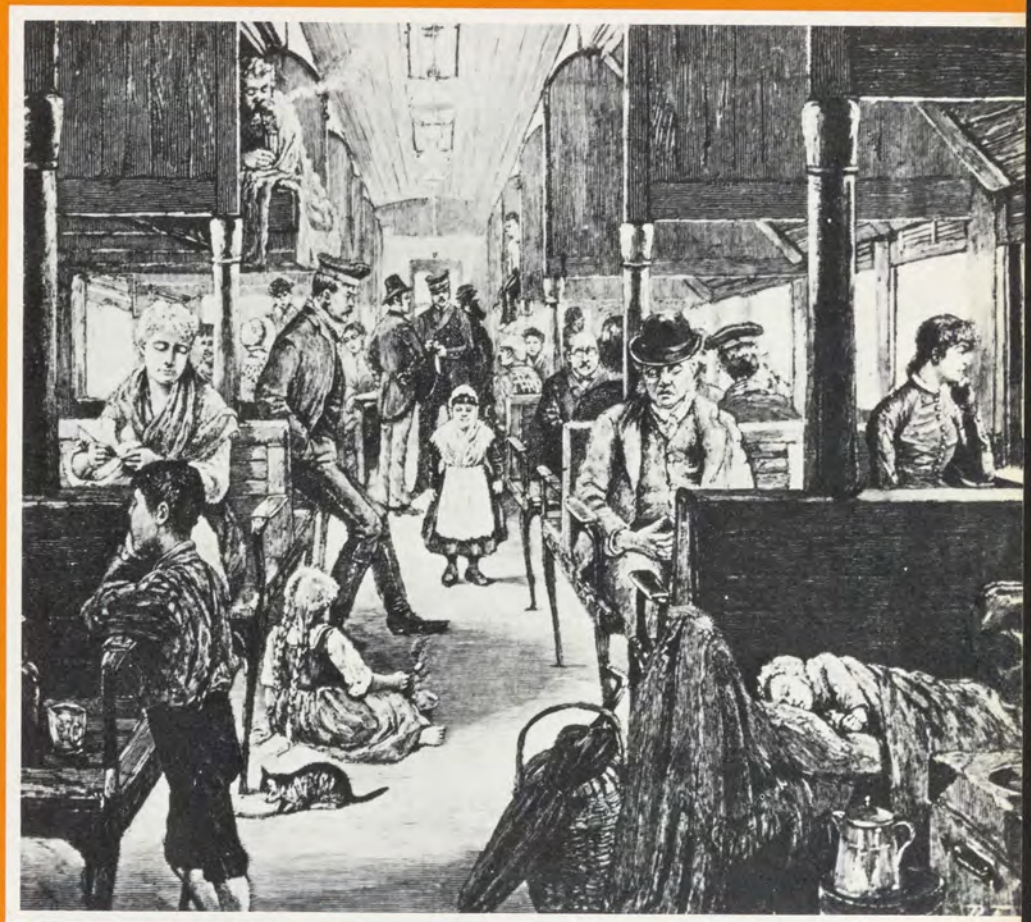
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Spring/Summer

1975

Volume 12

Number 1

Ramsey County History

Published by the
RAMSEY COUNTY and SAINT PAUL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz
Assistant Editor: Lansing Shepard

Contents

Spring/Summer

1975

Volume 12

Number 1

Jim Hill: A Search for
The Man Behind The Legend
By Virginia Brainard Kunz ..... Page 3

Fences
By Lansing Shepard ..... Page 11

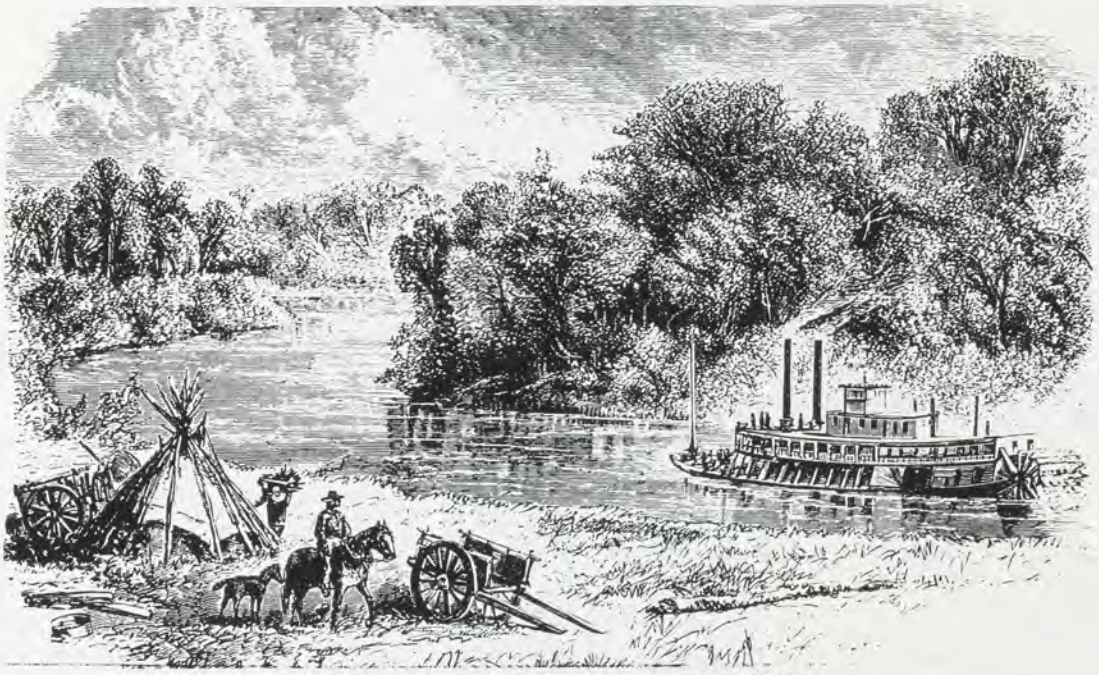
How St. Paul Came To Lose
The Red River War
By Dennis Hoffa..... Page 14

Volstead and Prohibition
A Roaring '20's Memoir
By Helen Warren Pfleger
as told to George A. Rea..... Page 19

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY is published semi-annually and copyrighted 1975 by the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society, c/o Macalester College, 1600 Grand Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota. Membership in the Society carries with it a subscription to *Ramsey County History*. Single issues sell for $3.00. Correspondence concerning contributions should be addressed to the editor. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Manuscripts and other editorial material are welcomed but no payment can be made for contributions. All articles and other editorial material submitted will be carefully read and published, if accepted, as space permits.

ON THE COVER: Lithograph of Emigrant Train leaving St. Paul's Union Depot — late 1800s. Immigrants supplied the railroads with the bulk of their work force.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Pictures used in this issue are from the audio-visual department of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, with the following exceptions:
Page 4 top, 6 bottom, 7 top — all from Joseph G. Pyle's Life of James J. Hill.
Page 9 bottom, 10 bottom — from The Good Years *by Walter Lord.*
Pages 14, 16, 17 and 18 — from the Hudson's Bay Company magazine, The Beaver.



A scene on the Red River — around 1865.

How St. Paul came to lose *the "Red River war"*

BY DENNIS HOFFA

The struggle between the United States and British interests for control of western Canada is one of those historical contests which seem fated to be forever dwarfed by the more spectacular and violent territorial battles of the times.

Fought not with guns and bullets, but with trade goods and commercial monopolies, it was, nonetheless, a bid for power no less significent (or desperate) than any shooting war of that century.

The principal adversaries were the powerful Hudson's Bay Company (under whose jurisdiction all of western Canada — Rupert's Land — lay) and a collection of hungry and aggressive U. S. merchants based in St. Paul. The key to the prize was the Hudson's Bay Company's stronghold of the upper reaches of the Red River Valley and the site of present day Winnipeg. Ironically, it was from the area itself that the first moves were made.

Lord Selkirk, who, in 1812 had established an agricultural colony at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, had long eyed the St. Paul area as a transshipping point for his settlers. Selkirk theorized that supplies could be had more easily by way of the Mississippi than by the Hudson's Bay Company's lengthy and often difficult routes from Montreal or Hudson's Bay. But Selkirk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dennis Hoffa is a 1975 graduate of the University of Minnesota, with a major in applied history. Mr. Hoffa served as an intern at the Society's Gibbs Farm Museum and on its St. Paul History program. He is now in charge of the Society's Joseph E. Karth Research Center.

was a large stockholder in the company and he felt committed to the firm's transportation policy. Nature gave him a chance to put his theory to the test. In 1818-1819, grasshoppers swept across the Canadian plains, destroying, among other things, the grain crops of the Red River settlement. That next year the colonists were forced to buy seed wheat — not from York Factory (the usual point of entry for company goods to the interior) — but from Prairie du Chien, south of present day LaCrosse, Wis. Two hundred and fifty bushels of grain — three full boatloads — were shipped up the Mississippi and Minnesota and down the Red River to the Selkirk colony. Despite some minor problems in passage, it was obvious to the settlers that the route was far more practical than the old interior supplyway. Thereafter, they used the new system with increasing frequency.

DESPITE THE PROVED feasibility of the Red River route, the Hudson's Bay Company was reluctant to abandon its old, established York factory run. It was still a big money-maker and there did not seem to be any need to open any new routes. This was an unwise decision. American traders, as well as the independent traders in the vicinity of Pembina, had watched with interest the Red River settlement's transportation experiment, and now saw great potential in the route. They began using the river as their regular pipeline for supplies coming up from around Mendota. The volume of this trade was at first insignificent, but by the 1840s it was beginning to blossom.

As competition from the new route began cutting into Hudson's Bay Company business, the firm sought ways to stem the effectiveness of the new route. Its first move was to clamp down on the independent traders operating within its crown-granted jurisdiction. For years these traders had been allowed to use the company's transportation system to ship their furs to York Factory. In 1844 the firm withdrew its permission. The move might have succeeded, had it been made a few years earlier. But 1844 was also the year St. Paul businessman Norman H. Kittson, acting as an agent of Henry Sibley's fur company, established a post at Pembina. The post was to be part of an oxen powered transport operation stretching from Pembina down the Red River Valley to St.

Rival routes to the Red River colony.

Paul. The independents, finding their Canadian supply lines cut, quickly turned to Kittson's new enterprise. That year, when the first brigade left Pembina loaded with furs, there were only six oxcarts in the caravan. In six years some 200 carts were involved in the annual trek.

By 1850, the Hudson's Bay Company was definitely feeling the threat. To check the increasingly competitive Red River-St. Paul trade, the firm raised its prices for furs. The scheme worked for a while. The company's generous offer drew furs from all the local districts and for the next few years the firm actually halted the growth of the free trade movement in the Red River area. But the situation was only temporary. While the returns from the Red River district increased annually, so did the area's demand for supplies. The York Factory route, already overloaded, became increasingly inefficient. The

York Factory in 1853, at the height of its influence. Sketch believed to be by the factory's chief trader, Alexander Murray.

groceries, dry goods, stoves, guns and farm implements obtained in exchange for furs (mostly buffalo robes), meat, tallow and wheat was fast becoming the economic lifeblood of the Red River Settlement. All could be had more quickly and at cheaper prices in St. Paul.

GEOGRAPHY HERE PLAYED a crucial role. The simple fact was that the only easy access to the Red River settlement from the East was up the Red River Valley via St. Paul. The only other route that came anywhere near the practicality of the Red River was from Montreal across the Great Lakes to Fort William on the western shore of Lake Superior. But west of this lakehead city, the traveler faced the enormous obstacle posed by the border lakes. These lakes were navigable by canoe, but hardly afforded a good freighting area for the vast shipments of merchandise required by the Red River settlers. Canoe expeditions sent by the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1850s to explore and test the route came to naught.

The York Factory route, increasingly untenable as it was, appeared to be the only logical alternative. Its chief drawback was the short shipping season of the Bay. The narrow timeframe made it difficult to coordinate interior shipments with imports.

On the other hand, St. Paul's position at the head of navigation on the Mississippi meant that merchandise from the eastern U. S. was easily obtained by the river links with Galena and other points south of the city. Shipping became increasingly easier as railroads pushed into the Upper Mississippi Valley. The situation moved St. Paul merchants to become ever more aggressive in their search for new markets. As the St. Paul Advertiser reminded its readers on

Red River cart brigade on Fort Street, Winnipeg.

Independent Metis traders working the Red River route.

March 20, 1858, the city had prospects of a "practically inexhaustible empire on the Canadian American plains, for Iowa looks out upon the mauvaise terres of Nebraska; Missouri has Kansas, but western Kansas is a sandy plain, which extends westward to the Rocky Mountains in the first installment of the Great American Desert."

TO THE GROWING St. Paul business community, the northwest frontier was clearly where the markets were.

The great Hudson's Bay Company with its royal trading monopoly soon realized this fact, and in 1858 decided that fighting the newcomers was no longer worthwhile. That year an agreement was reached between Hudson's Bay Governor Sir George Simpson and St. Paul businessman, James C. Burbank whereby the Company's freight would be routed through St. Paul to the Red River colony, utilizing Burbank's Northwestern Express Company as the carrier. Simpson's reasoning behind this decision was:

- The York Factory route no longer was able to meet the increasing demands of the Red River settlers for foreign goods.
- American traders and merchants at Pembina and St. Paul were cutting into the Company's hold on the region.
- The Red River route was shorter. Shipment to the Red River via St. Paul took only three months; that through York Factory took two years from shipment in England to deposit at Red River. In addition, the shorter time meant a saving of five per cent interest charges.

In 1859 the St. Paul route was formally inaugurated. From Liverpool, goods were shipped on Canadian mail steamer to Montreal; goods were shipped from Montreal to St. Paul on the Grand Trunk Railroad via Detroit and Milwaukee. From St. Paul the goods were freighted by Burbank to the Red River using his overland transportation system and finally, down the Red River on the steamboat, "Anson Northrup." In addition, the oxcart trade continued to boom. An eyewitness later described this trade:

"MANY THOUSAND tons of freight have been carried over this road and a brigade frequently meant hundreds of carts; on the fall trip they generally went down light, the buffalo robe catch having been carried in closely compressed bales of ten robes each by the spring brigades, the arrival of which in St. Paul was an event not only to the fur-buyers, but to the people of the place, who lined the sidewalks as the long train of squeaking fur-laden carts passed through, and English half-crowns and sovereigns were to be had at almost any of the shops, all of which eagerly sought the Red River Trade."

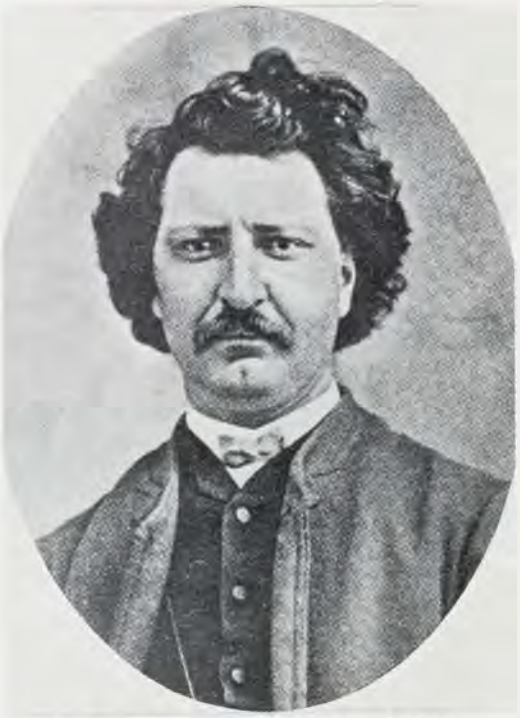
Initially an experimental route, this St. Paul link was used by the Company through the 1860's.

But a new element was creeping into the picture — Canadian nationalism. The burgeoning country of Canada, having consolidated its eastern holdings, was moving west, acquiring lands formerly owned by the Hud-

son's Bay Company. By the early 1860's negotiations had reached the upper reaches of the Red River Valley. Increasingly, economics in the area were giving way to politics. St. Paul businessmen, fearing the loss of trade with the Red River Settlement, should the latter become Canadian, began openly suggesting annexation of the territory. Chief among the annexation spokesmen was James Wickes Taylor, who had come to St. Paul from Ohio in 1856. He soon became known as "Saskatchewan" Taylor for his vigorous promotion of United States takeover of the Hudson's Bay Company lands to the northwest of St. Paul, including the Red River. In 1859 he was sent north by Governor Sibley to investigate the possibility of a route from St. Paul through the Red River Settlement to the Fraser River Valley gold fields, which were experiencing a boom at that time. The same year saw his appointment as a special agent of the United States Treasury Department, supposedly to investigate the possibilities of reciprocal relations between the United States and Canada. There is little doubt, however, that over the next ten years Taylor used his position to push for annexation of not only the Red River Settlement, but all of what would become western Canada.

ANNEXATION sentiment in Minnesota reached its peak in 1868. Spurred by the recent United States acquisition of Alaska, the Minnesota legislature passed a resolution calling for the United States to consider annexation of western Canada. Referring to the Red River Settlement, the *St. Paul Daily Press*, on March 4, 1868, declared that, "nothing is more evident than that this region must ultimately constitute a component part of the United States." Similar resolutions were passed in the United States Senate, but it all was to no avail. In 1869 final arrangements were made whereby the Hudson's Bay Company transferred its Red River territory to the Dominion of Canada.

A last-ditch effort to stop the changeover also proved futile. In 1869 a revolt against the new government was launched by Louis Riel and a company of descendents of voyageurs and Indians who lived in the Red River district. Annexation forces in St. Paul saw great possibilities in the uprising and efforts were made to sway Riel and his followers to actively seek United States intervention on their behalf.



Louis Riel . . . his rebellion failed.

Oscar Malmos, United States Consul in Winnipeg, went so far as to request then Minnesota Senator, Alexander Ramsey, to raise some $700,000 to support the rebellion. Malmos assured the Senator such backing would "make the rebellion a success." Ramsey, however, was unable to get sufficient support, especially from eastern interests for whom the issue was not as crucial. But Riel and his followers wanted no part of any imposed government, and the scheme failed, as did the revolt.

In 1870, with the passage of the Manitoba Act, the Red River colony became a part of Canada.

Sources

W. C. Fonseca, *"On the St. Paul Trail in the 1860's."* Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba Transactions No. 56 (Jan. 1900).

Gluek, Alvin C., Jr., *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.

Blegen, Theodore C. "Plans for the Union of British North America and the United States." *Mississippi Valley Historical Review,* March, 1918.

James Wickes Taylor: A Biographical Sketch. *Minnesota History* Bulletin I. November 1915.

Klassen, Henry C., The Red River Settlement and the St. Paul Route, 1859-1870. Master of Arts thesis, University of Manitoba, 1963.

THE GIBBS HOUSE

at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society as a restored farm home of the mid-nineteenth century period.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society are located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society also maintains a museum office in the basement of the schoolhouse on the Gibbs Farm property. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.