

Early Red River of the North Valley History

As early as 1812 Lord Selkirk opened settlements from Winnipeg to Pembina and invited people to settle there. In 1821 several Swiss settled in the Valley. But due to storms, floods, poor crops and grasshoppers they left.

The Red River Valley was also along the route of several of the oxen trails from the Selkirk settlements to the Mississippi river. Furs were transported along these trails starting in the early 1800's. In the late 1850's steamboats were traveling the river from Fort Garry, Canada to a small place called LaFayette, opposite the river of the Cheyenne River.

Norwegian migration to the Red River Valley started in 1869 primarily due to newspaper articles written by Paul Hjelm Hansen. In 1869 Gov. William R. Marshall asked Hansen to go the area north of Fort Abercrombie and investigate the land for possible settlement. Hansen was so impressed with the area that he wrote several articles and letters for Norwegian language journals and newspapers describing the area. His articles described fertile land free of stumps and stones attracted the many Norwegians. At this time (1870) there were only 2405 non-Indian people in Dakota and most of them were near Pembina. On the Minnesota side of the Red River were located very few farms between Fort Abercrombie, located south of Fargo, North Dakota and Fort Garry located at present Winnipeg.

As noted before, many of the Norwegians tended to settle with others who came from the same area in Norway. The Red River Valley did not have that same experience probably because most of the people came from some other place in America. And yet we find that some of the people did try to settle with people from the same general area of Norway. Along the Sheyenne River large groups of people from the Hallingdal Valley took land. Along the Wild Rice River and near Halstad most of the people were from Trondelag. The Goose River area has many settlers from Gudbrandsdalen area of Norway. The northern part of the Valley is more mixed than the southern part.

Perhaps the first Norwegians in the Red River Valley were two brothers, Bernhard and Christian Bye who came to the United States as small children from Roros, Norway. They were in southern Minnesota when they heard of the Red River Valley and decided to explore the opportunities of free land described by Hjelm Hansen. The two brothers started for Fort Abercrombie but got lost on the way. They parted ways with Bernhard going north and Christian going northwest. Christian came to Fort Abercrombie and went then north to Hickson where he settled. Bernhard ended up near Hillsboro where he settled. The next year Christian went back to Wilmington to bring back his wife and twin daughters. Their third daughter, Ida born after they returned, was the first Norwegian child born in the Red River Valley settlements.

About the same time Bernt Andersen from Hedemark, Norway settled near Christian Bye. They became the first Norwegian settlers in Cass County of North Dakota. During the same year Ole Thompson from Hallingdal and Peder Nokken from Sogn settled on

land across the Red River and were the first Norwegian settlers in Clay County of Minnesota. The following years saw many Norwegians settling in the Red River Valley.

The early settlers had to go to St. Cloud to trade their products for the supplies they needed. The trip with ox carts took about four weeks. Later Alexandria and finally Moorhead became trade centers for the early settlers. In the northern part of the Valley Grand Forks became a trade center.