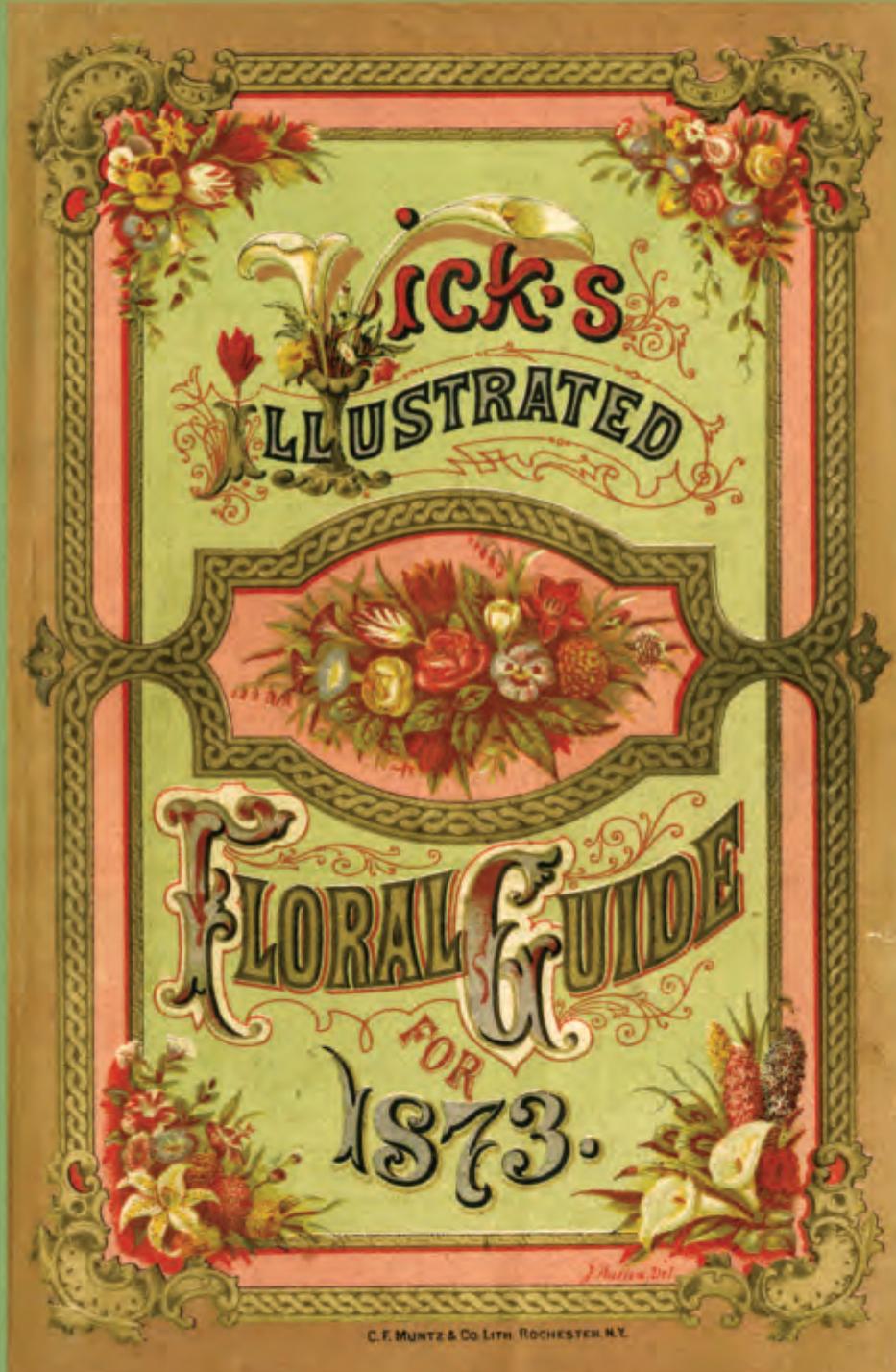


RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

*Pith, Heart, and Nerve*  
Truman M. Smith:  
Horticulture as the Way Back  
Barry L. and Joan Miller Cotter  
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Summer 2009

Volume 44, Number 2



The cover of Vick's Illustrated Floral Guide for 1873. Truman M. Smith was a customer of this commercial nursery and he also used the Vick's catalog to help him gauge the appetite of the St. Paul market for plants that Smith raised for sale. Vick's cover by John Walton. (9 x 5 7/8 in.). Rochester, N.Y. C. F. Muntz & Co. Lith., 1873. Reproduced courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society. © American Antiquarian Society.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 44, Number 2

Summer 2009

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ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

Many of us are newly conscious about eating locally grown foods and love to visit the farmers' markets in our neighborhoods for quality and savings. But the journey from garden to market to table has always been fascinating. In this issue we reencounter Truman M. Smith, who took up a new career as a horticulturalist and market gardener after the disastrous Panic of 1857 wiped out his bank and real estate holdings. To earn a living, Smith turned his hands to providing Twin Cities families with fruits, vegetables, and nursery stock. Although Smith succeeded, his out-of-town nursery stock suppliers did not always ship early enough, believing, in his words, that he "live[d] at the North Pole"! A generation later in the 1900s, John J. Ryan, who started out as a grocery clerk, became a long-time executive secretary of the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association. Ryan led statewide efforts to pass the Minnesota Pure Food and Drug Act, a year before national legislation, and helped bring about credit reform. But his later attempts to save family grocers from competition with new, grocery chain stores such as Piggly Wiggly fell victim to inevitable economic reality. Finally, our main book review recounts the powerful story of the Nasseff brothers, whose family saga of immigrating to St. Paul from Lebanon, and later success in differing business arenas, makes for fascinating reading.

*Anne Cowie,*  
Chair, Editorial Board

# Pith, Heart, and Nerve

## Truman M. Smith: Horticulture as the Way Back

Barry L. and Joan Miller Cotter

The initial installment of this two-part account of Truman M. Smith was published in the Fall 2008 issue of Ramsey County History. In that article, the authors examined Smith's arrival in St. Paul, his success as a banker, and his financial difficulties that resulted from the Panic of 1857. In this second part, Barry and Joan Cotter continue Smith's story with an account of how he transformed himself into a productive market gardener.

### "The Best Cultivated Acre"

- **February 1857**, downtown St Paul: banker Smith's new, splendid offices on the first floor of the Fuller House were "fitted up in style" according to local and national press.<sup>1</sup>
- **September 1860**, Ramsey County's McLean Township: gardener Smith's newly developed grounds were "The Best Cultivated Acre" according to a reporter from *The Minnesota Farmer and Gardener*.<sup>2</sup>

Truman M. Smith, Esq., on the bluff east of St. Paul, has an acre of ground devoted to asparagus, pie plant, grapes, currants, gooseberries, strawberries, etc., with a fair proportion of vegetables. We do not remember to have seen an acre in this new country so judiciously arranged, in regard to profit. In short, we consider it a model fruit and vegetable garden. . . . Everything was planted out in the most approved style of the art. . . . Some may think such high culture is quite unnecessary here, but . . . this single acre . . . (will) yield a much greater revenue than many of the large farms poorly tilled and devoted exclusively to the raising of grain. We count it something of a luxury to have such a garden, to say nothing of the "dimes and dollars."

Although separated in time by little more than three years, these press reports offer contrasting vignettes of Truman M. Smith, two public faces belonging to the same

man. The banker of 1857 had lost his bank by 1858, his enterprise a casualty of the devastating Panic of 1857.<sup>3</sup> The man himself, however, survived as a market gardener and, characteristically, Smith's new business of 1860 showed the same commitment to quality evident in 1857. These two facets as a story of survival and new beginnings hinge on Smith's "pith, heart, and nerve."<sup>4</sup> Here we examine how Smith's second initiative unfolded, plac-

The merchants and banks are suspending and failing all the country over, but not the sand-banks, solid and warm, and streaked with bloody blackberry vines. Invest, I say, in these country banks. Let your capital be simplicity and contentment.<sup>6</sup>

—Henry David Thoreau  
October 14, 1857

ing its larger significance in the history of early horticulture in Ramsey County. This part of his story goes approximately to 1865 when Smith had fairly established himself in his new profession.<sup>5</sup>

TRUMAN M. SMITH'S  
FRUIT GARDEN,  
DAYTON'S BLUFF,  
St. Paul, Minnesota.  
P. O. Box 361.  
Strawberries,  
Currants,  
Raspberries,  
Gooseberries,  
Grapes,  
Hardy Roses,  
& Evergreens  
MADE A SPECIALTY.  
STRANGERS AND CITIZENS  
are requested to call and examine my Fruit in bearing. I will be happy to show my Stock and Grounds, whether persons purchase or not, for I think I can convince them fruit can be grown in Minnesota.

An advertisement from the *St. Paul City Directory, 1865* for Truman Smith's Fruit Garden that was located on the city's East Side.

## Fruit Can be Grown in Minnesota

We start with early context for Smith's horticultural activity. Simply stated, early Minnesotans needed fruits and vegetables but, it was believed, most of what they needed could not be grown at the state's high northern latitude.<sup>7</sup> Importing was difficult without efficient transportation networks and refrigeration to sustain shelf life.

Soon after the organization of Minnesota Territory in 1849, growers had been experimenting with hardy orchard stock, with varying degrees of system and success.<sup>8</sup> By the early 1860s, when Smith started out, pioneer settler and agricultural leader Daniel A. Robertson was actively canvassing information from Minnesota farmers to determine growing history for apples, including successful varieties, techniques and yields. Grape growing had also been tried, along with the cultivation of strawberries, currants, and other small fruits.<sup>9</sup> This experimental and research activity sought to improve the lives of settlers, personally and economically.<sup>10</sup> But it also aimed to convince prospective settlers that, as Smith himself would proudly announce in a public advertisement from 1865, "Fruit can be grown in Minnesota."<sup>11</sup> Two economic paradigms illuminate Smith's contribution to the horticultural cause.

### The Urban Fringe

When Smith's bank crashed, he turned to working land because that was what he was bred to do, as he told John Kennicott, one of his early suppliers of retail nursery stock (BP, 937).<sup>12</sup> But there was more to it: Smith joined others in recognizing a business opportunity, an emerging market model, in fact, which *The Minnesota Farmer and Gardener* (*MFG*) was suggesting in the early 1860s.

In July 1861, "in these times that try men's pockets," *MFG* noted that some owners of lots around St. Anthony were using their land to grow vegetables rather than trying to sell it in a depressed real estate market.<sup>13</sup> These gardeners were validating a simple market vision the journal had laid out in January 1861: small fruits (in contrast to the problematic apple and pear, for example) and vegetables grew

well in Minnesota. And they could be made to pay, not only by improving the quality of a farming family's diet but because they would sell. As long as planters would take care of small fruits "as they deserve," only a few acres would produce enough for home and market.<sup>14</sup> Evidently this good advice was followed. In August 1861, *MFG* noted that the St. Paul and St. Anthony markets were being well supplied because "many of our gardeners now have large plantations."<sup>15</sup>

This was a specifically urban economic vision for horticulture. In September 1861 *MFG* devoted a column of advice to beginning farmers in Minnesota. They should rent land near a city or village, five to ten acres: "In time such small places will be very valuable near the large towns. In such cases we advise the cultivation of vegetables, small fruits, grapes . . ." And, relevant for the new Smith enterprise: "The best opening of this kind is in the vicinity of St. Paul, where almost anything sells in the way of garden products."<sup>16</sup>

This emerging opportunity might be called urban fringe market gardening which developed about a decade before the well-documented phenomenon of urban fringe farming.<sup>17</sup> In fact, as the 1860s opened, Ramsey County already understood itself as an urban environment: Lyman Ford, pioneering nurseryman and editor, expressed surprise and gratification that *MFG* found so many subscribers in 1860 from an area which was "not much of an agricultural county."<sup>18</sup>

Smith evidently was thinking along these same lines according to his letter of February 1861 to Seneca Smith, a friend and business associate living in Danby, Vermont, Smith's hometown.<sup>19</sup> He had an eighty-acre parcel in view for Seneca Smith to purchase, located two and one-half miles from St. Paul. It was good land in itself but also "near enough to Raise Garden Vegetables or Fruit for St. Paul Market which makes it much more valuable than for mere Farming Purposes" (II, 603). Smith made the same argument to his sister, Edna Kellogg, in July 1862, noting that her husband and two sons could do very well in the growing of small fruits if they would move from up-



In the 1860s *The Minnesota Farmer and Gardener* printed this engraving of currants, one of the fruits that Truman Smith successfully cultivated and sold.

state New York and buy land "especially near St. Paul" (SL, 149).

In 1859, when Smith turned to growing small fruits and vegetables, he was taking hold of a recognizable opportunity, not falling back on a last resort. Urban fringe market gardening defined a promising economic niche.

### "For Shade and for Comfort"

Retail nursery sales offered Smith a second, collateral horticultural niche. By the 1850s Americans were developing a passion for the planting of ornamental trees, shrubs, and flowers as an aesthetic



Sweet potatoes: another example of an early Smith success. (Illustration from *The Minnesota Farmer and Gardener*).



A portion of L. G. Bennett's 1867 map of Ramsey County that shows the location of Truman Smith's Gardens in McLean Township. The inset portion highlights the land that Smith cultivated on Dayton's Bluff. Map courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

and even moral enterprise.<sup>20</sup> Writers of that time said that progressive people, rural and urban, could improve and display their mental culture by landscaping. Trees and shrubs might mark boundaries and protect against wind and snow, but they would also give the gratuitous refreshment of shade for moments of leisure. Gardens provided food, but a few non-utilitarian flowers would give the comfort of beautiful plants beautifully laid out in a raw, pioneering country. Apart from testifying to the economic status of their owners, the use of ornamental plants was felt to preserve more traditional, humane values in a culture which increasingly defined personal worth by commercial norms.<sup>21</sup>

### Dimes and Dollars

Smith worked his “best cultivated acre” of 1860 as a kind of experimental station. Writing in January 1861, he noted his intention “to keep a correct account and see if good or Extra Tilling and care

won't pay in dollars” (II, 598). Whether he opened this acre in 1860 or, as is probable, broke the ground and began its careful cultivation in the growing season of 1859, cannot now be determined.<sup>22</sup> Smith's random, spotty comments over the next few years yield enough details, however, to show that he was right about the value of intensive cultivation.

In May 1861, Smith noted that he had already sold \$150 worth of “stuff” from his best acre, including asparagus and rhubarb. He said he hoped to sell another \$350 worth, probably including most of the varied kinds of produce inventoried by *MFG* in September 1860, but now including twenty-two varieties of strawberries, currants, gooseberries, pie plant (rhubarb), and asparagus (II, 639, 660). Certainly he was pleased with an abundant crop of sweet potatoes, some of which weighed in excess of two pounds apiece (II, 668). Grapes from twenty-three vines, as noted below, were doing

well (II, 750). Preparing already for the season of 1862, Smith had hired three to five men to work additional acreage on Dayton's Bluff, what later became known as “Truman M. Smith Gardens,” even building a small house for a “gardener” on those premises (II, 639).<sup>23</sup>

By July 1862 half of the best acre had produced asparagus sales of \$165 and strawberry sales of \$103 (SL, 149).<sup>24</sup> In September Smith noted grape sales of \$58.50 and was expecting additional general sales of up to \$100 (II, 750, 742).

The following year, in addition to his best acre, Smith had as much as three additional acres under cultivation, including grape vines (over 400 set out in 1862) and corn, potatoes, and other unspecified crops. He was also preparing an additional six acres (“four broke and one-half trenched,” II, 703) and employed two men plus his own labor (SL, 149). As of April and May 1862 he had already been looking for recommendations for a foreman (II, 701, 718).

For 1863 Smith was probably still getting his best yields from his “best acre”: a quarter acre, he said, produced asparagus by mid-July amounting to 5,085 bunches (a bunch containing a dozen stalks), much of which he sold to three hotels in downtown St. Paul (II, 793). In the same July letter

he related total sales to date of \$400, too early to account for grape returns. Careful cultivation could not influence weather, of course. Dry weeks this year disappointed Smith's hopes of selling as much as a projected \$300–\$500 worth of strawberries and raspberries (II, 799).<sup>25</sup>

### Vines

When Smith wrote his sister that he had worked seven acres in 1866 and had spent \$1,600 on hired help (SL, 164A),<sup>26</sup> we know that some of this land and overhead went for grape growing. Grape culture became a Smith specialty and Smith eventually became a recognized Minnesota authority. This grape component, summarized in the accompanying chart, deserves a separate narrative, also reliant on random Smith comments over the years.

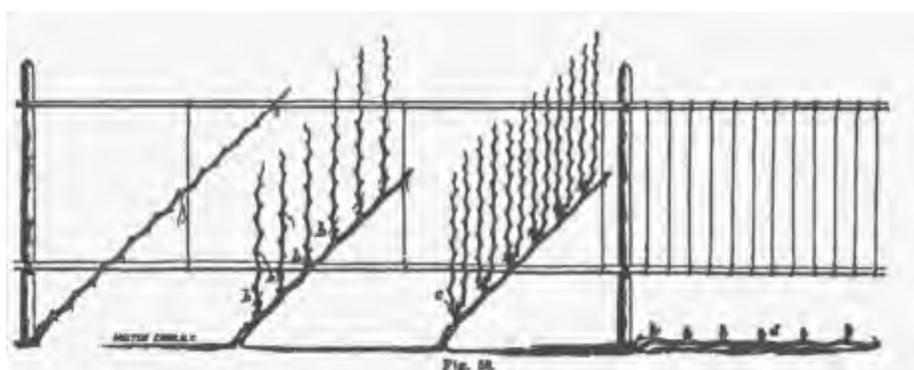
In 1860 Smith included grapes on his best acre, planting 23 Muscadine vines (II, 660). Already the harvest of 1861 validated his belief in Minnesota's potential for grapes. A full month before the first autumn frost, he had been able to complete picking an unspecified amount from vines of three well-bearing varieties: Early Northern Muscadine, Sages Mammoth, and Beerstones Early August (II, 668).

Encouraged by this right reading of soil and season, in January 1862 Smith sent a circular letter to various dealers asking for price quotations for their best stock and for terms of payment. By spring 1862 he had planted approximately 400 new vines. His harvest bore out his theory and hope: he took 300 pounds from the original maturing Muscadine vines for sales of \$58.50 or almost twenty cents per pound (II, 750).

If we look back from the end of the sixties, we can reconstruct his further progress. By 1867 he had 1,300 vines under cultivation (SL, 164A). By 1869 ("a bad year," III, 136), he had thirty-seven varieties of grapes of which twenty-seven had fruited, harvesting 4,000 pounds. Smith said that in this year grapes sold, as they had in 1862, at about 20¢ per pound, suggesting a potential gross of about \$800 (III, 136). 1870 found him with sixty varieties from which he was able to harvest about 6,000 pounds and gross about \$1200 (SL, 164B).<sup>28</sup>

### Smith's Grape Production

Year	Number of vines	Number of varieties	Yield in pounds	Yield in dollars <sup>27</sup>
1860	23	1		
1862	500		300	\$58.50
1867	1,300	37		
1869			4,000	\$800.00
1870		60	6,000	\$1,200.00



Grape culture with "oblique arms" as advocated by Smith in an essay from 1869 and described in the resource he used: Andrew S. Fuller's treatise, *The Grape Culturist* (1866).

### Poison No. 1 and Poison No. 2

Where grapes and other fruit grow, wine may follow. In September 1862, Smith wrote to his supplier of Oporto vines, ordering four to six sample bottles of wine and asking for "the mode of manufacture," especially concerning water and sugar content. Worried that the bottles would undergo sampling underway, he suggested labeling them Poison No. 1 and Poison No. 2 and sending the proper labels by regular mail (II, 750). He used legitimate sampling in aid of retail sales of vines as early as 1862, according to a letter to Shaker suppliers in New York, noting that "some of our first men such as Judge R. R. Nelson of U.S. Court and his friends . . . all pronounced it verry [*sic*] fine" (II, 743).<sup>29</sup> At the state fair of 1863, Smith was offering samples of grape wines along with his displays of produce (II, 822).

No data survive for estimating the extent or value of Smith's fruit wine production, but references to this side of his

work begin to appear as his grape industry expands. "Fine specimens of home made wine" from Smith were "tested" at the January 1869 meeting of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society.<sup>30</sup> In fall 1871, at a promotional "fruit party" at his gardens and home, Smith offered self-produced "native wine" and, in 1870, with a touch of humor, we find Smith naming one of his grape wines "Arctic," thus converting Minnesota stereotype to market cachet.<sup>31</sup>

### Above Average

Smith does not appear in the U.S. Agricultural Census for 1860, but he does find a place in facts gathered for McLean Township as part of the Census for 1870, based on production in 1869. These data suggest a standard for measuring Smith's market gardening progress over the decade.

In McLean Township, total market garden income for the eleven farmers engaged to some extent in market gardening was \$3,950, or a township average



Although no photographs of Truman Smith's gardens have survived, this engraving from 1874 shows the scale of L. M. Ford's greenhouse and market gardens in Rose Township, just north of St. Paul. Engraving courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

of \$359. (Sixteen farms of all kinds are listed for the township.) Smith reported income of \$2,000, thus accounting for over half of the township sales, and exceeding the average figure by \$1,641.<sup>32</sup> Frederick de Freudenreich, a neighboring gardener, was second with total income of \$750 or \$391 over the township average. Probably Smith and Freudenreich were the only ones focusing on market gardening, as some growers were evidently primarily farmers producing as little as \$50 in market products. By way of township comparison for income derived from market gardening, New Canada Township reported \$800; Reserve Township, \$3,035; and Rose Township, the largest, at \$21,322.<sup>33</sup>

Smith's contribution to this production probably lay in fruit-growing. Even allowing for imprecision in the numbers available, clearly the horticultural fruit agenda was succeeding. In 1860, total fruit production is estimated at \$649. By 1870 this number rose to \$12,654 and, by the end of this decade, the figure stood at \$121,648.<sup>34</sup>

Smith's correspondence describes a cumulative, careful approach to horticulture generally, expanding his operations only gradually after verifying assumptions. Reading back from the data for 1869 reported in the 1870 Census, we can say that Smith had made a successful transition to horticulture by the mid-sixties and contributed to fulfilling public hopes for its development.

## Flowers and Fruits

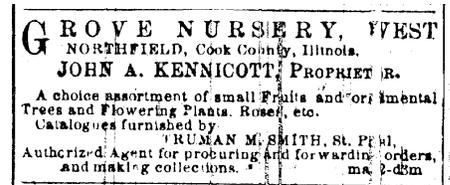
Smith's retail nursery business, his other horticultural enterprise, shows the same upward curve. When he had money during banking days, he assisted Lyman Ford, local nurseryman, in purchasing inventory (II, 597).<sup>35</sup> Ford may well have returned the favor in 1859 when Smith needed start-up stock at the beginning of his retail activity, although Ford would not have been his only supplier. Already by January 1861, Smith listed ample nursery inventory, including currant and gooseberry bushes, strawberry plants, and grape vines in quantities of one hundred to a thousand units each. He had obtained unnamed "mixed sorts" from Ford. But "mixture" was a problem for Smith who criticized Ford's taxonomical carelessness. Indeed, Smith consistently complained of botanical confusion in the trade generally as bad for business and professionally irritating to himself.<sup>36</sup> By late 1859 he was ordering willow trees, at least, from a different local supplier, W.H. Jarvis.<sup>37</sup>

Smith's retail status improved when he was able to advertise as agent for Dr. John A. Kennicott of The Grove, Cook County, Illinois, for example, offering "Cheap and Choice Stock" in *MFG* as early as January 1861.<sup>38</sup> As authorized agent for Minnesota, Smith was now associated with a nationally known grower and supplier.<sup>39</sup> More importantly, Kennicott upheld a horticultural standard responsive to Smith's own explicit program: "I want good and hardy plants or roots and true to name, care more about that than size as I wish to propagate from them and wish to sell nothing but is exactly as I recommend it" (II, 599).

Smith developed business relations in 1861 and 1862 with other out of state nurseries such as E. Ware Sylvester of Lyons, New York; W. T. and E. Smith of Geneva, New York; B. M. Watson of Plymouth, Massachusetts; and the Shakers of Mount Lebanon, New York. His once aggressive approach to the market economy, evident in his banking career, now lay behind him. Probably concerned that this earlier phase might taint his present enterprise, Smith would introduce himself to these potential suppliers by frankly describing his previous business experience.<sup>40</sup>

Sometimes he would suggest an agency relationship, as with Kennicott, to keep him "perfectly safe" (BP, 1122).

Smith sought full transparency in these transactions by laying out clear strategy for purchase, marketing and payment. Sometimes he sought an "accommodation" by which he undertook to pay for consigned nursery stock out of early-season market garden sales, intending to



*In March 1861 the St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat carried this modest advertisement for John A. Kennicott's Grove Nursery in Northfield, Ill. Truman Smith acted as the St. Paul agent for Kennicott's plants, shrubs, and trees.*

settle accounts by November of a given year. Sometimes he settled or made new purchases by setting off earned commissions against orders (for example, his commission from Kennicott was 12½%, II, 605). Becoming more established, he seems to have bought outright, making it easier for him to adjust prices according to market conditions (II, 716).

## So Much Confidence

From the outset, nurseryman Smith tended to deal in large quantities although he remained wary of speculation.<sup>41</sup> For example, in 1861 he filled an order for H. J. Brainerd, an early settler, for 235 apple trees of various kinds, evidently for starting or expanding an orchard during these early years of experimenting with fruit cultivation (II, 625).<sup>42</sup> Writing to Kennicott about orders for the 1863 season, Smith established ranges of quantity for popular trees and flowers he wanted, including 100–500 apple trees; 100–200 Mountain Ash; 50–100 balsam fir, Norway spruce and American arbor vitae; 25–50 weeping willows; and between 100 and 200 assorted rose bushes (BP, 1545).<sup>43</sup>

That same spring of 1863 he ordered \$100 worth of pear, apple, cherry, and plum trees as well as climbing roses and

200 grape vines from W. T. and E. Smith, (II, 770). From the Shakers of New York he took 100–300 Muscadine vines, 50–100 Concord vines, and 25–50 gooseberry bushes (II, 769). From E. Ware Sylvester, same season: 100 grape vines, 100 raspberry canes as well as plum trees and dwarf pear trees (II, 769).

Smith certainly intended some of this material for his own use as a grower, especially the grape vines and some of the fruit trees. But the bulk would have entered the market, reflecting in part Smith's strong confidence in local potential for fruit cultivation. In either case, already in 1862 he told E. Ware Sylvester of New York: "I have so much confidence in the operation if properly attended to that had I the money to pay for them I should set at least 1000 trees this spring" (referring to apple and pear, II, 681).

Demand for plants seems to have remained steady and prices, too. Prices for stock were reasonable. As an example to indicate range, Kennicott advertised apple and peach trees from 50¢ to \$1.00 apiece, cherry, pear and plum trees from 25¢ to 50¢. Herbaceous perennials and other shrubbery came in at \$5 to \$10 per 100.<sup>44</sup>

Smith counted some well-known names among his customers, including Auguste L. Larpenteur, Henry L. Moss, Dr. David Day, Rev. Cyrus Brooks, and Dr. Russell Post.<sup>45</sup> But no records survive to indicate total volume of sales in these early years although his correspondence suggests that Smith at least broke even, using his market gardening proceeds to fund his nursery investments and his nursery stock to expand his market gardens. Smith's retail work continued into the mid-seventies at which point he seems to have increasingly concentrated on market gardening and viticulture.

### Troubles at the North Pole

Logistical difficulties abounded at this early period of the horticultural enterprise and affected Smith both as grower and retailer.<sup>46</sup> Confusion could arise at the St. Paul levee when shippers and carriers over long distance by rail and water inadequately labeled bundled trees or bushes and flats of small plants. Customers might innocently take the wrong goods and these tangles could cost Smith time



*This photograph from about 1876 of the St. Paul City Market, then located at Cedar and Seventh streets, shows not only plenty of activity, but also an awning on the left side above one of the wagons with Truman Smith's name prominently displayed. Alfred U. Palmquist photo. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

and energy to track down stray product and regulate customers' claims (II, 633). Suppliers and buyers were sometimes botanically ignorant or simply careless in identifying related species of plants, thus compounding confusion. An inattentive B. M. Watson had sent him Diana vines instead of Delawares. Smith briskly told him that the two varieties were as distinct in leaf "as a Black Sheep is from a white one" (II, 748).

Smith had to work especially hard to educate suppliers in the art of far northern scheduling. The last part of any shipment's journey to St. Paul depended on the condition of the Mississippi River in spring. To Kennicott he wrote in June 1862 with some exasperation that his entire consignment of trees had been shipped too late for the local, very active selling season: "Apple & other trees were in full Bloom here when it arrived . . . You must get over the idea that we live at the North Pole" (II, 726).

Fraud was another problem. Roaming "tree peddlers," if unattached to reputable nurseries, damaged the credibility of professional nurserymen. These vendors ripped off customers by ripping up saplings and bushes from surrounding forests, selling same, sometimes claiming to be agents of known suppliers, and

then disappearing before the plants inevitably died.<sup>47</sup> Even war factored into Smith's obstacles. He rarely referred to the Civil War except to note its effect on labor supply. But the so-called Sioux War in the fall of 1862 impacted his business directly. Smith said he was experiencing very hard times in the following winter season: "How I shall get along, God only knows. The Indian war spoiled all my fall sales" (BP, 1491).

And some of the problems were purely personal, due to Smith's continued struggle to emerge from the complications of his banking career. For example, he was probably using the grounds and ground floor of his mansion on Dayton's Bluff as a site for sales and storage. But these premises were subject to a protracted legal battle during the early 1860s, one which Smith finally lost in January 1864 when his wife Mary died of tuberculosis.<sup>48</sup>

These struggles threatened his business and family life and Smith reported feelings of profound discouragement, intensified by Mary's death. He was usually laconic about intimate emotion so that his words to Amasa Kennicott, one of John Kennicott's sons and successors to his father's nursery business, took on unusual resonance: "I lost my wife January 24 and consequently have not felt much like Business or any-

thing else for I hardly know what to do I am so lonely” (II, 826).

### The Golden Rule, Again

Some of the pioneer horticulturists felt that they belonged to a band of brothers. Candidly describing his business circumstances in December 1861 to E. Ware Sylvester, a potential supplier, Smith explained his disclosure of personal affairs in part by appealing to this feeling

of group solidarity: “Please pardon me for thus trespassing on your patience as a stranger. But as Dr. Kennicott says there should be a Fraternal feeling among Horticulturists you will take that as my excuse for thus burdening you” (II, 665). Thus the language of transaction at arm’s length easily shifted in Smith’s letters to a disclosure of core beliefs or even feelings. As with Amasa Kennicott, a supplier he’d never met but one of the fraternity, a

business letter could offer Smith a place to lodge very personal information.<sup>49</sup>

Trust was key. Writing to John Kennicott when ordering some grape vines, Smith said simply: “I leave the price of my vines to your honor and want you to do the best you can by me” (BP, 1338). He also felt that an appeal to fair play would work well in settling business disagreements. When a supplier shipped him the wrong vines on a prepaid order, for which he had spent time

## Losers, Failure, and Truman M. Smith

Nowadays, when we want to state a non-negotiable point at issue, even if not talking business, we may use accounting language and say, “Here’s the bottom line.” Most of us have been taught that we should grow up “to amount to something.” People who do not do well professionally, in business or in their personal lives, we often characterize as “losers.” This way of speaking has a long history in the culture of the United States, a culture with a rich tradition of what it means to be a failure.

In his recent book, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in the United States* (2005), historian Scott A. Sandage traces the ways in which Americans have accepted the values of business as a means to judge human lives and, in the nineteenth century especially, male lives. How is it that we once could say a man’s business had failed but then over time got used to saying that the man himself had failed in business? How could we assume that a business failure automatically meant a failure of character?

Sandage says: “. . . a century and a half ago we embraced business as the dominant model for our outer and inner lives. Ours is an ideology of achieved identity; obligatory striving is its method, and failure and success are its outcomes. We reckon our incomes once a year but audit ourselves daily, by standards of long-forgotten origin. . . . By the end of the nineteenth century, this ideology was fully formed in American culture” (264–65).

Especially after the Civil War, Americans believed that the capitalist system and its market culture repre-

sented the best ideals of progressive thinking. Yet if men were faithfully exercising the values of striving to achieve, how could the system produce so many failures, evidenced clearly in the Panics of 1819, 1837, 1857, 1873, 1893? How should the culture treat men who were “ruined,” who failed “in the mercantile and American sense”?

Sandage, again: “This ‘American sense’ looked upon failure as ‘a moral sieve’ that trapped the loafer and passed the true man through. Such ideologies fixed blame squarely on individual faults, not extenuating circumstances. . . . Losers and nobodies stagnated while the likes of Cornelius Vanderbilt and Phineas T. Barnum proved that any poor boy with grit and sturdy bootstraps could make good. . . . [T]rue freedom rests not on your birth status but on the identity you achieve” (17–18).

Truman M. Smith lost emphatically in the Panic of 1857. Yet his post-crash career, as well as his private correspondence, demonstrates his sense of himself as something



An engraved portrait of Truman M. Smith from about 1857 by the Rawdon, Wright & Hatch Company. Engraving courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

other than a failure. He emerged as a man whole in himself, doing work he loved while supporting his family and making a contribution to the life of St. Paul. Horticulture offered Smith a way to remake himself but not in the business terms which continued to dominate the self-understanding of human life in nineteenth-century America and beyond.

If he could have read Sandage’s rich and illuminating text, Smith would have said, with characteristic emphasis, that whatever he was born for, it certainly was not to be a loser. Truman M. Smith’s Gardens amply proved the point to anyone who cared to look into the matter.

and money in preparing acreage, the Smith temper flared. Maybe the eastern supplier thought the western buyer was naïve: “I am not entirely green at the business. . . . [Perhaps] you thought I lived so far North and West that I would not know a Delaware grape vine from a bean vine or anything else” (II, 748). But Smith made no demand. He said he trusted the company “to do the fair thing,” and, in any case, “I cannot believe that you would knowingly cheat me” (II, 747). When the supplier offered to replace the vines and Smith had agreed to take delivery the following season, he closed the *contretemps* by saying: “I wish to do as I would be done by under similar circumstances . . .” (II, 782).<sup>50</sup>

Of course, Smith did not operate as a financial innocent. He was perfectly willing to tell suppliers where he thought they had gone wrong and to let them know he was doing business with competitors. Even so, he expected a kind of horticultural code to govern. For example, when ordering Wizard of the North strawberry plants from the nursery of E. Teas of Richmond, Indiana, he mentioned that he had paid \$5 a dozen the previous year and now noticed that another vendor was selling at \$2. Without asking Teas to reduce his price, Smith ordered a dozen plants of another variety and then asked for as many Wizards as Teas could afford to send for the \$5 bill Smith was enclosing with his letter (II, 631).

### **A Living, if a Poor One**

At the nadir of his banking career, in August 1858, Smith had written to an old friend in Danby, Vermont: “I mean to have a living while I Live, if it is only a poor one” (II, 550). By the mid-sixties, Smith had done what he said he intended to do. He had got his sufficient living, being now established as a market gardener and nurseryman and recognized increasingly in local and state horticultural circles.<sup>51</sup> Still, even with all his usual penetrating intelligence and intensity of application, including physical labor, Smith did not approach the financial standard of his banking years. His correspondence, business and

personal, over the decades suggests that he did a little better than break even, although times were improving markedly in St. Paul and Ramsey County in the postwar years as the sixties turned into the seventies.<sup>52</sup>

But this same correspondence with family, friends, and business associates also suggests that he felt little regret, either for the loss of his banking career or the financially circumscribed life succeeding it. Smith did look back nostalgically from time to time as when, years later, he wrote to his sister Edna: “I believe you are bound to be the only rich one in this family. I was once well off & lost all but not through my fault but we make out to get enough to eat and something to wear if not so good” (SL, 201A). Regret for financial limitation shades to gratitude for sufficient food and clothing. Here as elsewhere in the letters, Smith spent no time brooding over personal misfortune.

Having refused “loser status,” Smith in transition poses a final question: how did former banker, now horticulturist Smith maintain his personal “heart, nerve, and pith” as he repositioned himself within the muscular social forces shaping American culture?

### **The Nerve of Failure**

Writing of the Grange Movement’s response to the cultural effect of regnant monopoly capitalism in the post-Civil War era, Thomas Woods notes that “as competitive marketplace ambitions prevailed, ethical relationships of mutuality were eroded.”<sup>53</sup> Local relationships between producers and consumers were replaced by a developing industrial model which, in Minnesota’s agrarian economy, separated farmers from marketers, shippers from carriers, growers from speculators.

Horticulture offered Smith a way to resist this ethical erosion and preserve values of mutuality. His consistent appeal to a “golden rule,” his practice of collegiality and candid self-disclosure demonstrate this resistance. The same humane values appear in his later work as horticultural and Grange leader: he usually occupied progressive ground, while

refusing to “grind axes” on behalf of radical, more divisive interests.<sup>54</sup>

Closely related to the value of ethical mutuality was Smith’s insistence on quality of product, something which may have inhibited his income as market gardener. Writing in 1877 about his long-standing marketing policy, Smith said that he would rather have customers grumble about the price of produce than its quality (III, 219). Debating with fellow horticulturists at an annual meeting in 1873, he defended a less cost-effective method of pruning and protecting grape vines because it produced better fruit. He thought horticulturalists must grow fruit primarily for love of the work.<sup>55</sup> Smith the producer appears as Smith an embryonic advocate for quality control and consumer protection.<sup>56</sup>

After banking, if not before, Smith ever appears as a whole man: Smith the buyer and seller of nursery stock; Smith the accountant, quality controller, and advertiser; Smith the producer and shipper of fruit; Smith the man in the local market who sold the grapes and currants and apples raised by Smith the grower. In horticulture he had found a way to achieve one of the goals of this mercantile culture, “an independent competence,” but only in the sense of maintaining personal independence while getting his competence.

In a culture stigmatizing failure, Smith had what has been called “the nerve of failure” as opposed to the failure of nerve, “the courage to face aloneness and the possibility of defeat in one’s personal life or work without being morally destroyed.”<sup>57</sup> That is the “pith, heart, and nerve” now clearly discernible behind the name of Truman M. Smith.

*Barry and Joan Miller Cotter are retired and live in Evanston, Illinois. During their professional lives they lived in Mississippi and Ohio, where Barry served as priest in the Episcopal Church and Joan, a native of St. Paul and graduate of Macalester College, was a college German teacher. Joan is the great-great-granddaughter of Truman M. Smith.*

## Endnotes

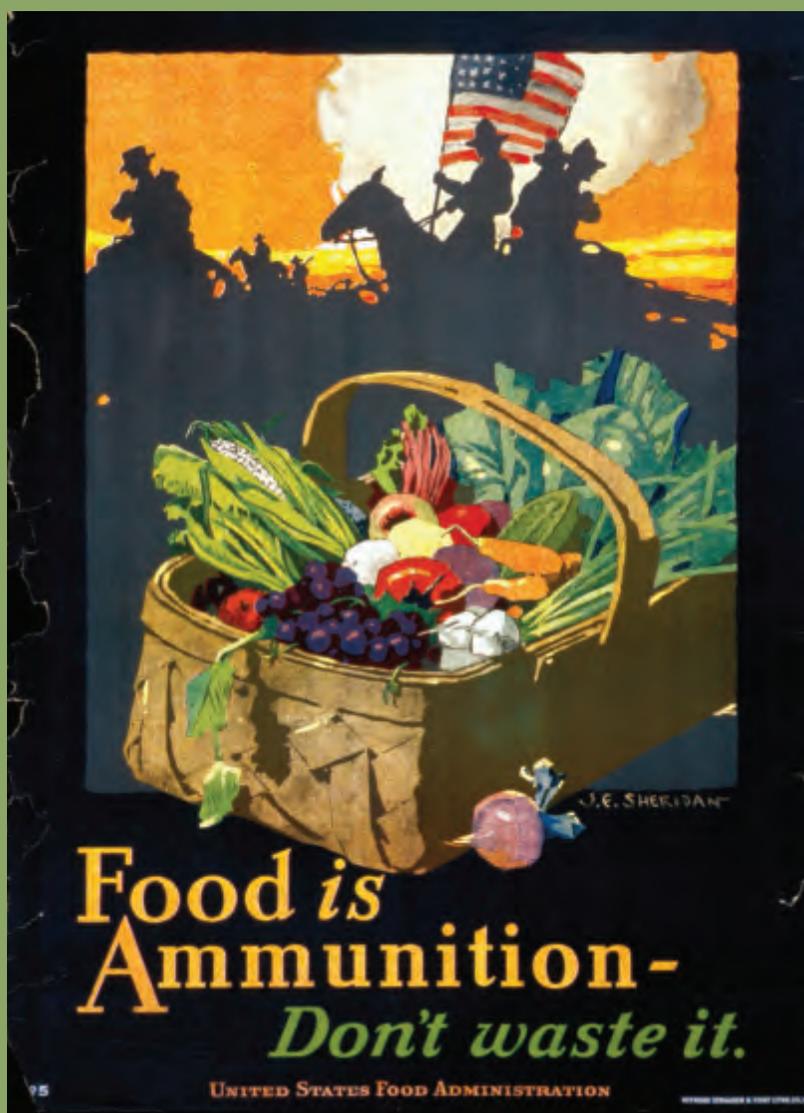
1. *St. Paul Pioneer*, February 24, 1857, 4; *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, October 10, 1857, 232.
2. *The Minnesota Farmer and Gardener (MFG)* 1 (December 1860): 45. Lyman Ford, chief writer and publisher, opened his Groveland Nursery outside of St. Anthony in 1856; see Marjorie Kreidberg, "The Up and Doing Editor of the Minnesota Farmer and Gardener," *Minnesota History* 49, no. 5 (1985): 191–201.
3. Barry L. and Joan Miller Cotter, "Pith, Heart, and Nerve, Truman M. Smith: From Banker to Market Gardener," *Ramsey County History* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 3–11.
4. Ossian Dodge, a colleague in the North Star Grange, had written of Smith: "His motto is: 'Work till the hard horny hand/ Brings wealth and good wine from our beautiful land!'/ May we each have the nerve and the heart and the pith/ Of our excellent Lecturer Truman M. Smith," *Minutes of North Star Grange of St. Paul, 1868–1883*, typed copy, 1937, Minnesota Historical Society, 3–4.
5. Smith's story after 1865 includes leadership in both the Grange and the Minnesota State Horticultural Society and a final chapter, spanning twenty-two years, in California. See note 51.
6. Quoted by Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 271, from Thoreau's *Journal*, October 14, 1857.
7. Horace Greeley notoriously said in 1860 he would not settle in Minnesota because apples could not be grown there, W. H. Alderman, "History of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society," *Minnesota Horticulturist* (February 1966): 9. See Michael Pollan for the nineteenth century American cult of the apple in *The Botany of Desire* (New York: Random House, 2002), 1–58. This challenge extended to flowers, see for example Hortense Share, "Annuals," *Transactions of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Company, 1877): 104–08.
8. *History of the Minnesota Horticultural Society, from the first meeting held in Rochester in 1866, to the last at Saint Paul in 1873* (St. Paul: St. Paul Press Company, 1873): 6–20.
9. For Robertson's apple campaign and other miscellaneous primary materials relevant to early Minnesota horticultural history, see documents assembled by Joseph Ball for WPA Project No. 165-1-71-124, Sub-Project 408, Division of Horticulture, WPA History of Minnesota Horticulture Papers, University of Minnesota Archives, box 1.
10. In 1853 William LeDuc estimated imports to Minnesota Territory of \$1,500,000. "Fully one-third of these imports has been produce that can and should be raised within our borders," *Minnesota Year Book for 1853* (St. Paul, Minnesota Territory: W.G. LeDuc, [1853]), 37.
11. *St. Paul City Directory for 1865*, 280.
12. In the following we use three collections of Smith letters: Smith Family Letters (1797–1910), owned by David Ross, Cincinnati, Ohio. References appear here as (SL, letter number). Ross holds the copyright for these materials. Letterbooks in the Truman M. Smith Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. References to Letterbooks I–III appear as (Volume Number, page). John A. Kennicott Business Papers, owned by The Grove National Historic Landmark with the Glenview Park District in Glenview, Illinois. These letters appear in the text as (BP, letter number).
13. *MFG* 1 (July 1861): 204.
14. *MFG* 1 (January 1861): 82.
15. *MFG* 1 (August 1861): 246. Ford does not specify what "large" meant. It could merely refer to intensity of cultivation.
16. *MFG* 1 (September 1861): 282.
17. *MFG* clearly distinguished market gardening from farming. Only the later urban fringe farming model has received scholarly attention, see Kendra Dillard, "Farming in the Shadow of the Cities: The Not-So-Rural History of Rose Township Farmers, 1850–1900," *Ramsey County History* 20, no. 3 (1985): 3–19; Russell R. Menard, "Urban Fringe Farmers: Agriculture in Ramsey County, Minnesota, 1860–1900," unpublished report submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, February 1982, Archives, Ramsey County Historical Society. We are grateful to our editor John Lindley for bringing the work of Dillard and Menard to our attention.
18. *MFG* 1 (November 1860): 31.
19. For Seneca Smith, see our Fall 2008 article on Smith, "Pith, Heart, and Nerve," 11, endnote 16.
20. Cheryl Lyon-Jenness, *For Shade and for Comfort: Democratizing Horticulture in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004) and "Planting a Seed: The Nineteenth-century Horticultural Boom in America," *Business History Review* 78 (2004): 381–421. Our understanding of the horticultural enterprise in general depends on her work, although it does not deal with Minnesota. Smith's activity as a horticulturalist and retailer of nursery stock closely conforms to Jenness's profile of this mid-nineteenth century commercial development, including the sharing of personal information and the difficulties and challenges typical of the trade, as noted below.
21. Lyon-Jenness, *For Shade*, 25–52.
22. Smith's letterbooks and other correspondence show a year's lacuna beginning with April 1859. With money tight, he may have elected not to buy the special ink required to activate copy paper.
23. L. G. Bennett's *Map of Ramsey County* from 1867 shows "Truman M. Smith Gardens" located on a rectangular piece of land bounded today by Burns, Mound, Suburban, and Earl streets. The 1884 *Real Estate Atlas, City of St. Paul, Minn.* by G. M. Hopkins shows five lots of this block in the name of Jacob G. Miller, Smith's son-in-law since 1866, also a viticulturist; other lots of the same plot in the name of T. R. Fletcher, a New England business associate; and E. L. Day, Smith's daughter. This is probably the ten acres he said lay "in others' hands," that he had the "use of for life," his "rent" being the taxes (II, 660, 683). Given his continued exposure to legal action for debt arising from the banking years, Smith sought to use land to which he did not hold title. The "best acre" apparently did not belong to this "Gardens" parcel because Smith described it as being "below our home," that is, the large house on the bluff purchased in 1857 and as a "separate piece" of land (II, 598, 658). This piece is probably part of what later became Smith's residence at 97 Hoffman Avenue, now green space on Mounds Boulevard next to Indian Mounds Park. After 1862, Smith doesn't refer to his "acre," probably because he had brought all his land up to the standard of that first experimental acre.
24. A neighboring gardener, Frederick de Freudenreich, computed strawberry sales for the season at \$39.40. Prices ranged from 12½¢ to 25¢ per quart. Freudenreich and Smith were selling asparagus at ½¢ per stalk, but Freudenreich noted total sales of only \$7.85. Diary for 1862. Baron Frederick de Freudenreich Papers, 1855, 1862–1879, Minnesota Historical Society Library.
25. We have no figures for Smith's sales (he said he "lost everything"). Freudenreich recorded strawberry sales of \$29.80, down approximately 25 percent from 1862.
26. This \$1,600 could well have represented wages paid in cash and kind. For example, in 1863 he hired two Irishmen for the season at \$1 per day or \$15 per month with board (II, 781). Working a 10-hour day at 10¢ per hour, the men would have earned \$14.14 per hour (as converted to current values using the unskilled wage index) or, more probably, \$1.77 (using the Consumer Price Index). For both indices and possible calculations, see: Samuel H. Williamson, "Six Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790 to Present," MeasuringWorth, 2008. <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/> (accessed 22 April 2009).

27. The dollar yields for 1869 and 1870 are based on Smith's 20¢ per pound figure, assuming the entire crop was sold. Using the Consumer Price Index to adjust these dollar figures to 2008, \$800 corresponds to over \$13,000 in 2008, while \$1,200 in 1870 corresponds to \$20,424. Williamson, "Six Ways to Compute."
28. We are grateful to Suzanne M. Schoolmaster for compiling data related to Smith's grape production. For estimated 2008 equivalent dollar amounts, see note 26.
29. Nelson lived in McLean Township, for which Smith served as chair of the Board of Supervisors for seven terms, starting in 1864, Edward D. Neill, *History of Ramsey County* (Minneapolis: North Star Publishing Company, 1881), 297–98.
30. *History of the Minnesota Horticultural Society*, 51.
31. Ossian Dodge produced another "pith/Smith" rhyme on the occasion of a promotional "fruit party" at Smith's gardens and house in the fall of 1871, which included the tasting of Smith-produced "native wine":  
 For the fruit that is sparkling  
 And free from all pith,  
 Give us that from the garden  
 Of Truman M. Smith.
- [http://www.daytonsbuff.org/DBDF\\_November2004/DBDF/November2004Txt.html](http://www.daytonsbuff.org/DBDF_November2004/DBDF/November2004Txt.html); *St. Paul Weekly Pioneer*, September 16, 1870. Confusingly, Smith's candid evaluation of the difficulties of grape growing has been made to contradict his lifelong advocacy and practice of viticulture, Dean Rebuffoni in the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, "Minnesota grape growers win their place in the vintners' sun," July 23, 1987, 3C and "Marrying arctic tough riparia to sweet vinifera," Sept. 19, 1988, 1E.
32. \$2,000 in 1869 was the equivalent of \$32,596.97 in 2008, computed using the Consumer Price Index. Samuel H. Williamson, "Six Ways to Compute . . ."
33. *Nonpopulation Schedules from Federal Census of Minnesota*, 1860, 1870.
34. Merrill E. Jarchow, *The Earth Brought Forth, a History of Minnesota Agriculture to 1885* (St. Paul: The Minnesota Historical Society, 1949), 244.
35. Specific details of one such transaction appear in *Flower City Bank v. L. M. Ford Company, Truman M. Smith*, Case number 1823, State of Minnesota District Court, Second Division, Ramsey County, suit on a Ford promissory note made June 16, 1857, endorsed by Smith, demand for judgment, \$926.
36. Jenness, "Planting a Seed": 391.
37. William Jarvis was a St. Paul druggist and photographer with a nursery and small fruit and vegetable garden below West St. Paul, T. M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers* (St. Paul: 1886), 719.
38. *MFG* 1 (January 1861): 127.
39. Jenness, "Planting a Seed": 388, 401–05.
40. As early as 1842 Lewis Tappan had begun to market a credit rating system based on character assessments of businessmen. The result of anonymous surveillance, these archived reports could permanently damage an entrepreneur's prospects, usually without a subject's knowledge or opportunity for correction. See Sandage, 99–128.
41. Smith had obviously calibrated supply and demand in April 1862 when he wrote to D. C. Brainerd: "I had better reduce the number (of plants) I wrote for in Feb as I wish to keep on the safe side all the time" (II, 705).
42. H. J. Brainerd had come to St. Paul in 1851, was a Ramsey County commissioner (1868) and representative to the State Legislature in 1873. Apple varieties Brainerd ordered included: Yellow and White Bellflowers, Rambo, White Winter Pearmain, Winesap, American Golden Russet and Roxberry Russet (II, 625).
43. Daryl E. Watson recorded orders filled by Kennicott for trees between 1857 and 1863. An average order for the whole seven-year period for Norway Spruce was 10 trees, but Smith's 1863 order alone was for 50–100 Norway Spruce, or 5 to 10 times the seven-year average; for Mountain Ash, an average of 14 versus Smith's 1863 order of 100–200, or 7 to 14 times the average; for Balsam Fir, an average of 7 versus Smith's 1863 order of 50–100, or 7 to 14 times the average; for Arbor vitae, an average of 17 versus Smith's 1863 order of 50–100 or 3 to 6 times the average; for Weeping Willow, an average of 9 versus Smith's 1863 order of 25–50 or 3 to 5 times the average. *Shade and Ornamental Trees in the Nineteenth Century Northeastern United States* (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1978), 212–17.
44. *MFG* 1 (January 1861): 127.
45. Larpenteur was an early settler and civic leader; Moss, a lawyer; Day, a druggist and prominent physician; Brooks, a Methodist minister and missionary; Post, a physician and originator of a noted magnetic treatment.
46. Jenness, "Planting a Seed": 393–96.
47. See Kennicott on tree peddlers as reported in *MFG* 1 (November 1860): 24. He advertised evergreens which were "sure to live," and "safe for weeks," *MFG*, 1 (January 1861): 127.
48. Mary's death extinguished alleged dower and domicile rights, legal arguments Smith used to defend against eviction; see our Fall 2008 article on Smith, "Pith, Heart, X and Nerve," 9.
49. "Such intimate details, seemingly irrelevant to the horticultural industry, were critical indicators of well-established ties, trust between correspondents, and deep affection," Jenness, "Planting a Seed": 413.
50. When he was Master of the Minnesota State Grange, Smith's belief in mediation struck some of his colleagues as "quixotic," see Oliver H. Kelley, *The History of the Patrons of Husbandry* (Philadelphia: J.A. Wagensell, 1875), 173.
51. Already in 1860 Smith was serving on the executive council of the St. Paul Horticultural Society. In 1866 he was one of the founding members of what would become the Minnesota State Horticultural Society. To complete the story, he was elected first Master of the Minnesota State Grange in 1869 and served in the North Star Grange of St. Paul for many years. He had eight one-year terms as president of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society, 1873–1877, 1883–1885. Smith continued as a fruit grower after moving to San Diego, California, in 1887 and was actively engaged until his death in 1909.
52. Jocelyn Wills, *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul 1849–1883* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 120–48.
53. *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Origins of the Grange in Republican Ideology* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991), 169.
54. "[We] give all to understand . . . that the Minnesota State Horticultural Society is not the place to bring any axes to grind. We are not in that business," Presidential Address, 1877. *Transactions of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Company, 1877), 72.
55. *History of the Minnesota Horticultural Society, from the first meeting . . .*, 135, 140–41. See also Presidential Address, 1878: "Fruit growing in Minnesota, for the present at least, will be pursued by those who have a love for it," *Transactions of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Company, 1878), 89.
56. Early on, Smith placed a personal "label" in his boxes of fruit as a guarantee of quality: "His idea was to sell nothing but first class fruit, and in every box he put a little card . . . 'Grown and picked by Truman M. Smith,' giving his address," comment by John S. Harris at the annual meeting of 1892, *Minnesota State Horticultural Society, Annual Report of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society* (Minneapolis: Harrison & Smith, 1892), 315. We are grateful to Clarence M. Smith for this reference.
57. David Riesman, as cited in Sandage, 267.

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*Between 1917 and 1920, the U.S. Food Administration commissioned various artists to create posters that encouraged public support for Liberty Loan drives, enlistment in the army and navy, Red Cross activities, war work, and the production and conservation of food during World War I. Poster by J. F. Sheridan courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. For more on food for the American people in the early twentieth century, see Mary Jo Richardson's article on page 13.*