History of Polk County

Polk County, named after ex-president of the United States, James Knox Polk, was established by legislative enactment on July 20, 1858. The boundaries were given as commencing at the southwest corner of Pembina County, and running up the Red River to the mouth of the Buffalo River; thence in a direct line to the head of Lake Itasca; thence northerly following the western boundaries of Cass and Itasca counties to the south-east corner of Pembina County; thence west to the place of beginning. The county seat was declared to be, “Hereby temporarily located at Douglas.” Douglas was situated where the Pembina Trail crosses at the Red Lake River. No changes were made in the boundaries until the establishment of Clay County in 1862, which placed the south line between townships 142 and 143. When Beltrami County was established in 1866, the east line was put between Ranges 38 and 39. These changes were made before Polk County was organized. The actual organization of Polk County took place by legislative act, March 3, 1873. In 1881, Norman County was created by taking the four southern tiers of townships from the county of Polk, and in 1897, the county of Red Lake was organized by taking 24 full and 7 fractional townships in a somewhat irregular form from the northeast part, leaving Polk County in its main part 46 and two-fifths miles from north to south, and about 30 miles from west to east, with a farther projection of the southern part for 30 miles and containing an area of nineteen hundred and forty-six square miles. This territory is, for the most part, quite level and in its natural state is mainly prairie land. Its southern part, however, forms part of the park region of Minnesota, with all the characteristics of that attractive portion of the state; its rolling surface, numerous groves and large bodies of timber, mainly oak, elm, ash, basswood, cottonwood and poplar. In one part, on the south shore of Maple Lake, once stood a large number of sugar maple to which the Indians came during the season, to make the sweetest of all delicacies, sugar from the maple tree, but most of these maples have been cut for fuel and the charm that forest has been much diminished. This portion has also many sandy hills, the highest being along the Sand Hill River near the south line, some of them reaching an elevation of 80 feet above the surrounding plain. It has also many beautiful lakes, the largest of which, Maple Lake, named after the forest trees which so largely lined its shore, is about seven miles long and one and one-half miles wide at its widest part. It has become much frequented as a summer resort and a considerable village of cottages and fine buildings have been erected upon it for occupancy in the summer season.

The general course of the streams in the county is from east to west; the most important is Red Lake River, which is the outlet of Red Lake, the largest body of fresh water wholly within the United States, except Lake Michigan, and carries more water than the Red River above their point of union at Grand Forks. The waters of the Red River derive a reddish, perhaps I should say, tawny tinge, from large tamarack swamps bordering on the west side of Red Lake and extending a long distance down its course, and this strongly tints the waters of Red River below the point of confluence and gives to it the name “The Red.” The only other considerable streams in the county are the Sandhill River and the Clearwater; the first takes its rise in the southern part of the county and flows nearly west.

Before the advent of the permanent settler in this county, it was the grazing ground of great herds of buffalo whose bones were thickly scattered over the ground until the last of the ‘70s, when someone conceived the idea of grinding them for fertilizing purposes, and many carloads were gathered and shipped East for that purpose; and soon, but few remained.

The route of travel to early Polk county was over the old Pembina Trail, which had been marked out for travel by Norman Kittson and Joseph Roulette in the year of 1844, but no trading post had been established within the borders of Polk county. The United States census of 1870 lists no population in the county but doubtless there were a few people of mostly Indian blood along the Red River. The year of 1871 was the beginning of permanent settlement. Some Norwegian families came from southern Minnesota and settled along the Red River near what are now the townships of Hubbard, Vineland, Tynsid and Bygland. Farther north and near the place where the Red Lake River joins the Red and along the Marais, also came a considerable number of Scotch and Canadian people, who had been attracted by accounts of the valley in the Dominion of Canada, but finding the desirable lands there already taken or reserved, they returned to this place, one of the garden spots of the Northwest, to make fine homes for themselves and their families. A line of boats had been established by Norman Kittson plying the waters of the river between Moorhead and Winnipeg and upon them most of the settlers reached their new homes. Among those who came and made the deepest impression upon the future of the county was Robert Coulter, John Coulter and William Fleming.

The next body of settlers came in the spring of 1872, to and around the place where the city of Crookston now stands with the survey and building of the St. Vincent extension of the St. Paul and Pacific Railway from Glyndon on the Northern Pacific Railroad to the Snake River, which is now the City of Warren. William H. Stuart succeeded in getting title to what is platted as the original townsite of Crookston. Robert Houston got what is Fletcher and Houston’s Addition, L. Fletcher’s and A. C. Loring’s addition. Other parts of the city were obtained.

This road grading was done in 1901 between Cargil and the Albert Erdmann farm. Eric Samuelson with his horses on the grader.