CHAPTER IV.

FUR TRADERS THE FIRST WHITE RESIDENTS.

THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY—DUNCAN GRAHAM COMES TO EAST GRAND FORKS PRIOR TO 1800—DAVID THOMPSON FINDS JEAN BAPTISTE CADOTTE HERE IN 1798—THE NORTHWEST FUR COMPANY FORMED AND SENDS IN TRADERS—THE COLUMBIA AND AMERICAN FUR COMPANIES.

The first white men with fixed residences and steady occupations in the country to visit and occupy portions of what is now Polk County, were fur traders in the service of the Hudson's Bay and the Northwest Fur Companies, both English corporations.

THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY.

In 1668 an American ship, the Nonsuch, Capt. Zachariah Gillan, a New Englander, sailed from London into Hudson's Bay and landed at the mouth of the Nelson River. It was sent out by some London furriers to investigate the fur and pelt resources of Hudson’s Bay, which great inland sea had been discovered by Henry Hudson fifty years previously. A full ship-load of furs and peltries was easily secured, and on the return of the Nonsuch to London a great corporation was soon formed to make permanent occupation of the Hudson's Bay region and make thorough exploitation of its resources available for traffic. The corporation called itself, "The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay." King Charles II, England’s "merry monarch" of the time, readily gave the company a charter which was dated May 2, 1670.

The first Governor of the Company was Prince Rupert, the dashing English cavalier, whose titles were Count Palatine of the Rhine and Duke of Bavaria and Cumberland. The region of country in which the company was to operate was styled Prince Rupert’s Land, which name is still in use. The generous King Charles gave the adventurers a vast expanse of country, which of course he did not really own, and which, according to the terms of the charter comprised,—

The whole trade of all those seas, streights, bays, rivers, lakes, creeks, and sounds, in whatsoever latitude they shall be, that be within the entrance of the streights commonly called Hudson’s streights—together with all the lands, countries, and territories upon the coasts and confines of the seas, streights, bays, lakes, rivers, creeks, and sounds aforesaid, which are not now actually possessed by any of our subjects or by the subjects of any other Christian Prince or state.

Of course, by the terms of the charter, the Red River region was included in the trade territory of the great corporation, since the water of the river whose name it still bears flows finally into Hudson's Bay and may be said to lie "within the entrance of the streights commonly called Hudson's Streights." Into Lake Winnipeg run both the Red River and the Saskatchewan, the latter rivaling the Mississippi in some respects, springing from the very heart of the Rocky Mountains. The vast territory drained by these streams was all legitimately covered by the language of the company’s charter.

It must be borne in mind, however, that at the time the charter was given, the French owned Canada, including the country south of Hudson’s Bay; and this great empire they continued to own and control until it was taken away from them by the English after the French and Indian War and by the treaty
of Paris in 1763. The charter recognized the facts, and therefore provided that the trading posts already in the country in the actual possession of "the subjects of any other Christian prince or state."

Hence it was that the Verendryes, La France, and other French subjects acting under the French authority, visited Lake Winnipeg and the Red River and made establishments long before the English came. How far they ascended the Red River, if they ever ascended it at all, or what they did, if anything, in the Polk County country, is unknown to the present writer, and it seems now that it is too late to inquire into the subject. There is no known record of the French exploitation of this district beyond what has been noted, and it is not probable that the operations connected therewith were of much importance or there would be such a record.

Moreover, it was many years after the Hudson’s Bay Company began operations when its agents began to operate in the Red River region. We only have disconnected accounts of the presence of these traders in the country, and these accounts refer to only the latter part of the XVIII Century.

DUNCAN GRAHAM AT GRAND FORKS.

The first engagee of the Hudson’s Bay Company to ascend the Red River, so far as the present writer is informed, was a young Scotchman named Duncan Graham. He came to Winnipeg and the Red River some time during the last half of the XVIII Century. A fairly reliable biographical sketch of the young trader was published in the Minnesota Pioneer of April 15, 1851, over the signature of "F." The author was probably Dr. Thomas Foster, a prominent pioneer newspaper man and a noted writer on Minnesota early history. In this article it is stated that some time prior to the year 1800 Duncan Graham was "connected with a trading post of the Hudson’s Bay Company at the Grand Forks on Red River. Later he was for a long time in charge of an establishment at the place which is still called Graham’s Point, south of the Grand Forks."

On which side of the river at the Grand Forks stood the trading establishment with which Graham was connected cannot with certainty be stated. Presumably, however, it was on the Polk County side, for the Indians who were its patrons lived chiefly on that side, being the Chippewas of Red Lake and the other lakes and rivers directly east of the post. Graham had associates, of course, and he may have had predecessors, but we do not know who they were. He is the first white man whose identity has been clearly determined that established himself within what is now Polk County. A sketch of him seems proper in this connection.

Captain Duncan Graham was a native of the Highlands of Scotland, and a member of a prominent family of the region. The Clan Graham, or Graeme, is one of the most renowned in the early history of Scotland. He was not born in Edinburgh, as one account says. He was born about 1766, although there is ground for belief that his birth occurred near 1760. He came to the Northwest when a very young man, presumably in the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company. He was in the Minnesota country in the latter part of the XVIII Century.

According to the sworn testimony of Michael Brisbois (as reported in Vol. 2, Wis. Hist. Coll., p. 130), Captain Graham, James Aird, Brisbois himself, and others were traders in the Sioux country on the Minnesota in 1781. If the Captain had been born in 1766, he would have been in 1781 but 15, or too young for an Indian trader. Judge Lockwood, who was a trader at Prairie du Chien and also on the upper Minnesota, in 1816, says Graham was in the country about 1786 or 1787 (as is noted in Vol. 9, Wis. Hist. Coll., p. 467), and it is certain that he was at Mendota, the mouth of the Minnesota River, in December, 1802, for at that date he was one of the witnesses to the will of Archibald Campbell, a prominent trader, who was killed in a duel, and his will recorded at Mackinaw.

Near Mendota Captain Graham married a mixed-blood Sioux woman, a granddaughter of a noted Frenchman of the earliest times named Penichon, who
was at first a trader among the Sioux but became chief of one of their small sub-bands. Succeeding him in the chieftainship was his son, whose Indian name was Nah-zhin Okanko, or Stops Suddenly, but who was generally called Son of Penichon; he was one of the signers of Lieutenant Pike’s treaty with the Sioux at Mendota in 1805. The true name Penichon is variously misspelled. His band was in time presided over by Chief Black Dog, and its last chief was Mankato.

During the war between the United States and Great Britain (1812-15) Graham became first a lieutenant and then a captain in the British military service, and was very active against the Americans. He had a command of Sioux Indians in northern Ohio and participated with his warriors in the battles of Maumee and in the unsuccessful assault on Fort Stevenson. He assisted in the capture of Prairie du Chien in July, 1814, and in the following September went down to the Rock Island, with 30 Indians and three small cannon, and utterly defeated and drove back down the river a force of 400 Americans under Colonel Zachary Taylor (afterwards President), who had a rather strong fleet of armed boats and was coming up to recapture Prairie du Chien. Graham was but a lieutenant at the time, but for this exploit was made a captain.

After the war Captain Graham remained in the Northwest and became a naturalized citizen of the United States. He was as faithful thereafter to his adopted country as he had been to British King George. He became an Indian trader in Minnesota, and a prominent one, and his operations ranged over the extent of country between Pembina and the Canadian border on the north and the latitude of Prairie du Chien. In 1819, when the crop failed in the Selkirk Colony, and the people on the lower Red River were starving, Captain Graham and another trader, named William Laidlaw (or Laidlow), went from Pembina to Prairie du Chien and brought back to the suffering colony three big boat loads of wheat and oats and 30 bushels of peas, which furnished plenty of seed for planting and quite a stock for eating.

How the supplies and the boats were transported from the head of navigation on the Minnesota over to the Red River can only be conjectured. (See Neill’s Hist. of Minn.)

Captain Graham had by his marriage four intellectual, fairly accomplished, and altogether worthy daughters, who married four prominent Minnesotians, viz.: Alexander Faribault, Joseph Buisson, Oliver Cratte, and James Wells. The son was Alexander Graham, who also became prominent in Minnesota. Some of the Captain’s grandchildren have long lived in Minnesota and at Devil’s Lake, North Dakota, and are well known as honorable and useful members of society.

Captain Graham died at Mendota, Minn., at the residence of his son-in-law, Alexander Faribault, December 5, 1847, aged between 81 and 87. His wife, whose Indian name was Hahzhah-hota-win, or Gray Huckleberry woman, also died at Mendota, March 2, 1848.

David Thompson Here in 1798 and Finds Jean Cadotte.

We know for certain that Captain Graham was not the only trader at East Grand Forks at an early day. David Thompson, the explorer, astronomer, cartographer, and general investigator before mentioned, visited the Forks in March, 1798, and found there Jean Baptiste Cadot, engaged in the Indian trade. Dr. Bryce (Hist. II. B. Co., p. 138) suggests that this was the son of the Cadot (or Cadotte), the veteran master of the Sault Ste. Marie, who for a long time refused to acknowledge the English sovereignty of the country but remained faithful in his allegiance to his “beautiful France.”

Thompson particularly notes in his journal the establishment of Monsieur Cadotte at the Forks, where he remained a few days. Then he determined to find the true source of the Mississippi, which had long been an object of interest to geographers and explorers. This, too, had been one of the duties laid upon him by his employers, the officers of the Northwest Company.
For it must be understood that, although Thompson had originally entered the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company, he had disagreed with its authorities as to what he should do, had withdrawn from its employ, and had, in 1795, entered the service of its strenuous rival, the Northwest Company, which had been organized in 1783-84. His position was that of chief surveyor and astronomer.

Making a detour from Grand Forks, in order to avoid the ice then in the Red Lake River, Thompson struck the upper banks of that river and followed the banks until he reached Red Lake. Leaving this lake, he made a portage to the south some 12 or 15 miles and came to Turtle Lake (in what is now the southern portion of Beltrami County), and this lake he considered to be the source of the Mississippi; but of course he was mistaken, for 40 years later Schoolcraft determined that Lake Itasca (in the southern corner of Clearwater County), some 35 miles to the southwest of Turtle Lake, is the true source of the great Father of Waters. But in early days many geographical mistakes were made. Thus when the treaty between the United States and Great Britain was made, in 1783, following the close of the War of the Revolution, the Turtle Lake visited by Thompson was thought to be farther north than the northwestern angle of the Lake of the Woods.

After leaving Turtle Lake, Thompson visited Red Cedar Lake and Sand Lake, in the direction of Lake Superior, and at length reached the Northwest Company’s trading post near the mouth of the St. Louis River and the Fond du Lac. On the Sand Lake River he found a trading post of his Company. Indeed about this time posts of the Northwest Company fairly dotted the country now comprising the northern portion of Minnesota. Singularly enough, however, when Thompson, in March, 1798, came to the present site of Winnipeg there was no trading post or other white habitation there. The Verendrye post of Fort Maurepas, built 70 years before, and succeeding white men’s establishments had all disappeared.
stars and stripes and Chief Factor McGillis promised
to send word to all the other traders in the country
that they must do the same.

Seven years after Pike's visit came the War of 1812
between Great Britain and the United States, and
then, of course, the stars and stripes came down from
the trading houses. Practically every British trader
was an emissary for King George. Robert Dickson, a
factor of the Northwest Company, recruited a num­
ber of Indians in Minnesota and led them into the
British service. They served against the Americans
on the upper Mississippi, in Michigan, and in northern
Ohio. After the close of the war, in 1815, they re­
sumed their trading operations in Minnesota. They
were openly and defiant of the authority of the United
States, kept up their British flags, held frequent coun­
cils with the Indians, distributed British medals among
them, and whispered to them that another time was
coming when their great English father would need
their services in a war against the Americans! A few
American traders had ventured up into the country,
but the British traders conspired against them and
drove them out. They controlled the trade from Win­
nipeg to as far south as the lower Des Moines Riv e r
and constituted a formidable menace to American in­
terests.

Upon the complaints of the American traders Con­
gress enacted that none but full American citizens
should have licenses as fur traders. The British fac­
tors evaded this restriction by having some humble
employee in their service who was an American take
out the license in his name and then they conducted
the business as theretofore. Finally the Executive
Department of the Government acted. In 1819 the
Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, of South Caro­
lina, determined that the laws and authority of the
United States should be respected. He ordered mil­
itary posts established on the northern and northwestern
frontiers, and that these posts should be supplied
with sufficient garrisons to bring the defiant British
trading malefactors to terms and to enforce the United
States laws in those regions. Posts were established at
the mouth of the St. Peter's River, now Fort Snelling;
at Council Bluffs, on the Missouri; at the mouth of the
Yellowstone, on the upper Missouri, and at the "Falls
of St. Mary's," now commonly called Sault Ste.
Marie.

Not long after the U. S. troops came up and built
Fort Snelling the Northwest Company began to lose
business in this region. Fort Snelling was built and
properly garrisoned in 1819-20, and in March, 1821,
the great Northwest Company virtually surrendered
the field and was absorbed by the Hudson's Bay Com­
pany under the latter's name.

The strife and warfare between the Northwest and
the Hudson's Bay Companies, involving attacks
against the members of the Selkirk Settlement, on the
Red River, in 1815 and 1816, the actual fighting of lit­
tle battles—in one of which Governor Semple, of the
Hudson's Bay Company was killed—the slaying of
perhaps 50 other men, etc., need not be more than ad­
verted to here.

What is of importance in a history of Polk County
is that it was the traders of the Northwest Company
that were within what is now that county between
1790 and 1820. Just where they all were, and who
they were, cannot now and here be stated. David
Thompson found Jean Baptiste Cadotte with a trad­
ing post at East Grand Forks, in March, 1798, and
we know that Duncan Graham was here in this period.
There was no trading post then at the Red Lake, but
traders came and went, and they may have been at
the big lake the year before or the year after. That
the traders of the Northwest Company were scattered
along the upper Red River and along the Minnesota
from its source to its mouth from 1790 to 1820 is a
fact well established.

THE COLUMBIA FUR COMPANY.

The Hudson's Bay and the Northwest Fur Com­
panies consolidated in March, 1821, and the follow­
ing year a number of their former traders that had
done business for them in the Red River and upper
Minnesota region concluded to form a new Company to
operate in the Minnesota country and did so. The incorporators were Joseph Renville, Thomas Jeffries, Kenneth McKenzie, Wm. Laidlaw, and perhaps Duncan Graham, and one or two others. They named the new organization the Columbia Fur Company. Its central establishment was the post on Lake Traverse. All of their posts were licensed by the U. S. Indian agent at Fort Snelling.

When, in July, 1823, Maj. Long’s exploring expedition reached Lake Traverse on its way down the Red River, it found an important post of the Columbia Company in charge of Mr. Jeffries and others. (Keating’s “Narrative,” p. 444 et seq.) The village of the Sioux chief Wahnatah, the Charger, was near by and the expedition spent some days in the neighborhood.

By the year 1825 the Columbia Company had a number of licensed trading posts in Minnesota. These posts were called by the pretentious name of “Forts,” and were as follows: Fort Adams, at Lac qui Parle; Fort Washington, at Lake Traverse; Fort Union, at Traverse des Sioux; Fort Barbour, Falls of the St. Croix; Fort Bolivar, at Leaf Lake; Fort Confederation, on the Des Moines River, where the city of Des Moines now stands.

THE AMERICAN FUR COMPANY.

In 1808 John Jacob Astor founded the great business organization known as the American Fur Company. He was its President until in 1834, when he was succeeded by Ramsay Crooks, father of Col. William Crooks, for whom Crookston was named. After 1822 this company had absorbed or swallowed up its smaller rivals and was conducted in the country east of the Missouri by what were termed its Northern and Western Departments. The Northern Department embraced the region of the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi and was conducted by Ramsay Crooks, whose headquarters were in New York, but who spent much time at Mackinaw and at other of his trading posts in the Northwest. Pierre Chouteau, Jr., of St. Louis, superintended the Western Department, comprising, at first, the Missouri River country and the Rocky Mountains. Later Chouteau & Company purchased the Western Department, including the country west of the Mississippi. In Minnesota the chief post or “factory” of the company was at Fort Snelling, and Gen. H. H. Sibley was the “chief factor” for many years.

In 1825 the American Company had a post at Red Lake called Fort Pike. Other of its posts in the Minnesota country were at the “upper sand hills,” on the Cheyenne; at Crow Wing, on the Mississippi; at Little Rapids (Carver), on the Minnesota; at Leech Lake, Devil’s Lake, below Big Stone Lake, Sandy Lake, and at the Forks of the Red Cedar River. It is unfortunate that the names of the traders at these posts have not been preserved.