

HISTORY OF LITTLE FALLS, MINN.

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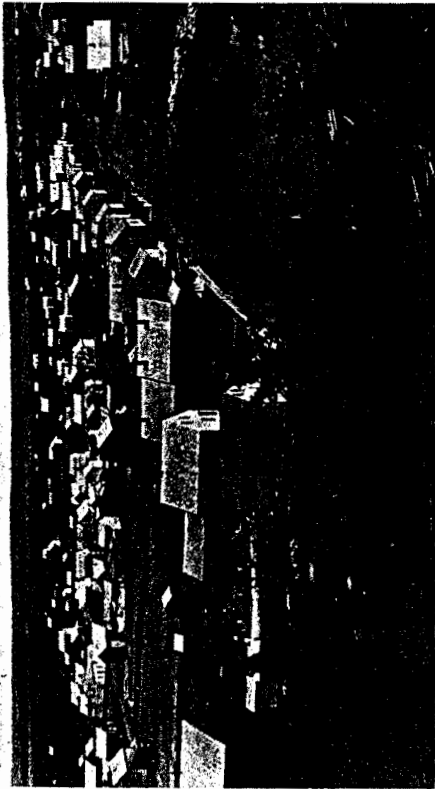
# Gold Rush Widows of Little Falls

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*A story drawn from the letters of  
Pamela and James Fergus*

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St. Anthony, Minnesota Territory, 1857

taken most of the beaver that had once populated the area's many rivers and streams. Asters, goldenrod, and sunflowers grew wild on large tracts of natural prairies whose rich soils had not yet been turned by plow or spade. Endless opportunities were open to enterprising men willing to accept the challenge offered by the wilderness.<sup>49</sup>

For all his enthusiasm over the lands he saw upriver, James did feel occasional twinges of guilt over leaving Pamela alone a scant two months after moving her to St. Anthony. The family was living in a house in serious need of repair, and he feared for the safety of the children. In a letter written from Fort Ripley, some 110 miles upriver, he promised to be home in eight to ten days—in time to fix up the house for the winter.<sup>50</sup>

He was as good as his word, but neither James nor Pamela felt the comforts of home in that house in St. Anthony. They had, after all, made the move to Minnesota Territory with the understanding that they would return to Moline if the right opportunities did not present themselves. By now, however, Pamela knew that James did not wait for opportunities, he made them. Her hopes of returning to Illinois faded with every trip he made upriver, searching for the perfect site for a dam that could power a city.

## Early Little Falls

JAMES FERGUS was hardly alone in his search. Up and down the river, enterprising individuals were securing title to the most promising lands, then drawing up attractive maps and lithographing copies.<sup>1</sup> During an 1852 visit to St. Paul, a correspondent from the *Pittsburgh Token* reported, "My ears at every turn are saluted with everlasting din. Land! Land! Money! Speculation! Saw mills! Town lots! etc., etc." Pronouncing everything "artificial, floating," the reporter predicted that, though "the excitement of trade, speculation, and expectation is now running high, and will perhaps for a year or so, . . . it must have a reaction."<sup>2</sup>

Untroubled by such warnings, James Fergus persisted in his speculative ventures, continuing his search for the perfect townsite. By the end of 1854, he had begun to focus on the Little Falls of the Mississippi River, some one hundred miles to the north, in approximately the geographic center of present-day Minnesota. Zebulon Pike had explored the region in 1805, remarking on "the beauty and convenience of the spot for building huts, the fine pine trees for pe-roques, and the quantity of game," all of which contributed to the suitability of the place for his winter encampment.<sup>3</sup>

Though James Fergus was equally impressed by the beauty of the area and the abundant pine, maple, and white oak forests, it was the waterpower potential apparent in the only natural falls in the upper reaches of the Mississippi that drew him to the place. The river fell eleven feet in a quarter mile at this site, and a crude dam was already in place, providing the power for a small sawmill and a gristmill, both currently operated by William Sturgis.<sup>4</sup> The sawmill's first owner had been James Green, who had taken an 1848 squatter's claim on the east bank of the Mississippi and obtained waterpower by building a wing dam to the island above, providing a head of about three feet. Upon Green's death, his partners, five investors from the surrounding area, had completed work on the mill, then sold mill, site, and waterpower to Sturgis sometime in 1850.<sup>5</sup>

By the time James Fergus and Calvin Tuttle arrived in October

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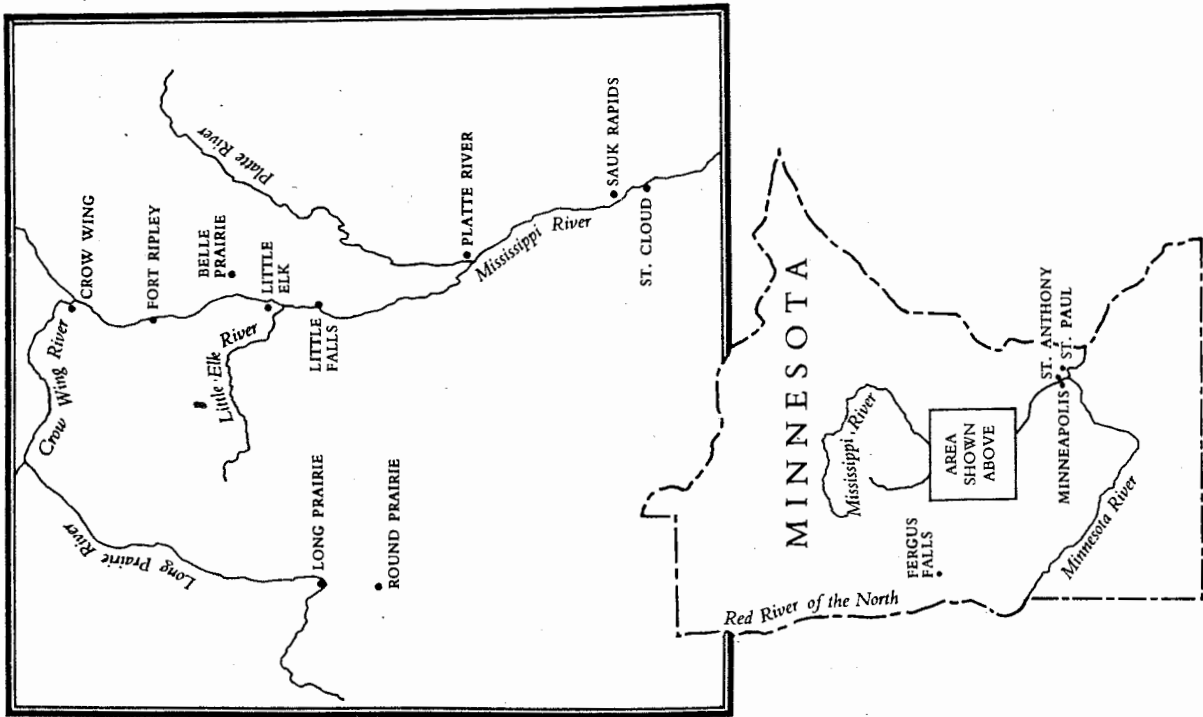
The Little Falls of the Mississippi River, shown here in 1889. By the time this photograph was taken, the town by the falls was beginning to experience the industrial boom of which James Fergus had dreamed thirty years earlier.

1854, the Sturgis mill had already earned the honor of sawing the first lumber north of St. Anthony, and there was every reason to believe the operation could be greatly expanded by constructing a larger dam, one that would span the river and provide enough waterpower to support a town that would rival any other on the Mississippi.<sup>6</sup> Fergus was convinced that the rich timberlands and rolling prairies that stretched along the river at this location could support the broad-based economy necessary for rapid town growth.

Tuttle, whose financial support was essential, concurred with his judgment, and the two men approached William Sturgis with their plan to form a company for the purpose of "making lumber, grinding grain, farming, cutting logs, making a town, selling goods, and doing any other thing or things conducive to the benefit of said company." With his holdings heavily mortgaged, Sturgis was ready enough to accept their proposal. Retaining one-third interest, he sold five-twelfths to Fergus and three-twelfths to Tuttle, and the Little Falls Company became a reality.<sup>7</sup>

The partners in that company were a study in nineteenth-century entrepreneurship. William Sturgis, who had pioneered in Iowa before moving north to Little Falls, was described by contemporary historian Nathan Richardson as "a man of great perseverance and

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Central Minnesota, 1860

energy" who was "acknowledged to be able to carry on more business with a small capital than any other man in . . . Minnesota."<sup>8</sup> Calvin Tuttle, who had helped build the first sawmill at the village of St. Anthony and then served as territorial treasurer for six years, was well experienced in land and townsite speculation.<sup>9</sup> Fergus himself, as primary investor, would manage the scheme, acting as go-between for Tuttle, who would remain in St. Anthony, and Sturgis, who was to overhaul the dam, finish the flour mill, supply logs, and encourage farming. Fergus would also assume responsibility for keeping the books, managing the milling and lumbering operations, and selling lots carved from the two thousand acres deeded to the company by the United States government.<sup>10</sup>

The plan seemed promising, and Pamela, having already made the break from Moline and with nothing to hold her in St. Anthony, agreed to the move north. It proved a major concession. If St. Anthony had lacked amenities, Little Falls was primitive. Two houses marked the townsite when James Fergus first saw it.<sup>11</sup> The Sturgis family occupied one of them. Rosanna Steele Sturgis, twenty-one years old and pregnant with her second child, had been a resident of Little Falls since the spring of 1852 when, as an eighteen-year-old bride, she had arrived from Iowa to be introduced to her three stepchildren — seven-year-old Jeanette, five-year-old Sarah Jane (Jennie), and two-year-old John — and to her only neighbors, the children's maternal grandparents, Lydia and John Kidder. From the window of her house, Rosanna could see the grave of her husband's first wife, Dorothy Kidder Sturgis, who had died in 1831 after following her adventuring husband from Black Hawk County, Iowa, to Minnesota Territory. Left with three children, one of them a toddler, William had waited but six months before returning to Iowa to seek a replacement bride.<sup>12</sup> Among Rosanna's first duties as the second Mrs. Sturgis had been the signing of a five-thousand-dollar note that mortgaged all their belongings — including land, lumber, and articles of personal property — to Henry M. Rice, one of the partners from whom William Sturgis had purchased the mill.<sup>13</sup>

With everything mortgaged to Rice — from boots, shoes, and clothes to crockery, groceries, and hardware — the couple had settled into married life. Sometime after the birth of Rosanna's first child, Ann, in November 1853, William had sent his older children to live with relatives in Iowa and Michigan. When Fergus and Tut-



*William Sturgis, about 1850*

tle arrived on the scene, Ann was the only little one on hand, and Rosanna was no doubt pleased at the prospect of the company of other women and children.<sup>14</sup> Shortly after the formation of the Little Falls Company, Samuel M. Putnam arrived to survey the townsite, and the carpenters who followed in his wake began work on the Fergus home. Over the next few months, sixty men, nineteen oxen, and eight horses worked long hours to lay out streets and erect buildings for the company, and Rosanna and little Annie watched as the town grew up around them.<sup>15</sup>

By spring 1855, the Fergus house was ready and Rosanna Sturgis welcomed Pamela, eight-year-old Mary Agnes, six-year-old Luella, and four-year-old Andrew. Pamela could hardly have been prepared for the scene that met her gaze. Along the muddy streets was a scatter of houses in various stages of completion. The Fergus home, an eleven-room, two-story structure, was already occupied by a goodly number of company employees — a pattern that would persist over the next few years as Pamela shared quarters with carpenters, masons, farmers, blacksmiths, merchants, land agents, and

the Falls Company had plans for flour and lumber mills powered by a dam that would also serve as the base for a roadway spanning the Mississippi River. On the strength of that promise, many settlers began to move into the area, lured, in part, by the offer of free homesteads partitioned off from the company's two thousand acres. By July 1855, the company's store, operating as O. A. Churchill & Co., was serving wholesale and retail customers, offering "Dry Goods, Groceries, Tin Ware, Hard Ware, Queensware, Boots and Shoes, Clothing, Camp fixtures & c. Flower Bacon, Lard, Pork, Farming Utencils, in fact everything usually kept in a country Store."<sup>18</sup> A school was established, run by a teacher recruited from Moline.<sup>19</sup> Joseph Batters built a hotel, the Elk Horn House, and other hotels followed, including the Northern.<sup>20</sup> The editor of the *Sauk Rapids Frontierman* praised the products coming from the company's mill and predicted that "Little Falls will ultimately take rank among the foremost towns of Benton County."<sup>21</sup>

Caught up in the spirit of rapid growth, Pamela and the other wives shared the dreams of their husbands. They planted apple trees and roses in anticipation of the years that lay ahead.<sup>22</sup> In time, there would be orchards and gardens. And churches. And theaters. Three doctors had already cast their lots with the fledgling town, among them one Timothy Smith, who brought with him his wife Amanda and two young children.<sup>23</sup>

The optimism expressed by Fergus and shared by the new citizens of Little Falls seemed well founded in early 1856, when the town was named the seat of newly designated Morrison County.<sup>24</sup> In the elections that followed, James Fergus was named judge of probate. Family dwellings sprang up on lots that were now selling for one hundred dollars per acre, and by year's end the town boasted eight stores, three hotels, several boardinghouses, a school, and a newspaper.<sup>25</sup>

Demand for lumber was at an all-time high, with orders coming in from towns downriver and from Fort Ripley, located some ten miles north of Little Falls on the west bank of the Mississippi, just below the mouth of the Crow Wing River. The company was doing record business, though most of the money earned at the mill was immediately reinvested in some other aspect of company business. Two of the partners were the picture of optimism, but the third was beginning to fret. Down in St. Anthony, a hundred miles removed from the town his money was helping to build, Calvin Tuttle read



Plat map of Little Falls, Minnesota Territory, 1856. Like most frontier towns founded during that era of speculation, Little Falls looked more impressive on paper than on site.

others who came and went according to the needs and interests of her husband's business.<sup>16</sup>

There were no schools, no churches, and no shops, though the Little Falls Company had almost completed a store. At least there were neighbors. In addition to the Sturgises and the Kidders, twenty-one families had settled in the community. Among them were the Churchills, the Illinois friends who had been renting the Fergus home in Moline. At James's urging, Orlando Churchill had come north to manage the company store and live in the quarters above it. Pamela welcomed his thirty-year-old wife, Temperance, and his daughters, six-year-old Alice and three-year-old Flora, as tangible connections to the world she had left behind.<sup>17</sup>

Pamela's world was rapidly changing. If luxuries were not yet to be found in Little Falls, optimism certainly was. The town quickly drew speculators who had heard that the partners in the Lit-

with displeasure letters discussing James Fergus's growing preoccupation with road building and the construction of a "public house." Out of cash and unhappy about having to mortgage his St. Anthony properties to support operations in Little Falls, Tuttle felt his partners had carried matters too far by neglecting the one aspect of the company's business that was currently supporting their many ventures. He urged Fergus to postpone his work on the other projects and to concentrate on enlarging the dam and upgrading the mill so that they could take full advantage of the lumber market.<sup>26</sup>

Ignoring Tuttle's pleas, James Fergus continued to pour money into peripheral projects, intent on enhancing the image of the town and the company. William Sturgis, ever the gambler, followed Fergus's lead, busying himself in other projects and postponing the repairs on and expansion of the sawmill operations. In a letter written to Fergus during a trip to St. Paul, Sturgis noted that "if we expect to make a town we must have help and there is no time to be lost this is the time to strike it is conceded by all that this is to be an important town on the Mississippi."<sup>27</sup>

Despite Tuttle's pessimism, the town seemed destined to fulfill those predictions. In March 1856, Fergus authorized business friends in Moline to sell his lots there and use the money to purchase equipment to be shipped upriver for use in the Little Falls mill.<sup>28</sup> He informed those friends — and his relatives in Scotland — that without any advertising to date, Little Falls had "become a fixed face," a town of forty families, eight stores, the largest hotel above St. Anthony, and more than a hundred young bachelors — but "no girls to match." To prove his point, James sent out copies of the *Northern Herald*, "published 'on the far up Mississippi' at our new home in Minnesota — where we are building another and bigger Moline." Founded by a Colonel French and quickly purchased by the Little Falls Company, the paper had been established to advertise for those things the growing town lacked — notably young women for the aforementioned one hundred young bachelors — as well as to "report progress" to friends far and near.<sup>29</sup>

The *Northern Herald* made no mention of the town's social problems, many of which were indicative of its frontier setting. As Fergus had noted, women were scarce, and many incoming laborers sought out Indian women as housekeepers and companions, only to abandon them when white wives became available.

When Pamela discovered that one impoverished Indian woman, Odishquaw Sloan, was living in a shack with her three young children, two of whom had been fathered by John R. "Pewter-Eyed" Sloan, who had since left her for a white wife, she hired the Indian woman as her housekeeper, gave her food for her children, and persuaded James to ask Sloan to provide her with household goods and a living allowance of ten dollars per month. Reproached for having embarrassed Sloan's new bride by hiring his "squaw" as her housekeeper, Pamela maintained that she had as much right to hire the woman as James had to hire the man, and the Ferguses remained firm in their support of the abandoned family, even in the face of angry letters from the father of Sloan's legal wife.<sup>30</sup>

Racial prejudice was fed by impromptu appearances of warring Indians on the streets of Little Falls. Situated near the boundary line drawn in 1825 to separate territories claimed by the Ojibway and Dakota, the Little Falls area was intermittently traversed by war parties of both tribes. Largely intent on their own rivalries, the Indians generally posed more of an emotional than a physical threat to townspeople.<sup>31</sup>

However, settlers who lived in outlying areas were not always free from danger. In the spring of 1858, a party of Dakota and Winnebago, en route to a battle with the Ojibway, invaded the home of Philo Farnham, located in Round Prairie, some twenty-five miles southwest of Little Falls, carrying off jewelry, clothes, provisions, and two cows worth sixty dollars each. Though Farnham and his family were all at home, they were not harmed. A scant two months later the house was again invaded, this time by a band of Ojibway who did considerable damage to the dwelling but spared its occupants. Unwilling to risk a third attack, the Farnham family moved into Little Falls on the assumption that there was safety in numbers.<sup>32</sup>

Despite such disturbances, Little Falls continued to flourish, and Fergus had no further thoughts of turning back. Clearly, the family's future lay in Minnesota. Then came a major setback. In the spring of 1856, the flooding waters of the Mississippi washed away logs purchased for the sawmill that were valued at forty thousand dollars.<sup>33</sup> In the face of such losses, the partners in the Little Falls Company formed a joint stock corporation thereafter known as the Little Falls Manufacturing Company. Keeping 50 percent of their

holdings, they offered the rest to the general public, hoping thereby to gain the cash they needed to remain solvent. Apparently the flood failed to dampen the spirits of would-be investors, for all available shares were quickly sold, bringing fifty thousand dollars in cash to the three partners.<sup>34</sup>

The new stockholders were promptly rewarded for their faith in the company, as stocks quickly appreciated to 250 percent of their original value. Construction was renewed on the dam and on the mills it would power. Property values soared, and speculators continued to buy, certain that prices would go even higher. Territorial immigration was at its peak, and the citizens of Little Falls saw no end to the population boom they were experiencing.<sup>35</sup>

So bright was the town's promise and so great the county's prospects that on November 5, 1856, the Morrison County commissioners authorized William Sturgis to build a courthouse for the sum of \$8,000. Having served three terms in the territorial legislature, Sturgis was a trusted, popular figure, and the commissioners required only his personal bond for the completion of the contract.<sup>36</sup> Though signed in earnest, that contract was destined never to be fulfilled. The very month Sturgis accepted the responsibility for the construction of the courthouse, he took on several other major obligations. He paid the Little Falls Manufacturing Company \$5,500 for lands along the Little Elk River just north of Little Falls, having the previous summer authorized the surveying and platting of that land for a settlement that came to be called Little Elk.<sup>37</sup> Around that time, in a move that would seem to indicate breach of faith in the company's long-delayed bridge over the Mississippi River, Sturgis established a ferry just north of Little Falls, which he ran for the next three years.<sup>38</sup> In addition, he and his brother Amos opened a store, the Little Falls Emporium.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, the Sturgis family was growing. Rosanna's second child, a boy, had not survived his second year, but in the spring of 1857 she gave birth to another daughter, Catherine. Shortly thereafter, her widowed mother Margaret Steele and teen-aged brother and sister arrived from Iowa City, bringing with them seven-year-old John Sturgis, William's son by his first marriage, who had been living with relatives there.<sup>40</sup>

While the number and nature of his business transactions would seem to indicate that all was going well for William Sturgis, there

were signs of impending trouble. As early as January 1857 James Fergus advised storekeeper O. A. Churchill to refuse further credit to Sturgis, who was apparently stocking the Little Falls Emporium through wholesale purchases from O. A. Churchill & Co.<sup>41</sup> By August the Sturgis brothers had abandoned the Emporium, and an announcement in the *Northern Herald* invited citizens to visit "a new store at Little Elk Mills, in the town of Little Elk," where dry goods, groceries, and hardware could be obtained "cheap for cash or in exchange for goods, pine lumber, hay, grain, butter &c."<sup>42</sup> In addition to these business affairs, Sturgis continued his farming activities, and though he appeared to be holding his own in all these dealings, by late summer he owed James Fergus \$1,177.66 for five notes signed over as many months.<sup>43</sup> Sensing the increasing precariousness of his financial position, Sturgis sought to protect his property by selling some of it to his mother-in-law, some to his brother Amos, and some to his father in Michigan.<sup>44</sup>

The summer of 1857 brought misfortune not only to the Sturgises but to other Morrison County citizens as well. The warm weather that for the past two seasons had meant record yields for those who tilled the county's virgin fields now contributed to a grasshopper plague that decimated crops. Farmers were hard pressed and townspeople went without. James Fergus, whose own thirty-five acres of farmland had been infested, described the insects as "something like the Locust mentioned in the Bible" and reported that they hatched out in the spring "in immense multitudes . . . [eating] up every thing we planted except here & there a very small patch of corn or potatoes."<sup>45</sup>

So great was the devastation that outside help was needed. In late October 1857, James Fergus was instrumental in forming the Morrison County Aid Society, a group that petitioned the state for provisions in the face of the desperate need. Dr. Timothy Smith was appointed an agent of the aid society and was sent to St. Paul with authorization to buy five hundred pounds of flour or twenty-five thousand pounds of grain on credit.<sup>46</sup>

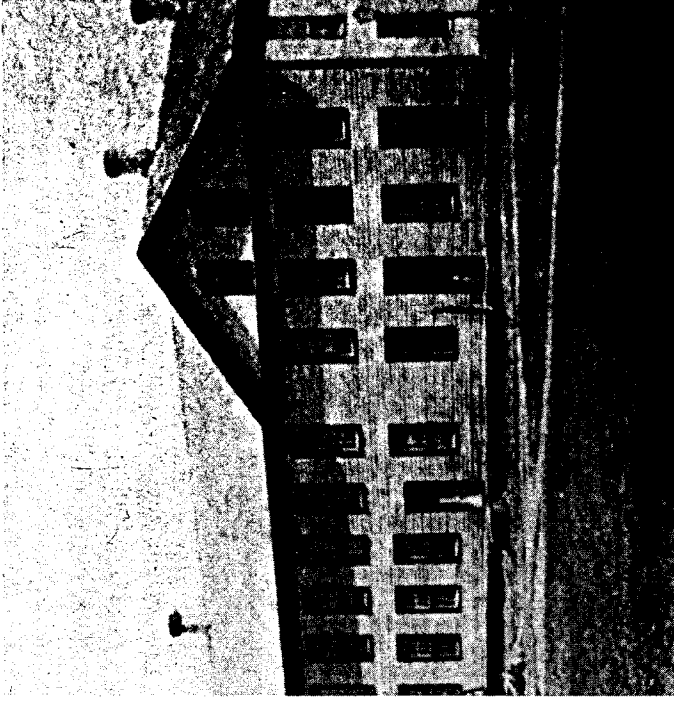
On the heels of the famine came disaster of another sort as Little Falls suffered the ill effects of the economic depression that swept the frontier and ultimately the nation in the late 1850s. A chain of bank failures on the East Coast caused creditors to call in the loans they had made to speculators in the outlying territories. Left with-

out cash, Minnesota businesses closed, railroads and banks failed, property values plunged, and once-wealthy citizens found themselves in dire straits.<sup>47</sup> The partners in the Little Falls Manufacturing Company were not immune to the disaster, and in early November 1857, Fergus noted that "the difficulty has increased until it has become a complete panic, a perfect whirlwind destroying and breaking our ablest men, banks and corporations . . . our whole business and merchantile fabric is threatened with destruction."<sup>48</sup>

Over the next few years, St. Paul lost half its population and Little Falls a third.<sup>49</sup> Property in Morrison County depreciated so rapidly that a lot worth a hundred dollars in the spring of 1857 was soon worth less than five. In time, Main Street lots that had sold for one thousand dollars could "hardly be given away."<sup>50</sup> The Little Falls Manufacturing Company faltered in the wake of plummeting real estate values, and ongoing arguments over management practices continued to weaken the Fergus-Sturgis-Tuttle alliance.

That alliance was dealt a further blow when Fergus, who had earlier lost his bid for a seat in the Constitutional Convention held on the eve of Minnesota statehood, announced his candidacy for the state legislature—running on a platform that opposed the taxation assessed for bonds that funded the work Sturgis had done on the courthouse. Though he ostensibly opposed the assessment on the grounds that those bonds had been "issued without the consent of the people, to build a Court house, unneeded, and so far unfinished," Fergus's stand might well have been influenced by the fact that Sturgis had defeated him in the earlier election and had gone on to represent Morrison County at the Constitutional Convention that summer. Though Fergus lost his bid for the legislature as well, his political ambitions were not diminished, and he later served as Morrison County treasurer.<sup>51</sup>

Shortly after the election, William Sturgis declared bankruptcy. Overextended by his land purchases and farm losses and further damaged by the company's financial reversals, he filed the necessary papers in late December 1857; abandoned the courthouse, roofed and enclosed but unfinished; and turned his attention to his newest projects at Little Elk—the sawmill, gristmill, and store. At the same time, the Sturgis family left Little Falls and, moving three miles north, settled into the new house Sturgis had built near the mill site. There Rosanna took up housekeeping for her two children, her



The Northern Hotel, Little Falls, about 1870

stepson, her mother, brother, and sister, and seven laborers involved in William's enterprises.<sup>52</sup>

Sturgis was not the only one with financial troubles in 1857. With construction activities almost at a standstill, John and Margaretha Ault were having difficulty meeting payments on their hotel and other properties. One of the earliest establishments in Little Falls, the Northern had been the scene of many town and county meetings and provided the first chambers for the federal district court.<sup>53</sup> Shortly after it was built, the Northern had come into the hands of the Aults, Canadian immigrants in their mid-thirties.<sup>54</sup> An 1857 notice in the *Northern Herald* called the hotel the largest establishment north of St. Anthony and described its facilities in some detail:

A large and comodus dinningroom, extensive ballroom, private parlors, and comfortable bedrooms . . . excellent bar . . . well supplied with the choicist liquors. Attached to the establishment there is an excellent warm stable well supplied with hay and grain.



The table of this house will always be supplied with the best the market offers.<sup>55</sup>

Despite its purported luxuries, the hotel did not bring prosperity to its owners, and some three months after running the above notice, they were \$2,376 in arrears on their mortgage and in danger of foreclosure.<sup>56</sup>

Equally beset by problems was Orlando Churchill, the Moline friend whom Fergus had invited into partnership in the company's store. Almost from the first, there had been friction between Fergus and Churchill, perhaps due in part to Churchill's drinking problem. When Fergus asserted that he had heard complaints about Churchill's treatment of customers, the shopkeeper maintained that in most cases he had only been following Fergus's orders. Angered by reports that Fergus himself has "said more against us than any one [else] in Little Falls," Churchill offered to sell out his part of the store, and in early May his partnership with the company was dissolved.<sup>57</sup> Fergus bought Sturgis's and Tuttle's shares in the store outright and took over Churchill's shares on credit at what he was later to call an exorbitant rate.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, aside from giving the establishment a new name, Fergus & Company, the buyout accomplished little, for Fergus hired the Churchills to run the store and they continued to live in the quarters overhead.<sup>59</sup>

As 1857 drew to a close, there were changes that touched Pamela Fergus in a more personal way. Three days after Christmas, she gave birth to her fourth child, a daughter named Lillie. Good-natured by all reports, the baby afforded some relief from the worries that accompanied the changing Fergus fortunes. The new year started well, with James directing work on the nearly completed bridge while overseeing improvements on the dam. In the spring of 1858 the dam spanned the east channel of the river, running from the east bank to the head of the island, then upstream a thousand feet or more. A sawmill, still owned by the Little Falls Manufacturing Company but now leased to a St. Anthony firm, also extended across the east channel, just below the dam. A large flume running from the east end of the dam downstream along the east shore for about one hundred feet furnished waterpower for a chair factory owned by Reuben Pond and for a large sash and door company and planing mill owned and operated by Z. H. and Harlo Morse. Fergus had spanned the river by constructing a roadway along the dam, be-

tween the east shore and the island, then adding a Howe truss bridge from the island to the west shore. By early spring the bridge was in service, though it had minimal use because there were virtually no improvements on the west side of the river, save a few claim shanties and a large farmhouse owned by John Workman.<sup>60</sup>

In May 1858, having been assured that the dam would be sufficiently improved to provide the additional waterpower needed for a flour mill, William Fletcher left a profitable operation in St. Anthony and moved his wife, Emma, and their five children to Little Falls. The Fletchers had only begun the building of the mill when another act of nature brought destruction and discouragement to the townspeople.

On June 4 a heavy storm caused a four-foot rise in the river in the course of a few hours. The raging waters destroyed the dam William Sturgis had built on the Little Elk, sending his nearly completed sawmill and a large boom of white pine logs surging downriver. The loss was keenly felt, for laborers had been making final adjustments on the saw in preparation for the mill's first cutting the very morning the wall of water swept down the Little Elk and into the Mississippi River.<sup>61</sup>

Miraculously, the logs and debris rushing downstream from the Sturgis mill site shot through the open channel at Little Falls, rather than slamming into the dam. Though likely weakened by the flooding waters, the dam showed no external evidence of damage. The sawmill remained in operation, and William Fletcher carried on with the building of his flour mill, about the only construction work in progress that summer. Dismayed but undaunted, William Sturgis also began the task of rebuilding his mill on the Little Elk.<sup>62</sup>

Even as Fletcher and Sturgis worked, new troubles were brewing. Little Falls had always had its share of "rough and unprincipled characters," but that summer of 1858 the deteriorating economic conditions turned drifters into thieves. No teamster dared leave his load overnight, and Indian agents delivering government annuities were ever wary. Highwaymen broke into the barn of John Ault's Northern Hotel and robbed a peddler's cart, then broke into O. J. Simon's store and took their pick of his stock. They tore down the shanty of R. L. Barnham, the aging justice of the peace who had dared to hand down sentences against some of their number, then snatched the old man out of bed and dragged him down the street

in his nightclothes. Townspeople grew increasingly concerned as the agencies of the law seemed incapable of handling the situation. Sheriff Jonathan Pugh himself was rumored to be one of the "rowdies."<sup>63</sup>

After the attack on the justice of the peace, citizens took matters into their own hands, forming a vigilante group to fight what was afterward known as the Little Falls War. Farmers were called in from around the countryside to assist in guarding and protecting houses and shops. For almost a month in the fall of 1858, the vigilantes engaged in search-and-destroy missions against a band of about twenty desperadoes who made camp in the woods outside of town. Eventually the acknowledged leaders of the band negotiated for safe conduct to other points of the compass. The vigilantes accepted the proposal, the rowdies disbanded, and peace returned to Little Falls.<sup>64</sup>

By the end of the Little Falls War, William Fletcher had completed his mill, only to find that there was still no water to turn the wheel. Seeing that Fergus had all but ceased work on the dam, Fletcher realized his efforts had been wasted and resolved to move his mill elsewhere. Over the winter months he took out his millstones and other fixtures, and when spring came he and his son rafted the lighter equipment from their flour mill downriver to Sauk Rapids, then hauled the millstones and castings by wagon. There he entered into partnership with Samuel L. Hays, who had put up a mill but lacked the equipment to begin his operation.<sup>65</sup>

Fletcher could hardly have been blamed for leaving. Weakened by internal bickering, the Little Falls Manufacturing Company, upon whose fortunes the town was vitally dependent, seemed unlikely to recover from its previous losses. Conscious of a need for restructuring, James Fergus traveled to Minneapolis in January 1859 to meet with Calvin Tuttle and the company's board of directors. A review of accounts and a discussion of company debts and obligations disintegrated into a name-calling session in which, by James's own report, he "spent a good part of one day giving them *Hell* about their charges against [him]." William Babbitt, president of the company since its incorporation in 1857, and Calvin Tuttle, known for his fierce temper, raged at each other, a sight that disgusted Fergus, who prided himself on his ability to remain calm in the face of adversity.<sup>66</sup>

That meeting brought matters to a head for Fergus. Immediately upon his return home he resigned as company director, noting that he had no other choice, since the board of directors refused to recall charges they had made against his character. In his letter of resignation he claimed that the board members pronounced themselves "fully satisfied" with his honesty and integrity, yet continued to attack him. "I acknowledge my errors and short-comings," he wrote, "but the greatest of these has been a too strong devotion to the interest and well-fare of Little Falls. I have sacrificed my own property and the property of the Little Falls Co. for its advance and now my property is gone and I have not even the thanks of the Directors (whom I elected) for my pains."<sup>67</sup> In the series of charges and countercharges that followed, Fergus pointed out the company's laxity in keeping its promise to construct a new and larger dam by 1857, noting that he and Tuttle had been forced to spend their own money on this project, then were blamed when they were unable to carry through on it.<sup>68</sup> In turn, the board accused Fergus and Tuttle of overcharging the company for the services they performed and of general mismanagement of company affairs.<sup>69</sup> Tuttle grew paranoid during this time, convinced as he was that the company was trying to swindle him out of the bridge that he had financed by mortgaging his properties in St. Anthony. He was also convinced that Fergus could very well have offered more financial assistance by mortgaging some of his own properties.<sup>70</sup>

There was at least some truth in Tuttle's accusation, for while Fergus publicly claimed to have been financially destroyed by the effects of the flood, grasshopper plague, and panic, he had, in fact, prudently transferred much of his property to Pamela's name when business had begun to falter, and he had chosen not to mortgage that property to help in the work on the bridge and dam.<sup>71</sup> Disgruntled and mistrusting, Fergus and Tuttle seemed to have but one point of agreement left—they both disliked company president William Babbitt and felt that his attitude had undermined their efforts to build a viable business enterprise.<sup>72</sup>

In the midst of their bickering came still another disaster. In June 1859, major storms again caused flooding on the Mississippi, this time washing out large sections of the dam owned by the Little Falls Manufacturing Company and calling into question once and for all the expertise of its builders. According to town historian Nathan

Richardson, the partners were foolhardy engineers. The bed of the Mississippi at Little Falls was rough and uneven, and the builders, assuming that "it would be much better to construct a dam on a nice smooth sand bed . . . accordingly hauled in [sand] to level up for a good foundation. Any man who can read his Bible could give the result of that kind of dam building. . . . I give their method of dam building as a specimen of the manner in which they did their work generally."<sup>73</sup>

Even as the flood's destruction of the company dam vindicated his move to Sauk Rapids, William Fletcher was completing work on his mill at the mouth of the Sauk River, and by early October the Fletcher-Hays mill, now the only flouring mill above St. Anthony, was in full operation.<sup>74</sup> Little Falls farmers who managed to harvest wheat and corn that season faced the prospect of hauling their grain thirty miles south to Fletcher's mill—when that very mill would have been in full operation at Little Falls, had the partners in the Little Falls Manufacturing Company made good their promises.

Another victim of the company's broken promises fought to stay afloat. Orlando Churchill, who was spending more and more time drinking liquor and less and less time keeping shop, had his inventory seized for nonpayment of debts. This was the last straw for Fergus, who severed all business ties with the shopkeeper. Withdrawing his name from the firm, Fergus commended his share of the remaining stock into the keeping of merchants William Butler and Francis X. Gravel.<sup>75</sup> Maintaining his residence above the half-empty shop, Churchill continued to serve his few remaining customers. Temperance helped out as best she could, eventually taking in boarders, holding fast to the hope that the economy would take an upward turn.<sup>76</sup>

As 1859 drew to a close, such hopes seemed ill founded. The Little Falls economy appeared well set in its downward spiral, and even James Fergus was forced to face harsh realities. If things did not look up soon, he would try his fortune elsewhere. This was, after all, not the only Minnesota town in which he had an interest. Two years earlier he and several other enterprising men had laid out a series of towns in nearby counties. Appropriately enough, the only one that had flourished bore the name Fergus Falls. A reconnaissance trip to the area in November 1859 convinced him that a new

start could be made there, even without the capital that had been lost in his Little Falls investments.<sup>77</sup> Eagerly he wrote to George Stephens, his friend in Moline, urging him to come north to the Red River country and join him in developing lumber mills around the Fergus Falls area. Alarmed, Stephens declined, warning his friend against "taking your little children into the wilderness where they must be deprived of Civil Society and [endure] many disadvantages that you do not think of now."<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps swayed by Stephens's advice, Fergus ultimately decided against the move to the Red River country and redoubled his efforts to save his investments in Little Falls. Without waiting for the approval of the stockholders, he poured most of the company's remaining funds into repairing the ill-fated dam. Still confident of ultimate success, he persuaded friends and relatives to invest in the town by buying up lots while they could be had at a good price. William Fergus of Scotland, James's half-brother, and George Stephens and D. B. Sears of Moline were among those who made investments, inspired by James's abiding faith in the future of Little Falls.<sup>79</sup>

By this time, not even Calvin Tuttle shared that faith. In Tuttle's view, James's resignation had hardly relieved him of his responsibility to account for his actions during his tenure as director of the Little Falls Manufacturing Company. "I have sent a great deal of money to Little Falls and to your charge," he wrote James in December 1859, "and it is but just that I should receive a reasonable answer to inquiries."<sup>80</sup> While expressing dismay at his partner's lack of trust, James continued to ignore his entreaties to see the books or to have full explanations concerning the handling of affairs in Little Falls.

While Fergus's stubborn refusal to open the books to his partner would seem to indicate that there may have been some irregularities in his bookkeeping, there were likely other factors at work. Well known for his need to maintain absolute control in all situations, Fergus would have found it exceedingly difficult to give in to Tuttle's demands, especially in view of the fact that to do so would have raised questions concerning his use of company funds for several projects not specifically authorized by the stockholders.<sup>81</sup> If he was to keep the company books, then he would keep them his way. And he would not waste his valuable time explaining himself to the

businessmen of St. Anthony. He had a dam to repair and a mill to get running.

Though as ignorant of the intricacies of the company books as Calvin Tuttle himself, Pamela Fergus was not ignorant of the growing tension between the partners of the Little Falls Manufacturing Company. Tuttle was increasingly hostile and Sturgis had maintained a low profile since the day two years earlier when he and Rosanna had loaded up their household goods and children and moved to Little Elk. While the Sturgis bankruptcy was not a matter to be taken lightly, at least it had marked an end to that family's involvement in increasingly unpleasant company affairs. Pamela remained in the midst of the furor, ever mindful of harsh public opinion of company enterprises and unable to escape the gossip that circulated concerning her husband's role in company affairs.

By early 1860 she sensed an urgency in the situation, a worsening of affairs that dampened even James's accustomed optimism. Thwarted at every turn, he seemed to be losing all hope of ever rebuilding the city he had once envisioned. Little Falls was dying, and there seemed to be nothing he could do about it. Recovery depended upon capital, and capital would have to be found elsewhere. But where? The nation itself had faltered. The pages of the *New York Tribune*, the *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, and the *St. Cloud Democrat* were filled with news of depreciating stocks, failed towns, and financial disasters. But on those same pages James Fergus was reading of the discovery of gold in Kansas Territory, present-day Colorado. Expressing the hopes of thousands, the cry "Pikes Peak or Bust!" stirred new hope in Fergus and inspired a new plan.<sup>82</sup> James would leave his family in Little Falls, go out to Pikes Peak and stake his claim. By winter he would be back with the capital he needed to right things in Little Falls. And he would manage this without uprooting his family and carting them off into unknown country.<sup>83</sup>

For Pamela, the news was hardly welcome. Gold nuggets in mountain streams were a fine fantasy, but little more. How would she and the children manage if James left them behind? She knew nothing about the business, and she had paid little attention to the management of the family farm. Taxes would soon be due on house and other properties. Assessments were periodically levied on company stock. Where would the cash come from? She hardly felt strong enough for the tasks James proposed. She was approaching

her thirty-sixth birthday, and her health was poor. An abscessed breast refused to heal, and Dr. Smith, the last of the town's physicians, had already said good-bye to Amanda and the children and set off in hopes of making his way west. Where would Pamela find medical care if she or one of the children needed it?<sup>84</sup>

The questions were endless. And the answers were not forthcoming from James, for he was lost in his plan and oblivious to her worries. In March 1860 he made a temporary settlement with the board of directors of the Little Falls Manufacturing Company and patched up company affairs as best he could before immersing himself in a new partnership, the Pikes Peak Company of Little Falls, a company consisting of James himself, Pamela's brother James Dillin, and two sometime company employees, O. J. Rockwell and Daniel Bosworth.<sup>85</sup>

The origins of the Pikes Peak Company remain obscure. The enterprise could not have been long in the planning, since Fergus made no mention of mining as an option as late as December 1859 when he considered moving to Fergus Falls. The company's composition was likely determined largely by propensity, though the skills of each member must have been taken into consideration as well. Twenty-three-year-old James Dillin had lived in the Fergus home intermittently since boyhood.<sup>86</sup> A carpenter with several years of experience, Dillin was a logical-enough choice for the partnership. Twenty-five-year-old Orson J. Rockwell, one of a goodly number of laborers living in the Fergus household as of 1857, was a farmer and a native of Maine. He had most likely worked for Fergus since his arrival in Little Falls, and the two men were to remain partners in the mining business for some years to come. His experience as a teamster made him a good choice for the long journey west.<sup>87</sup>

Thirty-four-year-old Daniel Bosworth, the fourth partner in the venture, was a lumberman. Born in Maine, he had worked in the pine forests of Michigan and Wisconsin before arriving in Morrison County sometime before 1857. There he met and married Caroline Farnham, and he was among those living in the Farnham home in the country near Round Prairie in 1858 when successive Indian raids caused that family to seek shelter in Little Falls. From that time, Bosworth was likely involved in cutting and hauling lumber for the Little Falls Manufacturing Company. At any rate, from his earliest



responsibilities and very differently situated from what you ever was before," he wrote, adding, "I hope you will meet [the responsibilities] as they should be met."<sup>92</sup> To help her do so, James spelled out in great detail how she was to handle the company business, their land and livestock, even the children.

In dealing with company matters, her prime concern would be to stall creditors and to keep the books away from Tuttle. In case James's vote was needed, he had arranged for her to act on his behalf. All other company business would be seen to by thirty-year-old Charles Freeman, a land agent who had come to Little Falls as a bachelor and had begun his sojourn there as a boarder in the Fergus household. In the interim, he and Fergus had become partners in a real estate business and he had married. Now he and his nineteen-year-old wife, Abby, and their infant son, Fred, lived next door to the Ferguses. Recently appointed county auditor, Freeman was knowledgeable and trustworthy, and James admonished Pamela to "keep in as good friendship with Mr Freeman as you can, as we are very much dependent on him in our company business."<sup>93</sup>

"Our own individual business is all in your own hands," James continued. "Freeman has nothing to do with it whatever, except to give you advise if you want it." In case of difficulties she could not handle, she was to call upon lawyer James Hall, but she was to consult him as little as she could, since he wanted "big pay" for his advice.<sup>94</sup> Fergus had left her with power of attorney so that she could handle taxes, assessments, and other legal matters, and she had also been given power of substitution to act on behalf of his relatives in Scotland and their friends in Moline who had bought property in Little Falls.<sup>95</sup>

The two hired men, Ben Nickerson, forty years old, and John Currie, twenty-five, would stay on in James's absence, but Pamela was to give them explicit directions for managing livestock and garden, since they could not be depended upon to handle matters on their own. "I would get the men to kill the largest hog, get a pork barrel from one of the stores, salt it carefully and it will do for your summer pork," he wrote. "The little boar can be cut early in the fall and fattened for next winter. The young sows will have pigs before long. You had better eat them as soon as they are big enough." He advised her not to plant the garden before May 15, not to keep the two calves, and "if the white faced cow jumps fences sell her."<sup>96</sup>

Careful management of such matters was essential, since she would be totally dependent upon the farm for vegetables and meat. She need not worry about flour, since she could obtain what she needed at no cost from the mill at Sauk Rapids, which was now being operated by the newly widowed Emma Fletcher. For her other needs, Pamela was to rely on her credit with various firms in town.<sup>97</sup>

With business matters attended to, James's advice stretched into more personal matters:

Last but not least you must take care of your own health, and the health of the children for none of you are overly healthy. If you have any more of those spells send the children for some of the neighbors at once. It might be well if your mother was to come . . . [or for you] to keep one of the children [home] from school, keep them all dressed warm, be careful about letting the girls wear low necked dresses when I go away, as they have not been used to them and will very readily catch cold. Keep Andrew out of and away from the water as much as you can, don't get angry with the children but reason with them, be firm but mild. . . . You must give them all good advice . . . you are pretty well provided for and if your mother comes up you should enjoy yourself.<sup>98</sup>

Knowing that a good many business transactions would need to be discussed in letters from Pikes Peak, James advised Pamela to "pre-serve all my letters carefull on file . . . put them up in a paper holder if you can find a spare one as I want to see those that are on business when I come back."<sup>99</sup>

By late March 1860, his preparations for the trip completed, his memorandum written, and Pamela's objections muted if not answered, James Fergus gathered his wife and children about him to hear a poem he had either composed for the occasion or clipped from a contemporary periodical, copied in his own hand, and altered to express sentiments dear to his heart:

*The Pike's Pecker's Farewell to His Wife and Children*

Farewell, dear wife, to distant lands  
Where Kansas streams bear golden sands  
I wend my way through wet and cold  
to dig for you, the hidden gold.

Farewell, farewell, my children dear,  
 'Tis for your sakes I leave you here,  
 to buy for you with toils and pains  
 The golden dust on Kansas plains.

To buy for you no idle bread  
 [To] place no finry on your head,  
 'Tis to store your minds with useful lore  
 That I leave you whom I adore.

Thus children dear, when I'm away  
 Let not your youthful steps go stray  
 Obey your mother; the [truth] tell.  
 Dear Wife and children fare you well.<sup>100</sup>

While there is no reason to doubt James's sincerity in proffering this bit of verse to his family, his words offered scant comfort to the wife he left behind. James Fergus was forty-six years old, his health had been a constant concern of Pamela's, and there was no way of knowing whether he would even survive the trip across the plains. And what if he did manage to return in six months? A good deal could happen to them in the meantime. After all, he was leaving her in full charge of four children, a house and lots, properties held in trust for others, and a failed business about which she knew virtually nothing. Furthermore, he was taking with him \$330 — almost all of the family's cash.<sup>101</sup> None of these matters seemed to trouble James as he packed for his journey. By his own report, he had done all he could for them. The rest would be up to Pamela.

## Colorado Quest

ON MARCH 29, 1860, James Fergus left Little Falls for St. Anthony, the first stop on his long journey to the goldfields. He stayed that night at the Stone Hotel, writing Pamela that he had sent twenty dollars to her mother in Geneseo, Illinois, asking her to use the money to visit Little Falls during his absence and suggesting that she bring Pamela's youngest sister, sixteen-year-old Jane, with her.<sup>1</sup> He also advised Pamela to take all she could get of the provisions left in the care of Butler and Gravel and belonging to the defunct Little Falls Company store. She might well need them. He noted that he had met with Tuttle and settled some company affairs and had enjoyed a chance meeting with Dr. Timothy Smith, who was at that moment seated at a nearby table.<sup>2</sup>

It is not known how long the doctor had been in St. Paul or what provision he had made for the wife and two children he had left behind in Little Falls. Both natives of New York, Amanda and Timothy Smith had lived for some time in Ohio, where he served in the United States Army. Isaac and Nellie had both been born there. Appearing in Little Falls within a year or so of the arrival of the Fergus family, Smith was welcomed as one of the first physicians in the area.<sup>3</sup> But he was a gambler and an alcoholic, and he soon fell out of favor. Mounting debts finally caused him to look elsewhere for employment, but when he left Little Falls, he traveled alone, promising Amanda that he would send for her and the children as soon as he got himself established.<sup>4</sup> By the time Fergus bumped into him in late March of 1860 in the dining room of the Stone Hotel, Smith had caught a case of gold fever and was already planning to go west. He and Fergus agreed to meet the next week in McGregor, Iowa.<sup>5</sup>

From St. Anthony, James Fergus traveled by stage to St. Paul, where he caught a steamboat down the Mississippi River, delaying a day in McGregor, where Doc Smith failed to show. Two days later he found Smith waiting in Galena, Illinois, and the two men traveled together as far as Moline, where Fergus made business calls