

I. THE ROADS OF PRE-TERRITORIAL MINNESOTA

"The history of roads and thoroughfares is the history of the commerce, of the population and settlement of every state and kingdom in the world. The roads and thoroughfares were first discovered, and mankind in their migrations and wanderings followed them." It was with these words that Judge Bradley B. Meeker addressed the members of the Benton County Agricultural Society at their annual meeting, held in the frontier town of Sauk Rapids in Minnesota Territory during the summer of 1855.¹ He spoke on a subject that was dear to the hearts of his listeners, for they felt the blighting touch of isolation and recognized the magnitude of the task of blazing paths to the new frontier. For more than half a decade already, the struggle to open roads had been carried on by pioneers few in number and impoverished in circumstance. Yet, filled with the high hopes or blind desperation which have characterized the history of the frontier, they persevered in their labor. Each year the strength of their army was augmented by fresh arrivals, and in the end they were successful, for in that vast new territory at the headwaters of the Mississippi no fewer than 160,000 persons found their homes during the brief space of a decade after 1849.

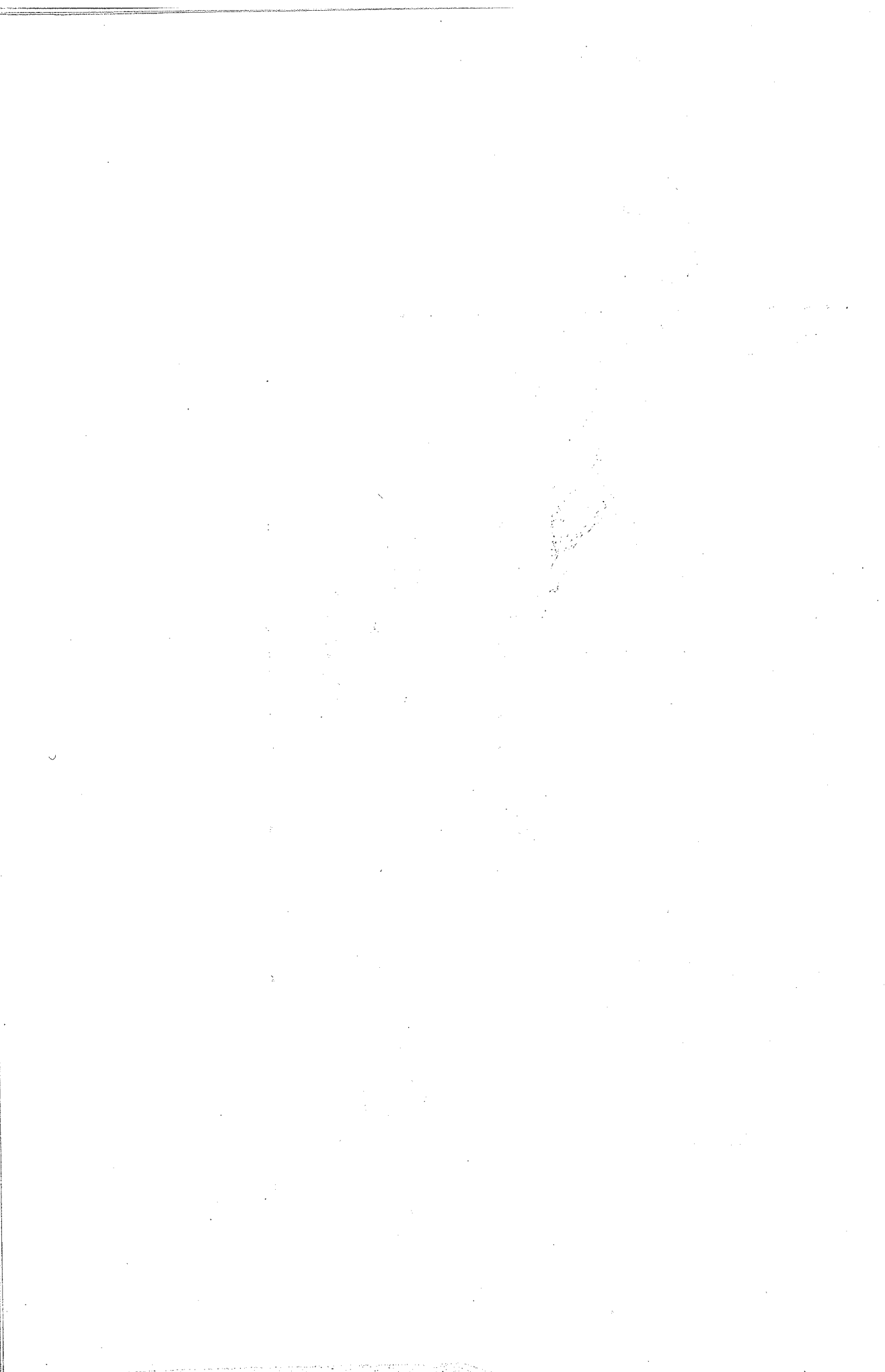
1. St. Anthony Express, July 7, 1855.

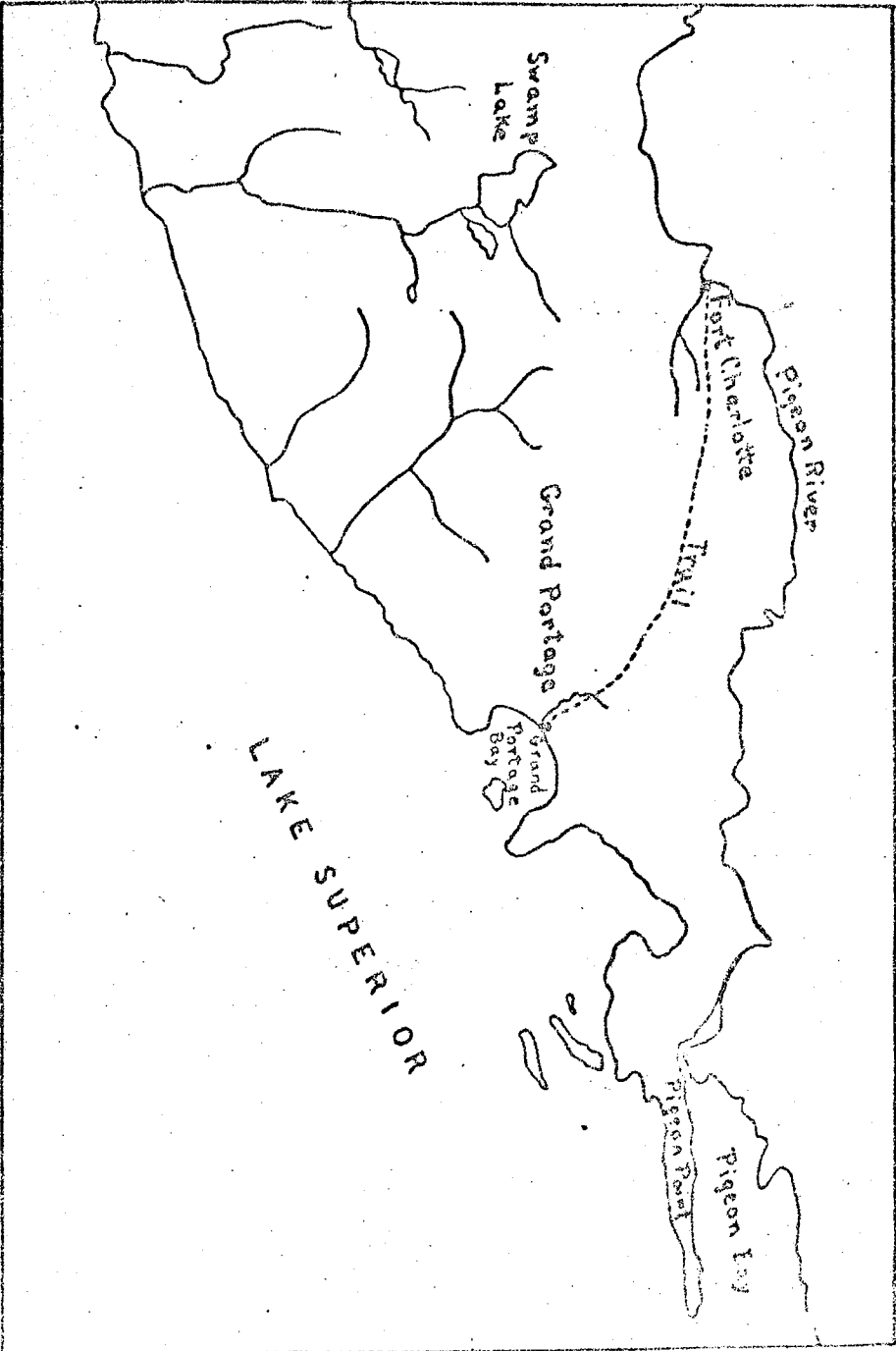
It was fortunate for the pioneers of 1849 that they did not have to start empty-handed. For centuries the Minnesota region had been the home of red men who, in their endless roving, had worn a myriad of trails through the wilderness. For two hundred years white men had been passing to and fro in the Minnesota country, and during the last half century the evidences of the journeying had become increasingly perceptible. Great trading corporations -- the Hudson's Bay Company and the American Fur Company -- and numerous independent traders had long exploited the vast crop of furs gathered in the wilderness. In the furtherance of their trade they established settlements toward which beaten tracks led from all sections of the territory.

The earliest trails used by the traders were undoubtedly those made by the Indians, and perhaps the most famous of these was the Grand Portage, a trail which led through nine miles of rocky wilderness and permitted travelers on Lake Superior to continue their trip by canoe on the waters of the Pigeon River above the series of falls which obstructed the last part of its course. Over this route a traveler could pass, with but a few portages, from the waters flowing into the St. Lawrence drainage system to those flowing into Hudson Bay. Who the first white men to use the Grand Portage were is unknown, but Vérendrye, passing that way in 1731, left a written record of it, and in the years that followed it became a meet-

ing place toward which all paths were directed. The period of its greatest use was during the score of years after 1783, when the Northwest Company had its depot there. It was not uncommon for upwards of a thousand persons to congregate at this one point during that period, when the total number of white men in the whole northwestern part of North America cannot have numbered many thousands. The trail over which was borne the fur produce of a great portion of the continent was worn deep by the feet of the voyageurs during those years. In 1788 the Northwest Company asked the provincial council at Quebec for a grant of land to enable it to construct a wagon road over the trail, but the request was denied. The road was made in later years, probably in 1816, and ox-carts traveled over it from Grand Portage Bay to Fort Charlotte on the Pigeon River, and thence to Fort William, a distance estimated to be thirty-six miles. This highway was abandoned by later generations of travelers in favor of other routes, but its fame remains as the white man's first road in Minnesota. ²

2. The best account of the Grand Portage is to be found in Solon J. Buck, "The Story of the Grand Portage," in Minnesota History Bulletin, 5: 14-27 (February, 1923). Dr. Buck states that the road may have been laid out by a detachment of British soldiers during the American Revolution (p. 19). In Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement: 1815-1819 (London, 1819), there is an account of a winter road from Fort William to Grand Portage, made in the fall of 1816 (p. 68). See also William H. Keating, Narrative of an Expedition to the St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, &c., Performed in the Year 1823, under the Command of Stephen H. Long, 2: 142 (London, 1825); James H. Baker, "History of Trans-





THE GRAND PORTAGE

In the Red River Valley the Hudson's Bay Company reached as far south as Lake Traverse, where Robert Dickson established a post in 1789. Dickson, it is said, brought his supplies to this far southern point from the English posts on the lower Red River "in carts made for the purpose," four or five days being required for the journey. Throughout the Red River country, the Hudson's Bay Company had posts, the supplies for which were carried in the carts made by the people of this far-off frontier. As a consequence, a well-defined series of trails reached all parts of the valley and extended beyond it to tap near-by regions. One trail led as far afield as Minday Wakon, or Devil's Lake; another led from Pembina to the post of the Hudson's Bay Company

portation in Minnesota," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 9: 9 (St. Paul, 1901). Next to the Grand Portage, perhaps the most famous was the Savanna Portage connecting the waters of the St. Louis and Mississippi rivers. See Irving H. Hart, "The Old Savanna Portage," in Minnesota History, 8: 117-139 (June, 1927). Other important portages were located between Lake Traverse and Big Stone Lake, between the lakes at the head of Leaf River and Otter Tail River, between Lake Julia and Turtle Lake, and between the Bois Brulé River and St. Croix Lake at the head of the St. Croix River. Accounts of their use by travelers are frequent. The Red River expedition which carried grain to the Red River settlement from Prairie du Chien in 1820, for example, passed over the Lake Traverse-Big Stone Lake portage. Post, p. 6. Captain John Pope returned from his Pembina expedition in the fall of 1849 by way of the Leaf Lake portage. Pope, Report of an Exploration of the Territory of Minnesota, 39 (31 Congress, 1 session, Senate Executive Documents, no. 42 -- serial 558). Giacomo C. Beltrami, on his return to Fort Snelling in 1823, followed the Lake Julia route, and the Sieur du Lhut made use of the Bois Brulé-St. Croix Lake portage on his Minnesota trip in 1680. William W. Folwell, A History of Minnesota, 1: 24, 109-111 (St. Paul, 1921).

at Red Lake, which was established as early as 1818. ³

The establishment of Fort St. Anthony, later known as Fort Snelling, at the mouth of the Minnesota River in 1819 gave American traders confidence to expand their trade in the area. As a result, the posts of the Americans multiplied in number, and the American Fur Company designated its post opposite the new fort as the headquarters for the upper Mississippi country. As all paths of the British traders led to Fort Garry, so all paths of the American traders led to Mendota. ⁴

It was not until the decade of the twenties in the nineteenth century that any great communication between the two centers of population in the Minnesota country was begun. The first trade between them reputedly was in the winter of 1819, when a deputation of settlers from Lord Selkirk's starving colony in the Red River country made a journey to Prairie du Chien in search of

3. Louis A. Tohill, Robert Dickson, British Fur Trader on the Upper Mississippi, 9, 16 (Ann Arbor, 1926); John P. Pritchett, "Some Red River Fur-Trade Activities," in Minnesota History Bulletin, 5: 407, 408 (May, 1924); Grace L. Nute, "The Red River Trails," in Minnesota History, 6: 280 (September, 1925); Nute, ed., "The Diary of Martin McLeod," in Minnesota History Bulletin, 4: 394n (August-November, 1922); Nute, "New Light on Red River Valley History," in Minnesota History Bulletin, 5: 567 (November, 1924); George W. Featherstonhaugh, A Canoe Voyage up the Minnay Sotor, 2: 13 (London, 1847).

4. The post was first known as St. Peter's. The name Mendota was not applied to it until about 1837. Warren Upham, Minnesota Geographic Names, 166, 227 (Minnesota Historical Collections, vol. 17 -- St. Paul, 1920).

grain. The southward journey was made in winter by land, but the return voyage was deferred until the spring of 1820, when it was possible to travel by boat on the Minnesota and Red rivers. In 1821 Alexis Bailly, the shrewd trader in charge of the American Fur Company post at Mendota, drove a small herd of cattle through the wilderness to the Red River colony to sell to the settlers there. The route he followed is not definitely known, but it probably led up the Minnesota River to Big Stone Lake, and thence, by way of Lake Traverse, into the valley of the Red River. The intercourse between the American and British settlements was not restricted to a trade in agricultural supplies. In spite of strict interdiction, the half-breed independent traders of the British settlement carried on a clandestine trade with the American fur buyers, and in 1822 the officials of the Hudson's Bay Company themselves made arrangements for the purchase of American products, which likewise were delivered over the Red River route. 5

It is probable that the Americans trading in the upper portion of the Minnesota Valley, where they fre-

5. Folwell, Minnesota, 1: 215-217; Henry H. Sibley, "Reminiscences; Historical and Personal," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 1: 383 (St. Paul, 1902); Pritchett, in Minnesota History Bulletin, 5: 409. At least two other herds of cattle were driven to the Red River, one in 1822 and the other in 1825. The latter consisted of four or five hundred cattle. Hattie Listenfelt, "The Hudson's Bay Company and the Red River Trade," in North Dakota Historical Collections, 4: 252 (Fargo, 1913).

quently came in contact with the British traders, made use of carts such as the British traders used from the time of their first dealings with them. Certainly it was more convenient to transport goods on the prairies by carts than by pack horses or by human pack carriers. For conveying cargoes of furs to the depot at Mendota and returning with needed supplies, however, the Americans on the Minnesota River used boats or canoes. The first appearance of the cart in the American trade -- if we may believe Joseph R. Brown, who for many years was a trader on the frontier -- was in 1823. At that time, according to Brown, Philander Prescott located a trading post at Traverse des Sioux, where the Minnesota River "could be reached with carts from the west without cutting a road through the woods." He further stated:

Previous to the days of the Columbia Fur Company, carts were unknown on the St. Peters; and either bark canoes or Mackinaw boats were used for taking supplies to Little Rock, Lac qui Parle, &c., and the trading posts were generally at White Rock, Le Sueur, Henderson, &c., below the Traverse, and the intercourse of the Indians of Lac qui Parle with those of the St. Peters was by a road which is yet frequently travelled, between Rush, and High Island rivers. The introduction of carts into the Indian trade shortened water communication and very materially diminished the length of time necessary for the trip to the upper country. The Traverse became the depot for the upper trade, and was the first summer trading post above the mouth of the Minnesota. ⁶

6. Minnesota Pioneer (St. Paul), April 7, 1853. The article quoted is not signed, but it was published while Brown was editor of the Pioneer and so strongly resembles

An unidentified traveler through the American Northwest during the summer of 1844 tells of meeting at Traverse des Sioux an Irishman named Peter Haydn, who was a pioneer over the Red River trails, having "made probably twenty journeys across this vast country, with a train of carts." If this traveler was right in his statement that the cart caravans made but one trip each year, leaving the Red River country in May and returning again in September, the approximate date for the opening of through traffic over the Red River trail is 1824. In the light of Brown's statement concerning the date of and purpose for establishing a post at Traverse des Sioux, it is perfectly possible that the information is reliable. This American traveler joined Haydn at Traverse des Sioux in September, 1844, and traveled with his train for several days on the return trip to the Red River. Two specific points along the route mentioned by him assist in identifying the route followed by the train. One stop was made at the "Petit Rochelle" or Little Rock River, which flows into the Minnesota River from the north near Fort Ridgely.

other writings of his that there is little room for doubt that he was the author of the editorial. The Columbia Fur Company was organized in 1822, and its traders operated in the upper Minnesota Valley until 1827, when it was absorbed by the American Fur Company. Folwell, Minnesota, 1: 190. High Island Creek has its source in the southwesternmost township of McLeod County and runs in an easterly direction through Sibley County to the Minnesota River, a short distance north of Henderson. Rush River likewise flows eastward through Sibley County to the Minnesota River, a short distance south of Henderson. Upham, Geographic Names, 319, 520.

The other point mentioned is the Pomme de Terre River, which likewise flows into the Minnesota River from the north, a short distance above Lac qui Parle. ⁷

For many of the settlers in the Red River settlement, the trail to Traverse des Sioux offered a line of escape from the horrors of starvation and privation which beset the members of Lord Selkirk's colony. When Alexis Bailly returned to Mendota after his stock-selling venture in 1821, he is said to have brought with him five families which had become discouraged with conditions at the settlement. When the Long expedition passed through the country in 1823 on its way to the international boundary, it encountered at Lake Traverse several Swiss emigrants from the Red River settlement on their way to the American settlements on the Mississippi River. They were the forerunners of a stream of discouraged settlers who fled down the trail to an American haven. In the spring of 1826, in consequence of disastrous floods on the Red River, 243 settlers left the Red River colony in a body to make the long trek to Fort Snelling. In 1827 Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian agent for the upper Mississippi country, estimated that 330 refugees from the Red River country had reached Fort Snelling over

7. "Elk Hunting on the Prairies," in Spirit of the Times, 19: 87 (April 14, 1849).

the Red River trail since 1821.⁸

While the migration from the Red River settlement was getting under way, the trails themselves were becoming better known. In 1823 Major Stephen H. Long was ordered by the war department to make an expedition up the Minnesota River and down the Red River to the international boundary for the purpose of establishing the boundary from that point to Lake Superior. The official account of the journey, written by William H. Keating, who accompanied the expedition as mineralogist and geologist, gives us the first detailed description of the Red River route. From Fort Snelling, the main body of the expedition set out up the Minnesota River in canoes, with the remainder following on foot along the south bank of the river. Keating records that the difficulties of land travel at the beginning were great because of the marshy ground and heavy forests. At Traverse des Sioux, however, the entire expedition took to the land route because of the difficulty of paddling canoes in the shoal waters of the Minnesota. With the exception of the cut-off at the big bend of the Minnesota River, over the Traverse des Sioux, the party followed trails along the south bank to

8. Sibley, in Minnesota Historical Collections, 1: 383; Keating, Narrative, 2: 2; Folwell, Minnesota, 1: 217. For accounts of other journeys, see Mrs. Ann Adams, "Early Days at Red River Settlement, and Fort Snelling: Reminiscences, 1821-1829," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 6: 89-95 (St. Paul, 1894), and Augustus L. Chetlain, "The Red River Colony," in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 58: 47-55 (December, 1878).

Big Stone Lake. They crossed to the east side of the Red River Valley between Lake Traverse and Big Stone Lake, and for the remainder of the way to Pembina followed a trail used by Pembina traders and hunters, which ran close to the east bank of the stream; never getting more than a few miles away from it. When they reached a point opposite Pembina, they crossed the Red River on a ferry. The party was joined at Lake Traverse by a half-breed guide and four Frenchmen with six carts, who were returning to the Red River settlement. That the Red River settlers were content to travel with the Long party would seem to indicate that the trail was familiar to them. ⁹

The number of travelers over the Red River route during the following two decades can only be guessed at, for few records exist. It gradually became an important thoroughfare, however, and life along its way must have been full of diversion. In 1833, for example, the traders and Indians along the route must have blinked in astonishment at the sight of a flock of sheep, which was being driven from Kentucky through the wilderness to the

9. Keating, Narrative, 1: 324-458, 2: 1-32. Long's manuscript diary of this trip, in three small volumes, is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. The Italian adventurer, Giacomo C. Beltrami, accompanied the Long party to Pembina, and his account of the journey was published in French at New Orleans in 1824. In 1828 an English version was published at London entitled A Pilgrimage in Europe and America Leading to the Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and Bloody River, with a Description of the Whole Course of the Former, and of the Ohio.

Red River settlement. Robert Campbell, one of a party from the Red River country which performed the feat, left a journal of his trip, which described in considerable detail the route followed. Through the Minnesota country, the shepherds followed a route up the Red Cedar River almost to its source, and then turned toward the northwest, striking the Minnesota River near the big bend. With some difficulty, the extent of which can be imagined, they succeeded in getting their charges across the river, and a short distance farther on struck the trail along the north bank of the river. At Lake Traverse they crossed the Red River Valley, and followed along the west side of the valley to Pembina. 10

In 1835 George W. Featherstonhaugh, an English adventurer, obtained a commission as United States geologist, and, accompanied by Lieutenant William W. Mather of the United States army, made a journey of exploration through the Minnesota Valley. Featherstonhaugh's exploration tour, for the most part, was made by canoe; yet in the published account of the journey he throws some light upon the trade and trails in the Minnesota country. He records that the supply boats of the fur company traveled as far up the Minnesota as Patterson's Rapids, a full hundred miles above Traverse des Sioux. Here for the first

10. L. C. Sutherland, ed., "Driving Sheep from Kentucky to the Hudson's Bay Country," in Annals of Iowa, series 3, vol. 15, p. 243-253 (April, 1926).

time he mentions the "charette road of the Fur Company," over which, his guide informed him, the goods of the traders were borne in "carts or charettes with two wheels and one horse . . . across the prairies to their different trading posts." 11

The trail from the Red River did extend all the way to the mouth of the Minnesota, however, for during that summer the arrival at Fort Snelling of a train of carts bearing the goods of refugees from the Selkirk colony was chronicled. 12 John C. Frémont, who, as a captain in the regular army accompanied Joseph N. Nicollet on his exploring tour of western Minnesota during 1838, found that a practicable cart route led from Fort Snelling to Traverse des Sioux, for he traveled over it.

As our journey was to be over level and unbroken country the camp material was carried in one-horse carts, driven by Canadian voyageurs, the men usually employed by the Fur Company in their business through this region. . . . Our route lay up the Mini-sotah for about a hundred and fifteen miles, to a trading-post at the lower end of the Traverse des Sioux. . . . We travelled along the southern side of the river, passing on the way several Indian camps, and establishing at night the course of the river by astronomical observations. The Traverse des Sioux is a crossing-place about thirty

11. Featherstonhaugh, Canoe Voyage, 1: 328, 2: 13. The official report of Featherstonhaugh's expedition was published in 24 Congress, 1 session, Senate Executive Documents, no. 333 (serial 282) under the title Report of a Geological Reconnaissance Made in 1835, from the Seat of Government, by Way of Green Bay and the Wisconsin Territory, to the Coteau de Prairie, an Elevated Ridge Dividing the Missouri from the St. Peter's River.

12. Edward D. Neill, "Occurrences in and around Fort Snelling, from 1819 to 1840," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 2: 127 (St. Paul, 1889).

miles long, where the river makes a large rectangular bend, coming down from the northwest and turning abruptly to the northeast. . . . In this great elbow of the river is . . . Big Swan Lake, the summer resort of the Sisseton Sioux. Our way over the crossing lay between the lake and the river. At the end of the Traverse we returned to the right shore at the mouth of the . . . Cottonwood River. 13

At this point the Nicollet party left the Minnesota, and traveled up the valley of the Cottonwood River, and thence to the Pipestone quarries on the western border of present-day Minnesota. On the return trip, they turned northeastward and came to the Minnesota River at Lac qui Parle. No mention is made of the kind of roads or trails encountered on this portion of the journey, but it is more than probable that the carts of traders had traversed that portion of Minnesota long before the Nicollet party made the trip. 14

Stephen Riggs, who came to Minnesota to establish a mission among the Sioux at Lac qui Parle in 1837, reported that the road from Mendota to Traverse des Sioux was not to his liking. He records that he traveled by boat from Mendota to Traverse des Sioux and over the traders' road along the north bank of the Minnesota River the remainder of the way. As late as 1840, according to Riggs, the traders' trail ended at the Traverse, for "it was then regarded as absolutely impossible to take any wheeled vehicle through by land to Fort Snelling." A few years

13. John C. Frémont, Memoirs of My Life, 1: 34 (Chicago and New York, 1887).

14. Frémont, Memoirs, 1: 36.

later a land route was opened which was passable, but "it was very difficult." 15

Martin McLeod came to the Minnesota country from the opposite direction. He enlisted as a member of General James Dickson's unhappy filibustering expedition, which appeared in the Red River country during the winter of 1836. In March, 1837, McLeod left Pembina for a hazardous late winter trip by dog team to Mendota, during which he almost lost his life when a prairie blizzard overtook his party. He followed a route which led along the west side of the Red River, far enough from it to permit crossing the tributary streams in their upper reaches, where they could be forded easily. At the foot of Lake Traverse he crossed to the east side and followed the road to the American Fur Company post run by Joseph R. Brown. From Lake Traverse he went by cart to Traverse des Sioux, following the road along the north bank of the Minnesota River. The remainder of the journey was made by canoe. He followed a well-known trail, for, almost fifteen years before his journey, a little party of refugees from the Red River colony had followed the same route in escaping from the hardships of the Red River frontier. 16

By the late thirties there evidently were several

15. Stephen R. Riggs, Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux, 49, 51, 52, 71, 82 (Chicago, 1880).

16. Nute, ed., in Minnesota History Bulletin, 4: 408-418; Adams, in Minnesota Historical Collections, 6: 89.

trails in existence up the Red River Valley. One followed close to the east bank of the river, while, on the west side, one ran close to the river, and another, far enough from it to avoid the marshes and deep water at the mouths of the tributary streams. In the Minnesota Valley there were at least two main trails, one on each side of the river at least for a portion of the way. It is probable that the trail along the north side was the more important.

It was in the decade of the forties that the Red River trade became a distinct factor in the business of the American Fur Company. In 1843 or 1844 Norman W. Kittson established a post for the company at Pembina, and from this date until well into the sixties the Red River trade and trails played an important part in the development of Minnesota. Prior to this time, the Red River trade was carried on by independent traders. But when Kittson's post was opened, the problems of supplying it with goods and of transporting to Mendota the furs and hides which he obtained in trade became pressing. He solved it as the early Red River settlers had done -- by using cart trains. The first summer after he had opened his post he sent a small cart train to Traverse des Sioux by the old route to Lake Traverse and down the Minnesota Valley. Although he failed to realize any profit on this first venture, he repeated it the next year, and thereafter the Red River cart trains

became an established part of the Minnesota fur trade. 17

When it became apparent that Kittson's venture was going to prove profitable, a competitor appeared in the field. In 1846 or 1847 Joseph Rolette, one-time employee of Kittson, began business as an independent trader. Rolette was not satisfied with the route to the Minnesota country by way of the Minnesota Valley, perhaps because he had difficulty in disposing of his furs in direct competition with the American Fur Company agent. At any rate, his cart trains blazed a new route to the lower country. They followed the old route along the west side of the Red River Valley to the junction of the Otter Tail and Bois des Sioux rivers. At this point they struck off in a southeasterly direction to the valley of the Sauk River, which they followed to its mouth. They forded the Mississippi River a short distance above Sauk Rapids, and followed along its east bank to St. Paul, then still but a struggling village, often referred to by the old-time settlers living there as "Pig's Eye Landing." Rolette was a successful trader, and in 1847 he is said to have sent a train of 120 carts to St. Paul. The trail which he opened came, in time, to be the main route of travel between the Red River country and Minnesota, although

17. Clarence W. Rife, "Norman W. Kittson, A Fur-Trader at Pembina," in Minnesota History, 6: 229, 245-248 (September, 1925); Pritchett, in Minnesota History Bulletin, 5: 413; J. Fletcher Williams, History of the City of Saint Paul, 48, 304 (Minnesota Historical Collections, vol. 4 -- St. Paul, 1876).

for a while the Kittson trains continued to follow the Minnesota Valley route. 18

During the forties other routes from the Red River country came into prominence. It is probable that at least some portions of them long had been traveled by the buffalo hunters of Pembina, as well as by traders. Corresponding to the trail which skirted the western edge of the Red River Valley where the tributary streams were shallow, was a trail on the east side. This trail ran southeastward from Pembina to about the site of present-day Thief River Falls. Here it turned southward and followed the sandy beaches of glacial Lake Agassiz to Elbow Lake, where it joined the Rolette trail. This route apparently was well traveled in the later years of the forties, for Major Samuel Woods, who made a reconnaissance of the Red River Valley in 1849 to select a site for a military post, planned to follow this route to Pembina. Unusually muddy roads on the route deterred him, however, and he went instead by way of the Rolette trail. 19

18. Williams, Saint Paul, 160; Pembina Settlement, 14 (31 Congress, 1 session, House Executive Documents, no. 51 -- serial 577); Pritchett, in Minnesota History Bulletin, 5: 413. An account of the arrival of a cart train, undoubtedly Rolette's, at St. Paul on July 10, 1847, is contained in the Wisconsin Herald of Lancaster for July 31, 1847. For a time after 1852, a route which led more directly to Traverse des Sioux from the upper Minnesota Valley was popular. It was not extensively used, however, because of the danger of Indian attacks. Weekly Minnesotian (St. Paul), July 24, 1852; Minnesota Democrat (St. Paul), August 2, 1854.

19. Pembina Settlement, 6, 8, 9.

Sometime during the decade the "woods trail" was opened by Red River travelers. This route to the Minnesota country followed the easternmost trail from Pembina to a point a short distance south of the crossing of the Wild Rice River. Then it turned eastward, skirted the north shores of Detroit and Otter Tail lakes, followed the valleys of the Leaf and Crow Wing rivers, and crossed the Mississippi River at Crow Wing. From that point it led southward along the east bank of the Mississippi and joined the Rolette trail at Sauk Rapids. William Hallet, an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, is said to have opened this road in 1844, after an attack on a cart train by unfriendly Sioux Indians the preceding season. This route had one very obvious advantage for the Red River people, for many of them were related by blood or marriage to Indians of the Chippewa tribes, and this road passed almost entirely through Chippewa territory. Jonathan E. Fletcher, agent for the Chippewa Indians of the upper Mississippi, stated in 1849 that there was communication with Pembina over this route as early as 1847, and Henry M. Rice reported that in 1848 the half-breeds from Pembina brought a large quantity of pemmican to Crow Wing and that he purchased several thousand pounds of it. Travel along the route was likely to be difficult and expensive, for it led through much swampy and heavily wooded country. The cart brigades, therefore, preferred the prairie trails. Yet it was a favored route for winter.

travel, the woods along the way providing a friendly shelter from the bitter storms that raged on the prairies. 20

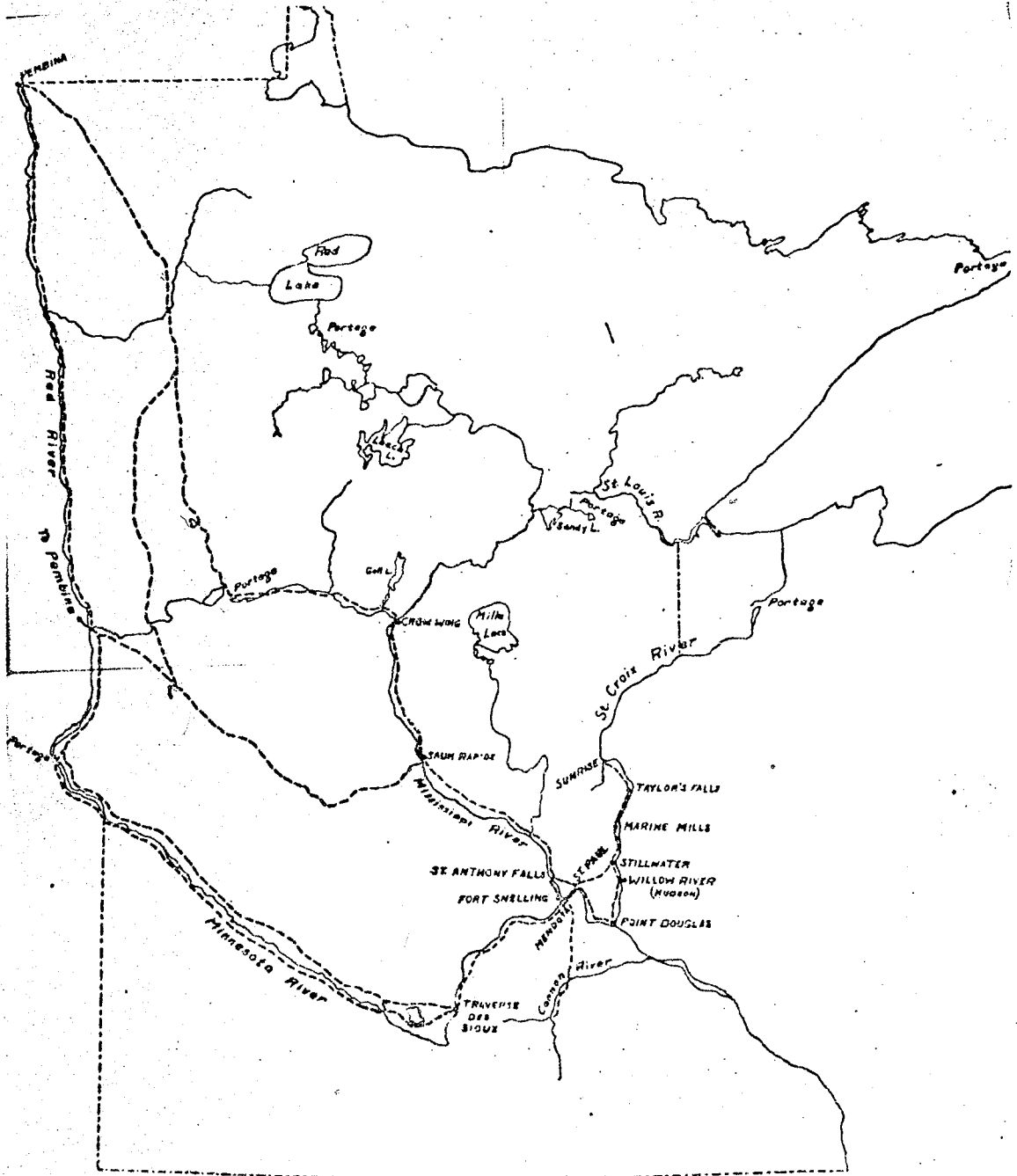
There was one other route to the Red River settlements from the Mendota post of the American Fur Company. It was a winter route, leading to Pembina from Crow Wing over the frozen surfaces of Gull, Leech, Cass, and Red lakes. During open seasons, if it was used at all, it served as a canoe route. Apparently it was used in the main for carrying mail. Throughout the greater portion of the territorial period, the only mail communication possible between the two centers of population was by private carrier, and only a limited number of mail deliveries were made each year. During the summer season, the mail was entrusted to any traveler who chanced to be passing through, although generally a leader of a cart train assumed charge of it. During the winter Kittson and Sibley maintained communication by special messenger, and in 1850 the traders at Pembina and the Hudson's Bay Company united to establish a private mail service. A government mail route, on a monthly basis, was established in 1852 from Pembina to Crow Wing, but it was discontinued after about a year. The long journey was made by dog team during the winter and took from

20. Minnesota Democrat, August 2, 1854; John C. Schultz, The Old Crow Wing Trail, 4, 12 (Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Transactions, no. 45 -- Winnipeg, 1894).

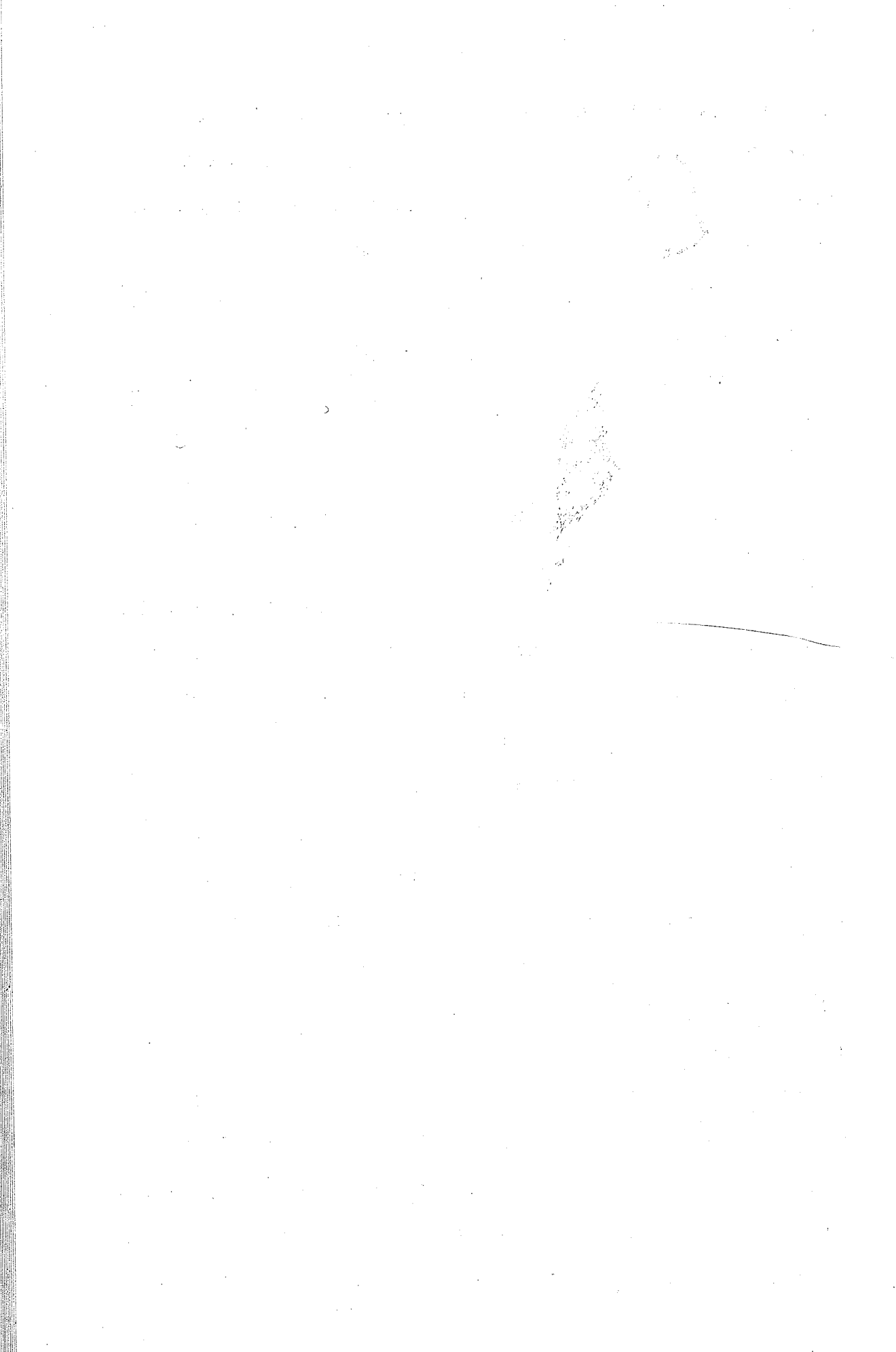
twenty days to a month, depending upon the occurrence of winter storms. The dog sled was a toboggan-like conveyance -- "a single plank turned up at one end like a fiddlehead," was the way Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike described it -- drawn by a team of from three to seven dogs, usually hitched tandem. Under favorable conditions, the traineau de glace, as the voyageurs called it, could travel from thirty to fifty miles in a day. Winter travelers usually went in pairs, partly for protection against the hazards of the trip, but also because the handling of a dog sled on unbroken trails required two men. One of them went ahead of the dogs to break the trail through the soft snow, and the other traveled behind to guide the sled. Snowshoes were an important part of their equipment. 21

The Red River trails were so variable that they scarcely could be called roads. Rather they were routes of travel. The traders' caravans rarely followed exact-

21. Minnesota Pioneer, March 6, 1850, January 29, September 9, 1852, December 1, 1853; Minnesota Democrat, February 11, 1851; Daily Minnesota Pioneer (St. Paul), December 13, 1854; Daily Pioneer and Democrat (St. Paul), May 13, 1856; Fred B. Sibley to Henry H. Sibley, February 26, 1853, in the Sibley Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. The perils of winter travel are graphically described in the pages of Martin McLeod's diary which record his journey from Pembina to Lake Traverse in March, 1837. See Nute, ed., in Minnesota History Bulletin, 4: 408-415. Selah G. Wright, a missionary at Red Lake, recorded that, on a winter trip from his mission to Pembina in 1843, his conveyance was an ox-drawn sled, which consisted of a plank fifteen feet long with one end turned up. Nute, in Minnesota History Bulletin, 5: 567.



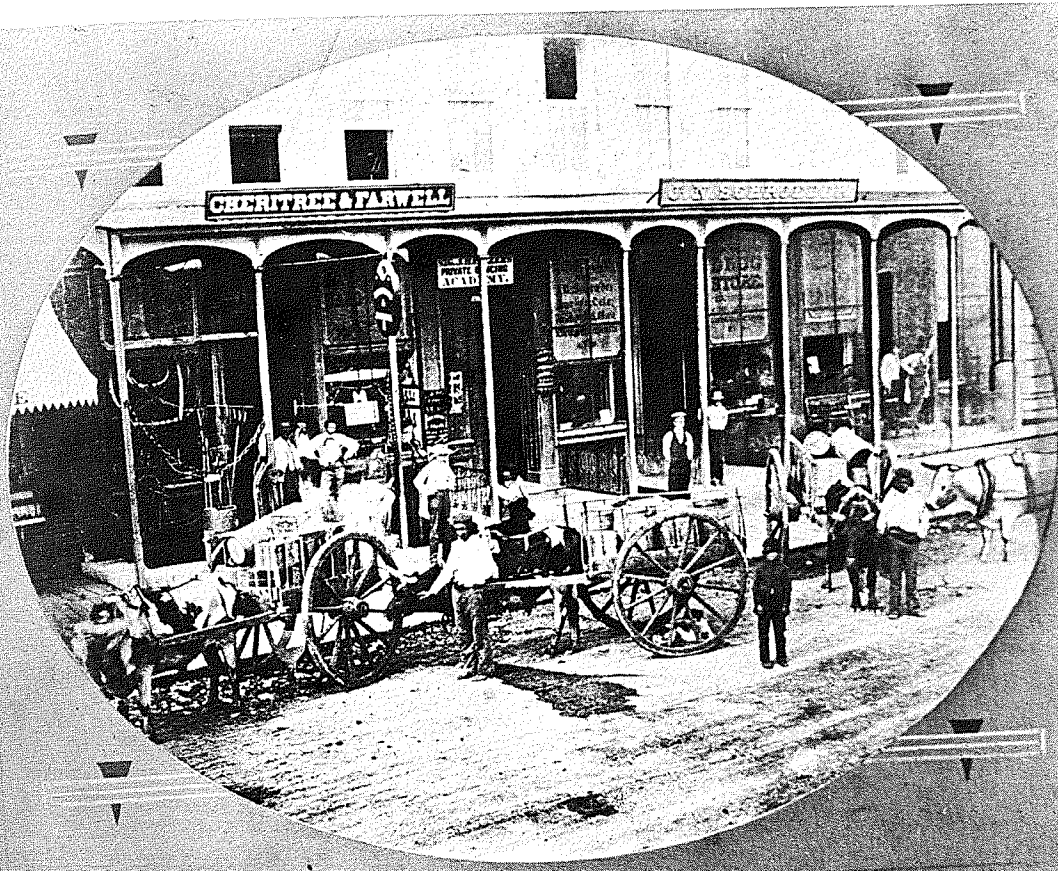
MAIN ROUTES OF TRAVEL IN PRE-TERRITORIAL MINNESOTA



ly the same trail two years in succession. The trains went where grass was most abundant for pasturing the stock, where troublesome Indians were most easily avoided, and where the grades were easiest, the ground firmest, and the fording places shallowest. Since the oxen or horses had to find their forage along the route, traveling on the trails was restricted to the period between late spring and winter. The prairie grasses usually were tall enough to furnish forage in May, and the departure of the trains usually took place during that month. Ordinarily, they returned to the Pembina region during September, although trains occasionally made the trip later. Upon such occasions, however, they ran the risk of being overtaken by the sudden fall blizzards prevalent in prairie regions, or by the equally hazardous prairie fires, kindled by Indians, by careless travelers, or by lightning. The fires destroyed the feed for the cattle, and many a caravan endured incredible hardships as a consequence of encountering them.

Over this network of trading routes, the commerce of the frontier passed, and the symbol of that commerce was the unique, unwieldy Red River cart. How the carts originated, no one knows, but they were extensively used in the prairie regions of the Red River Valley almost from the time the first white men appeared there. They were typically the product of frontier resourcefulness and of frontier poverty. A wagon or cart was needed

on the far fringe of civilization, but it was impracticable to import it. The plainsman, therefore, devised a cart of his own. Two large wooden wheels, crudely but sturdily built, were mounted on a heavy wooden axle upon which a box-like framework was fastened. Because of the scarcity of iron on the frontier, none was used in the manufacture of the cart. Instead, pegs of hardwood and fastenings of rawhide held the cart together. Since it was made of the materials at hand, the cartman could repair it with the materials that he found along the line of march. When fully loaded with from four to eight hundred pounds of furs or other goods, it could be drawn by a single ox or pony hitched to wooden thills with a harness of rawhide, and one gaudily dressed half-breed often drove four or five of them. He drove the lead animal, and those behind were hitched to the carts ahead by their halter straps. It was an awkward appearing contrivance, but it was light and strong, and the huge dished wheels passed lightly over ground too soft to sustain smaller wheels. The wilderness cartman used no lubrication on his vehicle, save only an occasional application of buffalo tallow, and an unmusical screeching and wailing of a wooden hub fretting against a wooden axle was an inevitable accompaniment of each revolution of a cart wheel. Occasionally several hundred carts traveled in a train, and the noise of their passage could be heard



RED RIVER OXCARTS ON THE STREETS OF ST. PAUL IN 1859
[From a photograph in the possession of the
Minnesota Historical Society.]



for miles around. ²²

The Red River trade was an important part of frontier economy. One historian has estimated that four-fifths of the entire annual shipment of furs and robes from St. Paul came from the Red River country. The number of carts employed in the trade increased until, during the height of the trade in 1858, as many as six hundred carts were reported to have made the annual excursion. The factors which led to the decline of the cart caravans consisted largely of improvements in the means of transportation. In 1859 a steamboat was placed in service on the Red River and a wagon road was opened to the river. The steamboat shortened the land journey to a little more than two hundred miles, and the road made it possible to transport furs to St. Paul by team more rapidly and at less expense than could be done by oxcart. The Red River cart traffic was dealt its mortal blow by the railroad. The St. Paul and Pacific Railroad was completed between St. Paul and St. Anthony during the summer of 1862. Each year thereafter, it was pushed a little farther toward the northwest, and each year more and more of the carts stopped at the terminus of the railroad. When the caravans set out

22. Pembina Settlement, 11, 14; Folwell, Minnesota, 1: 226; W. G. Fonseca, On the St. Paul Trail in the Sixties, 2-4 (Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Transactions, no. 56 -- Winnipeg, 1900); Joseph J. Hargrave, Red River, 58-60 (Montreal, 1871); Minnesota Democrat, July 22, 1851.

in 1866, the railroad had been completed to St. Cloud, and for the next few years, the southern terminus of the cart trains which still continued in the trade was there. In 1872 the Northern Pacific Railroad was completed to Moorhead on the Red River, and thereafter the annual pilgrimages of the Red River cart caravans ceased. 23

While the carts of the Red River caravans were wearing trails into the tough prairie sod, other factors were at work to help build a foundation for a road system in the Minnesota region. One of these was the government of the United States, which, during the decade following the war with England, was seeking to extend and consolidate its authority on the western frontier. In 1818 the army chiefs were evolving a plan for frontier defense which contemplated the establishment of a military frontier far in advance of the frontier of settlement. To provide for the control of the Indians and to protect the interests of American fur trad-

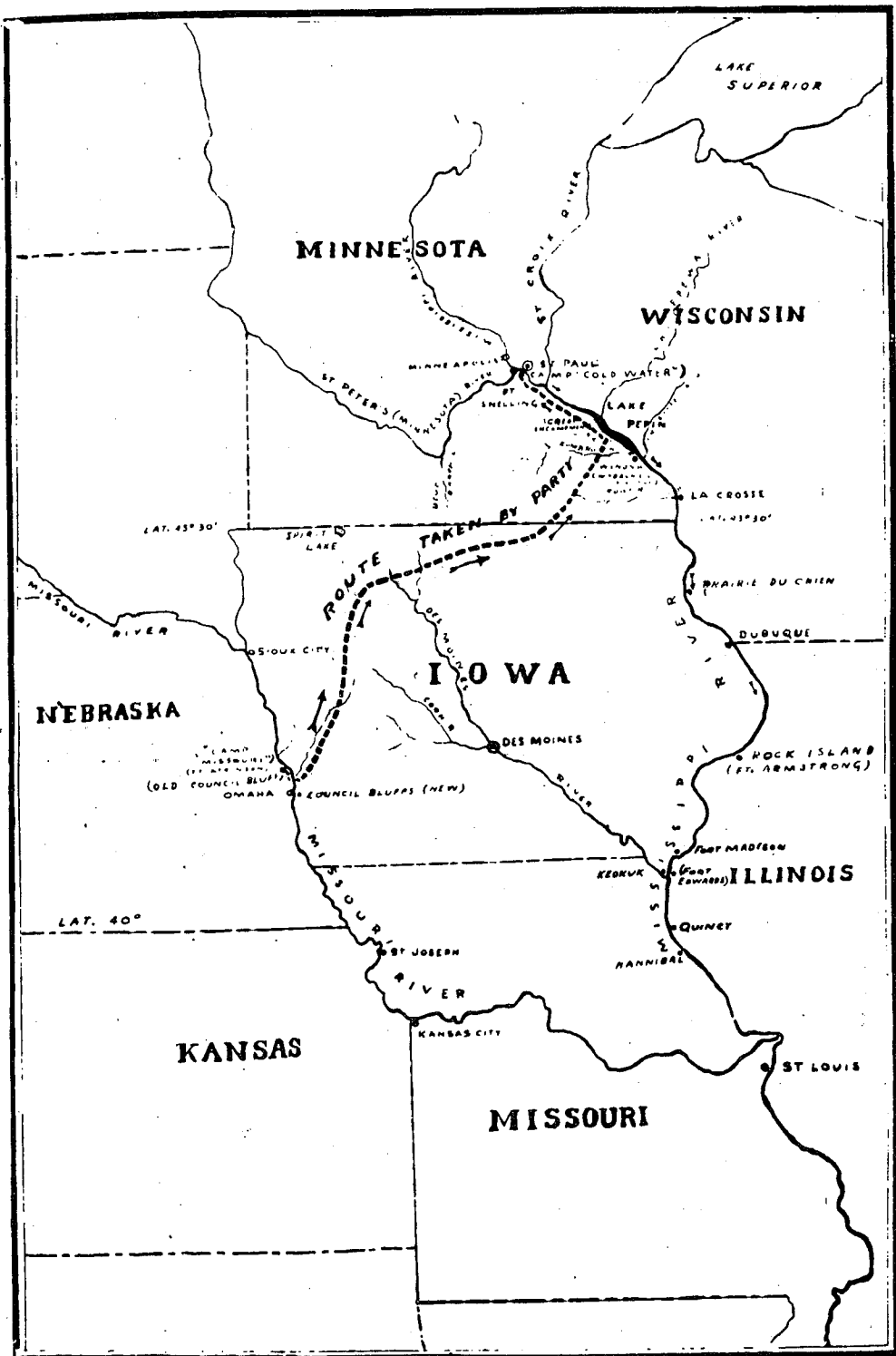
23. Williams, Saint Paul, 306; Russell Blakeley, "Opening of the Red River of the North to Commerce and Civilization," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 8: 45-66 (St. Paul, 1898). The Sauk Rapids New Era for August 9, 1860, recorded the arrival of a train of 30 wagons, belonging to the Burbank company, loaded with 430 bales of buffalo robes and 50 bales of furs, which they were carrying from the Red River to St. Paul for the Hudson's Bay Company. The entire shipment from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1860 amounted to more than 2,100 bales of furs and robes, and 130 teams were kept constantly on the road to haul them.

ers, the army planned to construct a series of frontier forts. One of these was to be located at the mouth of the Minnesota River, and another, either at the mouth of the Yellowstone River or at the Mandan villages on the Missouri River in present-day North Dakota. In 1819 Colonel Henry Leavenworth was sent with a detachment of troops to construct the post on the upper Mississippi River, and at the same time another expedition under the command of Colonel Henry Atkinson set off toward the mouth of the Yellowstone River. The Leavenworth command fulfilled its mission by establishing the post which later became Fort Snelling. The Yellowstone expedition found such obstacles in the way of navigating the Missouri River in the imperfect steamboats with which it was provided, that it got no farther than the Council Bluffs, not far from the site of present-day Omaha. There Atkinson established "Camp Missouri," which became a permanent post known as Fort Atkinson. These two frontier posts were to co-operate with one another in the enforcement of the law and preservation of order, but co-operation was dependent upon the establishment of a means of communication. The distance between them was almost 1,200 miles by water, but only 300 miles of wilderness separated them. It therefore was essential that a land route be opened. 24

24. American State Papers: Military Affairs, 2: 33; Valentine M. Porter, ed., "Journal of Stephen Watts Kearny,"

In the summer of 1820 a small detachment of soldiers under the command of Captain Matthew J. Magee was dispatched from the post on the Missouri River to explore a route for a road to Fort Snelling. Magee had orders to head directly to the new fort, but the country was unknown to the party, and their guides proved unreliable. They went up the valley of the Boyer River almost to its source in western Iowa, then turning to the northeast, they passed a few miles south of Spirit Lake. They had hoped to reach the Minnesota River, but by the time they came to the Des Moines River they were hopelessly lost. They turned more and more to the east, and from the Des Moines River to a point just beyond the Cedar River they traveled almost along what is today

in Missouri Historical Collections, 3: 8-12; Edgar B. Wesley, Guarding the Frontier, 144-158 (Minneapolis, 1935). Atkinson's instructions for opening the road toward Fort Snelling are contained in a letter from the secretary of war, John C. Calhoun, dated April 10, 1820; a letter from Calhoun to Leavenworth of the same date contains instructions to open the road toward Council Bluffs. Letter book copies of these letters are in the War Department Archives in Washington. The letters cited may be found in volume 11, pages 17 and 18, respectively, of the Secretary of War, Letter Books. Photostatic copies of many of the documents in the archives of the war and interior departments which are cited in this work are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. That society also has copies of calendars of those archives compiled by Dr. Newton D. Mereness. For the sake of convenience, in citing a document in the war or interior department archives, the number assigned to the item in the calendar will be placed in parentheses after the citation. The calendar numbers for the above citations are 1048 and 1049, respectively.



Modern Map Showing Route Taken by the Exploring Party (1820) in Crossing from the Missouri to the Mississippi River.

ROUTE FOLLOWED BY CAPTAIN MCGEE
 [From Missouri Historical Collections, 3: 16.]



the boundary line between Iowa and Minnesota. After crossing the Cedar River they turned northward, crossed the Zumbro River, and reached the Mississippi at the village of the Sioux chief, Red Wing, on Lake Pepin. They were still fifty miles from their destination, but by following Indian trails along the banks of the Mississippi River they reached the fort without further difficulty. They were not satisfied with the route they had followed, and the report of Captain Stephen W. Kearny, who accompanied the expedition, indicated that it would not be practicable for other than small forces because of the scarcity of wood and water and the rugged character of the country, and he advised against the construction of a military road over it. ²⁵

The unfavorable report on the proposed road caused the project to lapse. The explorers returned to their post on the Missouri River by boat, and the probability of opening a land route seemed remote. It is possible that one or more of the members of the expedition returned by the land route or that they made a later exploration, for a map published in 1823 in Edwin James's account of the Long expedition clearly shows a route

25. Porter, ed., in Missouri Historical Collections, 3: 8-29, 99-131; Wesley, Guarding the Frontier, 158; brigade order to Magee to command an expedition to mark a route from Council Bluffs to Fort Snelling, June 23, 1820, in War Department Archives, Adjutant General's Office, Miscellaneous Collection, Letter Books, 1792-1826, vol. 24, p. 72 (Calendar, 522).

from the fort on the Missouri River to the outpost at the mouth of the Minnesota River, which is labeled "Lt. Talcotts route in 1820." Lieutenant Andrew Talcott, of the engineers corps, accompanied the Magee expedition, but the route indicated on the James map is not the one Magee followed. In 1820 Lewis Cass recommended that Talcott would be a suitable person to conduct an expedition up the Minnesota River, and, although no report of it has been found, such an exploration may have been made. At any rate, the map in the James account shows a route closely following the Minnesota River from its mouth to the point where the river turns toward the northwest, and thence leading almost directly to the fort on the Missouri River. 26

For a decade and a half no further effort was made to open a land route between the Missouri and upper Mississippi country. During the middle thirties, however, the question of frontier defense was again raised, and in 1836 Congress appropriated \$100,000 for the construction of a military road along the

26. Porter, ed., in Missouri Historical Collections, 3: 27. James's Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820 . . . under the Command of Maj. S. H. Long, is reprinted in volumes 14-17 of Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., Early Western Travels, 1748-1846 (Cleveland, 1905). The map referred to is reproduced on page 30 of volume 14. No record has been found to indicate that Leavenworth dispatched a party from Fort Snelling to open a road to Council Bluffs in compliance with the instructions of April 10, 1820, from Calhoun. See ante, p. 27n. It may be that Talcott was selected for this duty upon the arrival of the Magee expedition.

whole western frontier from the Red River in Arkansas to the upper Mississippi River between the Des Moines and Minnesota rivers, connecting all the outlying frontier posts. Construction on it was to be held to a minimum, and the soldiers garrisoned on the frontier were to do only as much work as was needed to make it passable. Explorations for the new route were begun immediately. The road was divided into three sections, the northernmost of which extended from Fort Snelling to Fort Leavenworth. In July, 1838, Captain Nathan Boone of Fort Leavenworth arrived at Fort Snelling having completed his reconnaissance of the northern division. By the end of 1839 construction on the middle and southern sections was well under way, but on the recommendation of the quartermaster general of the army no work was done on the northern division, inasmuch as the whole region was "represented as an open prairie, that may be traversed in all directions without difficulty." To preserve the line of communication, however, he recommended that intermediate army posts be established near the mouth of the Big Sioux River on the Missouri River, and at some place on the Minnesota River. 27

27. Statutes at Large, 5: 67; report of the quartermaster general, November 29, 1839, in 26 Congress, 1 session, Senate Executive Documents, no. 1, p. 112-115 (serial 354). The exact route followed by Boone is not known, but Captain James Allen, who in the summer of 1844 made an expedition from Fort Des Moines through the Indian country of southern Minnesota and eastern South Dakota, discovered a stake in the prairie sod

These explorations were not destined to result in the construction of roads, but they were forerunners of an extensive program of military roads inaugurated in Minnesota after the organization of the territory. They added to the knowledge of the topography of Minnesota, and eventually a military road was constructed along the general route they covered, while the creation of Fort Ridgely on the Minnesota River in 1853 was an echo of the recommendation of the war department in 1839. In other ways, too, the military assisted in outlining the road system of Minnesota. The expeditions of Major Long and Major Woods delineated the great arteries of travel to the Red River country. The soldiers at Fort Snelling constructed roads in the vicinity of the fort -- to the Falls of St. Anthony and to Lake Calhoun -- and they were instrumental in establishing the ferry across the Minnesota River at Mendota. 28

near the Des Moines River in the vicinity of present-day Windom and explains that he "thought it was probably on the route of Captain Boone . . . from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Snelling . . . though I could see no other trace of their march." Jacob Van der Zee, ed., "Captain James Allen's Dragoon Expedition from Fort Des Moines, Territory of Iowa, in 1844," in Iowa Journal of History and Politics, 11: 92 (January, 1913). The route followed by Boone, therefore, probably skirted the north shore of Heron Lake, and very likely reached the Minnesota River at the great bend near Mankato.

28. Marcus L. Hansen, Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858, 73, 81 (Iowa City, 1918); E. S. Seymour, Sketches of Minnesota, the New England of the West, 117-119 (New York, 1850).

When Fort Snelling was established in 1819, it was far beyond the fringes of civilization. Within a score of years, however, the process of settlement brought people to its very walls, and, where Indians had once roved at will, the beginnings of towns and cities were to be found. Up to 1837 the infant settlements in the shadow of Fort Snelling were located on Indian lands. The negotiation of treaties during the summer of that year with the Sioux and Chippewa Indians resulted in the relinquishment of the Indian title to the portion of the Minnesota country east of the Mississippi River and south of a line drawn due east from the mouth of the Crow Wing River. One of the strongest forces that had worked for the negotiation of the treaties was the lumbering interest, for the valley of the St. Croix River possessed forests of white pine unequalled in the Northwest, and lumbermen of Wisconsin and Michigan were casting covetous eyes that way. Indeed, some of them had not waited until the treaties were negotiated to cut a few trees. In 1837 a town was laid out at the falls of the St. Croix River, and two years later the first sawmill was built at Marine. On the site of present-day Stillwater, Joseph R. Brown, one-time drummer boy at Fort Snelling, Indian trader, and lumberman, laid out a townsite which he called Dakotah. Lumber camps appeared in the choice forests of white pine, and the hum of the sawmill testified to

a rapidly growing industry. Within a dozen years of the signing of the treaties, lumbermen had gained a firm foothold in the Minnesota country, and a dotting of cleared spaces in the wilderness between Stillwater and the landing, which was dignified by the name St. Paul, presaged the advance of an agricultural frontier. 29

The lumbermen were probably the first road builders in the timberlands of the St. Croix Valley. Not a great deal is known about the roads they built, for they were but temporary trails. When the marketable timber in a locality was exhausted, the lumber camp was removed, and the roads were permitted to grow up to wilderness again. The logs were cut in the interior, hauled over rough trails to the bank of a neighboring stream, and, when the spring thaw came, were floated down to the great mills at Stillwater, St. Anthony Falls, and Marine Mills. As the streams in the spring served as highways for carrying the cut of the season to the mills, so, in the winter, they served as the highways over which the infrequent trips were made from lumber camps to mills or towns. The roads of the lumbermen were not elaborate, for the heavy snowfalls of Minnesota

29. Folwell, Minnesota, 1: 213-230. Agricultural settlement began in Woodbury and Newport townships of Washington County in 1845 and 1847, respectively, while emigrants from the Red River country settled in Afton and Lakeland townships between 1837 and 1842. George E. Warner and Charles M. Foote, eds., History of Washington County and the St. Croix Valley, 381, 386, 400, 413 (Minneapolis, 1881).

winters leveled off the uneven places, and the process of construction usually consisted merely of the removal of brush and the cutting of stumps even with the ground. Sometimes these logging trails became the basis for roads of another generation, for, even when abandoned, traces of them remained for a decade or more. ³⁰

The growth of settlement in the area west of the St. Croix River necessitated the provision of a more adequate system of government. In 1837, therefore, the ceded area was added to Crawford County, which comprised most of the northwestern portion of the territory of Wisconsin. Two years later, Joseph R. Brown was elected delegate from Crawford County to the Wisconsin territorial legislature. He was responsible for the passage of an act, early in 1840, that divided Crawford County, and created from the northern portion a new county called St. Croix. Most of the settlers in the new county were living in the St. Croix Valley, and, when they voted on a location for the county seat, they chose Brown's mythical city of Dakotah. Thus, the center for the government of St. Croix County was placed on future

30. Daniel Stanchfield, "History of Pioneer Lumbering on the Upper Mississippi and Its Tributaries," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 9: 325-362 (St. Paul, 1901). A brief description of logging roads may be found on page 346 of this article. An illustration of the adaptation of an old logging road to the needs of a later generation may be found in the opening of a road from Superior to Taylor's Falls in 1854, a portion of which followed a logging road. See post, p.109.

Minnesota soil, and, almost ten years before the organization of Minnesota Territory, the voters were gaining experience in handling their local affairs under a county government. 31

In the Wisconsin plan of government county commissioners had the power to make arrangements for opening new roads upon petition of at least ten householders in the township in which the proposed road was to be located, six of whom were required to live in the immediate vicinity of the road. Three disinterested electors of the county, chosen by the commissioners, were to select the route for the proposed road. Upon the completion of their task, they were required to deposit a copy of their proceedings with the county commissioners, who, if the report favored the opening of the road, assumed the responsibility for its completion. To keep roads in repair, the office of road supervisor was created. This officer, who was appointed by the county commissioners, had to see that all male citizens of his district between the ages of 21 and 50 worked on the roads for two days in each year. To him also was entrusted the task of collecting the road tax, imposed by the county commissioners, which was not to exceed one-half of one per cent of the value of the real estate assessed. The tax was payable either in money

31. Folwell, Minnesota, 1: 231-234.

or in labor on the roads at the rate of two dollars per day. If the county commissioners decided that bridges were needed, it was the duty of the supervisor to build them. Money for their construction was to be supplied by the commissioners from the general road fund.³²

At the first meeting of the commissioners of St. Croix County in October, 1840, one road supervisor was appointed. The following year, however, three such officials were named, probably because the territorial legislature of Wisconsin in 1841 passed acts authorizing the opening of three roads, from Marine Mills on the St. Croix to Gray Cloud Island on the Mississippi River, from the falls of the St. Croix River to Marine Mills, and from Prescott's Ferry at the mouth of the St. Croix River to Gray Cloud Island. For most of the remaining years before Wisconsin became a state, the records of the county commissioners are available, and they show that road supervisors were appointed every year except in 1844 and 1846. Apparently there was little activity in road construction, however, for, aside from opening the roads authorized by the Wisconsin legislature in 1841, the only other work recorded was that of locating a road from Stillwater to Marine Mills in October, 1847. There must also have been a road of some kind leading to the mouth of the St. Croix River, for the county commissioners in 1840 authorized

32. Wisconsin Territory, Statutes, 1839, p. 107-114.

Philander Prescott to operate a ferry there, and in the spring of 1844, the half-starved settlers at the falls of the St. Croix cut a road "fifty miles to Fort Snelling." Pioneer accounts record that there was also a road from St. Paul to Stillwater which was traveled at least as early as 1847. A visitor to Minnesota early in 1849 described these roads and also a much-traveled wagon road leading from Taylor's Falls to the pineries on Sunrise River. The roads of pre-territorial Minnesota were, for the most part, natural trails; that is, practically the only work done on them was to remove the timber and brush. They resembled the traders' trails which crossed the western prairies in that they varied from year to year as the old routes became rutted or full of mudholes, or as new ones were discovered which were shorter or smoother. 33

By 1849 Minnesota already had a considerable framework of roads upon which to build. The traders of the Indian country left a network of trails which led to the far western portions of the territory. The military guardians of the frontier left a projected, although

33. Moses M. Strong, History of the Territory of Wisconsin, from 1836 to 1848, 343, 374, 375 (Madison, 1885); Warner and Foote, eds., Washington County, 193, 322, 328, 330; Stanchfield, in Minnesota Historical Collections, 9: 335; Seymour, Sketches of Minnesota, 177-197; Florence A. Hartwig, "Earliest Political Activity and Organization in the Upper Mississippi Country," 51, 53, 60. The latter is a master's thesis, in manuscript form, which was submitted at the University of Minnesota in 1926.

uncompleted, system of military roads and an increased knowledge of the Minnesota country. Minnesota also inherited a few struggling settlements and rambling roads in the St. Croix delta, which provided the nucleus for future growth. More important than all these in the development of the Minnesota road system was the heritage received from the territory of Wisconsin in the form of a body of laws, providing the basis for the government of the territory of Minnesota.

