:222.



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