CHAPTER VII.

EARLY HISTORICAL DATA AFTER 1850.

FIRST NATIONAL CENSUS—FROM 1850 TO 1860—HUDSON’S BAY COMPANY RETURNS TO MINNESOTA—BUILDING OF FORT ABERCROMBIE—CREATION OF POLK COUNTY.

In Volume II of Cooper & Company’s History of the Red River Valley (Chicago, 1909), appears a chapter descriptive and narrative of Polk county. It may be characterized as the only historical sketch of the county ever published in imposing form. The article was written and revised by Hon. William Watts, of Crookston, and therefore may be regarded as authoritative. For Judge Watts is a long-time resident of the county and well versed in its history from its beginning as an organized county, and even long before. It is well that he consented to write the article, for otherwise much of the record of the county would be lost and not preserved in convenient and permanent form.

From the judge’s valuable article several notes of the county’s history have been extracted and used as data or notes for the present volume. Some of them have been quoted literally, but the majority have been used practically as texts or suggestions for comment. For example he speaks of the old Pembina trail, as “the route by which the Hudson’s Bay Company carried its furs and merchandise between the Northwest and St. Paul in the early days,” and he states that although the famous trail passed through Polk County the Bay Company had no trading post within its borders. The fact is that the Bay Company never used the trail “in early days,” and made but little use of it at any time. The trail was inaugurated in 1844 by Norman W. Kittson (then the chief factor of Chouteau & Company, of St. Louis) at Pembina, and it was used almost exclusively by him and his sub-agents up to about 1854, when he entered into partnership with Major W. H. Forbes, in St. Paul, in the general Indian trade supply business. The organization was called “the St. Paul Outfit.” The Hudson’s Bay Company first used the trail in 1858. In Harper’s Magazine for January, 1859, the late Dr. R. O. Sweeey, of St. Paul, wrote:

* * * The past season over 800 Red River carts, loaded with furs and skins, came into St. Paul from those far northwestern valleys. Even the Hudson’s Bay Company have at last availed themselves of the superior facilities of the heretofore ignored routes to our market, by sending last season over 60 packages of furs and pelts, taking in return cattle, mules, and implements of agriculture.

It would seem that 60 packages, or about 3,000 pounds, would not constitute but a very small portion of the cargoes of the carts, for three of the squeaking but stout vehicles could easily transport 3,000 pounds.

FIRST NATIONAL CENSUS.

From 1850 to 1860 there was some development and occupation of the country within the present limits of Polk county. Indeed it seems from certain known circumstances that settlements were made in different parts of the country’s present area before 1850.

In 1858, when Polk County was created by the Minnesota Legislature, its declared boundaries included all of the now area of the county, and also the following described territory: All of Pennington, Red Lake, Mahnomen, Clearwater, and Norman Counties; the greater part off the north half of Clay County; twelve miles of the northern part and a strip three sections long from north to south by one section wide off the
According to the manuscript copy of the census referred to the population of Red River Junction (now understood to be what is East Grand Forks) was as follows:

"Eustace Oiner, age 30; laborer; born in Upper Canada.

"Nolbert Laurence, age 20; laborer; born Upper Canada.

"Martin Schulte, age 14; servant; born Germany.

"Charles Benoit, age 18; servant; born Lower Canada.

"William C. Wilworth, age 33; engineer; value of real estate, $3,000; personal, $1,200; born in New York. His wife, Emily Wilworth, age 27; housewife; born New York; his child, Jane Wilworth, age 4; born in Minnesota.

"Wm. Peters, age 21; laborer; born Hudson’s Bay Territory.

"George W. Northrup, age 23; surveyor; personal property $300; born in New York.

"Antoine Bellaire, age 34; laborer; his wife, Katherine, age 34, and their seven children, Antoine, age 12; Charlotte, age 10; Mary, age 8; Eustace, age 6; Deliet, age 5; Solomon, age 3, and Joseph, age 1; all mixed bloods and born in Minnesota; no property listed.

"Saml. J. Painter, (f) age 39; steamboat captain; real estate, $3,000; personal property, $1,000; born Pennsylvania. His wife, Elizabeth, born Virginia, and their five children—Sarah Ellen, aged 11, Rosanna aged 9, Francis M. aged 7, and James aged 5, were born in Kentucky, and Joel, aged 3, born in Minnesota.

"Charles Cavileer, age 42; physician; real estate, $10,000; personal, $500; born in Ohio. His wife, Isabel, aged 22; born Hudson’s Bay Territory; their children, Sarah J. aged 3, Edmund R. aged 2, and William McI. aged two months, were born in Minnesota.

"Jane Bruce, age 30; no occupation given; personal property $200; born in Hudson’s Bay Territory; mixed blood.

"Eliza Currier, age 16; no occupation; born Hudson’s Bay Territory; mixed blood.

"Moses Currier, age 12; born H. B. Terry; mixed blood.

"Albert Sargeant, age 40; merchant; real estate $800; personal, $1,500; born New Hampshire.

"Wm. Henry Morse, age 30; steamboat pilot; real estate $10,000; personal $500.

"Richard C. Burdick, age 25; merchant; personal $1,000. His wife, Catherine, age 22; born in New York. Their child, Charles, age 2, born in Minnesota.

"Catherine Nelson, age 39; servant; born Virginia; negro.

"John Berau, age 24; servant; born Hudson’s B. Terry."
The whole population therefore was 40, including one negro and 12 mixed bloods. Total males, 25; females, 15. There were only 8 dwelling houses listed; perhaps the Indian and mixed-blood lodges and shacks were not counted. The total value of real estate owned was $26,800; personal property, $6,200.

Georgetown post office reported 65 people, of whom 3 were mixed bloods; Rice River, 46 whites and 4 mixed bloods; Red Lake had 4 whites (traders) and 80 mixed bloods and one Indian, John Tombay.

The exact residences of the people of these various post offices cannot here be definitely given. It is probable, however, that for the most part those of Red River Junction (as East Grand Forks was then called) lived at or near the Junction. The place was called Red River Junction because it was the junction of the Red River with its principal tributary, the Red Lake. What eventually became of all these Red River Junction people is not known to the present writer. We know that Charles Cavileer (as he always wrote his name) went to North Dakota and laid out the town of Pembina, was its first postmaster, and died there in 1902. He was prominent in early North Dakota affairs and the county of Cavalier (with the reformed spelling) was named for him.

George W. Northrup was from St. Paul, though a New York born. He led an adventurous life as a hunter, Indian trader, guide, etc. At one time, in 1858, he was captain of the "Anson Northrup" (Minn. Hist. Coll., Vol. 8, p. 52.) In the Civil War he enlisted in Company C, of Brackett's Battalion, of cavalry, and in the Sioux battle of Khay Tah-hkah Koota, ("hill or mountain where we shot the deer") commonly called the battle of Killdeer Mountain, he charged far to the front and received ten Indian arrows in his body, one through his heart. The Indians knew him well and called him "the Man that Pulls a Hand Cart," because when on one occasion, when he was connected with a train of Red River carts, he drew one of them quite a distance.


From 1850 to 1860.

After the creation and organization of Minnesota Territory, in the early part of 1849, the first Legislature divided the territory into nine counties, called Washington, Ramsey, Benton, Itasca, Wabasha, Dakota, Wahnahta, Mahkato, and Pembina. At the time the Missouri River was the western boundary. Pembina County extended from the west line of Itasca to the Missouri River and from the Canadian boundary southward to the mouth of the Buffalo River. It comprised generally what is now nearly all of the northwestern part of Minnesota and practically all of the present State of North Dakota east of the Missouri River. What is now and has in the past been North Dakota was for nine years a part of Pembina County.

The census of that county in 1849 gave it a population of 637, of which number 295 were males. The post-office of all these persons was given as Pembina, though many of them lived at what is now St. Vincent, on the east bank of the Red River, opposite Pembina. Of the entire population 27 persons were listed as born at Red Lake or elsewhere in "Minnesota Territory," and seven were natives of other States. Nearly all the people were of mixed Indian blood. (U. S. Census Reps. for 1850; also N. Dak. Hist. Coll., Vol. 1, p. 385 et seq.) It is almost certain that in 1849 there were white people living within the present confines of Polk, but we do not know who and exactly where they were.

The Hudson's Bay Company Returns to Minnesota.

After having its posts and agents banished from the United States, in 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company confined its operations to its own territory or other portions of Canada. There was great ill feeling by the American traders against the traders and posts of the great English corporation. The agents
of this corporation seem to have been always rapacious and they became unscrupulous and bold. They sought every means to capture and secure the Indian trade in the northern part of the United States west of Lake Superior and as far south of the international boundary as possible. They supplied the Indian hunters freely with whisky, during the trading seasons, induced hundreds of them to come over to Canada to trade and even to sell their furs to the company's servants at points within the United States. They frequently came upon trading excursions up the Red River and often were at Red Lake, always bringing whisky. They were not allowed under an English law to "sell" ardent spirits to the liquor-loving Indians, but it was held that "exchanging" these beverages for furs was not selling!

All along during the decade of 1840, and in the early part of that of 1850, Norman Kittson, Joe Rolette, and other American traders in this quarter had complained often and vehemently of the injuries done them by the Bay Company's traders and hunters. They said that in addition to seducing the Indian trade away from them, the company's men habitually raided what is now the northern part of North Dakota and killed and drove off so many buffaloes that often there was a meat famine among the Teton and Mandan Sioux and the Assiniboines, Crees, and Chippewas, upon whom the traders depended for patronage.

In the winter of 1849 Kittson and Henry M. Rice—the latter having a number of trading houses in the Chippewa country—made strenuous efforts to stop the predatory incursions upon their preserves. Kittson wrote to Delegate Sibley: "The traders of the Hudson's Bay Company have, during a few months past, been engaged extensively in introducing liquor among the Indians within our limits." Rice wrote to Gen. Fletcher, agent for the Winnebagoes:

"The agents of the H. B. Co. brought a large quantity of ardent spirits to their depot at Rainy Lake, and at the time the Indians were gathering their last wild rice crop they sent a quantity of liquor within our boundary and gave it to our Indians in exchange for rice. I have ample and positive proof of this. It is impossible to take provisions to these remote posts, and the traders and employees are compelled to live on wild rice and fish; the rice they purchase from the Indians. The object of the H. B. Co. was to secure all of the surplus rice so that my men would be compelled to abandon the country. They well know that, with the advantage of whisky, they can break down any opposition."

And February 12, 1849, Gen. Fletcher wrote to Hon. Wm. Medill, commissioner of "Indian Affairs."

"The object which the British traders have in supplying the Indians with ardent spirits is to break down the American traders. They annoy and discommode our traders by purchasing with whisky all the surplus provisions the Indians have, but they injure our traders most by preventing them from obtaining furs. While the Indians can obtain liquor, they will not hunt and obtain furs, and having no money nothing can be made out of trade with them. About 20,000 buffalo are killed annually within the country occupied by the Sioux and Chippewa Indians south of our northern boundary by half breeds from the British side of the line. One-third of the Red River Canadians subsist on buffalo killed on the American side of the line. The destruction of the buffalo is a heavy tax on our Indians, especially the Sioux."

These descriptions of conditions induced the authorities at Washington and the expedition of Maj. Woods and Capt. Pope, of 1849, was resolved upon. In his instructions to Maj. Woods for the conduct of the expedition, Adjutant General R. Jones instructed him, among other things, to observe and report upon the condition of the Indians at Pembina and the Red River Valley, and particularly to report "the influence exerted on them by the Hudson's Bay Company by trade, present, and otherwise." In asking President Taylor for the expedition, Hon. Thomas Ewing, Secretary of the Interior—which office had been newly created—stated that the great evils committed upon northern Minnesota by the Hudson's Bay agents ought to be at once "corrected and prevented in the future." Among other suggestions he proposed that a moderate portion of the then Indian country, near the boundary
line, and “upon the Red River of the North” be speedily acquired by treaty and purchase. This tract of country so acquired he thought ought to be “opened to actual settlement, for which it is represented to be well adapted.” On the tract he would place “a body of citizens ready, not only to observe our laws respecting intercourse with the Indians, but willing and able to prevent further violations of them or incursions into our territory by those connected with the British settlements north of the boundary.”

The Secretary wrote April 4, 1849, and on the 6th of June following the expedition left Fort Snelling.

But for some time after the Woods and Pope expedition to Pembina the trespasses of the Hudson’s Bay Company continued; not until 1857, after they had been allowed to establish their own posts on American soil. Gradually, however, they ceased almost entirely.

In 1857 the Hudson’s Bay Company decided to abandon York Factory, its station and principal port of entry at the mouth of Nelson River, at Hudson’s Bay. Soon after it completed arrangements with the U. S. Secretary of the Treasury whereby goods for the company and for the former Selkirk colonists might be carried in bond through the United States via St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Red River of the North. (N. D. Hist. Coll., Vol. 3, p. 552.) Trade with the Red River Valley now grew rapidly. Posts of the Bay Company, by permission of the United States, were established at various points on the river. In 1860 Mr. Kittson sold out all his interests in the Red River fur trade to his former unprincipled rival and oppressor, the Bay Company, and became its agent, eventually establishing a line of steamboats and barges called the Red River Valley Transportation Company.

BUILDING OF FORT ABERCROMBIE.

The establishment of Fort Abercrombie, although on the Dakota side of the river, was another event of importance in the history and development of the Red River Valley. Its location was determined upon in 1857, but it was built chiefly in 1858 and 1859. Its location was determined by the reports and recommendations of Maj. Woods and Capt. Pope, after their expedition to Pembina in 1849. Work was commenced upon the buildings in the spring of 1858, and the first structures were log cabins. It was named for Col. John J. Abercrombie, then lieutenant colonel of the Second U. S. Infantry, and detachments of that regiment constituted the first garrison.

In June, 1858, a private expedition, of which Manton Marble, the accomplished writer and artist, was a member, visited Fort Abercrombie on a trip to Pembina and beyond. On page 306 of Harper’s Magazine for August, 1860, appears a sketch by Marble of the incomplete fort as it was in June, 1858, with the little log cabins as the soldiers’ quarters, etc. Below the sketch is a printed description by Mr. Marble from which the following is an extract:

“North of Graham’s point (12 miles) as we rounded a turn of the river, whose wooded margin had concealed it from us hitherto, we came in sight of Fort Abercrombie—that is, of the one building erected for the commander’s quarters and the canvas storehouses, which are built upon the prairie near the river bank. The log houses or quarters which officers and privates at present occupy are all built in a quadrangle upon a pear-shaped promontory, looking west toward the prairie.”

The Government records show that Lieut. Col. Abercrombie arrived with the first detachment of his troops in August, 1857. (Sec. War Rep. Cong. Series No. 943, p. 354.) But the fort was not fully completed for several years later. The object of its building at the time the work commenced was not the protection of the American traders against the agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company, since at that time the latter, by permission of and license from the American authorities, had their posts everywhere through the Valley and practically controlled, without protest or objection, the trade of the region. The object was to protect and encourage the pioneers that were coming into western Minnesota to take advantage of the offer by the Government of new lands in that quarter.
Probably, too, the building was secured by the association of Northern and Southern Democrats, some of whom were Senator Henry M. Rice and Henry T. Welles, of Minnesota; John C. Breckenridge and Beriah Magoffin, of Kentucky; Robert Toombs, of Georgia; George B. Clitherall, of Alabama; Jefferson Davis, of Mississippi, and probably Dr. Archibald Graham, of Virginia. Some of the operations in Minnesota of these gentlemen are noted elsewhere.

But in July, 1859, the fort was temporarily abandoned. On the 25th Capt. N. H. Davis, Second U. S. Infantry, with one company of that regiment, abandoned the post, leaving it in charge of a military storekeeper. The reason assigned was that there was no longer any danger to Americans or American interests in that quarter. The abandonment was not for very long. In June, 1860, it was re-occupied by three companies of the Second Infantry, under Capt. Gardner and was garrisoned thereafter until in 1877, when it was discontinued as a military post.

The establishment of Fort Abercrombie was of great assistance in the development of Polk County and all of the other portions of the Red River Valley. Settlers were induced to come to the country in the belief that the fort would be a refuge and a rendezvous in case of Indian trouble, and that no serious danger need be feared from the savages. It was due largely to the representations of Henry T. Welles, through Senator Henry M. Rice, that a garrison was ordered re-established in the summer of 1859. The association which he represented had laid out the town of Breckenridge and wanted to sell lots therein, as well as to dispose of their lands in the vicinity, and the occupation of the fort by 300 soldiers would give confidence in the situation to would-be investors and speculators. (For a good and authentic sketch of Fort Abercrombie see Part 2, Vol. 2, No. Dak. Hist. Socy. Coll.)

**CREATION OF POLK COUNTY.**

The creation of Polk County was brought about by a strange set of influences and circumstances. In 1856-57, while Henry M. Rice was in Washington, as delegate in Congress from Minnesota Territory, he formed a sort of business alliance, as he had some time before formed an intimate friendship with certain prominent Southern men, the most of whom were members of Congress. Some of these men were Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War in 1856; John C. Breckenridge, Vice President; James Buchanan, President, both from 1857 to 1861; Robert Toombs, of Georgia, U. S. Senator, and Beriah Magoffin, later Governor of Kentucky.

Mr. Rice had long possessed great influence and control over a faction of the Democratic party in Minnesota Territory. Through his control of the Territorial Legislatures he succeeded in having Minnesota counties named from time to time in honor of his Southern friends and associates. Davis County (now partly Swift County) was named for Jeff. Davis; Toombs County (now Wilkin) for Robert Toombs, and Breckenridge (now Traverse, etc.) for the Vice President, all ultra pro-slavery men. Then two counties, Polk and Pierce, were named for ex-Democratic Presidents, and one for the existing President, James Buchanan. All of these Southern statesmen, except President Polk, had been of valuable personal service to Mr. Rice and were greatly pleased at the rare compliment involved in the naming of counties for politicians of others. It is probable that Mr. Rice lost nothing by his courtesy.

But the bestowal of the name of James Knox Polk upon a Minnesota county was proper and befitting. It is understood that his last official act as President, at 11:45 P. M., March 3, 1849, was his signing of the bill creating Minnesota Territory; he died at his home, Nashville, Tennessee, June 15 following. When Gen. Sibley, who was Delegate in Congress from what by courtesy was called "Wisconsin Territory" and was pushing the bill for the creation of Minnesota, it was understood that all along he had the sympathy of President Polk. It was unfortunate that he did not live to see the Territory which he helped to create become a magnificent commonwealth of the Union. He
was but 54 when he died, having been born in North Carolina in November, 1795. His home was in Tennessee after he was eleven years old. He served in Congress fourteen years and was Speaker of the House from 1835 to 1839. He was Governor of his State from 1839 to 1841. The Democrats nominated him for President in 1848 and he was elected over the great Henry Clay by a majority of 40,000 of the popular vote and of 70 in the electoral college. He declined a second term. He advocated the war against Mexico and was an efficient President during that contest. But he was opposed to wars in general, and it was largely his great influence during his administration which prevented war with Great Britain in 1846 over the Oregon question—a war of which many unwise Americans were decidedly in favor—and when he was in Congress he and some other Congressmen prevented a war with Spain. He was a man of pure and high character and personally popular. This county need be well satisfied with its name.

Polk County was created by the first State Legislature of Minnesota in the summer of 1858; it was approved by Governor Sibley July 27. From the Legislative Journals it is learned that the bill was introduced in the House of Representatives and was known as House File No. 303. It established the counties of Pembina and Polk and was so entitled. It is difficult to learn who was the author of the bill, since the Legislative Journals are without indexes; probably it was Hon. John N. Chase, the Representative from the Pembina district, which was the 22d and was composed of Todd, Cass, and Pembina Counties. The act passed the House some time in the first weeks of July and the Senate July 13. In the latter body the votes were 23 for and 3 against. Those against were Senators Michael Cook (for whom Cook County was named), H. L. Thomas, and George Watson. What their objections were is not known.

The boundaries of the county as originally established commenced at the southwest corner of Pembina County, opposite the mouth of Turtle River and running up the Red River to the mouth of the Buffalo River, or Georgetown; thence eastwardly up the Buffalo along the northern boundary of Breckenridge County, and then along the northern boundary of Becker County to the southeastern extremity of Lake Itasca; then north and east up the Mississippi to its intersection with the county’s eastern boundary line, at the northeastern extremity of Cass Lake; thence due north to the southern boundary of Pembina County, and then due west to the point opposite the mouth of the Buffalo River, the place of beginning.

The county seat of Polk County was temporarily located at Douglass, and that of Pembina County at St. Vincent. According to Sewall’s map of Minnesota for 1860, Douglass was located on the Red Lake River, at the new crossing, or where the new Pembina trail crossed the river, and where the Ramsey treaty of 1863 was held. The present site is called Huot P. O., and consists of one house, which stands in the southwestern part of Red Lake County. Douglass was originally a trading post belonging to the Hudson’s Bay Company. A town was laid out here in 1858, but it does not seem to have made any progress. No attempt at formally organizing Polk County was made until in 1872, and the Legislature did not declare the county fully organized until March 3, 1873, fifteen years after it had been created.