

# Reflections

As the legislative session winds down, members continue to work on bills as they wait for a compromised budget and some other key bills to be worked out between the House-Senate conference committees. Many are still spending 12-16 hours a day working to support or oppose issues that affect the lives of Minnesotans.

Once they leave the Capitol, most will work on re-election campaigns and connecting with thousands of constituents in their current and new legislative districts. They will also go home to catch up with family activities and friends, as well as concentrate on their full-time professions and other activities.

Yet, since the state became a territory in 1849, it is difficult to find a legislator who could match the stunning, active nature of Joseph R. Brown, one of the founders of the state.

Brown was an original member of the Territorial Legislature and held offices that included secretary and chief clerk. Brown later served two non-consecutive terms in the state Legislature. Minnesota historian Theodore C. Blegen credited him as being "versatile and resourceful ... an exuberant worker for Minnesota Territory."

Brown was 14 when he came to the territory as a drummer boy in 1819 with Col. Henry Leavenworth's army to build Fort Snelling. By age 17, he had learned the Sioux language, and with Joseph Snelling, son of the Fort's commandant, he searched for the source of Minnehaha Falls and located Lake Minnetonka. At age 19 Brown became principal musician and leader of Fort Snelling's band.

As diverse and talented as legislators are today, Brown outdid them. By the time he died at age 65, he was a lumberman,

grogshop owner (otherwise known as a saloon), American Indian agent, fur trader, officer in Gen. Henry Sibley's army, and inventor of a "steam wagon" that traveled at 40 mph.

Sibley was the state's first governor in 1858.

As a land speculator, Brown founded an area he named "Dakotah," but the city of Stillwater outgrew it and merged with it. Later Brown founded the town of Henderson. The town of Browns Valley and

Brown County are named in his honor.

While pursuing many goals, he was a confidant to important leaders of the day and editorial manager of the *Minnesota Pioneer* newspaper — now the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* — after its founder, James Goodhue died. Brown's persona, as well as his name, was used by author Sinclair Lewis in his novel,

*The God-Seeker*.

In 1846, when Minnesota was still part of the Wisconsin Territory, Brown was involved in many governmental projects that laid the foundation for the state to enter the Union. He worked closely with Sibley and others in sharing his experiences as a justice of the peace and a one-term legislator for St. Croix County. He even suggested the territory be named "Minasota" but Congress decided it should be Minnesota when it was established.

While overall achievements in the lives of legislators are noteworthy, Joseph Renshaw Brown's accomplishments are incredible. No wonder he was called "The most remarkable man who ever appeared in the Northwest."

—LECLAIR GRIER LAMBERT



Joseph R. Brown

Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

## Where to find information

### Chief Clerk's Office

211 State Capitol (651) 296-2314

The Chief Clerk's Office provides copies of bills at no charge, all agendas for House sessions, and the Journal of the House.

### House Index Department

211 State Capitol (651) 296-6646

The House Index Department, a part of the Chief Clerk's Office, has a computerized index available for public use. House Index lists bills by committee, topic, author, file number, and other categories. The office can also give you the current status of legislation.

April 19, 2002