Chapter IX

THE SETTLEMENT AND EARLY SETTLERS OF POLK COUNTY

Judge J. E. Montague

The earliest recorded and authentic settlement of any kind in the territory established at Polk County was the trading post of Baptiste Cadotte, located at the confluence of the Clearwater and Red Lake Rivers, near Red Lake Falls. In his diary, David Thompson tells of going from Roy’s post on the Dakota side of the Red River just west of Argyle, to Cadotte’s post in 1798, and from thence to Red Lake, Turtle and Cass lakes, and down the Mississippi. Thompson was a great explorer, and the greatest cartographer of his time in the west country.

In 1800, Alexander Henry was placed in charge of the Northwest Fur Company’s operation in the Red River district, and in that year established his trading post at Pembina with a view to cultivating the Indian patronage. In the fall of that year he made a trip south along the river, on the Minnesota side, to at least as far south as present Climax and Neilsville, and he gives a very good description of the Red Lake River, and the Sand Hill and Wild Rice rivers. Later he made a trip down the Snake River, about where Warren now is, and then across country to the old Cadotte Post, then abandoned, and then up the river to about the present site of Thief River Falls. His description of the country was very accurate. Henry was in charge at Pembina until 1808, and established trading posts at Grand Forks and near the present Climax. We have seen it frequently stated that LaVerendrye established a trading post at Grand Forks in the 1730’s, but there is no basis for such a claim. His own narrative does not mention it, but there is some reason to believe that he did establish one north of Red Lake, as well as a post at the mouth of the Roseau River.

In 1823 a government expedition under Major Stephen H. Long travelled from Fort Snelling to Pembina, following the old Pembina Trail which went from near Climax to the crossing of the Red Lake River, a short distance from the present Fisher. He was accompanied by the Italian traveller, Beltrami, who left the expedition at Pembina and struck off to the southeast across country until he struck the Red Lake River, which he followed to Red Lake, and thence south to Lake Julia, then through lakes Bemidji and Cass and down the Mississippi.

In 1836 Martin McLeod, afterwards a prominent member of the legislature and author of the bill establishing our public school system, came from the south to Red Lake, and then across country to Pembina.

In 1840, Joe Rolette went to Pembina to take charge of the post there, and in 1843 was joined there by Norman Kittson. It was they who established the Red River Trail that crosses the