HISTORY OF POLK COUNTY

CHAPTER 1.

GEOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY OF POLK COUNTY.

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PRINCIPAL RIVERS.

The great watercourses of Polk County are the Red River, which here flows nearly north-northwest, forming the western boundary of the county and the state, and its principal tributary, the Red Lake River, which takes a more meandering course. If the many small loops and bends of the latter stream are disregarded, however, its general route, from which the bends mostly deviate only a quarter to a half of a mile on either side, is seen on the map to be quite direct, running west and northwest through the central part of the county. The cities of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks are named from their situation where these streams unite, or rather where the lower river forks as it was seen by the Indians or the French voyageurs when coming up in their canoes.

Both these rivers have received translations of their Ojibway or Chippewa names, which these Indians gave to them on account of their being the outlet of the great Red Lake. Above the Grand Forks, indeed, the main Red River, as it is named by the white men, was called Otter Tail River by the Ojibways from the lake of that name on the upper part of its course. We may also go a step farther back to note that the name of Red Lake is likewise translated from its Ojibway name, given very long ago, according to the late Rev. Joseph A. Gilfillan, for twenty-five years a missionary on the White Earth reservation, from the bright red and vermilion hues of the sunset sky reflected upon the placid water of the lake; while Otter Tail Lake derived its Indian name from a long point of land, shaped like the tail of an otter, between the east end of the lake and its main inflowing stream.

FOREST AND PRAIRIE.

The southeast part of this county is sparingly timbered, mostly with groves of small poplars, being on the western limit of the originally forested region of the eastern United States; but it also has considerable expanses of original prairie, interspersed with the wooded and brushy areas. Westward a heavier growth of forest trees, including oaks, elm, basswood, box-elder, cottonwood, and other species, borders the rivers, usually reaching only a few rods and rarely a quarter of a mile from their banks. Otherwise the main western tract, forming a part of the broad and flat Red River Valley, is an extensive prairie, richly carpeted with grasses and flowers, being the eastern margin of the great prairie region of western and southern Minnesota, which thence continues west in the Dakotas and is gradually succeeded by the drier treeless plains that reach to the Rocky Mountains.

SURFACE FEATURES.

Although no very conspicuous hills or ridges diversify the surface of Polk County, it includes in its highest southeastern part two tracts of low drift hills, small ridges and knolls, called moraines, which were