CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST WHITE MEN IN POLK COUNTY.

The Norsemen who made the Kensington Rune Stone were first—the early white explorers—other first visitors to Minnesota—the La Verendryes discover the Red River Valley—first printed description of the region by a Chippewa half breed—red lake named "from the colour of the sand"—not many other early explorers.

It is always interesting to every citizen to learn (so as to believe) the facts connected with the early history of his country. Among the items composing these facts one of those of rarest interest is the identity of the first Caucasians or white men to visit his district or locality. Sometimes this may be ascertained with accuracy; but generally, especially in Minnesota, the information is impossible to secure beyond and without a reasonable doubt. The present writer is unable to assert positively, and to furnish proof of the assertion, who were the first white men to visit the district of country now comprised within the boundaries of Polk County. He can only furnish certain information on the subject, all that is readily accessible, and let every intelligent reader pass upon the question and decide it for himself.

Were Norsemen here in A.D. 1362?

It is fairly probable that the first white men that visited and traveled over the soil of Polk County were 32 Norsemen, who came some time in A.D. 1362. If they were here at that time, they probably came from the very early Norse Colony of "Vinland" which is said to have been on the northeastern Atlantic coast in what is now the State of Maine, or either of the Provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, or Newfoundland.

The evidence that these men were here, or at least somewhere in this portion of the Red River Valley, is a stone with an inscription to this effect. This stone has come to be known as the Kensington Rune Stone, because it was found near the village of Kensington, a station on the Soo Railroad, in the southwestern portion of Douglas County, and because the inscription on it is in the ancient Runic dialect. The stone was found on the farm of Olaf Ohman, three miles northeast of Kensington, November 8, 1898, by himself and his two young sons. Nils Olaf Flaaten, owner of an adjoining farm, was present immediately after the finding. All the parties are Swedes, and though plain people, in modest circumstances, are honest, upright, and highly esteemed citizens. None of them have any other than a primary education.

The stone was thoroughly discussed and examined by several Scandinavian and other archaeologists and scientists, and carried back and forth for two or three years, going in 1911 to Rouen, France. It is now in the custody of Mr. Hjalmer Rued Holand of Madison, Wisconsin, who obtained it in 1907 from Mr. Ohman, the finder. Mr. Holand has spent much time and money and made extensive research in his investigation of this tablet and is thoroughly enthusiastic in his belief that it is genuine. This opinion is firmly held by a large majority of the experts that have examined it. Those who doubt its authenticity do so on seemingly insufficient grounds. The strongest argument in its favor is the stone itself, which is of the variety that geologists call graywacke, which is
abundant in the locality where the stone was found. The whole subject is well presented in 66 pages of Volume XV of the Minnesota Historical Society Collections, and in Castle’s recently published State History.

An English translation of the inscription reads:

"Eight Goths and twenty-two Norwegians upon a journey of discovery from Vinland westward. We had a camp by two skerries one day’s journey north from this stone. We were out fishing one day. When we returned home we found ten men red with blood and dead. Hail, Virgin Mary, save us from evil. "Have ten men by the sea to look after our vessel 14 (or 41) days’ journey from this island. Year 1362."

The term Goths means Swedes, because they were from Gothland, in the southern part of Sweden. The characters on the stone translated ‘‘Hail, Virgin Mary’’ are the equivalents of A. V. M., meaning in Latin, ‘‘Ave, Virgo Maria.’’ It is uncertain whether or not the characters translated 14 should be 41, as some Runic writers put the figure denoting units before the figure denoting tens; the custom varied at different times and in different countries.

Assuming the genuineness of the stone, the authorship of the inscription may be determined with reasonable probability. The party, consisting of at least 40 persons, had set out from Vinland on an expedition of exploration and discovery. Uniformly a priest accompanied such an expedition as its chaplain, and at that period, and for 200 years thereafter, all Christians were Roman Catholics. In this instance the priest of the ill-fated party was, it may be presumed, a Runic scholar. The other members doubtless were illiterate. To record the tragic incident of the killing of ten of their number and the fact of their presence and condition in the country, for the benefit of civilized people that might come after them, the stone was prepared and inscribed. Probably the priest drew the Runic characters on the stone and a proper artificer cut them out. The priest would almost naturally offer a prayer to the Blessed Virgin for protection and preservation of the survivors from the fate of their comrades whom they had found ‘‘red with blood and dead.’’

The theory of those believing in the genuineness of the Kensington Rune Stone and in the authenticity of its inscription may be here stated. It is believed that the starting point of the expedition was, as the inscription says, in Vinland (or Wineland) the Scandinavian Colony on the eastern coast of America. Although unchallenged records prove that there was such a colony between the XI and the XIV Centuries, its exact location has never been determined. It may have been in Nova Scotia or New Brunswick or Maine or Massachusetts. It is supposed to have been founded by Leif Erickson, in about A. D. 1000. The records also prove that this colony sent out numerous exploring expeditions.

It is further believed that the expedition left Vinland in a ship of the prevailing character of the period and sailed successively through Davis Straits, Hudson’s Strait and across Hudson’s Bay to the mouth of the Nelson River. Here the ship was left in charge of ten men, as the inscription states, and the remainder of the party, including the priest, ascended Nelson River in smaller boats to Lake Winnipeg. Passing through the lake, they ascended the Red River, probably to the Grand Forks. Here, for some reason—perhaps on account of low water—they left the stream and marched overland in a southeasterly direction, through what are now Polk, Norman, or Mahnomen, Becker, and Otter Tail Counties, and then into Douglas, where the ten men were killed and where the stone was found.

What finally became of the party can now never be known. It is barely possible that it, or the most of its members, succeeded in returning to Vinland; it is more probable, however, that all perished under the stone weapons of the savages of the country that killed the ten men in the camp by the two skerries (or big rocks in the water) of the lake now believed to be Pelican Lake. These savages may not have been the ancestors of the Red Indians of modern centuries; for there is a belief that the ancestors of these Indians are
not the barbarians that drove away the Mound Builders.

If the Kensington Rune Stone be genuine, it can be readily accepted that the members of the party that made it were the first Caucasians or white men to visit and tread upon the soil of what is now Polk County. For they must have come up the Red River from Winnipeg in boats or canoes, since they could hardly have proceeded on foot through the swampy valley with its rank vegetation; and they must have struck out overland when the navigation of the river further southward became impracticable, which would be at the mouth of the Red Lake River, or "the Grand Forks" of the olden time.

All depends upon whether the stone is genuine or not. And at present a very large majority of those that may be considered authorities on the subject are of the decided opinion that it is what it purports to be, and that it is in no respect a fake or fraudulent. The latest history of Minnesota which is by the accomplished and conservative Capt. Henry A. Castle, gives it full endorsement.

The Earliest White Explorers.

Following the party of Scandinavians that made and left the Rune Stone in Douglas County—assuming that there was such a party—the next Caucasians to visit the region of what is now northwestern Minnesota, including Polk County, came in perhaps between the years 1655 and 1660. These were the two French adventurers, Radisson and Groseilliers. It is not certain through what portions of northwestern Minnesota they passed, if indeed they passed through any. Warren Upham (Minn. in Three Cents., Vol. 1, p. 274) says that their journeys extended into the present area of Minnesota, "but not, as I think to its western or northern boundaries." Yet the accomplished George Bryce, in his History of the Hudson's Bay Company, (p. 6) states: "They visited the country of the Sioux, the present states of Dakota, and promised to visit the Christianos (or Cree) on their side of a lake evidently either the Lake of the Woods or Lake Winnipeg."

Radisson left a "journal," written in English, which has been printed, and this is substantially the authority of all historians and writers for their assertions concerning the two unscrupulous adventurers. But the statements of Radisson in the "journal" of his alleged travels and adventures is confusing rather than enlightening. It is not certain where or when they went, what rivers or lakes they saw, or what people they met. No two writers agree on these points. Bryce and Upham disagree as to whether or not they visited western Minnesota and the Dakotas, and Bryce can be no more definite about a certain lake they reached than to say it was either Lake of the Woods or Lake Winnipeg, which are 100 miles apart. The "journal" says they passed fourteen months on "an island," and Blakely, writing in the Minnesota Historical Collections, says this "island" was in a lake on the northern boundary of Minnesota, while Warren Upham says it was in the Mississippi, near Red Wing.

It is certain that Groseilliers and Radisson were in the Lake Superior region and in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, but it is hardly possible that they ever saw northern Minnesota, or any part of what is now Polk County.

Other Early Visitors to Minnesota.

After Groseilliers and Radisson, the first Europeans to come to Minnesota were some other French traders and adventurers, whose leader was Daniel Greysolon Du Luth, for whom the present city of Duluth was named. These people came first in 1679 to northwestern Minnesota, below Duluth. Du Luth claimed that he went that year to the great Sioux village on the largest of the Mille Lacs, but this can hardly be believed. He was there the following year, however.

For in the spring of 1680 came Father Louis Hennepin, a Belgian Franciscan priest, and two Frenchmen named Accault and Auguelle to the Mille Lacs as prisoners of the Sioux. They were coming up the Mississippi in a canoe, when met by a Sioux war party at Rock Island, made prisoners and taken back to the
villages of their captors. The following July they were released and started with a large Sioux hunting party down the river. Below the mouth of the St. Croix they met Du Luth and his party and returned with them and the Indians to Mille Lacs, where they arrived August 14. Here they remained until the end of September, when they set out in canoes for Canada. They passed down the Rum and the Mississippi to the Wisconsin and then up that river and on to Green Bay, where was a large French trading post. Neither Du Luth or Father Hennepin ever saw the Red River Valley.

Subsequent white explorers, traders, and visitors to Minnesota—Capt. Perrot, Pierre La Sueur, and a few others—confined their investigations and operations to the southeastern part of what is now Minnesota and never visited the Red River Valley. They do not seem even to have gone very far up the Minnesota or the Mississippi. Le Sueur went up to the Blue Earth and a few miles up that stream, where he said he found extensive copper mines and took 30,000 pounds of their ore to France. He also said he had but 32 men, yet for a winter's meat supply he and his men killed 400 buffaloes. Of the buffalo meat so furnished, he and his chronicler, M. Penicaut, said that the party ate on an average six pounds a day, besides drinking four bowls of broth and that this diet "made us very fat, and there was then no more sickness among us."

Every one is at liberty to believe as much or as little of these portions of Le Sueur's reports as he pleases. If there was ever any copper ore on the Blue Earth River, Le Sueur must have taken it all away, for none has ever been found there since, although it has been diligently and thoroughly sought for. Le Sueur also claimed that he ascended the Mississippi "a hundred leagues" above the Falls of St. Anthony, which would have taken him up into Manitoba, although he says he went only within "ten days' journey," or 250 miles, from the source of the great river. Had Le Sueur visited the Red River Valley, which he did not, what wonderful reports he might have made!

It is an unpleasant fact that nearly all of the earliest white visitors and explorers in Minnesota have given us incorrect, erroneous, misleading, and even knowingly false statements of their adventures and of conditions in the country. Father Hennepin made no mischievous or hurtful statements, but even he wrote that, a little above where Fort Snelling now stands, he killed a snake "as big around as a man's thigh," and other of his assertions are gross exaggerations. Du Luth and Le Sueur make numerous incredible asseverations and falsifications of history. Radisson, as a narrator and historian, is simply preposterous and ridiculous. Capt. Jonathan Carver was a great liar, but every other American visitor that came after him in early days, as Pike, Long, Cass, Catlin, and others, wrote the truth, or at least tried to be accurate.

The La Verendryes Discover the Red River Valley.

The first Caucasians to look upon any portion of the Red River and its valley were a party of Frenchmen whose principal members were Pierre Gautier de Varennes, Sieur (or Lord) de la Verendrye, his sons, and a nephew named De la Jemerey. The senior Verendrye (pro. Vay-ron-dr-yay) was, in 1728, a "chief factor," or head trader, in the fur trade at Lake Nipigon, north of Lake Superior. From what the Indians told him, he was induced to undertake a rather formidable expedition to the far westward, expecting to secure large quantities of furs, to establish permanent trading posts or forts in the country, to get great gain for himself, and to advance the interests of his government. Verendrye was born in Canada, but was loyal to the French Government and its authorities.

With the permission of the French authorities of Canada and the financial aid of some Montreal merchants, the senior Verendrye, with his sons and his nephew—the latter the Sieur Jemerey—began, in 1731, a series of explorations and developments far west of Lake Superior. They followed rather closely a line which is now practically the northern boundary of Minnesota. They built a trading post, which they
called Fort St. Pierre, at the mouth of Rainy Lake; another which they called Fort St. Charles, on the west side of the Lake of the Woods, near the 49th parallel of latitude, and finally other posts as far west as on Lake Winnipeg and the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Rivers. The Verendryes and their associates were probably the first Caucasians to see the Red River of the North, and this at its entrance into Lake Winnipeg.

The senior Verendrye was far more anxious to cross the continent and reach the Pacific Ocean than to discover and note the local geographic features of the country through which he passed. He left very meager and unsatisfactory records of his travels and those of his sons. He sent the latter very far westward and they discovered some considerable elevations which they called "the Great Shining Mountains." Some modern historians and investigators think these were the Big Horn Mountains of Montana, while others think they were the Black Hills of South Dakota.

In June, 1736, a party of 22 French voyageurs accompanied by a priest and one of Verendrye's sons, were murdered by the Sioux Indians of northern Minnesota on an island in the Lake of the Woods. The Sioux considered that the Frenchmen were too friendly with their old-time foes, the Crees. Thereafter the Verendryes kept out of the Sioux country, and kept within the country controlled by the Crees and the latter's kinsmen, the Chippewas or Ojibways.

Verendrye's sons built a trading post on the southern shore of Lake Winnipeg, near the mouth of the Red River. Only the sons were here; the father remained at Lake Nipigon. We cannot tell what his sons reported to him, but in his records he makes no mention of any stream which can now be identified as the Red River of the North. Of course his sons were familiar with the river, but they either did not tell their father of it, or else he did not think it worth mentioning. It is not probable that they ascended the river any considerable distance, because, for one reason, they were afraid of coming upon the blood-minded Sioux.

In 1734, Verendrye, or his sons, built a fort near "Lake Ounipegon," at the mouth of the Maurepas River (which is now known as the Winnipeg River), and not far from the present Fort Alexander, on the southeastern projection of the lake. Here the Frenchmen passed at least a year, engaged in trading with the Indians between Lake Winnipeg and the Grand Portage (Bryce's History of the Hudson's Bay Company, p. 85), and during this time they must have become acquainted with the Red River, although they made no written mention of it.

A CHIPPEWA HALF-BLOOD GAVE THE FIRST PRINTED DESCRIPTION OF THE RED RIVER REGION.

The earliest printed description of the northern part of Minnesota, and especially of the lower Red River region, was published by Arthur Dobbs, in London, 1744. Among other articles it contains a narrative by a French-Chippewa half-breed named Joseph La France, who, from 1740 to 1742, traveled extensively through what are now the northern parts of Minnesota and all of Manitoba. He reached Lake Winnipeg (or "Ouinipique") in September, 1740, and spent the autumn there hunting beavers with the Crees. From these Indians he learned of the big Red Lake of Minnesota, but he understood them (or else his amanuensis misunderstood him) to say that it lay west instead of south of Lake Winnipeg. His description reads:

"On the west side of this lake [Winnipeg] the Indians told me that a River entered it, which was navigable with Canoes; it descended from Lac Rouge, or the Red Lake, called so from the Colour of the Sand. They said there were two other Rivers run out of that [the Red] lake, one into the Mississippi, and the other westward into a marshy Country, full of Beavers."

This is the earliest known printed description of the lower Red River Valley. It will be noted that La France says Red Lake was so called "from the Colour of the Sand," presumably to be found on its beaches and shores. Some other observers saw the reflection of a red sunset on its surface and thought the derivation of the name came from the apparent
color of the water they saw, and which of course the aborigines had seen.

During the summer and autumn of 1741 La France canoed to a lake which he called "the Lake du Siens." Warren Upham concludes that this lake is probably the present Rice Lake, in Clearwater County, fifteen or twenty miles northwest of Lake Itasca, and on the Wild Rice River, near its source. The Sioux word for wild rice is psin, pronounced as spelled, and Mr. Upham thinks La France corrupted the word into "Siens." Why he should use a Sioux word in a region peculiarly Chippewa to describe a natural feature cannot here be explained. Moreover La France's "Siens" may be a corruption of the French "cygnes" (pro. ceens), meaning swans. However, Mr. Upham's theory is rational and quite plausible.

Mr. Upham is also of the opinion that a river which La France called the "River du Siens" is the present Red River; that a "fork" of this river, which he mentions, is at the mouth of the Wild Rice River, and that an "eastern tributary" which he noted would be the Red Lake River. Although the conclusions of Prof. Burpee, in his "Search for the Western Sea," differ from Mr. Upham's regarding the lakes and rivers mentioned by La France, Mr. Upham still thinks he has identified these natural features correctly. (See Minn. in Three Cents., Vol. 1, p. 302.)

EARLY WHITE EXPLORERS OF THE REGION WERE NOT NUMEROUS.

After Verendrye and La France the English travelers and explorers were the first to come to what are now northern Minnesota and southern Manitoba. These were first of all fur traders, and their explorations in behalf of development and civilization were secondary considerations and operations. Some of them visited the Red River but others of them never saw it, confining their observations to the country eastward of the river and its valley. Two of them wrote out and committed to print instructive and valuable descriptions of the country they visited and interesting accounts of their experiences therein.

Alexander Henry, the senior, traversed the central route along a portion of the northern boundary of Minnesota in 1775, but did not get as far westward as to the Red River. In 1809 he published in book form a record of his investigations as a traveler, trader, and explorer, and his book "Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between 1760 and 1765," is frequently consulted and quoted from by modern historians.

Sir Alexander Mackenzie, who, in 1789, discovered the great northern river which still bears his name, came to the Minnesota shore of Lake Superior in 1785 and finally crossed the Rocky Mountains and the Coast Range to the Pacific, going by the way of the Peace River. In his book of "Voyages," etc., published in 1801, he narrates much concerning the white men and the Indians of northern Minnesota during the latter part of the XVIII Century. But he makes no particular mention of the Red River, which he never saw.

David Thompson, born in London in 1770, entered the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company when he was 19 years old, or in 1789. In 1797 he joined the Northwest Fur Company and in the Spring of 1798 he traveled through the Red River Valley, visiting Red Lake and even Turtle Lake, the latter about seven miles north of Bemidji, in Beltrami County. His other explorations for the Northern Fur Company were important. He became renowned for his maps of the country and his plates, field notes, etc., fill forty large record books of the public surveys department at Toronto. Portions of his records were published by the Canadian Institute in 1888 and by the eminent historian, Dr. Elliott Coues, in 1897. It is unfortunate, however, that his description of the Red River and its region is not very elaborate.

The younger Alexander Henry, as he is called, a nephew of the senior Alexander Henry, spent from 1799 to 1808 in the region of Lake Winnipeg and the Red River. He was engaged in the fur trade and his principal posts were at the mouths of the Park and the Pembina Rivers. His journals, in which he gives many geographic names of Northern Minnesota, were edited and published by Dr. Coues in 1897. Henry’s names of very many of the lakes and rivers of the region are still used.