

A "Down-Easter" in Wisconsin:

Sears Letters, 1849, 1854

Edited by Kenneth Duckett

Thomas Sears was neither financier, politician, land speculator, merchant, soldier, nor reformer. His role in Wisconsin history was less colorful but more fundamental to the development of the state, for it was he and the thousands of other farmers who emigrated westward, built their homes, cleared and fenced the land, raised the crops, and turned the frontier into a rich agricultural area.

Sears was born October 18, 1819, in Knox, Waldo County, Maine, where he lived on a farm until he was fifteen. In 1834 his father purchased a woolen mill in Freedom, Maine, which he later gave to his sons Thomas, John, and David. When the woolen mill burned the boys built and operated a saw and shingle mill until 1844. Then they sold the sawmill, and for three years Thomas earned his living as an itinerant millwright. In December, 1847, he married Adaline Holt, and two years later their first son was born. In the fall of that year, 1849, Sears, his brother John, and their families, moved to Wisconsin.¹ In the two letters printed below Thomas tells of their journey, describes Wisconsin, and contrasts it with Maine.²

Picture: "In the Emigrant Train," a drawing by C. Maurand in *Harper's Weekly*, January 24, 1874.

¹*History of Green County, Wisconsin . . . and Biographies of Representative Citizens* (Springfield, Illinois, 1884), 1009-1010.

²The letters reproduced here are the property of Mrs. J. D. R. Steven, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, who allowed the State Historical Society of Wisconsin to make photostatic copies for its manuscripts collections. The letters are published in their entirety except for brief family items of no general interest. In order to aid the readers, paragraphs and some punctuation were supplied.



Exeter, September 7th 1849

Brother David

I suppose that you are expecting a line from us and I have a good opportunity. I will commence a little description of our journey after saying that we arrived in Milwaukie safe and sound a week ago last Wednesday making our journey 17 days. We got into Boston Tuesday morning and stayed there with Porter Tripp until Wednesday morning 8 o'clock and then took the 2d class cars to Albany. . . . We got our miniatures taken and left them with Porter Tripp. He keeps a boarding house on Fleet Street. I do not know the number. His name is on his sign in pretty large letters over his door. He some expected to go to California and to visit Freedom before now. If he does not you will have to send for them. Louisa³ wishes her father to have hers. We contracted in Boston to have our freight taken through to Milwaukie for \$1.50 per hundred lbs. When we got into the cars at Boston we found it stuffed pretty full of Irish who were going out 30 or 40 miles so that we soon had a good decent company, plenty of room, and a comfortable chance.

We arrived at Albany Wednesday 6 o'clock P.M. and stayed over night on the east side of the river to see a man that was going to Farmersburg, Iowa. He said that there was plenty

³John's wife, Maria Louisa Sears.

of government land & a good chance. He was very anxious that we should go too. Our fare to Albany was \$3.35. Thursday morning it commenced raining and rained hard till 7 o'clock. We were on the east side of the river and there was no covered carriage to be had so we had to put out on foot, kits, cats, sacks, and wives, through the rain for all the world like pedestrian Paddies. Unless any body wants poor accomodations, poor fare, poor waiters &c I would advise them not to stop in Greenbush.⁴

The immigrant train of cars started from Albany at 12½ P.M. There was one car considerably better than all the rest which they kept locked so that every thing could not get into it. I found this car and made friends with him who had the key so that we got into it and fixed things so that we could monopolise four seats which gave us a pretty good chance through the night. We spread our pillows shawls &c on one seat and stowed away the children. Adaline I got a chance for partly on the seat and the rest in my lap so that she slept about five hours considerable comfortably. We got to Buffalo about 1 o'clock Friday. Fare \$5. We stopped very near the steamboat landing at Wheeler's Hotel. This is not so stylish and fashionable a house as some but they were quite accomodating taking us bag and baggage from the cars to the house and from the house to the boat free of charge and we stopped only to get our dinner but went on board the boat and stayed.

The boat started Saturday morning at 9 o'clock. This boat went round the lakes and landed in Milwaukie in 4½ days. We took 1st cabin passage, \$30 for the whole. We arrived at Milwaukie about 10 P.M. and put up at the Tremont House.⁵ We did not like our quarters very well and should think the American House⁶ would be preferable. The morning

after arriving was rainy so we stayed in Milwaukie that day and inquired the prices of goods and got a little information of almost all kinds. I don't think of anything now in the eatable line but what is cheaper than in Maine except molasses. Good sugar five cts. per lb. Dried apples 22 lbs. for one dollar. Stoves I should think were 25 per cent lower than in Maine. I can buy a pretty good cooking stove for \$8. Wooden chairs from .42 to 1.00 each, plain black walnut tables about the same as birch ones in Freedom and bureaus from 5 to 20 dollars. Factory clothes are about one cent per yard higher than in Maine.

Coming from Buffalo we got acquainted with a Methodist minister and his family. He was recommended to leave his family about 20 miles from Milwaukie west in the town of Pe-waukie while he looked for a chance to locate. Being all of us in the same situation we concluded to keep together and leave our families together. So we hired a team for \$4 to take us all there and the next morning we left the folks and paid him \$2 more to take us as far as the town of Richmond on rock prairie. We stayed with him over Sunday free of charge. He had an excelent farm which he wants to sell for \$10 per acre. It would be an agrava-tion I know to a Maine farmer to look over that prairie as far as the eye could reach and see the great fields of corn and almost innumerable stacks of wheat & shocks of oats containing about twelve large bundles as thick together as bundles would be in Maine. They have reaping machines that reap from 15 to 20 acres per day by horse power.

Monday morning we started for this place by way of Jaynesville. We went to this town of Centre and Magnolia which lies next west of Centre. Here we dropped our minister. He bought 40 acres of prairie, a gravel house 16 by 20 two stories hight, six acres of sod corn, a stack of hay, one hog, two cows, a horse & waggon, and takes possession immediately for \$415. We had a pretty good farm offered us in Magnolia for \$1000. It contained 160 acres of prairie with a good spring on it, 65 acres

⁴Greenbush, New York, also called East Albany, a former village in Rensselaer County, located on the east bank of the Hudson River opposite Albany. Angelo and Louis Hielprin, eds., *Gazetteer or Geographical Dictionary of the World* (Philadelphia, 1922) 756.

⁵The Tremont House, a second-class hotel, located on Michigan Street, is not listed in the Milwaukee city directories of the period, although it was advertised in Samuel Freeman's *Emigrant's Handbook* (1851). See John G. Gregory, *History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin*, (4 vols., Chicago, 1931) 2:689.

⁶The American House, located at 27-31 Spring Street (now Wisconsin Avenue), was a three-story frame hotel built about 1842, and managed for many years by Messrs. Skinner and Blackstone. In 1861 it was destroyed by fire.

prepared for a crop next year, 100 apple trees grafted fruit set out, and 40 acres of opening two miles distant. We have not known of seeing but one piece of government land and that is an island so called, surrounded by a kind of dry marsh. It contains about a section. It is good wheat land and would make a capital farm for raising stock as there is plenty of hay and pastureage for nothing. We got here day before yesterday & shall not all get ready to start on our tour till Monday. I must say good bye & write the rest some other time. If you write to us you can direct to Milwaukee or to our wives at Howard post office Pewaukee. The office is in the house they stay in.

Mt. Pleasant, April 30th 1854⁷

Dear Brother

. . . Our spring thus far has been uncommonly fine. The three first weeks of March were warm for the season. A considerable [part] of the time we had no fire in the school house and frequently kept doors and windows open. Some of the large boys were taken from school to commence spring work and plowing was commenced by many and sowing by some before the middle of the month. The last week was colder and froze up and put a stop to plowing. I commenced my farming April 4th. I have but little to cultivate this year on account of sowing so much down to grass last spring, viz 27 acres. I have only 20 this year. My team is light (a middling sized pair of four year old steers and a dobbin that I harrow with) and my plowing all to do this spring. I have sown 10 acres wheat, 2 of oats, and planted 2 of murphys, one acre reserved for grass [?] seed and other et ceteras and finished one week ago. The last week I have been preparing the ballance for corn, making garden, and grafting. I have grafted two or three hundred this spring. I think that I will have trees enough for you an orchard by the time you are ready for them and of the best kinds too of which I will write you the catalogue.

⁷Thomas and John Sears bought land in Mount Pleasant township, Green County, and during the winter of 1849 they shared their log house with a third family. Four years later Thomas built a frame house, which he occupied until 1879. *History of Green County*, 1010.

. . . We hardly know what to make of that part of your letter "expecting this to be your last year in Maine." You have never mentioned about having [an] opportunity of disposing of your property there. I thought while making my garden that perhaps I had ought to anticipate your wants and enlarge a little which I should have done if you had been a little more explicit, but it was thought it would perhaps be counting on unhatched chickens. If you are coming to Wisconsin I want you to speak in season and carry on John's place the first year until you can get your own in order.⁸

I do not know when I left Maine that I had any serious thoughts of ever returning and now think it extremely doubtfull. I often think of my feelings when first catching sight of Freedom Village after a long absence.⁹ After tossing about by sea and land about three weeks my head at last passed over the hill on the country road above De Bellows' from whence I could command a full view (of that modern Sodom). Well I exclaimed to be sure I have taken a great deal of pains to behold so meagre a prospect. I have no nest egg there now and never have one lingering desire to see it again. I am a farmer now and if I should visit what should I see (viewing by contrast) but small fields (with numerous rocks looking larger than heretofore) covered principally with grass indicative of the labour of tilling the soil and an almost everlasting winter. I would be glad to see my friends but I tell them if they want to see me, why [not] come here and not only see me but other things which will be new to them. Adaline, I think when we left, set four years for her return which will elapse in September, but she says if your family moves here she shall never go back. She says if you know when you

⁸John Sears either died or migrated elsewhere, leaving Mrs. Maria Louisa Sears to manage his farm. In 1857 David Sears moved to Wisconsin, and both he and Thomas prospered. Three years later their real and personal property totaled \$7,830 and \$6,663 respectively. Manuscript Federal Census for the State of Wisconsin, 1860, Green County, Mount Pleasant township, 172, 174.

⁹Thomas was probably referring to the winter of 1844 when he traveled to Georgia, where he worked as a millwright, and returned to Maine in the spring. *History of Green County*, 1010.

are well off you will stay where you are but is still very anxious for you to come. I sometimes tell her I believe I must follow suit and sell out and go somewhere else. She quickly puts her veto on that saying that she should never find another place that seemed like home, and I dare say she would not exchange her situation to go to any place she was ever in.

New England people are flocking in this spring faster than ever. Four men from Maine bought out residents in this vicinity lately. Two more young men were here from Oxford County a week or two since and last night some New Hampshire men were here trying to rent a part of my house. Every house, shanty, or empty [hut?] is occupied (my old cabin among the rest)¹⁰ and people are obliged to push on further for chances to stop. Land has risen within six months at least one

third and plenty of buyers. Wild land to improved farms (without buildings of any consequence) are selling from five to twelve dollars per acre. Stock of all kinds is monstrous considering the cost of raising. Cows are from 20 to 35 dollars, oxen from 70 to 120, horses fair to good 100 to 150. Prices of produce in market are a fraction lower than they were. Butter 12½, eggs not worth taking to market so we just fall to and crucify them ourselves. I will send Sarah a recipe for making Wisconsin cake which she may try if she can afford the eggs, but as Adaline has not returned from meeting yet I shall have to wait for the description . . .

¹⁰In the winter of 1854-1855 the first school in district number eight met in Thomas Sears' log cabin. *History of Green County*, 997