Life in 1868

Looking back 150 years ago

In HER Pulitzer Prize winning book Prairie Fires, Caroline Fraser detailed the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder in the broader historical context of settling frontier states and territories in the upper Midwest through the late 19th century. “Life in frontier times was a perpetual hard winter,” Fraser writes. “It was the heroism of daily perseverance, the unprized tenacity of unending labor.”

Until the mid-1800s, the livelihood for most families was tied to agriculture and farming techniques that hadn’t changed significantly in over a century. When our modest “shed church,” as it was known, opened on the banks of the Mississippi River in 1868, the country and our community was on the cusp of widespread changes across many facets of life, including post Civil War politics, the growth of industry and commerce, and shifts in general societal trends. In a few short decades, Fraser notes, “the world had shifted so rapidly from subsistence agriculture to a market economy.”

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1868 at a Glance

- US President: Andrew Johnson; Ulysses S. Grant was elected in 1868 and took office in 1869
- Minnesota Governor: William Marshall
- Minneapolis Mayor: Dorilus Morrison through April; Hugh Harrison
- Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution is adopted, guaranteeing due process of law and full citizenship to African Americans
- Treaty of Fort Laramie (also called the Sioux Treaty of 1868) is signed
- Memorial Day observed for the first time
- Wyoming Territory is organized
- William “Buffalo Bill” Cody serves as a scout for the US Army
- First volume of Little Women by Louisa May Alcott is published
- Jean-Martin Charcot diagnosed Multiple Sclerosis
- Helium is discovered
- Thomas Edison applies for his first US patent
- W.E.B. DuBois was born in Massachusetts
- Immaculate Conception parish founded; construction of “shed church” begins
Census tallies cited 36% of the state’s population was foreign-born, 23% were born in other states, and 23% were born in Minnesota. By contrast, in 2015 only 8% of Minnesota’s population was born in a foreign country.

In 1870, 57% of the state’s workforce was employed in agriculture, with 21% in a service industry, 14% in manufacturing or mining, and 8% in a trade or transportation. There were approximately 46,000 farms in the state, with most farms between 20 and 100 acres in size. The census reported 866 churches in Minnesota spanning 15 denominations; 225 of those were Methodist congregations, with Roman Catholic and Lutheran following as most common.

The year 1868, when our “shed church” was constructed, started with extreme cold in January with a rapid warm-up in March, allowing for an early wheat seeding. Favorable weather followed in May and June. July was the hottest month in almost 40 years with afternoon temperatures in the mid-80s or higher, allowing for record harvests of both corn and wheat. The fall was cool, wet, and “exceedingly unpleasant,” according to the St. Paul Daily Pioneer newspaper; a snowstorm even struck the evening of September 23. Cool and wet weather continued through the September opening of our “shed church” and into October and November, filling local rivers and flooding many cellars. The year ended with moderate temperatures and light snowfall.

Accounting for inflation, $1 in 1868 would now be worth about $17.75. Sugar cost about 7¢ per pound, flour was 4¢ per pound, and coffee was 12¢ per pound. One could buy 2 apples or a pound of cheese for a nickel. The price for a new cook stove was $25, chairs were $1.25 each, and a bed, bureau, and commode cost $15. A year’s supply of coal for one household was about $80. Montgomery Ward’s first catalog, published in 1872, sold six pairs of men’s socks, seven yards of denim, or three yards of cashmere each for $1. Plain calico or cotton fabrics for work dresses or household linens cost 10¢ to 15¢ a yard.

Apparel for both men and women was still quite formal. Women typically wore heavily embellished full-length skirts with petticoats and hooped crinolines. Daytime dresses, worn with corsets, featured bodices with high collared or lace necklines and full sleeves, while evening bodices usually had short sleeves and lower necklines. Long hair was often parted in the middle, smoothed or waved around the ears, and then braided or turned into a low bun. Bonnets, hats, and hair nets were often worn.

Men’s fashion remained similar to the previous decade, with linen or cotton collared shirts, wide neckties, full-length pants,
and heavy frock- (knee length) or sack- (slightly shorter) coats worn, often with a vest or waistcoat. Top hats were still worn, with felt bowler hats increasing in popularity. John B. Stetson introduced the dense felt Boss of the Plains hat in 1865 to immediate popularity, especially in the West. Men’s hair was usually side-parted and frequently smoothed with hair oil.

STATE POLITICS
Two issues loomed large in state politics at this time: populism and African American suffrage. Populism began in the rural areas of Minnesota in the 1860s in response to high railroad and milling prices. Oliver Kelley, a farm owner from what is now Elk River, Minnesota, organized six others to form the National Grange and Order of Patrons of Husbandry in 1867 to create a common voice protecting the interests of farmers and their families. Local chapters formed quickly around the country and Kelley helped found the Minnesota Grange in 1868. Men or women could become members and officers. Minnesota Grange’s political clout grew through the early 1870s but started to decline when Minnesota’s congressional election divided populist parties. Nevertheless, many later populist parties and organizations stemmed from this movement and influenced state and national issues, including protection for workers, labor reform, prohibition, and women’s suffrage, into the twentieth century.

Most Minnesotans supported Lincoln’s emancipation policies, yet African American citizens in the state could not vote, hold political office, or serve on juries. In 1865 and 1867, amendments were offered to remove race from state voting requirements; while gaining in support, they did not pass. In 1868, the same year our “shed church” opened, the Governor implored lawmakers to issue a vote, and a bill passed in both the state House and Senate that March. Minnesota and Iowa were the two Northern states calling for an African American suffrage amendment referendum on the November 1868 ballot. One year later, the Governor proposed the fifteenth amendment to the US Constitution, which was approved by three-quarters of the states and certified by the US Secretary of State in 1870.

NATIONAL NEWS
Similar to our current political climate, the late 1860s were dynamic times brimming with political discontent. Andrew Johnson, once a senator from Tennessee and a fierce critic of the Southern secession, was appointed by Abraham Lincoln as the military Governor of Tennessee in 1862 and elected Vice President in 1864.

Upon Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865, Johnson was sworn in as President and embraced Lincoln’s lenient post-Civil War reconstruction policies, which set the stage for a bitter showdown with Congress. In March 1867, Congress passed the Tenure of Office act (over the president’s veto), which prohibited the president from removing officials confirmed by the Senate without Senate approval. The act protected members of Johnson’s Cabinet, including the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, who was appointed by Lincoln. Johnson attempted to replace Stanton with General Ulysses S. Grant in Fall of 1867. Fearing legal action, Grant turned the office back to Stanton after Senate passed a measure in protest of the dismissal.

In February, Johnson appointed General Lorenzo Thomas as Secretary of War. Stanton refused to yield the office and the outraged House of Representatives approved eleven articles of impeachment detailing Johnson’s “high crimes and misdemeanors.” This was the first impeachment of a President since the office was created in 1789. A Senate impeachment trial followed, but the 35–19 vote in May 1868 was not the two-thirds majority needed to convict him, and Johnson remained in office. 

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