

# History

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*St. Paul in celebration, 1924. This photo from the Gibson-Wright collection shows St. Paul during the years of labor turmoil that followed World War I. The 1880s city hall-county courthouse is on the left, with the St. Paul Athletic Club beyond it in this view looking east down Fourth Street. See W. Thomas White's account, beginning on page 4, of the 1922 Shopmen's Strike in the Northwest.*

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**he Spring issue of our magazine inaugurates a new feature that focuses on the personal experiences of individuals growing up in St. Paul or Ramsey County. Willard (Sandy) Boyd, who grew up in St. Anthony Park as the son of Dr. Willard Boyd, director of the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus, has written the first memoir that begins this new feature.

A graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School, Sandy Boyd was president of the University of Iowa from 1969 to 1981. He is now president of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

Boyd writes about his youth in Ramsey County during the Great Depression. We learn first hand, for example, what the great droughts of 1934 and 1936 meant to him and his friends. Editorial Board members hope that others will share their experiences with our readers.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

# The Earl of Selkirk and His Utopian Dream

Ronald M. Hubbs

Early in the nineteenth century, a colony that would play a part in St. Paul history was established north of the border now separating the United States from Canada.

Although the Selkirk Colony contributed some of the first settlers of the hamlet that became St. Paul, references to the aspirations and tragedies of this ill-fated experiment in resettling the poverty stricken are only infrequently published. Yet, the story is definitely a part of Ramsey County's history, in spite of the great travel hazards and distances of those days.

What was the Selkirk Colony, who founded it and why? To fill what he saw as a gap in historical knowledge, the late Dr. Walter Reeve Ramsey published sometime in the 1940s, a booklet he titled *The Selkirk Colony on the Red River of the North*. . . . and its profound influence on [the] early development of the Twin Cities. . . ."

In his twenty-five-page booklet, published privately and now out-of-print, Ramsey traced the history of the colony that was founded by the Scottish Earl of Selkirk. The quotations here are from his little book.

Ramsey had a special interest in this Red River development. A St. Paul physician, a founder of the St. Paul Children's Hospital and an associate professor emeritus of the University of Minnesota Medical School, he also was a descendant of Selkirk colonists. His great grandparents and his grandmother were among the early Selkirk settlers to arrive from Scotland.

"In spite of the fact that the Selkirk colony has had a profound and far-reaching influence on the development, not only of the Red River Valley but of the northern portion of the Mississippi and the Minnesota valleys as well," Ramsey wrote, "it is surprising how relatively few people know anything about this colony—how it came

about or what happened to it."

"The Selkirk Colony, founded in 1811, was perhaps the most comprehensive private program of colonization ever attempted on the North American continent," his account began. "The vast settlement consisted of 116,000 square miles, in one of the most fertile valleys in the world. This territory extended from Lake Winnipeg on the north, on both sides of the Red River, south into what are now the states of North Dakota and Minnesota."

"The founder of the colony was Thomas Douglas, fifth Earl of Selkirk, who belonged to one of the oldest and most distinguished families of Scotland." Thomas Douglas was the youngest of seven sons, Ramsey explained, and a graduate of the University of Edinburgh. He inherited the earldom after the deaths of his brothers.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Ramsey noted, there was "no doubt but that the fur trade was the most important factor in the exploration and [the] bringing [of] knowledge of this vast area to the outside world and ultimately in its settlement by . . . people of European origin." It was a contest between the French and the English, both with property claims in eastern Canada and the United States and both with Native Americans as allies.

Finally, England's "Prince Rupert\* in 1670 was able to persuade [Charles II] to grant a charter to 'The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading Into Hudson Bay.' This charter gave this group, the Hudson's Bay Company, a monopoly of the trade in furs in the 'Chartered Lands,' that is, all lands drained by the rivers which empty into Hudson Bay. In

*\*A cousin of Charles II of England and the first governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. Until 1870, the land drained by rivers flowing into Hudson Bay was known as Rupert's Land, or Prince Rupert's Land.*

addition to the right to trade in furs, the charter gave the company complete control over this vast area. . . .

"By 1685 the company had organized trading posts over a large territory north, west and south into the valley of the Red River. [An early] governor of the Hudson's Bay Company was John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, a progenitor of Winston Churchill. . . ."

Throughout the next century, the French and the English first, and then the Americans after the American Revolution, struggled with each other over the lucrative North American fur trade. Early in the nineteenth century, the young Earl of Selkirk entered the story. Motivating Selkirk and his dreams of a colony on the North American continent, Ramsey argued, was the earl's early interest "in the sad condition of his countrymen, particularly the Highland Scotch workers and small farmers who for many years had suffered serious economic hardship and whose prospects for a better standard of living were steadily growing worse."

Thousands of Scotchmen were emigrating to the United States, and for a number of reasons—the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Law barring British goods and ships from continental ports—but the most serious and immediate reason for the Highland Scotch was the abolishment of the clan system. Under this centuries-old social system, clan members occupied small farms and looked for protection to the "laird," the head of the clan with his castle and large land holdings. When the clansmen rose up against their chieftains, the British government suppressed the uprising, evicted the small farmers and turned over their lands to the chieftains.

"Selkirk," Ramsey continued, "carefully studied the situation, visited the Highlands and finally decided that emigration

was the only solution. After many letters to British statesmen and personal appearances before Parliament, Selkirk was able to get an allotment of land for a colony in Prince Edward Island, Canada. In July, 1803, three ships sailed from Scotch and Irish ports with 800 settlers. This colony was a success from the beginning and today, several of our most respected citizens in St. Paul are descendants of these original settlers.

"This small colony, however, did not meet the requirements and finally Selkirk decided upon the Red River of the North since it was in the domain of the Hudson's Bay Company in which he and his wife had a controlling interest. This being prairie country and of great fertility, Selkirk argued that the colonists could begin planting their crops at once without first having to clear the land of trees."

By February of 1811, Selkirk had succeeded in getting a majority of the governing board of the Hudson's Bay Company to allow him to begin organizing a colony on the Red River of the North. Because he wished to make this a personal venture, he purchased the immense territory that extended from Lake Winnipeg south into the present states of North Dakota and Minnesota.

"In the first group of settlers which sailed from Stornoway, Scotland, July 26, 1811, there were to be no women or children," Ramsey continued. ". . . To arrive at their destination on the Red River, they still had 700 miles to go [from York Factory at Hudson Bay] and the only means of getting there were on foot, by canoe or by some other type of small craft. The season was so late that it was finally decided [that] the entire company should winter at York Factory, a Hudson's Bay [Company] post, and that separate barracks should be built for the settlers, separate from the personnel of the Hudson's Bay Company."

It was a long, cold winter, Ramsey wrote, but by "April and May there was plenty of wild game and from April 27th to May 5th no less than three thousand deer crossed the river below the camp." On July 6, 1812, the company began its 700-mile trek south, negotiating the Hays river on flatboats, and arriving at the fork of the Red and Assiniboine rivers (the site today

of Winnipeg) on August 30.

"Soon after their arrival," Ramsey continued, "a delegation from the North West Company\* arrived and informed those in charge that settlers were not wanted and it was intimated that serious consequences would follow any attempt to establish a colony on the Red River."

". . . The scarcity of food soon became apparent and owing to the hostility of

would have starved to death," Ramsey wrote. "Pemmican," he added, "is the North American Cree Indian word for a meat prepared in such a way as to contain the greatest amount of nourishment in the most compact form. . . ."

"It is composed of the lean meat of the buffalo cut in strips and dried in the sun or before a fire, then pounded or shredded finely and mixed into a paste with the melted fat. It is often flavored by mixing in crushed wild berries such as the saskatoon or cranberries. It is then packed into sacks made from the buffalo hides with the fur side out and sealed up with rawhide and tallow. If kept dry, it will keep for an indefinite time. . . ."

". . . During the spring of 1819, a small group of Hudson's Bay officers and employees made their way up the Red River to its source—Lake Traverse—then over the divide to the headquarters of the Minnesota River—Big Stone Lake—thence to Fort Snelling\*\* and down the Mississippi to Prairie du Chien."

Purpose of the long journey was to buy badly-needed supplies—250 bushels of wheat, 100 bushels of oats, thirty bushels of peas and some chickens. Total cost for Selkirk was \$5,200 at the then rate of exchange. Loading their supplies on a flatboat, the men retraced their journey to their settlement. Planted at once, the seed grew well and saved the colony from starvation.

"A new problem arose," Ramsey continued. "It now became known that a part of the Selkirk holdings were south of the 49th parallel and were in the United States, so Selkirk lost title to all the land below the line. . . ."

"As a result, many of the settlers went north of the border into Canada, but some stayed and entered the employ of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, the headquarters being at Grand Forks and Pembina" (in present-day North Dakota). Others wandered south, [eventually taking] up land around Fort Snelling and in \*The rival fur trade company with which the Hudson's Bay Company fought a virtual civil war during the early 1800s.

\*\*Although the site had been selected, construction on the fort didn't begin until the following year.



Red River ox cart on Third Street in St. Paul in 1859.

the North West Company, it was not probable that food could be purchased from them, but it soon became known that the traders and employees of both companies were almost as badly off for food as were the colonists.

"The reason for this was that the winter of 1811–1812 had been the most severe the Northwest had experienced in more than twenty years and even the Indians, owing to the shortage of pemmican, were reduced to the most 'horrible and revolting' means of eaking out an existence."

The following winter was even more severe and, "had it not been for pemmican purchased from the Indians, the settlers

the triangle between the St. Croix and the Mississippi rivers. A number of the descendants of these original settlers still live in and around St. Paul."

However, for Dr. Ramsey's great grandfather, John Smith, the mounting hostility between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company suggested an earlier and prudent departure. Taking his wife, Mary, and their daughter, Jean, he left the Red River settlement for Fort William, then traveled by canoe through Sault Ste. Marie to Niagara Falls. He started a small factory at the end of Lake Ontario. There Jean met and married Robert Ramsey. In the fullness of time, they became Dr. Ramsey's grandparents.

" . . . In 1817," Ramsey's narrative continued, "Selkirk returned to Montreal by way of Mendota, Prairie du Chien, St. Louis, Washington and New York. In Washington he took up the matter of regaining title to the property south of the 49th parallel with his attorney, Daniel Webster, but after consultation, [Selkirk] decided it would be better to drop the matter for the time being, since there was now active competition with the American Fur Company and, besides, it was too soon after the War of 1812-14 and the burning of the White House was still fresh in the minds of the American people."

By now, Selkirk's health, sadly undermined by exposure and anxiety, was deteriorating. He returned to Scotland in 1818. Ordered by his physicians to Pau in southern France, he died there on April 8, 1820. A year later, under his son, the new Earl of Selkirk, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company were merged under the name of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Ramsey's narrative continued. "When Selkirk left his colony in 1817, it was very dubious whether it would survive, but new settlers continued to arrive from Scotland and Switzerland and in the face of great odds [the colony] became a permanent settlement.

"The Scotch generally made good farmers, as most of them had been farmers in Scotland, but many of the Swiss were of German, French and Italian backgrounds and were mostly ex-soldiers, watchmakers, musicians and, in fact, almost anything else but farmers, and besides, they

did not get on very well with their Scotch neighbors. As a result many of the Swiss later gave up their farms and wandered to the cities of the United States where they could ply their respective trades."

"The colonists, as well as all employees and traders, were expected . . . to sell their furs and other produce and purchase all their supplies through the Hudson's Bay Company, but as early as 1821 there was considerable illicit trade crossing the border in both directions. The American Fur Company had established posts at various points, including Pembina, and many furs found their way there and at a better price than could be secured from the parent company, and by barter they got the things they wanted, including poor whiskey, in return. . . ."

One of the traders was the colorful Joe Rolette . . . "the same Joe Rolette," Ramsey wrote, "who in 1857, as a member of the Minnesota legislature from Pembina, ran away with the bill passed by the Minnesota territorial legislature removing the capital from St. Paul to St. Peter, thus saving the capital [for] St. Paul.

"A life-size portrait of Joe Rolette in semi-Indian dress hangs on the wall . . . in the Minnesota Club in St. Paul. Contrary to what is generally believed, Joe Rolette, son of a partner of John Jacob Astor at Prairie du Chien, had a college education which he received in Cincinnati, during which time he lived in the family of the future Bishop Grace of St. Paul. . . ."

Rolette, who was an agent for the American Fur Company at Pembina, was one of the initiators of "the Ox Cart Brigade," the train of unwieldy, greaseless, two-wheeled carts pulled by oxen that for more than twenty years hauled furs to St. Paul and supplies back to the Red River country. By 1849, the year Minnesota became a territory, several hundred carts a year were traveling between St. Paul and Pembina, with cargo valued at more than \$500,000.

"And so," Ramsey concluded his account, "we have come to the end of our story of the Selkirk Colony, born far beyond the borders of [the United States] in 1811." Refugees from the colony had long since settled in the small community that became St. Paul. Swiss, French Canadian, Scotch, they had been driven from the colony, be-



*Dr. Walter Reeve Ramsey*

ginning in 1820, by a series of natural disasters, including the flooding of the Red River, and they clustered around Fort Snelling where they opened small farms. The rest of their story during the early years of the future capital city is familiar to readers of Minnesota history and needs to be told only briefly. In 1838 they were evicted from the military reservation. Moving down the Mississippi, they settled finally on land that is now downtown St. Paul.

*This is Ronald M. Hubbs' sixth article for Ramsey County History. He is the retired chairman of the board of the St. Paul Companies.*



*The Hudson's Bay Company Fort at Pembina, now in North Dakota, from the Canadian Illustrated News, 1871. See the article on the Selkirk Colony, beginning on page 23.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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