

Galesville Area thought to Be Garden of Eden

By Reggie McLeod, La Crosse Tribune 2-6-1983

Coulee Region residents who refer to their part of the planet as God's Country will never be accused of modesty. But even that estimate of the area's rivers, valleys and ridges pales when compared to the view of the Rev. David Van Slyke who in 1886 published a booklet declaring the area north of La Crosse to have been the site of the Garden of Eden.

'This vast area-Eden-containing the most fertile and habitable region of earth is being settled and inhabited by the most industrious, enlightened, Christianized and well to do people in the world: the asylum or universal home of the oppressed and needy of all lands, contains 'The Heart of the New World', the Land of Promise, in this Christian United States of America', he wrote in his book, 'The Garden of Eden'.

Granted, there are lots of good people living in the area and the scenery is impressive. But Van Slyke—who had read the Bible more than 25 times—cited a number of other reasons for his conviction that the prairie contained between the cities of Galesville, La Crosse and Winona, was the Garden of Eden. Van Slyke, who lived with his family in Galesville, believed that the configuration of rivers in the area matched those described in Genesis. Four rivers watered the biblical Garden of Eden where they joined together forming one. Van Slyke believed that these rivers were the Trempealeau, Black, La Crosse and Mississippi which all flow across the plain he believed to be Eden.

The Euphrates is often described as the major river flowing through the Garden. Van Slyke pointed out that Euphrates translated means 'long river' which could also describe the Mississippi. The steep bluffs, which stand as much as 600 feet above the river valley, form a wall around the Garden of Eden, according to Van Slyke, who sometimes referred to the bluffs as 'hanging gardens'.

Of course there has to be snakes in the Garden of Eden, and Van Slyke pointed out the Indians referred to the area as 'Rattlesnake Hills'. 'There were so many rattlesnakes,' he wrote, 'that an early settler living near the Mississippi in one year killed more than 90 on a path in front of his house.' Being about midway between the Equator and the North Pole causes the weather to fluctuate from very cold to quite hot. This, wrote Van Slyke, makes it an ideal location which to populate the earth from because residents learn to cope with a broad range of climates. Alas, Van Slyke then found no apple trees but he speculated that they 'have been driven out with fallen man'. If that were the case, they have returned. There are today a number of apple orchards in the Galesville Area.

Van Slyke reviewed a number of other theories being debated in his era on the location of the Garden of Eden. One authority claimed the site to be near the North Pole and others that it was in the Middle East or Africa. Van Slyke found deficiencies in all of

those theories, 'but we further say that we have the garden and everything considered, not only the greatest and grandest and best but the only spot on earth that answers the bible description of that notable spot or Garden of Eden'.

Even though Van Slyke's praise sometimes took on the tone of a Chamber of commerce brochure carried to excess, he took pains to disclaim any commercial interest in the area. 'All the land I own is a burial plot in the Galesville cemetery and not for sale and not many have money enough to purchase it.'

Though the City of Galesville and some businesses in the area today make references to being in the Garden of Eden, in his time, Van Slyke was viewed as somewhat of a crank especially during the latter part of his life, when he was expounding on his Garden of Eden theory. Van Slyke's grave marker is a pillar of rough that he quarried himself near Trempealeau and hauled several miles to Galesville. For nearly a century, the stone has stood in the cemetery on the edge of a steep hill overlooking Van Slyke's beloved Galesville with his plain of Eden dissolving into the distance.