Prior to 1844 the import of goods to and the export of furs from the Red River Colony and the trading posts in that quarter were made through the circuitous, difficult, and uncertain Hudson’s Bay route. This route was open and navigable practically only two months in the year and was beset with difficulties at all times. In 1843 Norman W. Kittson (for whom both Norman and Kittson Counties were named) established a trading post of the American Fur Company at Pembina. The first season he secured about $2,000 worth of furs and buffalo robes, but there was the greatest difficulties in the way of sending them to market. He had to deliver them at Mendota (Fort Snelling), the headquarters of the Minnesota division of the Company, and formerly the way of transporting furs from the upper Red River posts to the “factory” at Mendota was up the Red to and through Lake Traverse, then by portage to Big Stone Lake, and thence down the Minnesota. But this method of transportation involved much hard work and its success depended largely upon the proper stage of water in the rivers.

After due deliberation Kittson procured six of the rude carts which have been referred to, loaded his furs, and in the spring of 1844, set out for Mendota, which he reached after a toilsome and expensive journey. Presumably he had six or eight men with him. The route he followed was that which had been taken by the Red River refugees when they had left the Selkirk Settlement for Fort Snelling; it ran along the west side of the Red River to Lake Traverse, then by portage to Big Stone Lake, and thence down the Minnesota. But this method of transportation involved much hard work and its success depended largely upon the proper stage of water in the rivers.

The Old Red River Cart Trail.

Mr. Kittson’s first ventures in cart transportation were failures. On the first trip he lost $600; and on his journeys the two following years he lacked over $1,000 in coming out even. But he was of stubborn Scotch courage and believed in his scheme and followed it up and in time a great success crowned his efforts. He soon realized that he had made mistakes and he corrected them. First, he changed his route. He crossed the Red River near Pembina and went down the east side of the river to near the mouth of the Otter Tail; then he struck across by way of Otter Tail Lake to Sauk Rapids, on the Mississippi, near St. Cloud, and then it was an easy march down to Fort Snelling and Mendota. His carts, too, brought back goods and supplies for the use of his patrons and for the people of Pembina generally. The trail from Pembina down to the Otter Tail was always a few miles east of the river.

The new route crossed the Red Lake River near and west of Fisher. This passage way was long known as “the Old Crossing of the Red Lake River.” It crossed Sand Hill River near Beltrami. It passed through the western part of Polk County from north to south a distance of about 50 miles. This was called the “western route,” to distinguish it from others. It was also called the Kittson Trail, the Half Breed Trail, and the Crow Wing Trail. One reason for its selection by Mr. Kittson, in addition to the fact that it was most direct, was that it avoided the route by Big Stone Lake and Traverse des Sioux, the country of the Sioux Indians, who were in a chronic state of deadly hostility against the Chippewas, including Kittson’s mixed-blood cart drivers. The latter were wholesomely in fear of their old enemies and struck against being employed among them. In time the upper Red River traders, who did business with the Sioux sent their trains down the Minnesota Valley and brought back goods and supplies.

This route was selected by Wm. Hallett, a noted scout and trader of the region acting for Mr. Kittson. For a long time it served its purpose well. Maj. Woods and Lieut. Castor, with the dragoons of Capt. Pope’s party, came over it in August and September, 1850. Capt. Pope shows it on his map accompanying his official report, and the map shows where Maj. Woods and the dragoons encamped every night. It crossed the Red Lake River apparently seven miles...