

James Duane Doty: Frontier Promoter. By Alice E. Smith. (Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1954, pp. x, 472. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$5.00.)

Any mention of the frontier these days immediately brings to mind the ubiquitous Davy Crockett and his kind, coonskin-capped and busy at backwoods turkey-shoots hammering nails into stumps at fifty yards with their long rifles, or neatly puncturing the pipe-clayed cross belts of Mexican regulars unfortunate enough to encounter them. The West produced other types, however, and this volume is a solid account of one of these—the frontier promoter. The archetype of the genius himself, Colonel Beriah Sellers, never exhibited the boundless energy, the unlimited audacity, or the fabulous optimism of James Duane Doty. Had Doty never been born the history of the United States would not have been materially affected; but this emphatically cannot be said of that group of men that he typified. The history of the West is to a large degree the record of their ceaseless pursuit of self-interest through land speculations; town-jobbing; and canal, river, and railroad promotions. This Miss Smith admirably demonstrates in her well-written and historically well-crafted case study of a man who became territorial judge, delegate, and governor, Indian superintendent, agent for the powerful Astor interests, United States congressman, and friend and confident of party leaders and cabinet ministers, all largely to advance his promotions.

Doty was not content to buy up farmlands and wait for a rise in their value; this was too slow for one consumed by the feverish desire for a grand coup that would glitteringly produce a fortune overnight. His specialty was speculation in town sites, his most brilliant feat the imposition on the Wisconsin territorial legislature of a platted wilderness for the new capital. Doty's formula was to select a likely spot—based on his wide knowledge of geography acquired in his travels as a circuit-riding judge and attorney, explorer, military road builder, Indian attorney, and tireless roamer—then “organize a group of investors into a company, purchase the land, lay out a village, sell a few lots and bring in a few settlers, and then turn his energies to working out land or water connections with the outside world” (p. 176).

The active implementation of this formula for riches and success led him, as a boy of nineteen in 1818, to Detroit and a lifetime of frenetic speculation and political activity in Michigan and Wisconsin territories. After a career of fabulous vicissitudes, the new Republican party revived his failing fortunes when an appointment as Indian superintendent sent him to the Utah Territory in 1860. Here in 1865, now territorial governor, Doty died, still in harness and with one eye cocked on the promise of far western railroad schemes to lead him at last to the promised wealth that had forever eluded him.

Through the baffling complexities of Doty's tortuous schemes Miss Smith conducts us with a sure hand. Her triumph over the paucity of evidence and her evident ability to ferret out of many a hidden corner the records which did exist represent historical research in its best tradition. Her finished picture is well done, and if it is only at infrequent intervals that Doty the man emerges from the enigma automatically pursuing its endless convolutions, this is no criticism of the author but rather a comment on the difficulty of drawing full-length portraits without the mass of personal papers needed to put flesh on otherwise bare bones.

The general reader might at times wish he had been spared some of the minutia of Doty's schemes, but to the special student such a close analysis of a promoter's technique is fascinating. Especially interesting is the light thrown upon the frontier agents for powerful eastern capitalists and speculators, who often gave their representatives *carte blanche* to use their money for them to best advantage, and who represented for the agents—as the Astors did for Doty—powerful friends and sources of influence and support.

Anyone who is interested in the history of the West, especially that much neglected area of American history, the territorial experience, will find Miss Smith's scholarly book a valuable study.

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin must also be complimented for producing a handsomely bound and clearly printed volume with a usable index. The illustrations are well chosen and beautifully reproduced. One small criticism is the lack of one or two maps which would have facilitated the following of Michigan and Wisconsin territorial developments.