

NEW LIGHT ON RED RIVER VALLEY HISTORY¹

In my work as curator of manuscripts for the Minnesota Historical Society, I have opportunity to discover much unpublished and practically unknown material on the history of different parts of the state and the region. Handling and reading day by day old letters, account books, diaries, reminiscences, and similar data, I come to know, after weeks and months, the papers which contain items of interest for special localities. From the standpoint of economy it seems useful to draw up brief accounts of this material from time to time so that persons who desire to learn more of their local history may know the manuscript sources on the subject. It is with this end in view that I want to tell you today about some little-known documents from which one can learn much about past events and conditions in the Red River Valley. I shall speak chiefly of unpublished manuscripts in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. Some are copies of documents in other places. Many, however, are the original manuscripts.

Though actual settlement began late in this valley, the region has an intensely interesting history extending back into fur-trade days, when it was one of the chief avenues of communication between the fur posts in the north central part of the continent and the rest of the world. As long ago as 1768, eight years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a document was written at Mackinac, instructing a certain James Tute to proceed up the Mississippi, past the Falls of St. Anthony into the Sioux country, and thence to Fort La Prairie in what is now southern Manitoba.

¹ Read at the state historical convention under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society at Detroit, June 21, 1924.

Such a route would necessitate traveling through a considerable portion of the Red River Valley. Though the journey as originally mapped was never taken, the instructions indicate more or less knowledge of the valley and of the location of fur posts in it and are of interest to us as one of the earliest references to the valley after Canada and the Northwest passed from French to English control.²

The next manuscript, in chronological order, which interests us here is a diary kept by a certain John McDonell, a fur-trader on the Qu' Appelle River, a branch of the Assiniboine. The latter stream joins the Red River at Winnipeg, entering from the west. This diary, kept for part of the year 1793, and that of Archibald Norman McLeod, another fur-trader whose post was on a branch of the Assiniboine, kept for a part of the year 1800-01, make many references to the Red River, the valley, the fur trade, the buffaloes, and the Indians. One finds in these diaries family names that are still heard in Minnesota.³

Manuscripts relating to the valley after the year 1800 are more numerous. In the minutes of the Northwest Company, discovered in Montreal last summer, we can find records of the wages and provisions of the men who wintered on the upper and lower Red River — for the two portions were always distinguished — and the names of the traders for

² Mr. T. C. Elliott has published this document in his "Jonathan Carver's Source for the Name Oregon" in the Oregon Historical Society's *Quarterly*, 23: 65-68 (March, 1922). The Minnesota Historical Society secured its photostatic reproduction from a contemporary copy of the document in the Gerrard Papers of the Baby Collection in the Bibliothèque St. Sulpice, Montreal. This contemporary copy differs slightly from the copy in the Public Record Office, London, which Mr. Elliott has printed.

³ Photostatic copies of these diaries have been made for the Minnesota Historical Society from the original documents in the Redpath Library of McGill University, Montreal. McDonell's diary is anonymous; the process by which it was identified is described *ante*, p. 306. The last entries of this early diary overlap the opening remarks of McDonell's diary for 1793-95, extracts from which are published more or less accurately in Louis R. Masson's *Les bourgeois de la compagnie du nord-ouest*, 1: 283-295 (Quebec, 1889).

1806.⁴ An interesting agreement between the Northwest and Michilimackinac companies, made in December, 1806, and recorded in these minutes divides the fur trade of the region between the two rival companies. One clause reads:

That the said North West Compy shall establish no Posts on the Grand Red River higher up than the Entrance of the Chayenne River into the said Red River and shall not Trade with the Scioux Nation. That the said North West Company shall not establish any Posts beyond the height of land dividing the waters of the *quéué de loutre* [Otter Tail River]. . . . That the said Michilimackinac Company shall not establish any Posts higher up the Mississippi than the Entrance of the River *Aile de Corbeau* [Crow Wing] and that River or the direct water Communication from the Mississippi to the *quéué de Loutre* shall be the boundary between the said Companies to the Height of Land at *quéué de Loutre*. That the said Michilimackinac Company shall not establish any Posts for Trade on the Red River nor navigate that River, unless for the purpose of gaining the River Commonly called the *Riviere des Scioux* [*Big Sioux River*].

Thus, it can be seen, the valley was considered a rich source for furs, and each company was to have control of a certain portion of it.

For the period from 1806 to 1823 we find few manuscripts relating to the region. Doubtless there are many letters, diaries, and other papers in existence written in these years, for the Selkirk settlers arrived during this period and settled where Winnipeg and its environs now are; and many must have been the letters sent back to anxious friends and relatives in England and Scotland and many the diaries kept. Sometime before it is too late, it is to be hoped that much of this material will be located and used for historical purposes. At present, however, we must pass over these years to 1823,

⁴ The minutes of the Northwest Company for the period from June 30, 1801, to February 28, 1811, were discovered among the Gerrard Papers of the Baby Collection in the Bibliothèque St. Sulpice by Dr. Wayne E. Stevens of Dartmouth College while he was searching for manuscripts of Minnesota interest. A photostatic copy has been secured by the Minnesota Historical Society. See *ante*, p. 306.

when Major Stephen H. Long was sent to establish the exact location of the forty-ninth degree as the boundary between the United States and British North America. From Keating's published accounts we know a very great deal about the expedition that passed down the entire length of the Red River Valley from Lake Traverse to Lake Winnipeg one hundred years ago last summer. How many people, however, know that the original diaries kept by the leader of the party are now in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society? Minute descriptions of rivers, lakes, prairies, trees, and other natural characteristics are given; and, most interesting of all, a series of very accurate maps illustrates the record of daily marches.⁵ For the first time the Red River Valley was thoroughly explored and a scientific account of it rendered. It may be interesting to note that Long's investigations showed that Pembina was within the territory of the United States. It was, in fact, the first settlement in the American portion of the valley.

From 1823 we will pass to 1836 and 1837, when Martin McLeod kept an interesting diary on an expedition through northern Minnesota, down the Red River to the Selkirk colony, then up that river to Lake Traverse, and down the Minnesota to Fort Snelling. I will not deal fully with this record of adventure and romance, because it is to appear in a short time in the MINNESOTA HISTORY BULLETIN, the quarterly publication of the Minnesota Historical Society. After Long's diaries, it is the next extensive account of the valley which we have, and it is very valuable for its descriptions of the country and the Indians.⁶

⁵ The two-volume work by William H. Keating, geologist and historiographer of Long's expedition, entitled *Narrative of an Expedition to the Sources of the St. Peter's River* (Philadelphia, 1824), embodies some of the material in Long's manuscript diaries; but the most valuable portions from many points of view, the maps, have not been reproduced.

⁶ Since the reading of this paper McLeod's diary has been printed in the belated August–November, 1922, number of the BULLETIN (see *ante*, 4: 351–439).

I will mention here manuscript records of censuses taken at the Red River settlement in the years 1838, 1840, 1843, and 1846-47. These documents are kept at the Provincial Library in Winnipeg, but photostatic copies have been ordered for the Minnesota Historical Society because of its interest in the Red River settlers, many of whom became United States citizens just across the border in North Dakota and Minnesota. These records give such facts about each settler as his name and age; the number of cows, pigs, sheep, plows, horses, canoes, carts, and boats which he owned; and the amount of land which he cultivated.⁷

Similar records for the American portion of the valley are to be found in the census records for the Territory of Wisconsin in 1840, which included portions of what is now Minnesota; in the schedules of the census for Minnesota Territory taken in 1850; in the national census records of the state for 1860 and 1870; and in the state census records for 1865, 1875, 1885, 1895, and 1905. These records, which are preserved in the manuscript division of the Minnesota Historical Society, are invaluable for the early history of the Red River Valley. It is interesting to note in the population schedules of 1840 and 1850 how large a percentage of the settlers of Minnesota were born in the Selkirk colony.⁸

During the forties the valley became a commercial highway of no little importance. The Red River settlement was growing and its inhabitants wanted to market their furs and agricultural surplus more advantageously than had been

⁷ Photostatic copies of these census schedules have been obtained since this statement was written.

⁸ A photostatic copy of the population schedule of the census for 1840 of Crawford County, Wisconsin, now largely within the state of Minnesota, has been made from the original schedule in the federal census bureau. The schedules of the census of 1857, taken for the purpose of determining whether Minnesota Territory had a sufficient number of inhabitants to become a state, have been located in the federal census bureau since this paper was read. Plans are afoot to secure copies of these schedules and so to complete the set of early census records for Minnesota.

possible when England, by way of a ship from Hudson Bay, was more accessible than any American market. After settlement began at the mouth of the Minnesota River, however, the colonists on the Red River gradually changed their market until annual processions of squeaking Red River carts carrying furs, tallow, and some other articles to St. Paul, and general provisions and household goods on the return trip, became a common sight along the so-called "Red River trail."

This trail constitutes such an important item in Red River Valley history that many persons are beginning to ask the questions: when was it first established and through which villages and towns of today did it pass? Although there is manuscript material relating to the establishment of the "woods" and "plains" trails, we shall pass over this phase of the matter and deal with their courses. The "plains" trail left the Mississippi at St. Cloud, struck the Red River at Breckenridge, and passed down the west bank of the river. The "woods" trail passed through Crow Wing, up the Crow Wing and Leaf river valleys, skirted the northeast corner of Otter Tail Lake, passed Detroit Lake, and followed the right bank of the Red River to Pembina. For the latter trail we have accurate manuscript charts made by two United States engineers, E. A. Holmes and George H. Belden, in the years 1855 and 1857, when the traffic on the trails was very heavy. These give woods, streams, marshes, lakes and other natural features in such minuteness that one can readily map the trail in a given locality, for instance, in the vicinity of Detroit. One of the most prominent traders on the "plains" trail was Norman W. Kittson, many of whose letters deal with the fur trade at his post, Pembina, and with trips up and down the valley.⁹

⁹ These charts are a part of the Alfred J. Hill Collection, a valuable group of maps, diagrams, and papers relating to Minnesota geography and exploration. Norman W. Kittson's letters are, in the main, in the Sibley Papers, which include considerable other material on people and events in the Red River Valley after 1834.

Other manuscript sources for data on the Red River Valley are missionaries' letters, diaries, and reminiscences. Thus the Reverend William T. Boutwell, a Congregational missionary at Leech Lake for several years in the thirties, kept a diary in which many allusions are made to events and people in the valley. Many of his letters to Henry H. Sibley and to other missionaries have been preserved, and some of these contain items of interest for our purpose.¹⁰

The most interesting and unique Minnesota missionary data, however, are the reminiscences of the Reverend Sela G. Wright, who was stationed at the mission farm on Red Lake during the forties and fifties. Very little else has ever been written or known about this mission, but Wright's reminiscences are quite full and tell, for example, of a farm which could produce three thousand bushels of corn and two thousand bushels of potatoes, besides other vegetables, in 1848, when all the rest of northern and western Minnesota was a wilderness — an enterprise worthy of more than passing remark by the historian. Among the incidents recounted by Wright is the story of a trip to the Red River settlement in December, 1843, to purchase oxen and cows. He includes a description of the sled used on the return trip. An interesting study should be made sometime of methods of travel in the Red River Valley, for this sled appears to have been quite an unusual contrivance — an oak board turned up at one end after the manner of our toboggans. It resembled a dog sled but was drawn by an ox and was fifteen feet in length.¹¹

¹⁰ Only a copy of Boutwell's diary has been preserved. This is in the handwriting of J. Fletcher Williams, the secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society from 1867 to 1893. Records in Williams' hand seem to indicate that he made the transcript from the original diary, which was lent to the society for copying by Boutwell himself.

¹¹ The manuscript reminiscences which Wright dictated in 1890 are now in the possession of the Oberlin College Library, which in 1920 generously permitted the Minnesota Historical Society to make a copy. See *ante*, 3: 370.

Thus we have reached the fifties, when settlers began to arrive in the valley. And now we come to a manuscript, recently acquired, which deals exclusively with the valley. It was written in 1857 by Increase A. Lapham of Milwaukee, who had just made a trip to the region. A very minute description of the topography, history, and settlement of the valley is given. In a word, Lapham was boosting the region, desiring to see it fill with immigrants. He mentions some of the towns, just building—Lapham, Breckenridge, Cold Spring, Holmes City, Winthrop, Mansfield, Reno, Bellevue, and others. "The settlers in these places," he says, "are nearly all Americans—and of the right stamp for pioneer work. Courage, hope, patience & industry can have their freest & fullest development in this newly sought frontier." He continues his account of a trip into the valley and remarks, "We saw a few deserted wigwams; they told us of a race fast vanishing from existence; while our little white tent, newly pitched, whispered to us of the onward march of that mighty wave of immigration, flowing on towards the setting sun, soon to cultivate this goodly land."¹²

For the late fifties, the early sixties, and the seventies, one can glean an amazing amount of knowledge of activities, men, and conditions in this valley from the papers of James W. Taylor. His position as American special agent and later as consul at Winnipeg gave him opportunity to exert a large influence in shaping the destiny of the valley. His efforts to annex the British portion of the valley to the Union are well known. Few persons, however, know of his intimacy with some of the great railroad magnates of the day, notably with Jay Cooke, Lord Strathcona, and Lord Mount Stephen. His endeavor was to extend railroad connections into the lower valley. Incidentally in so doing he came into contact with George L. Becker, for whom Becker County is named. Con-

¹² The original manuscript by Lapham is owned by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, from which a typed copy was obtained in May, 1924. See *ante*, p. 506.

siderable correspondence with Becker and many allusions to him are found in Taylor's correspondence.¹³

In 1869 a traveler, Mr. A. W. Graham, journeying from St. Paul to the settlements on the lower Red River, kept a diary which has recently come to light. I wrote to him and received a reply about six weeks ago relative to the diary, which he modestly deprecates as a youthful effort. It proves very profitable reading, however, for one interested in Red River Valley history. Certain entries I will quote to show the flavor of the diary:

July 8 We arrived at St. Paul in the morning and the same evening found us at St. Cloud. The first thing attracting our attention were Red River carts and half-breed drivers. These carts were made without iron or nails, the tires even being rawhide called "Shaganapi." They are made with shafts and one ox to a cart, with harness much like horse harness, but more crude, made mostly of rawhide. The axles are never oiled, and in driving each wheel makes a different kind of music, which can be heard on a still day or night for miles. There is one driver for three to five carts. These were the freight cars carrying goods west.

July 16 Travelled 48 miles today. At noon crossed the Ottertail River. Passed two trains of Red River carts. A beautiful country. . . . We are making on an average 42 miles per day.

July 17 Reached Fort Abercrombie The fort is on the Dakota side of the Red River. Some American soldiers have been stationed here since the Sioux massacre in 1862. The river is crossed by a ferry boat. We got our wagon repaired and bought some provisions.¹⁴

¹³ The Taylor Papers constitute one of the largest and most important manuscript collections owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. They cover the years 1852 to 1893 and consist of thirteen filing boxes filled mainly with correspondence, twenty letter books, three scrapbooks, and a few miscellaneous items. Theodore C. Blegen's "James Wickes Taylor: A Biographical Sketch," published *ante*, 1: 153-219, contains a description and an evaluation of the Taylor Papers.

¹⁴ This diary has been printed under the title "Diary of A. W. Graham during the Red River Rebellion" in *Reminiscences of Early Settlers and*

As Fort Abercrombie has been mentioned, we will consider another reference to it in the diary of Samuel R. Bond, a member of Captain James L. Fisk's expedition to escort the gold-diggers across the western plains in the summer of 1862, when the Indians were still too numerous and too hostile for emigrant trains to pass unprotected.¹⁵ The party of emigrants and soldiers left St. Paul, followed the "plains" trail to Breckenridge, and crossed the Red River to Fort Abercrombie on the western shore. Here they arrived in time to celebrate the Fourth of July, which Bond describes thus:

Friday July 4 Remained in camp today to participate in a celebration at the Fort of the anniversary of our national Independence, and to allow some teams still on the road to overtake us. A Salute of 13 guns was fired at day break at the Fort. Capt Fisk and his party having horses formed a cavalcade and at nine o'clock A.M. proceeded to the Fort where they were received by officers and men of the Garrison & escorted in procession around the Fort and vicinity. At a place called the "Old Fort" they were unexpectedly joined by the rest of Capt Fisks party, armed with shovels, spades &c indicative of the vocation of Gold-Seekers. Here all were generously entertained with the wholesome teutonic beverage, lager beer.

The garrison, after a salute of musketry, escorted us to our Camp where our men got their guns and fired a salute. All the horsemen then took a gallop across the prairie. At 5 o'clock P.M. about 200 or 250 men and about 20 ladies met in the area of the Fort around the noble flag-staff recently erected, and seated in tents erected and adorned with green boughs prepared by the Garrison, awaited the exercises that had been projected for the occasion.

After telling about the reading of the Declaration of Independence and the delivery of several appropriate speeches, Bond continues as follows:

Other Records, 70-84 (Elgin Historical and Scientific Institute, *Publications*, vol. 4—St. Thomas, Ontario, 1911). Mr. Graham resides at St. Thomas.

¹⁵ The original of this diary has been deposited by the author with the Ipswich (Massachusetts) Historical Society, which has permitted the Minnesota Historical Society to make a typed copy. See *ante*, 4: 450.

At night a ball was given by Capt Vander Horck at his Headquarters. Thermometer stood at 101° in shade at 3 ocl^k

Saturday, July 5 . . . Another ball was given at Headquarters of Capt Vander Horck tonight.

After we had all gone to our camp and to sleep tonight we were suddenly aroused and startled by the Indian war-whoop, drum-beating and all the other sounds that characterize an Indian war-dance or battle, in close proximity to our Headquarters, and coming nearer and still more near. Upon our sallying from our tent we encountered our hospitable entertainers . . . and about 15 men from the Garrison who had determined to pas[s] our sentinels, if possible, and give us a foretaste of what we might expect during our Camp-life in an Indian country. Our sentinels could not refuse to pass into our camp at any hour of day or night those who had welcomed us to their hospitalities with such cordiality and generosity.

Our assailants presented a mug of lager to each of our throats and after receiving their fire with firmness and unbroken lines we planted a small howitzer of bourbon at our tent-door and returned the fire to the best of our ability. The combat then closed, our assailants retired and left us to sleep on the field.

Bond's journal of over two hundred pages presents a vivid picture of the upper valley in 1862, giving the author's impressions of the towns, the country-side, and the Indians. On the same journey one of Bond's friends also kept a diary.¹⁶ His entry for July 2 reads in part: "reached Breckenridge by a little after noon. B. is made of one Hotel (empty) & a saw mill."

I will close this paper by advising any who are interested in the early days of the valley to read a recent book called *Women of Red River, Being a Book Written from the Recollections of Women Surviving from the Red River Era*, by W. J. Healy of Winnipeg.¹⁷ Although it relates primarily

¹⁶ Dr. William D. Dibb kept diaries of the Fisk expeditions of 1862, 1863, and 1864, photostatic copies of which have been made by the Minnesota Historical Society from the original in the possession of Mrs. Jeremiah E. Fitzgerald of St. Paul, a daughter of the author. See *ante*, p. 225.

¹⁷ This little volume was published in Winnipeg by the Women's Canadian Club in 1923. It is reviewed *ante*, p. 493-495.

to Manitoba, there are constant references to trips through northwestern Minnesota to St. Paul. One woman making a journey to Illinois via St. Paul in 1848 "saw the newly-built log cabin of Pierre Bottineau, which was then the only building on the site of Minneapolis."¹⁸ What a retrospect for this woman of ninety-two! Think of watching this beautiful valley develop from the days of Indians, Red River carts, and no white men's habitations south of Pembina to the present with its scenes of prosperous farms and thriving towns! It savors almost of the miraculous to have witnessed such changes within the limits of one life time.

Such are some of the available sources of Red River history, nearly all in manuscript form. You who are proud of this unique history will do well to preserve its sources — by presenting to your local or state historical society any diaries, letters, account books, or other manuscripts which relate in any way to the region. It is from such documents that authoritative history is made. Few regions in America have a more interesting or picturesque history and few offer more possibilities for the discovery of manuscripts that will open up wholly new chapters of that history. It is for you of the valley to locate these papers and preserve them.

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¹⁸ Healy, *Women of Red River*, 29. Bottineau's house was in St. Anthony, which did not become a part of Minneapolis until 1872. Daniel S. B. Johnston, in a manuscript entitled "The Beginnings of St. Anthony, Minneapolis, and the University of Minnesota," calls Bottineau's house the second in St. Anthony.



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