

# The Early History of the Roseau Valley

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THE ROSEAU RIVER VALLEY has played an interesting part in the history of Minnesota. The river has its source in the Beltrami Island highlands in the southwestern part of Lake of the Woods County. It flows abruptly downward from the sandy lands into the valley of the Roseau River, actually an ancient bay of glacial Lake Agassiz whose gently sloping terrain today cradles the prosperous heart of agricultural Roseau County. The river flows in a northwesterly direction, roughly bisecting the county to its northernmost tier of townships, then turns sharply westward, flowing sluggishly between low banks to the point where it crosses the Kittson County line near the international boundary. The valley harbored white men at a date far earlier than most regions of the state, and its beautiful forests and plentiful game were a legend in the Red River Valley long before settlers began to make their way into the new land in numbers in 1888.

Apparently the first white men to enter the Roseau Valley were Frenchmen associated with the French-Canadian trader and explorer Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de la Vérendrye, who established Fort St. Charles on Magnusson's Island in Lake of the Woods in 1732.<sup>1</sup> It seems likely that his son, Jean Baptiste, entered the Roseau Valley in 1734. Early in the spring of that year a large band of Cree and Monsoni warriors, full of the spirit of reprisal and valor doubtless whetted by the possession of French arms, began preparations to invade the country of their hereditary enemy, the prairie Sioux. The leaders importuned Jean Baptiste to accompany them as their commander in order that he might bear witness to their valor in battle.

<sup>1</sup>L. A. Prud'homme, "Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de la Verendrye," in Historical Society of St. Boniface, *Bulletins*, vol. 5, pt. 2, p. 37 (1916); Theodore C. Blegen, "Fort St. Charles and the Northwest Angle," *ante*, 18:231-248. Judge Prud'homme was a member of the party that rediscovered the site of Fort St. Charles in 1908.

The elder La Vérendrye unwillingly granted their request, lest the Indians conclude that the French were cowards. Accordingly the party left Fort St. Charles on May 11, 1734, with Jean Baptiste la Vérendrye at their head. They probably took the route from Muskeg Bay up the Warroad River, and across a portage to Hay Creek, a tributary of the Roseau, which they followed to its confluence with the Red River.<sup>2</sup>

After the Treaty of Paris ended French sovereignty in the New World, the fur trade in the Northwest suffered disorganization and for many years the wilderness claimed its own. It is known that in the early 1820's the American Fur Company was operating a post at the mouth of the Warroad River.<sup>3</sup> Little is known of the Roseau Valley, however, for more than a hundred years after La Vérendrye's time.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the Hudson's Bay Company, which was extending its influence from York Factory southward along the Red River Valley, began to push its fur trading activities to the region drained by the Roseau River. Records of the Hudson's Bay Company in London reveal that its representatives visited the valley in 1847 and investigated the vicinity of Roseau Lake. They reported that in the western portion of the valley "the river channel can be traced through a marsh ten miles long, nearly on a level with the water in the river. The depth of the marsh does not exceed three feet, and it is quite possible to wade on horseback through it." The report is accompanied by a map of part of Roseau River and Lake, on which a Hudson's Bay Company post is indicated on the south shore of the river where it enters Roseau Lake. Records in the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company in London indicate that the post was abandoned in 1851. The exact site has

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence J. Burpee, ed., *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Vérendrye and His Sons*, 185, 186 n., 214 n. (Toronto, 1927); Prud'homme, in Historical Society of St. Boniface, *Bulletins*, vol. 5, pt. 2, p. 54. According to the latter writer, there were 660 warriors in the party which went out in canoes to attack the prairie Sioux. The Roseau River route would offer the only convenient water access between Fort St. Charles and their destination.

<sup>3</sup> International Joint Commission, *Final Report on the Lake of the Woods Reference*, 127, 131, 141 (Washington, 1917); Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur-trading Area," *ante*, 11:366.

never been determined. Jim Kobenas, Roseau Lake Indian, once told interviewers that he and a number of playmates tore down the remaining tiers of rotted logs while playing an Indian version of "Cops and Robbers."<sup>4</sup>

It was not until some decades later that the Roseau Valley was settled. As late as 1878, while guiding a barge down the Red River, J. W. Durham, a pioneer of the valley, met an Irishman named Daniel Meighan, who vividly described the country to the east and fired the young bargeman's imagination by tales of the unsurpassed hunting grounds along the Roseau River. Finally, in 1886, Durham was able to answer the insistence of adventure. With two companions, Richard Avery and William Applegarth, he set out from Hoople, North Dakota, and after three days of arduous travel came at last to the broad, slow-flowing Roseau. After descending the valley, Durham concluded that the facts corroborated Meighan's tales. Of the country at that time Durham writes: "I found these forests teeming with wild game of every description. Chief among these were the moose, elk, caribou, and red deer. These animals often gathered into large droves, giving the early comers every opportunity for the hunt. Birds of every description were as plentiful then as now, the only difference being that wild geese and ducks were far more numerous."<sup>5</sup>

Durham found only a scattering of people in the valley, and few landmarks had emerged from the trackless confusion of wilderness. He relates that Jacob Nelson had a camp near the big bend of the river, that Nick Cain and Lon Irish were in the valley, as well as

<sup>4</sup> *Parliamentary Papers Relative to the Exploration of the Country between Lake Superior and the Red River Settlement*, 101 (London, 1859); Inga M. Billberg, "History of the Roseau Valley," in *Northern Minnesota Leader*, November 14, 1935; Hudson's Bay Company to Eddy and Inga Billberg, January 9, 1935. In an effort to determine the exact site of the Hudson's Bay Company post which, according to tradition, was located near Roseau Lake, Mr. Billberg and his daughter wrote to the company's London office. Its reply, cited above, includes a report based upon material in the company's archives. "We have not traced any evidence that the post at Roseau Lake was actually established in 1847," it reads, though "it would appear probable that a trade was carried on there by the 'derouine' runners from Pembina and Red River." One of a "chain of posts along the frontier" planned in June, 1848, was "Reid Lake," under charge of Postmaster Thomas McDermot." The post seems to have been "changed" to Shoal Lake for the trading season of 1850-51. The Hudson's Bay Company's report is now in the possession of the writer.

<sup>5</sup> J. W. Durham, *Minnesota's Last Frontier*, 10-13 (Minneapolis, 1925).

the fur trader Israel Ryder, and that Seward Wood had a cabin at Pelcher's Crossing near the present village of Roseau. Ole Holm, who with his brother Erick arrived in the valley in 1886, recalls that Bill Book, Jim Jester, Wood, and Ryder were the first actual settlers in the valley. They had cabins on the river within a few miles of one another, and all in the vicinity of the present village of Roseau. Both Book and Jester had their wives with them.

Practically all the settlers who entered the Roseau Valley came by way of the historic Sandridge Trail, which pierced the forest and scrub eastward from the edge of the Red River plain to the Roseau River. The trail followed a high gravel beach, a former shore line of glacial Lake Agassiz, which offered convenient access across territory otherwise characterized by frequent barriers of marsh and bogland. Primarily, the incoming settlers were attracted by timber and the protection it afforded from the wind in contrast to the bare Red River Valley, the abundance of wild game, and the pasturage and hay provided by the pea vine which grew lushly on the banks of the Roseau.

It did not take the pioneers long to discover one of the chief reasons for the prodigal vegetable growth in the Roseau River country. Rains came with monotonous recurrence. After falling, the water had no place to go, so it stood around. Much of the recollection of the old timers is a factual nightmare of mud and mosquitoes. Durham, who located a claim six miles south of Pelcher's Crossing in the present town of Stafford, complains that the sod roof of his house would become so saturated with water that it would continue to leak until the next shower came along, so the family had to endure perpetual rainfall. Mrs. Karen Enger, who settled with her husband on the ridge near Fox, tells of keeping the baby under the table when it rained because the roof afforded very little protection.<sup>6</sup>

Even during dry years the swamps and lowlands were filled with water. People living on the edge of such stretches would have to wade knee-deep in water in order to get to neighboring farms, and some of the pioneer women paddled about in such receptacles as tubs

<sup>6</sup>Inga M. Billberg, "Reminiscences of Old Pioneers," in *Northern Minnesota Leader*, December 5, 1935.

and water troughs in order to have their cherished chat and cup of coffee together. Incidentally, the valley once underwent a coffee famine which made the recent rationing of that beverage look generous. It must have caused untold suffering in a community of Scandinavians. It is recorded that the women, scenting the possibility or aroma of Java, would descend in great numbers upon some hapless neighboring housewife.<sup>7</sup>

Not only did the first comers have to face the annoyance of persistent rains, but they also had to contend with periodic floods of the Roseau River. In the early 1890's the *Roseau Region* published the following commentary on the state of flood water in the lower Roseau Valley: "Father Nelson of the Indian Village has finally fled to the mountains. He hung to the willows with commendable tenacity, but when the catfish began to flop their tails against his windows and monkey with the door knob, he donned his life preservers and struck out, admitting for the first time that he actually thought the water was going to be high."<sup>8</sup> Another severe flood occurred in 1896. Some families were isolated by water for six or seven weeks, and many settlers lost valuable seeds and domestic animals.

To add to the burden of the pioneers, the shades of evening were composed mostly of mosquitoes. In wet seasons the cattle, maddened by torture, would bellow day and night and walk unceasingly for relief, or when possible, stand in water up to their necks. Snakes, too, were a nuisance in the early days. One pioneer woman relates that she had to hang out her straw mattress each morning in order to rid it of the many small snakes which found their way into it each night. Though the reptiles were numerous, they were not poisonous. They always invaded the cabins, however, perhaps for shelter and warmth, and then "proceeded to make nests in mattresses, to find their way into the sugar sacks, to drop down upon the beds by way of sod roofs, and to make themselves very troublesome in other ways."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Billberg, in *Northern Minnesota Leader*, December 26, 1935.

<sup>8</sup> The file of the *Roseau Region* from which the writer copied this quotation in 1936 is no longer available. So far as is known, no other file exists.

<sup>9</sup> Billberg, in *Northern Minnesota Leader*, December 12, 1935.

Money was almost a curiosity in the early days of the valley. One settler recalls that he loaned a friend two dollars to make possible some venture. Three years later the man was still unable to repay the debt in coin, so he squared his obligation by delivering a load of lumber. The frontier period was an era of barter, free giving, and co-operation. Once the settlers began to arrive in substantial numbers, they went to work on co-operative enterprises by which to better their condition. One of their first ventures was the building of a crude sawmill with which two operators could cut a hundred feet of lumber a day. A shingle mill, which worked much like a kraut cutter, also was constructed.<sup>10</sup> An early brick plant flourished on the present Magnusson farm north of Roseau.

The Roseau Valley settlers had no sooner built their houses than they began to look for a place in which the Bible might be explained. The Seventh Day Adventists were perhaps the first to enter the field of church activity through the work of Louis Haglund and Mrs. Lon Irish. Baptist, Mission Friends, and Lutheran congregations quickly followed. In the beginning, religious services were conducted in the houses of the settlers. The first church, built a mile and a half east of the present site of Roseau, was erected in 1891, and was open to all denominations. The Reverend Nels K. Askeland probably was the first ordained resident minister. He had charge of the Lutherans, both Norwegian and Swedish, who worked together. Askeland was an earnest, God-fearing man, who never spared himself in his efforts to minister to his scattered, backwoods parishioners.<sup>11</sup>

Education also occupied the attention of the pioneers at an early date. The story of the circumstances incident to organizing the first school in 1890 is refreshing. First of all the pioneers signed the usual blanks to petition the county board of Kittson County for a school district. But after this was done, someone discovered that the number of children of school age was not equal to that required by law for the organization of a district. To overcome the discrepancy, the settlers wrote into the petition the full number required and added

<sup>10</sup> Durham, *Last Frontier*, 16, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Durham, *Last Frontier*, 18.

one extra for good measure. This was made possible by the expedient of reporting that a number of bachelors were of school age.<sup>12</sup>

After 1887 settlers poured into the Roseau Valley in great numbers. Ole Holm estimates that between seven and eight hundred people entered the valley in 1889. Conditions steadily improved as the population grew and community activity increased. The valley had begun to bustle with most promising activity when an incident that came close to depopulating the whole region occurred. This was the Indian scare of 1891.

When the pioneers arrived they found the Indians of the valley peaceful and friendly. The settlers traded with the Indians and the two peoples were mutually helpful in many ways. Both J. W. Durham and Jacob Nelson, the valley's pioneer historians, dwell upon the marked honesty of the Indians. Nevertheless, there were always bad Indians, whisky, and nervous whites. These were the ingredients from which the Indian scare was brewed over the fire of malicious mischief.<sup>13</sup>

In the fall of 1890 the Sioux at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, became tired of reservation life and made a break for the open. Although the revolt was easily put down, the incident caused widespread uneasiness among the settlers. Rumors spread throughout northern Minnesota that the Sioux chief had visited the Chippewa of the Red Lake Reservation to incite them to revolt, and that the Chippewa had purchased all the powder and lead available in Thief River Falls. Other terrifying stories also were current. One writer asserts that the scare in the Roseau Valley was precipitated by the "machinations of several ill-intentioned whites." Louis Enstrom and Ole Holm, two early settlers, testify that a Mrs. Marshall, living in what is now Stafford Township, played a large part in fomenting the scare. She was a half-breed who resented the intrusion of the whites. Panic, however, was in the air. Many of the rumors probably were gen-

<sup>12</sup> Durham, *Last Frontier*, 46; Billberg, in *Northern Minnesota Leader*, February 6, 1936.

<sup>13</sup> The present account of the Indian scare is based largely upon Durham, *Last Frontier*, 39-45. See also Jacob Nelson, "Forty Years in the Roseau Valley," a manuscript in the collection of the Roseau County Historical Society. The author was one of the earliest settlers in the Roseau Valley.

erated spontaneously. It was reported that three hundred Indians in full war paint had passed Sprague's lumber camp, just across the line in Manitoba. The number quickly grew to three thousand. Later investigation revealed that three Indians actually had passed the camp!<sup>14</sup>

In January, 1891, fear of impending massacre swept the valley. The Chippewa of the Warroad village, twenty-two miles east on Lake of the Woods, were said to be dancing the ghost dance with visitors from Red Lake and other places in the vicinity. The climax of a series of wild stories was a Revere-like arousal of the valley settlers by two men who bore the terrifying information that Indians in war paint were descending upon the settlement. In confusion and panic, settlers loaded their household goods on carts and headed precipitately, in the dead of winter, out of the valley. Those who were determined to remain, grimly prepared to defend themselves. Among those who held their ground were some who doubted the story of an uprising. They sent scouts to Warroad to see what the Indians actually were doing.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime the evacuation of the valley continued. Erick Holm, who was dispatched to Hallock to report to the authorities, "met about sixty teams of refugees on the sand ridge in a most miserable plight." Upon returning from Warroad, the scouts reported that the Chippewa there were friendly and were only indulging in social dancing. Moreover, when Chief Maypuck and his band learned of the scare, they were almost as frightened as the settlers. Apprehensive of repercussions, Maypuck and a companion journeyed to Roseau to learn more about the matter.

Ironically enough, the friendly aid of the Indians helped to prevent the settlers who had abandoned their homes from suffering big losses. To Roseau one day went the good Indian Mickinock. He found that all the whites had left. Their stock was almost perishing for lack of food and water, so he watered and fed all abandoned

<sup>14</sup> This incident was recalled by Edward Erickson, a pioneer of the Ross community who served for many years as a member of the board of county commissioners.

<sup>15</sup> Both Durham and Nelson say that the scouts were Oluf Efsen and John Hendrickson, and other testimony supports the claim. There is, however, some controversy on this point. See Durham, *Last Frontier*, 40.



cattle on his way from his camp to town. Upon hearing that the whites believed the rumors of an uprising, Mickinock was incredulous. He told the people to send word to those who had fled to return, as he could not take care of their stock all winter. So quickly did the scare resolve itself and so slowly did the refugees travel in ox carts, that emissaries soon overtook them and persuaded most of them to return. February saw smoke once again rising above the housetops, proclaiming that all was well in the Roseau Valley.

As early as 1888 settlement in the valley began to concentrate about a point known as Pelcher's Crossing. In this vicinity H. W. Sutton opened a store, which served not only the purpose for which it was established, but as the first hotel, the first post office, the first polling place, the first jail, and the first courtroom in the territory which is now Roseau County. Sutton's store was followed by a few other places of business, which became the nucleus of the village of Roseau. In 1892 Rudolph Jacklin established a flour mill about a mile upstream from the crossing, and in the same year, with J. H. Sanders, he platted the village of Roseau. The first newspaper, the *Roseau Region*, edited by Andrew J. Clark, appeared on August 23, 1892.<sup>16</sup> The first number of the *Roseau County Times*, published on July 19, 1895, under the editorship of R. J. Bell, reveals that the village then had at least twenty-five business establishments, including, besides the flour mill, a cheese factory, four newspapers, and three saloons. An electric powerhouse was in the course of erection, and two thousand dollars had recently been spent for a schoolhouse.

Roseau County was organized on January 1, 1895, and Roseau became the county seat. By 1894 the tide of immigration had shifted farther to the west, where in 1895 the townsite of Badger was platted. The settlement grew rapidly, and within two years a movement was underway to make it the county seat. The matter came up before the county board on April 6, 1896, but after a spirited discussion the motion was defeated.<sup>17</sup> This did not end the movement, however,

<sup>16</sup> Durham, *Last Frontier*, 47, 48. Supplementary information about the beginnings of the community has been gleaned from early newspapers and from interviews with pioneers.

<sup>17</sup> *Roseau County Times*, July 26, September 20, October 18, 1895, April 10, 1896; Durham, *Last Frontier*, 48.

and it was a number of years before the echoes of the dispute finally died away.

For some years the development of the county was hindered by the lack of adequate transportation facilities. In 1900, however, the Canadian National Railways built a line around the south shore of the Lake of the Woods, through the village of Warroad, and across the northwestern section of Roseau County. This and other circumstances led the recalcitrant James J. Hill to extend a branch of the Great Northern Railroad into Roseau County as far as Greenbush in 1904, but it did not reach Roseau until 1908.<sup>18</sup> Within a span of twenty years, the Roseau region had progressed to a new era of development.

<sup>18</sup> *Pelan Advocate*, November 16, 1904; *Roseau County Times*, March 6, October 23, 1908; P. R. McMiller and others, *Soil Survey of Roseau County*, 9 (Washington, 1942).



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