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
Red Lake River at Huot, and goes south through Polk County on the ridges east of Crookston, and it was they who really estab­lished the Red River cart traffic.

In 1857, the great Canadian scientist, Hind, made a trip from Pembina to St. Paul, and gives an interesting and accurate ac­count of his journey. He followed the Red River Trail crossing the river at Huot, and thence down through Polk County. He is very accurate in his measurement of the distances between the different streams he crossed, and he tells of meeting the mail-car­rier, who was then 15 days out from Crow Wing (near the present Brainerd). He met two trains of Red River carts, one 21 and the other 19 days out from St. Paul. He states that the trail used in the winter time turned to the east in Marshall County, going to the present Thief River Falls, and then down the river and lakes to St. Paul.

In 1857, Joe Rolette and Norman Kittson platted a town­site at the point the trail crossed the Red Lake River, at the pres­ent Huot, and named it Douglas. When the legislature passed the act establishing Polk County, Douglas was named the county seat. It is doubtful whether there ever was anything there except a trading post, for when Joseph Wheelock accompanied Governor Ramsey, when the “Old Crossing” Treaty was made, he wrote: “On the opposite or northern side once flourished a magnificent city, founded by Joe Rolette and others in 1857 and known as Douglas. The ruins are still visible — a single monumental chim­ney of mud and sticks.”

The first settler in what is now Polk County undoubtedly was W. C. Nash, who settled at what is now East Grand Forks in 1869. He came here as a mail carrier, contractor and Indian trader—not with the intention of making it is home, though it turned out that he spent the rest of a fairly long life there.

Early in 1871, Levi Steenerson went north from Lac Que Parle County and took a job with the Hudson’s Bay Company, driving teams with supplies between Georgetown and Frog Point (opposite Climax on the Dakota side of the river). That spring and sum­mer being dry, Frog Point was the southern terminus of river transportation on the Red River. On one of his trips in the latter part of May, he swam across the river at Frog Point and selected a homestead along the Sand Hill River, and went back to work. He wrote to his brother Knute urging that he come there and select land also. So in June, 1871, there arrived Ole Estenson and family, Peter O. and Esten Estenson, Peter Satermoe, Ole Jvening, Tollef Ose, Knute Steenerson, Henry and Paul Simon, Gullek and Salva Spokely, Tollef Tollefson, Jorgen Knutson, John Bremseth, Peter Jacobson and John Sundet, all of whom settled on the east side of the Red River from a point just north of where Climax now is to a point south of the present Neilsville, the settlement extending for about twelve miles north and south. The land was not surveyed except by townships, and they agreed among themselves as to the boundaries of their claims.
They constituted two distinct groups: those south of the Sand Hill River were acquaintances from Houston County, most of them having come from Telemarken, Norway; those north were from Freeborn County, and originally from Osterdal. Mr. Estenson tells that his family located where it did on the advice of James Hill himself, to locate opposite Frog Point.

A little later the same year came several Irish families, who located north of the Sand Hill River settlement, mostly in what is now Tysid township. The following year, 1872, came the Ose brothers, from Saterdal—brothers of the Tollef Ose who came to the Climax area in 1871. They located in what is now Bygland, named after the settlement in Norway from which the Ose brothers came; they were quickly followed by numbers of their countrymen.

In 1872, also, a number of Scotchmen, who had come from lower Canada to Manitoba to look for homes, decided that this side of the line offered the better opportunities, and located near the Red Lake River in what is now Huntsville and Nesbit townships. Among the first were Robert and James Coulter, James Thomas, Robert Nesbit and William Fleming. They were quickly followed by their friends and acquaintances, and soon there was a fairly large and prosperous Scotch settlement in the Mallory neighborhood.

The year 1872 marked the beginning of Crookston. Most of the people who settled there first were among those who had worked on the railroad construction. Among the number were E. C. Davis, John Darkow, Bernhard Sampson, Jake Meyers, D. Jacobus, Dick Hussey, the Greenhalgh family, Joseph Barret and family, F. J. LaChappelle and his wife, William Stuart, William Ross, Robert Houston, E. M. Walsh, Henry Shepherd and Frank Jerome.

It was quite evident that a city would arise where the railroad crossed the Red Lake River, and when the line was finally located at the present crossing, the engineers who had first knowledge where the crossing would be, made pre-emption filings upon most of the lands around it. As they made but slight improvements and had no bona-fide residence on it, their claims were for the most part contested and cancelled. William H. Stuart succeeded in getting title to what became the original townsite of Crookston and Robert Houston got what is Fletcher's and Houston's additions and the A. C. Loring addition. Other parts of the present city were obtained by E. C. Davis, Bernard Sampson, Mary Carlton, John Darkow, Joseph Barrett, and Rueben Reynolds, while a part of Frank Jerome's homestead became Jerome's addition.

"It is impossible in the scope of this report to list all of the early pioneers who were first settlers in the founding of the many towns and villages of Polk County. However, a brief summary of Judge Montague's research on other towns as follows."—McCall

"During these early years, settlers located mostly along the
rivers. The land was not surveyed until 1874, so boundary lines and exact locations were not possible, but after the survey mutual adjustments were made without much difficulty. In 1876, J. B. Bottineau, son of the famous guide, brought in 119 families, all of French descent, and the settlement of the Gentilly and the Red Lake Falls territory began. With the completion of the railroad line to St. Vincent and the location of the Land Office in Crookston in the years 1878 and 1879, new impetus was given to land settlement. It was in 1879 that settlers first located in the territory around the present Fertile. It was in 1883 that the ‘Thirteen Towns’ was opened for settlement and the mad rush for lands in the eastern part of the county commenced. In 1886-87 a number of ‘squatters’ had located there. Most of them were removed by the government, but a few families managed to remain in the vicinity of the present Fosston. In 1885, the railroad was built from Crookston to Fosston, but it was not until 1887 that the Northern Pacific built north from Detroit through Fertile on to Red Lake Falls and then west to East Grand Forks. The line from Fertile to Crookston was not built until 1890 to 1894."

The early settlers settled quite largely in nationality groups with peoples from Norway and Sweden in the early years dominating the area beginning in the southwest corner of the county to the central, south and east, and northeast parts of the county. The French descent settlers were in the north central part of the county, the Scotch in the northwest central, the Irish in western section and a mixed Bavarian and other nationalities in the north-west central. Through the teachings of English in the public schools language barriers have now disappeared.

1945 May 5th. War in Europe ended.
1945 Sept. 2. War with Japan ended.
1953 July 27th. War in Korea ended.
1946 Tuesday, Feb. 5th. Blizzard struck Red River Valley during Winter Shows.
1957 June 20th. Tornado struck Fargo, N. Dak. Ten lives lost.
1959 December, Polk County Historical Society re-activated. Second floor McKinley School building in Crookston for county museum.
1960 July. Polk County Museum open to public.
1961 Entire McKinley School building acquired for the Polk County Holte Pioneer Museum. Grand opening of complete museum held on April 15 and 16. Museum reported to be one of the finest in Minnesota.