

John Shober Mantorville Merchant

M. Haugen

The ad read “Pioneer Merchant of Dodge County.” The year ... 1857 ... July, 16 to be exact. The paper was the first edition of the Mantorville Express. Located on page 3, column 4, using 75% of the available column space, the ad distinguished itself with the stereotypic hand, index finger fully extended. The finger pointed down to the copy directing the reader’s eyes to its offerings. It boasted a broad range of products that were “JUST WHAT THE PEOPLE WANT,” including: dry goods, shoes, shovels, paints, plows, plus much more.

John Shober, an ambitious, hardworking, entrepreneur and public servant, placed the ad. Not as well-known as the Mantor brothers, whom the settlement was named after, Shober played a significant role in developing the commercial and civic aspects of the new settlement and county. He established the first general store in Mantorville and in Dodge County.ⁱ

Shober came to Mantorville with the second group of settlers in the fall of 1854. Earlier that spring the Mantor brothers and others made the trek from Pennsylvania, building homes on land they had claimed the previous autumn.ⁱⁱ

Born in Loudon County, Virginia, 1832, Shober attended law school in Cincinnati and was admitted to the Ohio Bar before coming to Mantorville.ⁱⁱⁱ

In April, 1854, Shober, then 22 and living in Iowa, struck out from his home to venture into Minnesota Territory in search of a suitable location to establish a new home. He was accompanied by his brother-in-law, John Row, and close friend Joshua Olmstead. In May they arrived in the Zumbro River valley at the area soon to become Mantorville. At that time the only building standing was a partially constructed cabin that Peter Mantor had built the previous autumn before returning to Pennsylvania for the winter. The cabin was located a short distance to the “east” side of the river.¹ Shober and his companions remained in the Zumbro valley for several weeks. The group ventured to Sumners Grove (later to be named Concord) and stayed a couple days with the Sumner family. The Sumner’s cabin was the first residence to be built in Dodge County and was completed only several weeks before the Shober group made their visit.^{iv} Shober, satisfied with what the area offered, decided to settle in the Zumbro valley with plans to open a store. The trio went home to Iowa to gather supplies for the journey back. In July Shober and Olmstead returned and built two cabins south of Peter Mantor’s cabin. These were the second and third cabins built in what soon was to become Mantorville. After the cabins were completed, Olmstead returned to Iowa. Shober traveled to Galena, IL to pick up supplies needed for his store soon to open.

THE WONDER OF THE WEST!

It has a long life (Mantorville was chosen of us great as a point of trade! There is no better place than J. H. SHOBER in the

Pioneer Merchant

—OF—
DODGE COUNTY,

And one of the very best in Northern Minnesota, and that he has successfully turned the location of Western Life and that he always has

JUST WHAT THE PEOPLE WANT!

And accordingly there is a general stock of everything that the well-to-do families in and this corner can find in the

UNION STORE,
South Side of the River.

A large and complete stock of goods, which in consideration of the hard times, he will sell at very low rates.

His Stock consists of a well selected assortment of

DRY GOODS, GROCERIES,
PROVISIONS, QUEEN'S WARE,
HARDWARE,
READY MADE CLOTHING,
BOOTS, HATS,
PAINTS, OILS,

and every variety of

FARMING

IMPLEMENTS!!!

Among which is a very large stock and Excellent Quality of

HAY FORKS, OCCASION UTENSILS,
GRAIN CRACKERS,

PLOWS!

ALSO.

A large and well selected stock of Cook

STOVES,

Of Every Description

*** All persons wishing to purchase anything in the above mentioned line, will do well to give me a call before purchasing elsewhere.

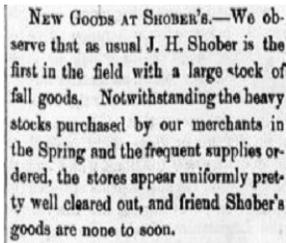
I feel confident from my long experience and successful business in the purchase of the foregoing articles, that I can offer as good, if not superior inducements, to purchasers, as any other person in Northern Minnesota.

J. H. SHOBER.
Mantorville, July 16, 1857.

¹ The direction east was taken verbatim from Slocum’s Reminiscences Pertaining to Mantorville article. The Zumbro predominantly runs west to east in Mantorville. Consequently the reference is more than likely to the south side of the river.

The supplies were sent by riverboat to Red Wing, and hauled by wagon to Mantorville. The larger cabin was used as the store and smaller of the two served as Shober's residence. The store opened in October 1854.^v

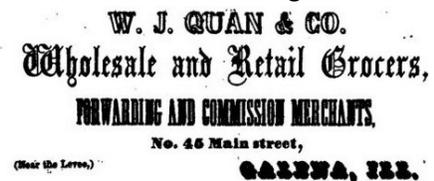
The store structure was a 14' x 14' log cabin, having a flat roof and a split log floor. It was in close proximity to several other small commercial enterprises. These included a house/hotel operated by J.B. Hubbell, a blacksmith shop, law office, plus several other businesses.^{vi} The general store Shober established sold the basic necessities to area settlers, allowing them to avoid the 40 – 50 mile trek to Mississippi River towns for provisions. In the summer of 1855 Shober expanded his business by building a larger building made of stone. Also located on the south side of the river, it was on the opposite side of the road from where the first two cabins were built. The store was moved into the first floor of the new building while the second floor became the home of John's father, George, along with his wife and daughter. This was the first stone building in southern Minnesota with the exception of Winona.^{vii}



Mantorville Express

The supply chain for receiving products for almost all inland frontier merchants in the Minnesota Territory, was a multi-step process. It involved purchasing the necessary goods, bringing them together at a warehouse/freight forwarder at a port city (almost always a Mississippi River port for the merchants in southeastern Minnesota). The goods were loaded on to riverboats shipped upriver stopping to deliver goods at various river towns. The Galena advertiser in 1851 commented "While in the Eastern counties of the State (Illinois) and Wisconsin, the farmers send the surplus of their stock East; in this neighborhood and South along the river, they are forwarded northward to supply the Lumberman, Indians, Garrisons, and settlers with meat in the newly occupied land"^{viii} (capital letters as used in the article).

John Shober used Galena, IL as the staging city to bring his products to Mantorville. Although he used several freight forwarders, the most used was the W.J. Quan Co.^{ix} Once loaded, the boat would then head toward the Mississippi River traveling approx. 4 miles down the Galena River until it opened into the Mississippi. The boat tuned upstream to make the 226 mile journey to Red Wing. At Red Wing the goods were almost exclusively turned over to the care of John Elder, who would arrange the loading into wagons for the 50 mile trek to Mantorville.^x



Galena Advertiser (date unknown)

In his *Reminiscences Pertaining to Mantorville*, George Slocum writes of Shober: "John had his faults, also his virtues, he was a firm believer in the doctrine that the 'end justifies the means;,' no person was ever refused credit by him, his theory and practice was simple but direct. If A needed provisions and could not pay, he got what he needed and the goods were charged to B, who was opulent and had much wealth."^{xi}

Shober played a very active role in organizing Dodge County and Mantorville. He was the first post master for Mantorville as well as serving 3 years as Dodge County Register of Deeds and 3 years as Clerk of the County Board. Some of the new residents didn't necessarily think his active roles were strictly

due to civic pride. Again, Slocum commented: "At this early date John held by proxy or otherwise most of the offices in the County and it must be conceded that he held them for all there was in it."^{xii}

John Shober left Mantorville in 1858 to move further west, settling in Bon Homme County, Dakota Territory. In 1861 he was elected a member of the first Council of the Legislature of Dakota Territory. In 1862 he was elected President of the Council.^{xiii}

In 1864 he again moved west, settling in Helena, Montana Territory. He started a law practice and in 1864 was elected District Attorney. 1894 saw Shober elected to Montana's Fourth Legislative Assembly. He invested heavily in mining companies becoming wealthy.^{xiv}

Again, from George Slocum, referencing Shober's Mantorville experience: "He was a unique character and pages could be filled with his doings while a resident here."^{xv}

Never married, John Shober died in Montana on August 22, 1925.



*Courtesy of the
Montana Historical
Society*

ⁱ H.A. Smith, History of Winona, Olmsted, and Dodge counties Together with Biographical Matter, Statistics, Etc. (Chicago, H.H. Hill and Company, 1884) 860

ⁱⁱ Smith, History of Dodge County, 859

ⁱⁱⁱ Archives West, Orbis Cascade Alliance, archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv97480

^{iv} The Shober Family, George Slocum, 178, Old Settler's Association of Dodge County Commemorative Meeting Materials. Minnesota Historical Society

^v Shober Family, Slocum, 179

^{vi} Reminiscences Pertaining to Mantorville, George Slocum Old Settler's Association of Dodge County Commemorative Meeting Materials. Minnesota Historical Society

^{vii} Shober Family, 179

^{viii} Evadine A., Minnesota History, Dec. 1933, 378

^{ix} W.J. Quan & Co. bill of lading, Shober Collection, Minnesota Historical Society

^x Shober family archives. Minnesota Historical Society

^{xi} Reminiscences Pertaining to Mantorville, George Slocum 2, Old Settler's Association of Dodge County Commemorative Meeting Materials. Minnesota Historical Society

^{xii} Reminiscences, Slocum, 2

^{xiii} South Dakota Historical Society

^{xiv} Archives West, Orbis Cascade Alliance

^{xv} Reminiscences, 2