CHAPTER V.

EARLY AMERICAN EXPLORATIONS IN RED RIVER VALLEY.


MAJOR LONG’S EXPEDITION OF 1823.

In the spring, summer, and fall of 1823, pursuant to orders from the War Department, a miscellaneous expedition, under the command of Maj. Stephen H. Long, with a corps of scientists for observations of a general character, went from Washington to and through a considerable portion of the Northwest, including the Red River Valley and a great deal of northern Minnesota. Coming into the Minnesota country in July, the expedition passed from Fort Snelling up the Minnesota Valley to Lake Winnipeg (then called Winnipeek) thence up the Winnipeg River to the Lake of the Woods and thence eastward along the Canadian boundary to Lake Superior. A very interesting and valuable history of the expedition was written by Prof. Wm. H. Keating, its geologist, recorder, and historian.

The expedition left Fort Snelling for the ascent of the Minnesota in the latter part of July, 1823, and comprised two small parties, one on horseback riding along the shores, and the other up the river in boats. Lake Traverse was reached July 23, and here three days were spent with the authorities of the Columbia Fur Company, at their main post. They struck the Red Lake River a few miles from its mouth, and found their position to be latitude 47 degrees, 47 minutes, and 25 seconds north, and longitude 96 degrees, 53 minutes, and 45 seconds west. Keating calls the river “the Red Fork of Red River,” and says that where the party forded it the width was forty yards. Its banks were steep, and the carts were crossed with difficulty; its bed was sandy and its current very rapid. The party went along the east bank of the river to Pembina, which was reached August 5. The village—or rather settlement—of Pembina had then a population of 350, most of whom were Metis, or half bloods, and who lived in 60 log houses or cabins, nearly all of which stood on the west bank, adjacent to a former fort of the Hudson’s Bay Company, which had been recently abandoned.

It will be borne in mind that the Hudson’s Bay Company originally claimed the country of the Red River Valley as far up as the “Red Fork,” or Red Lake River. In 1812 the Company granted to Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, for his colony, the country of the Valley, including both banks of the Red River, “up to the Red or Great Fork,” assuming ownership and control to that extent. But when, after the War of 1812, the international boundary line was established, as a result of the successful issue in 1781 of their War for Independence, the Americans acquired
the country far down the Red River, including the site of the Pembina Settlement.

Keating notes that in the spring of 1823, a few months before Maj. Long's arrival, the astronomers of the Hudson's Bay Company had made observations which had led them to suspect that the Pembina settlement was south, and not north, of the boundary line. They, therefore, removed "Fort Pembina" down the river to Fort Douglas, at the mouth of the Assiniboine River. Keating records that Fort Pembina was 120 miles by water up the river from the Assiniboine, "and near the mouth of a small stream named by the Chippewas the Anepeminmanse, from a small red berry termed by them anepeminan, which name has been corrupted into Pembina. The theme of the word is anepin, meaning summer, and minan, meaning berry, while sepe means river or creek." The berry is identified as the high bush cranberry; scientific name, viburnum oxycoccus. Many writers say that the discovery of the fact of their illegal location and the removal from Pembina to Fort Douglas occurred in 1820 or 1821, but Keating was there in August, 1823, and says that these events occurred the previous spring.

Describing the rivers and other natural features of the Polk County region, Prof. Keating writes:

"The Red Fork, which by the Indians is considered the main branch of the Red River, takes its name from the Red Lake, in which it rises. Both are said to be translations of the term bloody, used by the Indians, and which is doubtless derived from some slaughter committed in that vicinity, and not (as is the case with many other rivers which have the same appellation) from the color of their beds.*

*In times of flood the Red Fork is navigable for barges throughout its length to Red Lake, a distance of 120 miles; in ordinary stages of water, canoes can ascend to its source. This is the most important tributary of the Red River, containing an equal quantity of water with the main stream above the Grand Fork. Mr. [Thomas] Jeffries [of the Columbia Fur Company, and guide to the expedition] informed us that the Red Lake has, at the western part of the main lake, the form of a crescent, with its back to the southwest.

"The general course of the Red Fork from this lake is northwest. It receives a few small tributaries, the most important of which are the Clear River, entering about 30 miles from its mouth, on the southwest side, and Thief River, entering it from the northeast. The woods along Red Fork are very thick and extend to about half a mile on either side. Hazelnuts were very abundant and nearly ripe at that time [August 2]."

"Below the junction of the Red Fork with the main stream, the Red River was observed to be about 40 yards wide and its current was about one knot an hour. The bed of Swamp or Marsh River was dry. At the confluence of the two branches of Two Rivers there is a considerable salt spring. * * * There are doubtless in this country a great many salt springs, especially below the Red Fork; we saw none, but we were informed that fine springs exist on Big and Little Saline Rivers, on the Two Rivers, and in other places, where the salt is found in white efflorescences, so as to be annually collected there by the colonists of Pembina. And yet, notwithstanding its abundance in the country, and the ease with which it can be gathered, the price of this article is from $4 to $6 per barrel of 80 pounds. One of the residents on the river cleared $500 in one winter by the salt which he collected. Probably by boring to a small depth abundant springs would be found."

Recent investigations show that salt exists in innumerable quantities in Kittson, Marshall, and the northern part of Polk Counties, and at no very considerable depth from the surface. Time alone can determine whether or not this great resource will ever be developed.

COUNT BELTRAMI VISITS RED RIVER AND RED LAKE.

There accompanied Maj. Long's expedition from Fort Snelling (or Fort St. Anthony) to Pembina, an Italian gentleman named Giacomo Costantino Beltrami. He had come to America on a journey of adventure under the patronage of an Italian countess; his elaborate published account of his "Pilgrimage in Europe and America," etc., is mainly a series of descriptive letters addressed to this lady. Anglicized, his name would be James Constantine Beltrami and on the title pages of his books it is given as J. C. Beltrami.

The accomplished but eccentric Italian joined the Long expedition as a guest, but his relations with the
party were unpleasant almost from the start at Fort Snelling. When Pembina was reached, there was an open rupture and he left the party to complete his "pilgrimage" by himself and on his own account. Leaving Pembina (which he calls "Pembenar") Beltrami set out, with two Chippewas and a half-breed interpreter, and traveled southeastwardly to the junction of the Thief and the Red Lake Rivers, and thence his journey was by canoes up the latter river to Red Lake. He calls the Thief River "the Robbers' River" and gives the name "Bloody River" to both the Red Lake and the Red Rivers. He considered the former the principal branch of the latter, which in one place (Pilgrimage, Vol. 2, p. 400) he mentions as "the Red River, or, more properly speaking, the Bloody River." But he does not call Red Lake "the Bloody Lake."

After a number of perils and privations Count Beltrami finally reached Cass Lake and Leech Lake, and then went down the Mississippi in a canoe to Fort Snelling, and thence to New Orleans, etc. En route, on Thief River, the Sioux fired on his party, severely wounding one of his Chippewas. The next day both Indians and the half-breed deserted him and took a short route to Red Lake. For four days the Count waded up Red Lake River, towing his canoe, in which was his baggage; once the canoe upset, throwing everything into the water. On the evening of the fourth day he met some Chippewas, and one of them assisted him in paddling his canoe to Red Lake after two days of hard work. He skirted a great deal of the shores of the main Red Lake and finally made a portage from the south shore to waters which eventually led him into Mud Lake, which he said the Indians called the "Paposky-Weza-Kanyagnuen," or End of the Shaking Lands. The chief of the Red Lake Chippewas was called Big Rabbit, and on the north shore was another band of some 300 souls whose chief was the Big Elk.

THE SELKIRK SETTLEMENT AND POLK COUNTY.

Reference has been made to the settlement by Scotch, Swiss, and French Canadian Colonists of the district obtained in 1881 by Lord Selkirk from the Hudson's Bay Company and which was on the lower Red River. It was called generally the Selkirk Settlement, and sometimes referred to as the Red River Settlement. The first colonists came from Scotland in the fall of 1812 and located at the mouth of the Assiniboine, near the present site of Winnipeg.

The Selkirk Settlement is definitely and in some respects rather prominently connected with the history of Minnesota, and especially with that of the Red River Valley. The first permanent settlers and residents of the State, and of that part of the Valley within the State, were refugees and fugitives from the Selkirk Settlement, or Red River Colony. They had been driven out by grasshoppers, floods, droughts, and other calamitous visitations and they sought safety to the southward, where they believed conditions were better. By the year 1840 nearly 700 Red River refugees had come to Fort Snelling and many of them had made permanent settlements about St. Paul and elsewhere in Minnesota. (Minn. in Three Cents, Vol. 2, p. 76.)

And so, too, regarding the first white settlers in the Polk County district of the Red River Valley. They too came from the Red River Settlement. Only a few of these were farmers, however. They were traders, but had cabins along the Red, and perhaps on the Red Lake River, and doubtless they cultivated gardens and small tracts of grain. There was also considerable corn raising in the country in early days, more perhaps, in proportion to other crops, than there is now. In 1826 the Chippewas of Red River were raising plenty of corn, potatoes, and turnips. In 1832, when Schoolcraft and Boutwell were on their famous expedition to Lake Itasca, they stopped, in the first week of July, at the trading post at Sandy Lake. In his journal (Minn. Hist. Socy. Coll., Vol. 1, p. 158) Boutwell writes:

Corn for this post is mostly obtained at Red Lake, from the Indians, who there cultivate it to a considerable extent. The trader tells me that he bought 105 bushels from that place this spring, and that it is not a rare matter to meet a squaw who has this quantity to sell.
On page 168 (ibid.) Boutwell refers to corn raising by the Indians at the Red Cedar Lake and says: "They originally obtained the corn, which they have cultivated here for many years, from Red River."

The History of the Minnesota Agricultural Society (p. 11) says that at intervals between 1827 and 1838 the quartermasters at Fort Snelling bought corn from the northern Chippewas, and that in many instances the Indian women had carried the grain on their backs from their granaries to the shipping points on the upper Mississippi.

So that it is quite probable that the early settlers in the Polk County region raised corn, notwithstanding the difficulties of its cultivation, when it was subject to the injurious attacks of blackbirds, wild pigeons, and grasshoppers from its planting to its harvesting. The Selkirks, in their settlement at Pembina, had these pests and other obstacles to contend against in their agricultural operations, and this was why so many of them left the country for the lower Minnesota districts, and other more favored regions. Some of the Red River refugees went as far as to Indiana.

SELKIRK’S COLONISTS FIRST POLK COUNTY SETTLERS.

The fact is not generally remembered that many of the early members of Lord Selkirk’s Colony settled in what is now Polk County prior to 1820, under the mistake that they were locating on British territory. They were quite excusable. They knew but very little about the boundary line between the United States and the British possessions, as established after the War of the Revolution by the treaty of Paris, in 1783. As has been previously stated, the charter given the Hudson’s Bay Company by King Charles granted the Red River Valley to the company—at least as far south as to the Sioux Wood River. In 1811, when Lord Selkirk purchased the land for his colony from the company, the deed gave (in part) the boundaries of the grant as extending from the Assiniboine River “due south from that to the height of land which separates the waters which run into Hudson’s Bay from those of the Missouri and the Mississippi.” (Ross’s R. R. Settlement, p. 9.)

The “height of land” mentioned is equivalent to the watershed between Lake Traverse and the mouth of the Sioux Wood, in Traverse County, Minnesota, and Roberts County, South Dakota. This is more than 200 miles south of the 49th parallel, or the boundary line between Canada and the United States, and of course the Hudson’s Bay Company had no right to dispose of any land on American soil or below the boundary. But it seems that neither Lord Selkirk nor any one else in that quarter of Canada knew (and perhaps did not care) anything about the international boundary.

Selkirk (or Lord Thomas Douglas) was apparently innocent. He had paid a good round sum for the land of his proposed colony and he was determined to have a perfect title to it. He recognized the title of the Cree and Chippewa Indians to the country and he was bound to extinguish it so that there should be no cloud upon his own. So, at “the Forks of Red River,” July 18, 1817, he made a treaty with certain chiefs and warriors of the tribes mentioned by which they ceded to him their claim to the territory described as follows:

All that tract of land, adjacent to Red River and Assiniboine River, beginning at the mouth of the Red River and * extending along the same as far as the Great Forks, at the mouth of the Red Lake River, and along Assiniboine River as far as Muskrat River—otherwise called Riviere des Champignons, [the River of Mushrooms] and extending to the distance of six miles from Fort Douglas, [near Winnipeg] and likewise from Fort Daer, [at Pembina] and * also from the Great Forks and certain other parts extending in breadth to the distance of two English statute miles back from the banks of the said rivers, on each side, together with all the appurtenances whatsoever of the said tract of land, to have and to hold,” etc.

The consideration given the Indians was 200 pounds of tobacco, 100 pounds to each tribe, for the entire grant amounting to about 110,000 square miles. (Bryce’s H. B. Co., p. 207; but his “Romantic Settlement of Selkirk’s Colonists,” p. 42, says 116,000:

* The italicizing is by the compiler.
Large numbers of Indians were soon attracted to the settlements by the presence of so many strange people and the display of so many tempting articles of traffic; moreover many of the colony were at once induced to take to themselves Indian wives, and in a few years the half bloods that resulted from these connections amounted to several thousands. It was not until about 1820 when it was ascertained that these settlements had been made within the territories of the United States. It then became necessary for the traders that had settled among the people, and who belonged to the English trading companies, to remove their stores to points within the British possessions, and they forced all the peoples who had by this time become dependent upon them for goods and supplies, to break up their settlements and remove to points lower down or north on the Red River. They now [1850] extend along both banks of the river from the northern frontier of the United States northward to the entrance of the river into Lake Winnipeg, in latitude 51 north. (See Pope's Report to Secy. of War, Senate Ex. Doc., p. 30, No. 42, in 31st Cong. 1st Session.)

A FEW OF THE FIRST WHITE RESIDENTS.

Not many names can now be given of the Selkirk Colonists that settled on the Red River in or near what is now Polk County. Bryce's "History of Lord Selkirk's Colonists" (p. 167) mentions a French family that afterwards was in the Colony as having been at "the Forks of Red River" as early as in 1811. The name of this family was Lajimoniere. In 1815 the family had joined the main colony and Mr. Lajimoniere distinguished himself by carrying a packet of letters for Lord Selkirk from Red River to Montreal.

Another former member of the Selkirk Colony was Charles Bottineau (father of the noted mixed blood Pierre Bottineau, who was prominently identified with Minnesota history), who became a fur trader and lived for a considerable time near the present site of East Grand Forks. He had been a hunter for Alexander Henry, at Pembina, in 1803, later a partner with Charles Grant, at St. Joseph, and joined the Colony several years later. In 182—, he had "a hundred acres in crop." (N. D. Hist. Coll., Vol. 1, p. 304; Ross's Red River Valley, 176.) Some time after this he became a trader in the Grand Forks region.

It is commonly stated that his noted son, Pierre, was
born in the Red River Settlement, in Manitoba; but surviving members of his family state that the historic old guide, scout, pioneer, town builder, etc., was born, in 1810, at the trading post of his father, at Bear Point, on Turtle River, 12 miles northwest of Grand Forks, and in North Dakota. His last years were spent on the Red Lake River, and he died at Red Lake Falls in July, 1895.

Donald McKay and Alexander McBeth, both Scotchmen, were two other Selkirkers who engaged in trade in 1821 at “the Great Forks” and on the “Red Fork.”

Joseph LaBissoniere was a French Canadian with a half-blood Chippewa wife, who left the Selkirk Colony and about 1830, was a trader on the lower Red Lake River. Prior to that time he had been a Northwest Company trader at “La Grande Fourche,” or the Great Fork, and had also been on Turtle River, a few miles to the westward. His son, Isaac LaBissoniere, was born at his father’s post in North Dakota in 1823, and died in St. Paul, in June, 1910. The family removed to St. Paul in 1837 and Joseph and Isaac helped build the little log Catholic church at St. Paul in 1841. The church was called St. Paul’s and the city took its name from it. This was the first Christian Church building erected in Minnesota.