Was Never Held
(Old Crossing by Fisher)

Superintendent Clark Thompson who was head of Indian affairs in Minnesota notified the Chippewas of Red Lake and Pembina to gather at Old Crossing of the Red Lake River on the twenty-fifth of August, 1862. The Chippewas were to meet commissioners appointed by the government to negotiate for their lands and the right of navigation on the Red River of the North. William P. Dole was Commissioner of Indian affairs. John G. Nicolay, President Lincoln’s private secretary, reached Minnesota late and for two days he tried to negotiate a treaty with the Indians. He was authorized by Congress.

A train of 30 wagons of supplies and about 200 cattle were sent ahead for food and gifts during the treaty negotiations. This train reached Fort Abercrombie about August 15, 1862.

Clark Thompson, commissioner for the government, started from St. Paul and reached St. Cloud on August 19, 1862. The next day, August 20, 1862, they received word of the great Sioux uprising of the year and also learned that Chief Hole-in-the-Day and some other Chippewa chiefs were acting angrily and threateningly towards the commissioners. The Indians wanted $10,000 ransom goods to let Clark Thompson’s government commissioners pass and would not guarantee safe passage for military personnel or anybody else. The commissioners feared for their lives and would not go any further into the Indian country at this time, and went back to St. Paul.

The Chippewas waited at the Old Crossing to make a treaty. They waited for 20 days until they had eaten all they had and all they could get in the surrounding vicinity. Then they hijacked Mr. Kittson’s ox cart train, enroute from St. Paul to Pembina, with 114 carts carrying $25,000 worth of goods.

Part of this belonged to the Hudson’s Bay Company and some to British subjects. The starving Indians took everything that was eatable on the train: flour, canned goods, pork, beans and peas. They had no quarrel with Kittson, and he was their friend but that the Indians should be getting paid for their thoroughfare cart trains going through their country. The Indians offered to pay for food and damages. If the Great White Father would make a treaty with them this year 1862 or next year 1863, they would pay out of the land sold.

One of the reasons for getting a treaty in 1863 was the strategic location of the Pembina Chippewa Indians. It put them in a position from which they could control all four travel routes: West Trail, East Trail, Woods Trail and Steam Boat Trail. The military wanted free access and travel to protect business interests and pioneer settlers. With the growth of the Red River Valley trade protection from Indians raids was needed; therefore locks, hinges, ammunition and tools were needed for this protection.

On August 24, 1863, an advanced party with 13 wagon loads of Indian goods and 55 oxen left St. Paul for Fort Abercrombie. September 2, 1863, Alexander Ramsey, Ben Thompson, and the honorable Ruben Ottman left St. Paul to organize for Red Lake treaty. Mr. Wheelock, who later started the St. Paul Paper, describes Ben Thompson as a very efficient commissioner of the expedition. J. G. Morrison, special interpreter, and military officers and members of the cavalry completed the company. At Richmond two companies of Sibley’s mounted men joined the escort train. Wheelock (in “diary notes”) describes it as looking like a great pageant train. 60 armed officers, 54 by wagons and 50 by mounted men from St. Paul, carrying Indian goods and four to five passenger coaches, with their escort of three companies of mounted men. On September 7, misfortune touched the treaty party as a farmer was murdered within 100 yards of the military camp by Indians while he was protecting his barns.

Bishop Whipple’s carriage tipped over near Sauk Center and his hand was crushed so badly that he could not come on to the treaty council. Bishop Whipple, who was an Episcopal bishop, was to be a spokesman for the Indians. The Indians called him the straight-tongue-pipe-smoker and they loved him. The Indian chiefs had asked Bishop Whipple what they should do when the Great White Father comes and wants to buy their land. Alexander Ramsey kept a day-to-day diary which tells that they had trouble bringing heavy wagons across some small streams because of steep banks. They had to build several bridges and at times the whole escort was needed to pull wagons across. Ramsey’s diary also tells that the train was caught in a terrible prairie fire. All help, including over 300 military men, fought fire and built a back fire. It is thought that some spiteful Indians started the fire. The year 1863 was a year of terrible drought and many bogs, lakes and small streams dried up (“Everything is so dry that it will all burn”).

The trail of the treaty cavalcade was from St. Paul, through Sauk Center, Alexandria, Chippewa Lake, Fort Pomme-de-terre crossing the Otter Tail River and reaching Fort Abercrombie September 12, 1863. At Fort Abercrombie the caravans met with the advanced units of the caravan and loaded on 25 tons more of Indian goods that were stored at the fort since 1862, the year previous when the treaty was called off. Ramsey’s caravan going from Fort Abercrombie to the Red Lake River consisted of 290 army men, 340 mules, 180 horses, 55 big oxen, and 90 vehicles and wagons winding on toward the Red Lake River. While traveling over the level prairie they shot many wild ducks, prairie chicken, snipes and plovers giving them banquets fit for a king. (“We met the Indians on the plains as we were bearing northwest. They were about six miles from the Crossing. We reached the Crossing September 21, 1863, at 10 o’clock in the morning”).

Ramsey’s party pitched his big meeting tent on the higher knoll on the east side of the Red Lake River. The soldiers set a Gatling gun facing west on higher ground overlooking the tent encampment. Several pit stoves were set up for baking bread. Coyotes and wolves were a problem for 20 days while pitching the big oxen to have fresh beef to feed the Indians and people at the treaty. The Red Lake band of Chippewas with Ashley C. Morill, agent for the Chippewas, and the commissioner to negotiate with the Red Land and Pembina Chippewa, who were already there and had their tents pitched. The Indian commissioner came by way of Leech Lake and Red Lake. The Indian chiefs from Red Lake were: Moose Dung (Med-au-ag-onin) meaning he is spoken to; Little Rock, their spokesman; Broken Arm and Leading Feather. The next day, September 22 the Pembina Indians arrived with Red Bear, chief of the Pembina Indians; and Little Shell, chief of the Turtle Mountains, as their head men.

Charles Bottineau, who escorted the Pembina Indians to the treaty, brought not only the chiefs and head men as directed but also almost the whole body of Indian and half breeds. He submitted a bill for $1,800 to Ramsey for the cost of supplies and other things on the journey from Pembina to the treaty ground. On September 23, 1863, the government, there were present from Red Lake: 579 Indians; 34 half-breeds; and from Pembina 352 Indians; and 663 half-breeds. With 1,618 guests and their horses and numerous dogs to feed and provide for; Ramsey wanted to dispatch the business quickly and get a treaty made before the stock of provisions was exhausted.

In the big tent, Ramsey and his group occupied one side of the tent; and the Indian chiefs and their spokesmen the other. The Indians had just finished a big meal of white man’s food. Hand shaking between chiefs and head men with Ramsey and the United States commissioners had just taken place. All were given liberal amounts of smoking tobacco and the chiefs sat on the ground in front of their people and smoked in silence. Ramsey opened the meeting by condemning their common enemy, the Sioux, and praising the Chippewas for never violating the solemn faith of treaties. He asked for agreement in the importance. Speeches were given a few sentences at a time and had to be translated; so things went slowly. Ramsey told the Indians that the government wanted to purchase a right-of-way through Indian country for $20,000. The Indians spent the