Chapter VIII

THE "OLD CROSSING" WAYSIDE MEMORIAL PARK

It seems difficult for those of us living in Polk County in 1958 to understand why the early settlers living near the "Old Crossing" in Polk and Red Lake counties did not appreciate the significance and historic importance of the "Old Crossing" on the Red Lake River. Perhaps the county separation battle, which ended in 1896 with the formation of Red Lake County out of the north central part of Polk County, diverted interest from this historic spot. Two famous pioneers, who participated indirectly in the signing of the "Old Crossing" Treaty, resided in Polk County until their lands became a part of the new county, Red Lake. The most famous and honored of the two pioneers was Pierre Bottineau, who was a noted scout and guide for the area and served as an interpreter for the Chippewa Indians at the signing of the treaty. Pierre Bottineau lived on his farm west of Red Lake Falls until his death on July 26, 1895. He was buried in a nearby cemetery. The other pioneer was Benjamin Dalbec, an escort at the treaty, who lived in that county until his passing in 1928.

While many people in the two counties had a passive interest in the "Old Crossing", yet it remained for John Saugstad of Crookston to take the leadership in the recognition of this historic spot. As state senator in 1913, he was responsible for having a marker placed at the "Old Crossing." Governor A. O. Eberhard took part in the ceremonies of this first historic recognition of the site. From that early date, John Saugstad was the torch bearer for those interested in the regional significance of this historic crossing on the Pembina Trail.

In the late twenties, a number of business leaders from the Red Lake Falls and Crookston area became interested in developing a park at the treaty site. Congressman C. G. Selvig, former Superintendent of the Northwest School and Experiment Station, his successor, Dr. A. A. Dowell, together with Sam Hunt and V. M. Higginbotham, and others from Red Lake Falls, gave added enthusiasm to the park project. Congressman C. G. Selvig introduced and secured the passage of H. R. 5271 in April, 1930, for an appropriation of $5,000 for the erection of a suitable memorial at the "Old Crossing." The Board of County Commissioners of Red Lake County purchased the 8.8 acres at the west bank of the "Old Crossing" from the Huot family. The Red River Valley Development Association pledged care and maintenance of the memorial site until its status as a state park was established. Farmers of the community, businessmen from Red Lake Falls, and committees from the Kiwanis and Rotary Service clubs of Crookston worked under the direction of the writer in cleaning up the dead trees and brush and the restoration of the "Old Trail" through the park. The memorial decided upon was the bronze life size figure of a Chippewa Indian holding the pipe of peace.
A noted sculptor, Carl G. Mose of Washington, D.C., was commissioned to cast the approved design of the Chippewa Indian in bronze. Enough of the $5,000 was left over to cover the costs involved in making and placing the bronze marker plaques on suitable granite boulders, and one large granite slab left conveniently nearby the prehistoric glaciers.

The dedication of the “Old Crossing Treaty Memorial” was held in the park on June 25, 1933. A crowd of more than 3,000 persons was present for the dedicatory exercises with special recognition being given to the local pioneers and the Chippewa chiefs and headmen from Red Lake, White Earth, Ball Club and Ponsford. Congressman C. G. Selvig, President of the Polk County Historical Society, presided at the meeting. The memorial was presented to the state on behalf of the United States government by Mark L. Burns, Superintendent of the Consolidated Chippewa Agency of Cass Lake, Minnesota. Superintendent Burns also served as fiscal officer in the expenditure of the Congressional appropriation for the memorial.

The acceptance of the memorial in behalf of the Chippewa Indians was made by Edward L. Rogers, member of the Chippewa tribe and County Attorney of Walker, Minnesota, and in behalf of North Dakota by Joseph Rabinovich, Department Commander of the American Legion, Grand Forks. Greetings in behalf of the pioneers were extended by Chas. E. Boughton, Sr., Red Lake Falls, and Martin O'Brien of Crookston. The Address of Acceptance and Dedication for the State of Minnesota was given by Dr. Theodore C. Blegeen, Superintendent of the Minnesota State Historical Society. The music for the program was presented by the Crookston Municipal Band.

The Old Crossing Memorial Park plaque contains the following inscription: *Within the area comprising this park, in the fall of 1863, negotiations were conducted with the Pembina and Red Lake bands of Chippewa Indians by which they ceded to the United States about three million acres of land in northwestern Minnesota and northeastern Dakota. This cession made possible the settlement of the Red River Valley. Here stood the great Cottonwood tree which served the early settlers as a post office and here also the ox-cart trains, which carried furs and supplies between St. Paul and Pembina by way of St. Cloud or Crow Wing, forded the Red Lake River. The monument, representing a Chippewa Indian with the pipe of peace, by the sculptor Carl C. Mose, was erected by the United States under the terms of a bill introduced by Congressman Conrad G. Selvig of Crookston.*

The land in this park was donated to the State of Minnesota, in 1931, by action of the Board of County Commissioners of Red Lake County—Sam E. Hunt, Frank P. Grenier, Nels L. Roseen, E. E. Hill and Ole O. Lee.

The site was improved under the direction of a committee consisting of V. M. Higginbotham, John Saustad and Thomas M. McCall.
In the late thirties, citizens of the Crookston and Red Lake Falls communities acquired a little more than 100 acres of land which included the portion of the Pembina Trail which led to the east bank of the “Old Crossing” and the tract of land on both sides of the river north of the bridge (a tract which had been held by the Northern States Power Company at a site for a power dam). Some preliminary work had been done in planning for this dam before 1920. What appeared to be several hundred-wagon-loads of native granite boulders, which had been purchased from nearby farmers, were dumped over the hill for rip-rapping the banks. It occurred to many interested in this purchase that the time might come when a dam could be built on the site, not for the generation of power but, as a check dam for flood control and to conserve spring run-offs for domestic and industrial uses for the towns downstream dependent on the Red Lake River. Such a reservoir could be a valuable asset to a state park. The land was given to the State of Minnesota and included in the park area.

Because of the highway and river cutting the park area into four parts, the State Park Service classified the two divided portions of the land on the west bank of the river as the “Old Crossing Wayside Park”. To date, funds set aside from the State Department of Public Parks have not been adequate to maintain the whole 8.8 acres of the memorial site. A good picnic area around the Post Office Tree and Bronze Memorial is available for small gatherings. There are great potential possibilities in the development of a beautiful and historic park. The portion of the park on the east bank of the river, south of the present highway through which the Pembina Trail descends from the ridge to the river, is a natural amphitheatre. This tract, of approximately fifteen acres, would require considerable work to get the trees and brush removed from the trail and above the river bank. This park, if it is to be properly developed, remains a challenge not only to the State Park Service but to Polk and Red Lake counties.

1918 November 11, Armistice Day World War I.

1940 November 11, Terrific blizzard and cold wave extending from Canada through the Red River Valley south and southeastward through Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska. One of the most widespread storms in recent history causing great losses to livestock, turkeys and great damage to trees and shrubs.

1941 March 15th, 9:10 p. m. Terrific blizzard swept down from north striking entire Red River Valley on south and east. Comparable to Jan. 9th storm in 1873 in S. W. Minnesota. Tornado-like winds, heavy snow with temperatures near and below zero. Seventy lives lost in area—several in Crookston area.

1941 December 7th, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor involving the United States in World War II.