CHAPTER VI.

CHIEF HISTORIC FEATURES OF EARLY TIMES.


THE RED RIVER CARTS AND THEIR OVERLAND COMMERCE.

Reference has been made to the passage, in former times, through what is now Polk County, of trains of two-wheeled vehicles called the Red River carts. These carts were originally built wholly of wood and rawhide, not a particle of metal being used in their construction. The wheels were large and clumsy, being sometimes five feet in diameter and three inches thick. The felloes were fastened together by tongues of wood, and pressure in the revolutions of the wheel assisted in keeping them from falling apart. The hubs were thick and strong, the axles were all wood, and even the linch-pins were wooden. A light box frame, tightened by wooden pegs, was fastened, also by pegs, to and poised upon the axle. The common price of such a cart was, in Manitoba, two pounds; in Minnesota, ten dollars.

Each cart was generally drawn by a single ox, and sometimes by a tough, strong Indian pony, or "ca-yuse." The animal was hitched between shafts, and its harness was made of roughly tanned ox hide or buffalo hide. This leather was called by the Red River Metis, or mixed bloods, "shaganappi," and the horse that drew the cart was called a "shagga-nappi pony." A loaded cart generally contained about 500 pounds weight. A good pony could often draw such a load 50 miles a day, but a slow, plodding ox could not compass more than 20 miles in that time. The axles of the cart were not greased or lubricated in any way, and the wheels turned with a dreadful squeaking and screeching which could be heard on the open prairie for more than a mile.

The carts generally moved in trains. Ten carts constituted a "brigade," in charge of three men. Five or six or more brigades made up a train, which was in charge of a guide or leader, who assumed much authority. He was on horseback, rode backward and forward along the line, yelling at the drivers and those in charge of the extra oxen or ponies, and marshaling his forces in pomp, flourish, and style. He had to be an intelligent man, for the stopping places for the night, where there were plenty of grass and water; the tine of halting and starting; the disciplining of the crews, and all the other details of the successful management of a considerable caravan were all under his charge and responsibility. The history of these Red River cart trains which often might be likened to ancient Midianitish caravans, may be briefly sketched.