Chapter VI

EARLY EXPLORERS AND EXPLORATIONS OF THE RED RIVER VALLEY

It is not the purpose of this Centennial History of Polk County to trace or describe the journeys and explorations of all of the early explorers visiting Minnesota and the Red River Valley, nor verify the claims of their respective governments for title to the lands of which the Red River Valley is a part. Much of that information is available to students in text books of American history, books published on the work and accomplishments of early explorers, journals and records in the Library of Congress and in the archives of many state and county historical societies. It will be the purpose of the treatise to list chronologically, explorers, explorations and changes of titles of ownership of importance to the Red River Valley and Polk County.

The date the first white man visited the Red River Valley probably never will be known. Many people would like to believe, the writer included, that Norsemen entered the valley by way of Hudson Bay and the Red River before Columbus discovered America. While the authenticity of the Runestone record has been discredited, yet the finding of old Norse type anchor stones in lakes of the area has never been explained. Following the explorations of Radisson and Groseilliers in eastern Minnesota, 1658-1660, France sent officers to the region and in 1671 claimed the whole area south to the Gulf of Mexico. England, previous to this time, granted the Hudson Bay Company all of the lands draining into Hudson Bay, which caused a conflict of interests between the two countries. The brief interlude in which Spain claimed title to the lands had no appreciable effect on the bitterness of feeling between the English and French fur traders in the area. The title to the lands west of the Mississippi was transferred back to France under Napolean. Irritation between the two countries over boundary lines ended when the United States gained title to this area as a part of the Louisana Purchase in 1803. The boundary line between English and United States lands was not definitely established until 1823 by the scientists and surveyors of the Stephen Long Expedition.

The first authentic records of white men crossing the Red River Valley was in 1732. This record and subsequent explorations are quoted from Report No. 1126, House of Representatives, 71st Congress, 2nd Session, from the Committee on the Library:

"On the outskirts of this valley along its northeastern confines as early as the year 1732, the year in which George Washington was born, French traders and missionaries established Fort St. Charles on the shores of the Lake of the Woods. In 1763 LaVerendrye crossed this fertile valley near the location of the proposed monument (Old Crossing Treaty site) on a journey to the present location of Minot, North Dakota. In 1798, David Thompson, an English explorer, passed through the Red River Valley during the early winter and wrote about Christmas Eve festivities in camp among Indians."
“The first settlers migrated south from Fort Garry, now called Winnipeg, in 1812. They were a part of the Lord Selkirk colonization party and made their homes at almost the exact spot where the forty-ninth parallel of latitude crosses the Red River.

“In 1823, President Monroe issued orders to Major Stephen H. Long to explore this valley. Splendidly equipped and having in his party noted scientists and surveyors, Major Long secured authentic information, which later was issued in book form. The historian of the party wrote glowingly of the fertile soil, the agreeable climate and the abundance of game and fish. In fertility of the soil he likened it to the valley of the Nile and prophesized that it would produce food to feed millions when opened for white settlement.

“The record shows that Major Long forded the Red Lake River at a point not far west of the ‘Old Crossing’ which early became a historic spot in this section of the United States. Proceeding northward, he encountered the settlers of the Selkirk company at Pembina. The official surveyor established the exact location of the forty-ninth parallel of latitude, which had been agreed upon as the northern boundary, and ascertained that all but six families living in this settlement had built their homes on the American side of the line and were therefore privileged to claim the protection of the Stars and Stripes and be citizens of the United States Government. It is recorded there was great rejoicing and that a magnificent feast was held in honor of the visitors.

“Count Geacomo Constantino Beltrami, who accompanied Major Long on his expedition to Pembina in 1823, left that party there and travelled southeasterly with two Chippewa guides to find the source of the Mississippi. He evidently went down Thief River to its junction with the Red Lake River, where his guides left him. He hired another guide and went up the river to Red Lakes, then down to Lake Julia, across to Lake Bemidji, down the Mississippi. The inaccuracies of his reports are apparent when he stated ‘Lake Julia was the most northern source of the Mississippi and that the Red Lakes were the most southern source of the Red River.’

“Another explorer, who was first to explore what was later to become the southeastern boundary of the original Polk County, was Henry R. Schoolcraft. Schoolcraft, a minerologist, accompanied Governor Lewis Cass to northern Minnesota in 1830 to get the Chippewa and Sioux Indians to cease their warfare. Regarding the success of this mission, Schoolcraft stated, ‘Much good tobacco and eloquence was wasted on Indian tribes.’ On May 3, 1832, Schoolcraft was issued an order authorizing him to make an expedition on the upper Mississippi. His party was well equipped with a surgeon to vaccinate Indians against smallpox and a clergyman in addition to the regular corps of helpers. He reached Cass Lake on July 10, 1832, and first saw the headwaters lake (which he named Itasca) on July 13, 1832. Some later explorers have contended that the small Elk Lake which connects to Lake Itasca may be the source of the Mississippi; however, authorities agree that Lake Itasca is the source of the great Mississippi and that the honor for its discovery belongs to Henry R. Schoolcraft.’

“It has been the purpose of this report to include only a report of the early explorers who left reliable records of their visitations of the area. Many other early explorers evidently visited some parts of the Red River Valley who lacked a knowledge of the geographical areas they visited. Fur traders did move up the Red River to points at or near Grand Forks more than 100 years ago. They were a migratory lot; however, one of their number did remain to be the first or one of the first white settlers in Polk County. He was William Nash, settled in '69 at East Grand Forks.