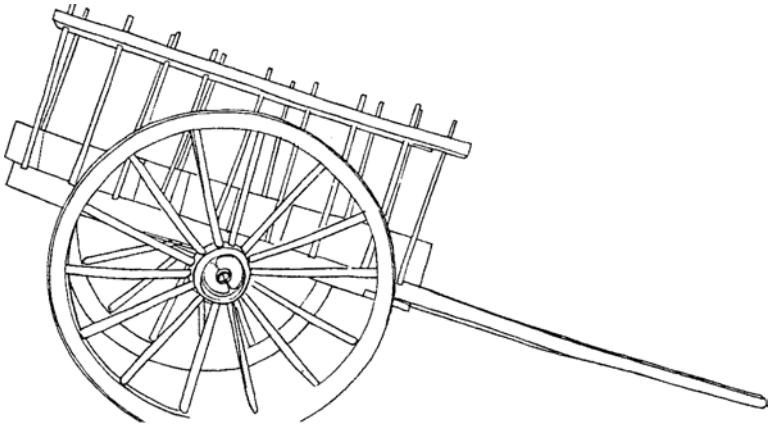


CHAPTER 4



Indian, Métis, and White in the Red River Valley

THE RED RIVER COUNTRY was part of a remote region at the center of the North American continent. West of the river was a vast grassland, the Northern Great Plains, supporting immense herds of buffalo; north of the prairies, stretching northwest of Hudson Bay, lay the fur forest, producing fine peltries. Three waterways led into the area: The Hudson Bay–Hayes River–Lake Winnipeg route; the St. Lawrence–Ottawa–Great Lakes–Lake of the Woods route; and the Mississippi–Missouri route. These connected it with the outside world, with centers of population and commerce in the eastern United States and western Europe.

Outsiders came by way of the Bay and the Great Lakes to exploit the fur forests; they came by way of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers to exploit the buffalo plains. Their aim was to make the region a colonial hinterland of some outside center of trade. As they struggled for supremacy, they made the Indian dependent upon their trade goods; they debauched

him with liquor; they married Indian women and produced a new race of mixed blood, the métis; and they established an agricultural settlement, the Selkirk colony, on the Red River of the North.

For many years the fine peltries of the fur forest went to English and European markets. Eventually, the Hudson's Bay Company (coming from England by way of the Bay) beat out the North West Company (coming from Montreal by way of the Great Lakes). But later the métis and the settlers of the Selkirk colony, aided by American traders from the Mississippi, revolted against the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company and tied the Red River region to St. Paul and American markets. Buffalo robes and pemmican, products of the grassland, began to flow southward.

The flow of trade changed because the Red River cart solved the problem of freighting on the level grassland. It became the foundation of both the métis buffalo hunt—the first non-Indian exploitation of the grassland—and of trade with St. Paul. And it was the métis' use of the Red River cart which finally broke the isolation of the Red River Valley and made it a commercial highway serving outside markets.

ORGANIZATION OF THE INDIAN TRADE

The valley of the Red River of the north played a part in the fur trade of British North America as well as in that of the northwestern United States. Three British groups came to the valley: The Hudson's Bay Company, the North West Company, and small traders from Mackinac.

In 1670, Charles II granted the Hudson's Bay Company a monopoly on trade in Rupert's Land, the region draining into Hudson Bay. The company soon built forts on the Bay, one of the most important being York Factory, located between the mouths of the Nelson and Hayes rivers. For more than a century the company remained on the Bay while the Indians carried their peltries to its forts. After France surrendered Canada to Britain in 1763, traders from Montreal began to infiltrate the old French trading country west of Lake Superior. Because these men went to the Indians, the company called them "pedlars."

In 1783-1781 the pedlars, facing ruin from competition among themselves, joined the Scottish merchants of Montreal who supplied their trade goods in a partnership known as the North West Company. Thereafter the Nor'Westers—the pedlars from the Indian country and the Montreal merchants—

met each summer at Grand Portage on the northern shore of Lake Superior to exchange furs for goods and to plan the next season's business. From Grand Portage a canoe route ran along the present international boundary to the Lake of the Woods and then on to Lake Winnipeg and Red River. After 1804, Fort William, some miles to the east, replaced Grand Portage as the summer rendezvous.

The small Montreal traders who went to Mackinac spread out, as had the French before them, from that strategic point into Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Some paddled their canoes from Green Bay up the Fox River, made a portage to the Wisconsin River, and followed the latter stream to Prairie du Chien on the Mississippi. From Prairie du Chien, an old French town, the Scotsmen Murdock Cameron and Robert Dirkson went up the Minnesota River to trade with the Sioux.

In 1787, Dickson took his first canoeload of goods up the Minnesota. About 1800 he built a fort on Lake Traverse, his home and headquarters for the rest of his life. A tall, commanding man of sterling qualities, he became the most influential trader in the region. He read much, learned Chippewa, Sioux, and French, won the respect of the Indians, and married a sister of Red Thunder, a Yankton Dakota chief.

At Lake Traverse, Dickson lived beside a favorite camping ground of the Yanktons and Yanktonais, who roamed the plains to the west. He was also near the Sisseton bands of the Upper Minnesota and Upper Red rivers. Indian gardens flourished by the lake; buffalo ranged the plains; beaver and otter swam in the rivers and lakes. The territory of the Dakotas (Yanktons, Yanktonais, Sissetons, and Wahpetons) extended north on the Red to present-day Wahpeton. Beyond that they hunted only when prepared for war. As far north as the Turtle River lay a debatable country claimed by both the Dakotas and the Chippewas.

Dickson and the other traders from Mackinac, losing money and falling heavily into debt, combined to eliminate competition. Too many traders overstocked the Indian country with goods, raising the price of furs, and, by stimulating hunting, and, by stimulating hunting, reduced the amount of game. In 1805 a new firm, Robert Dickson and Company, united many of the leading traders of the Upper Mississippi. On the last day of 1806 another new combination, the Michilimackinac Company, replaced it. The Michilimackinac Company divided the region with the North West Company, which gave up some of its posts south of Lake Superior and promised not to trade on the Mississippi south of the mouth of

the Crow Wing, or on the Red south of the mouth of the Sheyenne. Thus the Indians, like the white farmers who were to come later, often had to deal with a monopoly.¹

Dickson and other traders working out of Mackinac dealt with the Indians of what was to become southeastern North Dakota; the traders from Hudson Bay and Grand Portage came into the northeastern portion of the future state. Competition for furs in the country between Lake Superior and the Rockies forced the Hudson's Bay Company to build forts in the interior. By the 1790's its men and the Nor'Westers were constructing forts side by side throughout much of the region. When the two firms united in 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company had seventy-six posts, the North West Company ninety-seven.

Their competition involved distances and routes to the sea. The finest furs came from the Athabasca country in the drainage basin of the Mackenzie River; indeed, half the profits of the North West Company were said to come over Methye Portage, the thirteen-mile trail that connected the waters of the Athabasca River with those flowing to the south and east. With regard to distance, the Hudson's Bay Company held the advantage. Its ships carried trade goods almost to the heart of the continent. The Nor'Westers, on the other hand, had an expensive fifteen-hundred-mile canoe journey from Montreal to the fur country and so double transportation costs. The direct water route to the Bay meant cheaper goods at Hudson's Bay Company posts.

But other advantages lay with the Nor'Westers. They were a hard, experienced lot—“Lords of the Lakes and Forests,” Washington Irving called them—and knew the Indian languages. They brought in great quantities of liquor to win over their customers. Cruel and reckless, on occasion they robbed and murdered Hudson's Bay men, who were under strict orders to keep the peace. More than that, the North West Company's business was built on the freight-carrying canoe of the Canadians, on the French Canadian and half-breed *voyageurs'* amazing capacity for labor, on Indian corn and pemmican, and on the organizing ability of Scottish merchants and traders. The Scottish genius for business enterprise showed up well in the hazardous fur trade, where the courage,

¹ Louis A. Tohill, "[Robert Dickson, British Fur Trader on the Upper Mississippi](#)," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, III (October 1928), 9, 12-14, 23-32.

shrewdness, and adaptability of the race were valuable. These men loved the rushing river and open lake, the empty plain and dark woodland.

The common goal of the competing firms was to secure high-quality furs, the finest of which, with deeper color and better luster, came from densely wooded districts; the animals of the open plain had coarse fur. The companies, however, especially the North West Company, needed provisions from the plains to feed their men at the northern forest posts, where the food supply was both uncertain and scanty. Particularly was this the case for the canoe brigades, which made the long trip to the Grand Portage rendezvous each summer. The staple item was pemmican, a nourishing and long-keeping food which the Indians made by drying long strips of buffalo meat in the sun or over a fire, pounding these to a powder, and mixing the powder with melted fat in a bag of green buffalo hide. Much pemmican, a bag of which weighed ninety pounds, was made at forts on the Assiniboine River and later at Pembina.²

The fur companies were slow in building trading posts on the Red River of the North. Before 1789, Peter Grant, a clerk of the North West Company, constructed a fort on the right bank of the river near present-day St. Vincent, Minnesota, and in the fall of 1797, Charles Jean Baptiste Chaboillez, also a Nor'Wester and a 55-year-old veteran of the fur trade, built on the high riverbanks where Pembina now stands. The Hudson's Bay Company was erecting a post nearby in charge of a Mr. Richards. But it was Alexander Henry, a wintering partner of the North West Company, who made a permanent establishment at Pembina in 1801 and opened up the valley to the south. The diaries of Chaboillez and Henry give an excellent account of the trade.

In the summer of 1800, Henry started west from Grand Portage with a brigade of eight canoes. Each canoe, manned by four or five French Canadian *voyageurs*, carried twenty-eight packs of trade goods and provisions: corn, grease, tobacco, general merchandise, hardware, guns, gunpowder,

²Arthur S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-1871* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, Ltd., [1939]), pp. 2, 22-26, 300-308, 426-431, 508-530; Douglas MacKay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the Hudson's Bay Company* (2nd ed.; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, [1949]), pp. 36, 84, 108-111, 122-130; Gordon C. Davidson, *The North West Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1918), pp. 9-16, 22-26, 121.

lead, flour, sugar, and high wine (concentrated alcohol to be watered before it was given to the Indians). Such packs weighed ninety pounds. The canoe used west of Grand Portage was the “North canoe,” about twenty-five feet long and capable of carrying three thousand pounds of freight besides its crew. The larger “Montreal canoe,” thirty-five to forty feet long, made the trip from Montreal to Grand Portage. In 1805, some 156 North canoes went west from Lake Superior.

Henry’s brigade followed the regular route—from Grand Portage to Pigeon River, Rainy Lake, Lake of the Woods, Winnipeg River, Lake Winnipeg, and finally to the Red River. Having many wild rapids, it was both beautiful and dangerous.³ The *voyageurs*, “smart, active men” in Henry’s phrase, faced a grueling, month-long journey. They had to carry the canoes and cargoes over sixty-two portages—muddy paths up to a thousand yards long. On such a trip many would become ill, lame, or emaciated from fatigue. Sometimes a man drowned when a canoe was smashed in a rapids.

Going up the Red, Henry sent four of his canoes west along the Assiniboine River while he himself sought the virgin fur country south of Pembina. He left some of his men to build a trading post at Roseau River, then pushed south with eight Chippewas and their families, all he could persuade to accompany him toward the no man’s land between the Chippewa and Sioux territories. Henry’s Chippewas were daily alarmed that the Sioux might be nearby, but the trader coolly refused to show any fear. When they reached Park River (so named because the Assiniboins once made a park, or pound, for buffalo there), the danger posed by the Sioux began to seem real even to Henry.

He built a fort a quarter of a mile up the Park River, and his Indians and *voyageurs* had a profitable hunt that season. But the Park river fort seemed to close to the Sioux. In the spring of 1801, Henry abandoned it and built a new one on the north bank of the Pembina River a hundred paces from the Red River of the North. His men put up a high stockade, a storehouse, a stable for horses, a blacksmith shop, and some whitewashed houses. A new storehouse built in 1802 was twenty by one hundred feet; a new stable in 1807 accommodated fifty horses. Except for some years between 1823 and 1840, Pembina has been occupied continuously

³ Grace Lee Nute, [*The Voyageur’s Highway, Minnesota’s Border Lake Land*](#) (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1941), pp. 35-38.

from 1801 to present-day.

From his fort at Pembina, Henry supervised outlying wintering houses in the valleys of the Red and Lower Assiniboine rivers. The trading year began in August when he arrived from Grand Portage or Fort William with a new outfit. He would send part of the goods up the Assiniboine to Portage la Prairie, and at Pembina he would make up assortments of goods and send them out with traders to winter in the Pembina Hills, at Grand Forks or Turtle River, and sometimes at Red Lake. Then Henry's Indians (he traded mostly with Chippewas but also with some Crees and Assiniboins) would take goods worth twenty beaver skins on credit and set off on the fall hunt. Before they left, the trader might distribute some small gifts (flints, needles, awls, net thread, tobacco) and treat them with liquor to encourage them to hunt well and to pay their debts. In a few weeks the Indians would come in to pay their debts and contract new ones, after which activity declined until the spring hunt.

In the fall Henry would set his *voyageurs* to making hay and harvesting vegetables. In 1803 they gathered 420 bushels of potatoes, as well as cabbages, carrots, onions, and turnips. Henry hired a Chippewa to hunt meat for the fort, and in 1802 his choice was Le Boeuf, a tall, spare man and a remarkable runner. Le Boeuf could chase buffalo on foot, loading and firing as he ran, and keep in the thick of the herd until he had killed as many as he wished.

In 1801 and 1802, Henry saw an incredible number of buffalo; sometimes they passed in droves within a hundred yards of the fort. To bring meat in 1801, Henry's men made a cart with solid wheels sawed from the trunk of a tree. A year later they worked out crude wheels with spokes. This was the beginning of the famous Red River carts, which were made entirely of wood. In winter Henry's men made salt, soap, snowshoes, and dog sleds. With dogs and sleds, they could go trading *en derouine*, that is, to the Indian villages.

Spring brought new activities at Pembina. The Indian women made sugar from box-elder sap, and Henry's men set nets in the river, once taking 120 sturgeon weighing 60 to 150 pounds each within twenty-four hours. They also planted gardens, repaired canoes, and made pemmican. At the end of May, the canoes left for Grand Portage or Fort William with the year's peltries.

The most important returns from Pembina, however, were provisions for the northern posts and their canoe brigades. Beaver was the most desired fur. Henry's posts on the Red and

Lower Assiniboine rivers took 2,736 beaver pelts in the 1801-1805 season but only 696 in 1807-1808; disease and overtrapping had brought a rapid decline. In 1804-1805, Henry made up 144 packs of furs and 125 bags of pemmican; in 1807-1808 he had 60 packs of furs and 334 bags of pemmican. Most of the pemmican was made at Pembina. Henry's returns in the 1807-1808 season included 48 kegs of sugar, mostly from Leech Lake, and 46 kegs of grease. The buffalo of the grasslands were furnishing provisions for the trade, but Henry sent no buffalo robes to Fort William.

For a time he had to compete with the Hudson's Bay Company and the X. Y. Company, which built forts near his own in 1801. Competition made the firms increase the number of their wintering houses, cut prices, spoil the Indians with presents, and extend credit freely. In 1804 the North West Company took over the X. Y. Company. The next year, Henry made a friendly agreement with the Hudson's Bay Company man to eliminate competition; they divided the Indians between them, cut the number of wintering houses, and forced the Indians to pay their debts.

Henry lived close to fifty or sixty Chippewa families who spent much of the year at his fort. But he did not know, apparently, that one of his customers was John Tanner, a white man taken captive as a child in 1789 in southern Ohio. Tanner had been raised by an Indian woman among the Ottawas near Lake Huron and came west to the Red River with some of them in the 1790's. Lord Selkirk later restored Tanner to his own family. He became an interpreter for the Indian agent at Sault Ste Marie and told his story to Edwin James. It was published

as *Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner during Thirty Years' Residence among Indians* (New York, 1830). Tanner, a skilled hunter, was an erect, hardy man, with an unconquerable spirit. Ranging up the Assiniboine River and along the Red with his Indian companions, he trapped beaver, built canoes and made sugar, went on war parties, visited the Mandan villages on the Missouri, bought watered liquor, and courted and married an Indian girl. His narrative is a remarkable account of Indian life on the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.

Sometimes war parties of Dakotas (probably Yanktons, Yanktonais, Sissetons, and Wahpetons) attacked the Chippewas at or near the Pembina fort. In 1805 about three hundred Yankton warriors killed ten Chippewas on the Tongue River; Henry's father-in-law and mother-in-law

(Henry had an Indian wife) were among the victims.

Losses in hunting and war reduced the number of men in the Indian population. In 1805 there were 160 men, 190 women, and 250 children in Henry's department on the Lower Red River. That year, a North West Company census of Indians showed 7,502 men, 16,995 women and 58,871 children in its territory.

White contact hurt the Indians. Many of the Chippewas had bad coughs and died of pulmonary consumption. Henry would frequently treat his Indian customers with liquor—to celebrate his arrivals and departures and the payment of their debts, and sometimes to bribe them to some course of action. "Men and women have been drinking a match for three days and three nights." He wrote in his diary, "during which it has been drink, fight—drink, fight, drink and fight again—guns, axes, and knives their weapons—very disagreeable." Again he wrote: "Grande Gueule stabbed Capot Rouge, Le Boeuf stabbed his young wife in the arm, Little Shell almost beat his old mother's brains out with a club, and there was terrible fighting among them."

The result, Henry saw, was the decay of Indian life: "The Indians totally neglect their ancient customs; and to what can this degeneracy be ascribed but to their intercourse with us, particularly as they are so unfortunate as to have a continual succession of opposition parties [the fur companies] to teach them roguery, and to destroy both mind and body with that pernicious article, rum?" The Indians, however, had to profess friendship for the whites because they had become dependent on trade goods ("their necessaries," Henry called the goods). But, Henry wrote, they "despise us in their hearts." Although they were often insolent to Henry and tried to frighten him, they never pillaged him, as they did some traders. He kept his nerve and outfaced them convincing them, as he said, that he "would prove a tough bone for them to gnaw."

THE SELKIRK COLONY

Before the conflicts of Indian and white were resolved, the Indian trade itself was threatened by the coming of agricultural settlers to the Red River. In 1812, Thomas Douglas, the fifth Earl of Selkirk, founded a colony of Scots and Irish at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, the location of present-day Winnipeg. Selkirk, a Scottish nobleman of humanitarian sympathies, had become interested in

emigration as a solution for the difficulties of the Scottish and Irish peasantry. The Highlanders were being driven from the land by an enclosure movement which accompanied the shift from crops to sheep raising. Homeless people drifted to a precarious living by fishing or to the new industrial centers to become wage slaves in Factories. Selkirk, touring the Highlands in 1792, thought that emigration “was the only solution for a bad situation.” He later decided that the social and economic evils of Ireland called for the same solution. Wanting to keep the emigrants within the British Empire, he came to believe that the Red River Country would offer them an opportunity for a better life.

In 1811 the Hudson's Bay Company voted Selkirk, a stockholder, a grant of 116,000 square miles on the Red River of the North for an agricultural colony. The grant, named the District of Assiniboia, extended south from Big Island in Lake Winnipeg to the high land separating the Red River Valley from the Mississippi drainage system, and from near the source of the Assiniboine River on the west to the Lake of the Woods on the east. The colony would benefit the company by producing foodstuffs, for many Hudson's Bay employees were Orkneymen who did not relish pemmican. Moreover, an agricultural colony would relieve the company of the heavy expense of importing food from Britain. It might also, in the future, be a convenient source of employees.

The North West Company, however, believed that the fur trade and agriculture were incompatible and that the colony would be a barrier across its lines of communication to the west. The Nor'Westers bought stock in the Hudson's Bay Company in a vain effort to block the grant. They also sent out agents to thwart the recruitment of settlers.

But Selkirk, gathering recruits in Ireland, the Hebrides, Glasgow, the Highlands, and later even in Switzerland and Lower Canada, sent a series of small parties to the Red River. Some—the Swiss watch-makers and the De Meurons (former soldiers of many nationalities from a mercenary regiment disbanded in Canada)—were not good farmers. The best were steady Scots from Kildonan Parish in Sutherland. Most came by ship to Hudson Bay and York Factory, and then up the difficult Hayes River to Lake Winnipeg and on to Fort Douglas, the center of the colony at the forks of the Red and

Assiniboine. The first settlers arrived there in the summer of 1812 after spending a quarrelsome, mutinous, scurvy-ridden winter at York Factory.

The establishment of the colony was a most difficult matter: distance and obstacles to communication between the Red River and the sea (seven hundred miles, or fifty-five days of travel), the uncertain food supply, the doubtful character of many of the immigrants, and the lack of farm stock and tools. Moreover, the Nor'Westers made a determined effort to destroy the colony. The struggle was over pemmican. In January, 1814, many of the colonists were without food. Miles Macdonnell, the man Selkirk had made governor, issued a proclamation forbidding any fur trader to take flesh, fish, grain, or vegetables out of the colony. He later seized six hundred bags of pemmican from a North West Company post out on the Assiniboine River.

Thus Macdonnell threatened the very existence of the North West Company. The Nor'Westers, in turn, made an armed attack on the colony in June, 1815, and sent Macdonnell under arrest to Montreal. They also transported to Canada 133 settlers who were ready to give up, and burned their cabins, the storehouse, and the mill. But Colin Robertson, an able lieutenant of Selkirk, revived the colony with ninety new settlers from Scotland. The conflict reached a climax with the Massacre of Seven Oaks in June, 1816. Half-breeds, led by Cuthbert Grant and egged on by the Nor'Westers, attacked the colony and killed twenty settlers. The colony, however, survived the massacre and the North West Company united, bringing peace to the fur country.⁴

Selkirk himself visited the colony in 1817 and bought a strip of land along the Red River from the Crees and Chippewas. He was to pay a hundred pounds of tobacco annually to each tribe. The strip, two miles wide, extended from the mouth of the Red at Lake Winnipeg to Grand Forks; at Fort Douglas, Pembina, and Grand Forks, Selkirk's land was to be six miles wide. Selkirk returned to England in 1818. Worn out by the struggle against the North West Company and discouraged by

⁴ Morton, *History of the Canadian West*, pp. 527-534, 556-578, 623-630; W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), pp. 45-59.

his failure to secure the punishment of the culprits for Seven Oaks, he died in southern France in 1820.

THE SETTLEMENT IN PEMBINA

The story of the Selkirk colony is largely the story of the beginnings of Manitoba, but the colony was saved in its early years by the buffalo herds near Pembina. Lacking provisions for the first winter, most of the settlers went to Pembina and built cabins, a storehouse, and a stockade, which they named Fort Daer (Selkirk was also Lord Daer). They subsisted on buffalo through the winter. Although they returned to Fort Douglas in the spring, each winter for several years most of them went to Pembina in order to hunt buffalo.

The colony was slow in raising the food it needed to survive. In 1818 and again in 1819, grasshoppers destroyed much of the crops. Some of the métis, or half-breeds, encouraged by Governor Macdonnell, settled at Pembina. A few of the colonists also lived there, but most of them made their homes near Fort Douglas.

The growth of Pembina was helped along by the missionary Father Sévère Dumoulin. Selkirk and Bishop Plessis of Quebec took the lead in sending out two young Roman Catholic missionaries to the Red River in the summer of 1818. Selkirk hoped that they could prevent another outbreak of violence against the colony. Plessis instructed them to urge peace and good behavior, to help "delinquent Christians," to prepare for baptism Indian women "who live as concubines of Christian men," and to plant high crosses along the routes where the *voyageurs* passed. Father Joseph Norbert Provencher established a mission across the Red River from Fort Douglas, the beginning of St. Boniface.

Father Dumoulin, however, went to Pembina, where he built a chapel (thirty by sixty feet), a presbytery, and a store. At first the work flourished more at Pembina than it did at St. Boniface. Father Dumoulin baptized thirty persons in 1819, prepared some for their first communion, and married a number of freemen, after much persuasion, to their Indian women. The missionaries found that liquor, given out freely by the fur companies, was the chief obstacle to their work. Yet they soon acquired much influence among the métis. In

all, Father Dumoulin baptized 313 persons and performed 53 marriages at Pembina.

He was, therefore, bitterly disappointed when the Hudson's Bay Company forced the métis and white settlers to abandon Pembina. In 1818 the United States and Great Britain signed a treaty establishing the international boundary at the forty-ninth parallel from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains. In 1823, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun sent Major Stephen H. Long to locate the boundary. That summer, Long's soldiers set up an oak post, marked "U.S." on one side and "G.B." on the other, at the forty-ninth parallel on the Red River. The American flag was run up, a salute fired, and Long read a proclamation that the land south of the marker was within the United States. The Pembina settlement, except for a single cabin, lay south of the marker. The settlers watching the ceremony at once said that all the buffalo, the great object of their interest, would be on the American side of the line.

Even before Long marked the boundary, Sir George Simpson and other officials of the Hudson's Bay Company in Rupert's Land, as well as the representative of the Selkirk estate, decided to break up the settlement at Pembina. They believed that the division of the settlers, some at Pembina and some at Fort Douglas, weakened the colony. Further, Pembina might become an American base for operations against the colony. So the colonists pulled down Fort Daer and the Hudson's Bay Company fort, floating the timbers down river to use at Fort Douglas. The French settlers who had come from Quebec in 1818 and some of the métis moved to St. Boniface. The rest of the métis went to live at White Horse Plain, sixteen miles west of Fort Douglas. Father Dumoulin sadly gave up his mission and returned to Quebec.

For a while some of the métis and settlers stayed on at Pembina. Long reported that 350 persons, mostly métis, were living there in 60 cabins in the summer of 1823. All eventually moved away, however, and when Martin McLeod passed by in 1836, no one was living in Pembina. The Treaty of 1818 placed a large part of the Selkirk's grant of Assiniboia within the boundaries of the United States. He, and later his heirs, made fruitless efforts to acquire a good American title to the land.

Although the colony cost Selkirk some £100,000 and

probably his life (his fatal illness seems to have been related to his conflict with the North West Company), it had become firmly established. Selkirk himself stopped paying for the recruitment of settlers after the unfortunate Swiss who came in 1821; they were the last from across the Atlantic. The union of the of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821 brought the discharge of hundreds of men, and the majority of them settled down in the colony, doubling its population (about two thousand in 1824). For Garry, near the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, was the center of the settlement.

The Hudson's Bay Company aided the colonists by selling them imports at cost and issuing note which served as currency. It was, of course, the principal market for their farm produce. In 1834, Selkirk's heirs had returned Assiniboia to the company. It was just as well, for after Selkirk's death in 1820, company officials became the principal voice in the colony's government.

Although it could do little for the peasantry of Ireland and Scotland, Selkirk's dream of an agricultural colony on the Red River had become a reality. He had defeated, in the end, the remoteness, the cold, all the obstacles of the wilderness, and even the North West Company's bitter opposition. Selkirk had laid the foundations for Manitoba, and in doing, he profoundly influenced the history of the Red River Valley south of the international boundary. From its first days the colony felt the pull of the plains south of the line. As long as the buffalo lasted, the métis visited the plains, and out of their hunt grew the trade that tied the Red River settlement, as Selkirk's colony came to be called, to the growing American outpost on the Upper Mississippi at St. Paul. Swiss and other discontented people, abandoning the Red River settlement, provided the first nonmilitary settlers at St. Paul. The Red River Valley became a highway between the two settlements, and the resulting trade opened the valley below the forty-ninth parallel.

THE MÉTIS OF RED RIVER

Composing by far the largest element in the population of the Red River settlement were the half-breeds, the offspring of white fathers (French Canadian, Scottish, and English) and

Indian mothers (Chippewa, Cree, and Assiniboin). Most were of French and Chippewa stock. They were called *bois brûlés* (French for “burned wood”—from their olive complexion) or *métis* (French for “mixed breed”). The fur traders—bourgeois, clerks, *engagés*, or *voyageurs*—usually took Indian wives after the custom of the country. Although some whites soon deserted their Indian mates, such unions were frequently permanent. The officials of the fur companies sometimes sent their children to eastern Canada to be educated.

Many freemen also took Indian women. The freemen were whites living in the Indian country but not employed by a trading company. The first of them on the Red River were left there without employment when the X. Y. Company dissolved in 1805. The number increased greatly with the merger of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821. Even in 1808 many freemen, with their wives and *métis* children, were living in camps on the Park River and in the Pembina Hills. They owned many horses and carts and were busy making provisions to sell to the fort at Pembina.

By 1850 more than half of the five or six thousand people living in the Red River settlement about Fort Garry were *métis*. Many of them lived in St. Boniface and at White Horse Plain, some miles west of Fort Garry. There were contradictory reports about the number south of the boundary. In 1849, Norman W. Kittson, enumerator in a special census for Minnesota Territory, counted 637 inhabitants at Pembina on the American side. But that same year, Major Samuel Woods reported that the white and half-breed population at Pembina was 1,026 and that these people had 600 carts, 300 oxen, 300 work horses, 150 horses for the chase, 1,500 horned cattle, a few hogs, and no sheep. The United States Census of 1850 counted 1,116 persons at Pembina and reported that most of them had been born north of the boundary. Most of the men gave their occupation as “hunter.” In 1853, Isaac I. Stevens heard that four thousand lived about the Pembina Hills.

In physical constitution, character, dress, and way of life, the *métis* were midway between their white and Indian forebears. Their hair and eyes were black, their complexion a deep olive. The men were strong, good runners and horsemen, and able to endure much fatigue. They dressed in woolens, wearing what was called a Hudson's Bay coat with a hood, or

capot, attached. They secured the coat with a sash about the waist, and slung powder horn and shot bag with beaded bands over the shoulder. They would don a calico shirt, leather leggings, and moccasins, but frequently went without a hat. The women, often not so handsome as the men, dressed in gaudy calicoes and moccasins. They were skilled in making moccasins and all sorts of beadwork. The métis spoke a patois of French, Chippewa, and other Indian tongues.

They were a gay, improvident, prodigal people who loved gaming, the music of the violin, and, too often, strong drink. But they were gentle, kind, and warmhearted. Some thought them idle and indolent; even their friend Father George A. Belcourt wrote that they were “not over anxious of becoming rich.” In 1853, Isaac I. Stevens found them “a hardy, willing, enduring class, inured to hardships, the most obedient and hard-working fellows in the world.” He praised them for being “industrious and frugal in their habits, leading a virtuous and pious life.” They were intelligent, quick and eager to learn, and much attached to their priests. In 1821 the mission school at Pembina had begun to teach some of the children Latin and French, as well as reading and writing. The métis came to think of themselves as the “lords of the land” and as “a new nation” in the Northwest.

Many of the métis became notable men. The Hudson’s Bay Company made Cuthbert Grant, a man of great influence, warden of the plains and a member of the council of Assiniboia. Pierre Bottineau led many expeditions across the Northern Plains; a county and a town in North Dakota were later named for him. In 1879 the leading men of Minnesota—former governors, congressmen, judges, army officers, and bankers—petitioned Congress to give Bottineau a pension in recognition of his notable services. Bottineau, Paul Boulieau, Antione B. Gingras, and other métis became members of the territorial legislature of Minnesota. Gingras, fat and jolly, shrewd and successful in the cart trade with St. Paul, was said to be worth sixty thousand dollars and the wealthiest man in northern Dakota. What is now Well County was originally named Gingras County after him. Jean Baptiste Wilkie (“a man...of fine appearance and pleasant manners,” wrote Stevens) was also a respected métis leader living at St. Joseph, now Walhalla.

The métis both north and south of the international boundary farmed small plots of about fifteen acres. All the farms fronted on the rivers, following the Red up to Pembina and also going out the Assiniboine River. Most of the métis were squatters, with no title to the land. Though some were solid farmers like Selkirk's Scottish settlers, most were careless and slovenly. They planted Indian corn, barely, potatoes, some tobacco, vegetable gardens, and a bearded variety of wheat which would yield twenty-five bushels per acre. They also raised fast horses for the buffalo hunt, but used oxen (valued at fifty or sixty dollars a yoke) for farm work. In frontier style, they broadcast the cereals by hand, harvested with a sickle (later a cradle) and threshed with a flail. Eighteen windmills and two water mills ground the wheat into flour. Some of the métis sold agricultural products to the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1823, prices were high, with wheat two dollars a bushel and corn and barley (much used in soup) both three dollars.⁵

Most of the métis took part in the organized buffalo hunts across the plains to the southwest. The hunt came to be a mania, the focal point of their lives. They rode out on two hunts each year, a summer hunt beginning in the middle of June after the crops were planted and a fall hunt starting in October. The summer hunt was for provisions—pemmican, dried meat, and grease—and leather for moccasins and tipis. The fall hunt, too, was for provisions (the buffalo were fatter then), but also for buffalo robes. The summer hunt was the larger; only a third of

⁵["United States Census of 1850, for Pembina District, Minnesota Territory,"](#) ["North Dakota Historical Society Collections, I"](#) (1906, 384-411; Major Woods's report in *House Executive Document 51*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess.; Isaac I. Stevens, *Narrative and Final Report of Explorations for a Route for a Pacific Railroad near the Forty-Seventh and Forty-Ninth Parallels of North Latitude from St. Paul to Puget Sound*, in *Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practical and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, 1853-1855* (Washington, 1860), Vol. XII, Pt. I, pp. 40-41, 63, 70; George A. Belcourt, "[Department of Hudson's Bay](#)," [Minnesota Historical Society Collections, I](#) (1872), 224-225; Morton, *History of the Canadian West*, pp. 575, 658-659, 805-808, 856, 873; Vernice M. Aldrich, "Father George Antoine Belcourt, Red River Missionary," [North Dakota Historical Quarterly](#), II (October 1927), 33.

the men took part in the fall hunt. Sometimes the métis divided into two parties; sometimes all would go out to the plains together.

As the time for the hunt approached, the métis and their families, horses, oxen, and carts went into a rendezvous on the Pembina River, pitching their tipis and making preparations until all had gathered. A Catholic priest frequently went along. They would elect a governor of the hunt, captains for each parish, guards and guides, and adopt the customary rules. The rules forbade running buffalo or traveling on the Sabbath. No party was to fork off, lag behind, or forge ahead without permission; no hunter was to run buffalo before the general order was given. The rules sought to give everyone a fair share of the game. If the hunters failed to abide by them, quarreling, hatred, and an unsuccessful hunt resulted. The presence of the priest helped to ensure respect for the rules, that is, for the rights of the poorer hunters on the slower horses.

With the hunt organized, the métis broke camp and the caravan of Red River carts moved out to the southwest, led by a guide bearing a flag. Each night the men placed the carts in a tight circle, enclosing the tipis and stock, and posted a guard. Sometimes the Sioux, hating the métis for killing the buffalo, their own livelihood, attacked the camp. Each day the priest said Mass and catechized the children; occasionally he preached in Chippewa instead of French in order to please the people. In 1819 a teacher from the mission at Pembina had forty children in school on the prairie as he followed the hunters. The caravan might march many days, going two hundred miles or more across the Sheyenne River and on to Dogden Butte, before they found a buffalo herd.

When a herd was found, the hunters, as many as four hundred men, formed a long line on their horses and, riding abreast, advanced slowly toward it in order to get as close as possible before the buffalo became frightened. When the buffalo fled, the hunters galloped into the herd, shooting them down at close range. They picked out the cows (tenderer meat), their horses, unguided, following the twists and turns of the quarry. The hunter rode at full speed with a mouth full of balls. After each shot he poured another charge of powder down the muzzle, spat in a ball, jarred it home with a slap of the gun butt against thigh or saddle, and fired again.

The average hunter could kill three or four buffalo in a half-hour chase: those with the fastest horses might get ten or twelve. On the fall hunt of 1845, the 55 hunters killed 169 cows one day, 177 another, 114 another, and 168 another; in all they killed 1,776 cows. Each hunter could identify own kill. The galloping men, the rapid firing on every side, badger holes and uneven ground, the maddened buffalo, the dust and noise and confusion—all made the hunt dangerous. Frequently, accidents killed or maimed a hunter.

After a run, the women came up with the carts to help the hunters skin and cut up the kill. They cut the flesh in to thin strips and hung these on poles to dry in the sun or over a buffalo-chip fire. They rendered the fat in sheet-iron kettles and made the dried meat into pemmican or tied it into bundles. The marrow fat was preserved in the bladders of the animals.

The métis wasted much of the carcass. They had to kill eight or ten cows, weighing probably a thousand pounds each, to load a cart with eight or nine hundred pounds of meat. They commonly spent two months or more on a hunt in order to fill three or four carts for each hunter. After the hunt, the métis kept half the provisions for their own use and sold the other half and the buffalo robes to the fur companies or carried them to St. Paul to exchange for dry goods, sugar, coffee, and other necessities.

The métis hunts caused a decline in the number of buffalo. The size of the hunt grew rapidly; there were 540 carts in 1820, 820 in 1830, 970 in 1835, and 1,210 in 1840. The Sioux, American traders, the United States government, and the Chippewas of the Turtle Mountains all protested against the destruction of the herds on American soil by people living north of the boundary. In 1845 the United States Army sent Captain Edwin V. Sumner with a troop of dragoons from Fort Atkinson to the Northern Plains to ward off the métis buffalo hunters. And in 1849 the army sent Major Samuel Woods, commandant at Fort Snelling, to Pembina, where it was considering the establishment of a military post. Woods urged the Pembina métis to use force to stop the hunters from across the boundary. In 1856, Lieutenant Colonel C. F. Smith again warned the métis. Such warnings must have encouraged some métis to settle south of the boundary. In 1852, Chief Green Setting Feather of the Turtle Mountain Chippewas

complained of the métis: "The manner of his hunt is such as not only to kill, but also to drive away the few he leaves, and waste even those he kills."

Even though it was wasteful, the métis hunt was the first large utilization of the buffalo—the great product of the grasslands—by non-Indian people. The hunt tied eastern and central North Dakota to the Red River settlement north of the boundary and to the fur trade of western Canada. More important, it produced the chief commodity carried by the métis to the growing American market on the Upper Mississippi.

AMERICANS ON THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI

The Red River Valley did not become a trade route until Americans established themselves on the Upper Mississippi River. Before the War of 1812, British traders from Mackinac still conducted the Indian trade of Wisconsin and Minnesota, although the region had been part of the United States since the close of the American Revolution. American troops moved into Mackinac in 1796, but British traders continued to keep Americans out of the country west of Lake Michigan. The Canadian government persisted in giving the Indians of Wisconsin and Minnesota presents, medals, and flags: all Wisconsin chiefs wore silver medals bearing the image of George III. But Zebulon Montgomery Pike's expedition to the Upper Mississippi (1805-1806) and the United States customhouse and trading factory at Mackinac were beginning to check the British by 1809. During the War of 1812, however, the British continued to control Mackinac and also Prairie du Chien, the center of the Upper Mississippi trade.

At the end of the war the Treaty of Ghent paved the way for the advance of American traders. British troops gave up Prairie du Chien in May, 1815, and that year the United States made peace with the Indians of Wisconsin and Minnesota at Portage des Sioux. In 1816, Congress passed a law which limited licenses for trade with the Indians to United States citizens. John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, chartered in 1808, bought the posts of all British traders south of the boundary. The company established its headquarters at Mackinac and was soon doing business throughout the Upper Mississippi Valley.

The United States Army moved into the region. In 1816 it built Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien. In 1819 it sent Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leavenworth up the Mississippi to the mouth of the Minnesota River. The following year, the army began to build Fort St. Anthony at that strategic point, soon renaming it Fort Snelling. The fort aided the traders. In two years (1819-1821), Major Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian agent at Fort Snelling, talked the Indian chiefs into giving up thirty-six medals of George III, twenty-eight British flags, and eighteen gorgets.⁶

The Indian trade of the region grew in part through the efforts of well-established British traders. Men like Roben Dickson, Joseph Rolette, Sr., Jean Baptiste Faribault, Alexis Bailly, and Joseph Renville took out naturalization papers and stayed on in the country they knew and where they held the confidence of the Indians. In 1816-1817, Robert Dickson—he who had rallied the Indians to the British cause so well during the War of 1812—again had a post on Lake Traverse and brought goods from the Selkirk colony in Red River carts. Joseph Renville and others who had recently fought against the United States (Renville gave up his British pension to become an American citizen) put together the Columbia Fur Company in 1822 and had six posts in Minnesota by 1826. Some of them were at Lake Traverse, at the confluence of the Red and Sheyenne rivers, near Devils Lake, and at Grand Forks.

The American Fur Company, however, controlled the bulk of the trade. In 1826 it held ten of the seventeen posts in the region, with a headquarters post at Mendota, across the Minnesota River from Fort Snelling. It had no post at Pembina until 1829 or 1830, when it sent William Aitkin to trade there. The Hudson's Bay Company came back to Pembina (it had left in 1823) and drove Aitkin out. Then for a number of years it paid the American Fur Company an annual fee to stay out of the border region, in effect leasing the area from Pembina to Lake Superior.

The trade in Minnesota was carried on by means of

⁶Louise P. Kellogg, *The British Regime in Wisconsin and the Northwest* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1935), pp. 144-145, 233-234, 237-238, 265-320, 325, 328-329.

partnerships. The representative of the American Fur Company formed partnerships with the men who did the actual trading. The company furnished the goods, the trader his time, and both shared the profits. The region was divided among "outfits" in order to prevent competition. The trader sold the goods on credit to the Indians, who then went out on their hunts, settling their debts (if they could) in the spring. The chief fur was muskrat, but by 1823 the posts on the Minnesota River were buying many buffalo robes.

In 1834, Henry Hastings Sibley, after a five-year apprenticeship at Mackinac, came to Mendota to take charge of the country north of Lake Pepin for the American Fur Company. His territory included the valleys of the Minnesota and Red rivers down to Pembina. Sibley, at twenty-three, was well-educated (two years of law study), athletic, a master of canoe and rifle, strong and steady; he was to remain the most prominent figure in Minnesota until his death in 1891. His large stone house at Mendota, the first built in Minnesota, is now a museum.⁷

As American traders were moving north, the people of the Selkirk colony were reaching south. In 1817, Selkirk returned to the east by way of Prairie du Chien, the northernmost settlement on the Mississippi. When grasshoppers destroyed the crop at Fort Douglas, some of the settlers went to Prairie du Chien in the winter of 1819-1820 for a new supply of seed. The colony needed cattle. Enterprising Americans drove in herds, principally from Missouri, in the 1820's and sold them at good prices. They did not fare so well with sheep. In 1833, only 60 of a flock of 1,270 sheep survived a drive from Kentucky.

When some of Selkirk's colonists were ready to give up the pioneering struggle, they hired Red River carts and guides and

⁷ Alvin C. Gluek, Jr., "[The Struggle for the British Northwest: A Study in Canadian-American Relations](#)" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1953), pp. 15, 21, 36 (Gluek's dissertation was published in 1965 by the University of Toronto Press under the title *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest: A Study in Canadian-American Relations*); John P. Pritchett, "[Some Red River Fur-Trade Activities](#)," *Minnesota History Bulletin*, V. (May 1924), 408; Wilson P. Shortridge, "[Henry Hastings Sibley and the Minnesota Frontier](#)," *Minnesota History Bulletin*, III (August 1919), 115-125.

crossed the prairies to Fort Snelling. Most of the Swiss and some of the De Meurons traveled that way. The first large exodus came after the destructive flood of 1826. Probably five hundred left the Selkirk colony for the United States from 1820 to 1835.

Commerical connections soon expanded. The presence of Americans on the Upper Mississippi gave the Red River settlers a chance to compete with the Hudson's Bay Company, to break in on its monopoly. From 1823 on, the company, relaxing its legal right to conduct all trade, allowed settlers to import goods on company ships to sell or trade to the Indians or others for furs, robes, and provisions, provided the articles received were for the settlers' own use and not for sale. The export of furs to outside markets would still be handled by the company.

The company found it impossible to keep its monopoly intact. Many of the Red River settlers were discharged employees of the fur companies who often became independent traders instead of farmers. With a supply of clothing, ammunition, and other merchandise, they would slip out onto the plains to barter with the Indians and métis for furs. A market lay across the boundary with some American trader or at a post on the Mississippi. For young men, smuggling a few packs across the line was a lark, and Pembina became a smugglers' rendezvous. In 1831 the company placed a 7.5 percent duty on imports from the United States.

Most of the illegal traders were métis. There is no direct evidence concerning the volume of their trade, but they were selling pemmican to American traders (four thousand pounds to Joseph Brown in 1836), and before 1840 they were making annual excursions to St. Paul and Mendota with Red River carts loaded with furs, buffalo robes, and pemmican to exchange for merchandise. In 1835 the métis stated in a petition against the import duty that they "had already made several trips to the Mississippi exporting horn cattle, horses, furs, and some articles of colonial industry, and, on their return, bringing home cotton goods, groceries, ammunition, tobacco, etc., etc."

Yielding somewhat to the métis' protest, the Hudson's Bay Company reduced the import duty to 5 percent and then to 4 percent. But it also tried to stop illegal trade by licensing

traders, controlling the mails, searching travelers bound for Minnesota, and seizing furs. Such trade grew after Norman W. Kittson established a post at Pembina for the American Fur Company in 1844, and as it grew, so did the métis' opposition to the monopoly. Father George A. Belcourt, a devoted missionary, sided with the métis and was driven from the settlement by the Hudson's Bay Company (he built a new mission at Pembina in 1848). The year 1849 saw the climax of the struggle and the end of the company's monopoly. A métis, Guillaume Sayer, was tried and convicted of trading furs, but his fellow métis, gathered in force, made it impossible to punish him. "Le commerce est libre—vive la liberté," they shouted. The company gave up trying to enforce its monopoly, and from 1849 on, open trade with St. Paul developed rapidly.

NORMAN W. KITTSON AT PEMBINA

Developments on the Upper Mississippi had helped the métis in their struggle for free trade. Although the whole of Minnesota was Indian country and so not legally open to white settlement, a little community had grown up at Mendota, beside Fort Snelling, in the 1820's. In 1837 the United States bought the land between the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers from the Chippewas and Sioux and opened it to settlement, the first in Minnesota. The primary purpose in buying it was to secure the magnificent pine forests on the upper reaches of the St. Croix. Lumbering soon began, and farms sprang up to supply the lumber camps. The village of Stillwater, the early market for logs from upstream, started the manufacture of lumber in 1844.

When soldiers evicted the squatters living on the military reserve about Fort Snelling in 1840, the latter moved to the east bank of the Mississippi on the newly ceded land. Their village took its name from the Chapel of St. Paul, built in 1841. Other whites settled by the Falls of St. Anthony, a valuable source of water power, and in 1849 platted the village of St. Anthony, just above St. Paul and, like it, on ceded land east of the river. In 1847 a regular line of steamboats came to St. Paul from cities, such as St. Louis, farther down the river. In 1849, Congress created Minnesota Territory, including the country as far west as the Missouri River. Its population was

4,535, excluding the military garrison but including people at Pembina and on the Missouri.⁸ St. Paul itself had 910 inhabitants.

Fur traders Henry Hastings Sibley and Norman W. Kittson built up the growing trade between the Red River settlement and the Mendota-St. Paul community. In 1840, Sibley sent Joseph Rolette to Pembina, but he did not have a free hand against the Hudson's Bay Company until Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company of St. Louis supplanted the American Fur Company in 1842 (the old firm name was still commonly used). Sibley took a partnership in the new organization. The old arrangement, by terms of which the Hudson's Bay Company was to stay away from the border, was dead.

Sibley had other concerns. On June 30, 1842, he and Franklin Steele agreed to supply Kittson with goods for trade with the Sioux. Kittson's posts were to be at Big Stone Lake and on the Sheyenne and James rivers. Kittson was born in Lower Canada and had served, like Sibley, an apprenticeship with the American Fur Company. In 1842 he was an intelligent, sprightly young man of twenty-eight, a trader and merchant near Fort Snelling, and an old friend of Sibley.

In the fall of 1844, Kittson gave up his posts among the Sioux and moved to Pembina. The first year's trade was a failure. Then, in the fall of 1845, Sibley and Kittson made a deal with James Sinclair and Andrew McDermott, the leading independent traders in the Red River settlement about Fort Garry. They were to smuggle furs across the boundary to Kittson at Pembina. Kittson would pay for them in cash; Sinclair and McDermott could buy American goods. At Pembina, Kittson would also gather buffalo robes from the métis.

Kittson's trade grew. In 1846-1847, Sibley gave him credit of some twelve thousand dollars, the largest extended to any of Sibley's partners. At Pembina, Kittson built a collection of straw-thatched cabins around a square: residences, warehouses, a trading house, an icehouse, and a blacksmith shop. Occasionally a crowd of métis and Indians, with their lodges, horses, cattle, carts, and dogs, would fill the square.

⁸ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (4 vols.; St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1921-1930), I, 213-265, 351-352.

“Toward the river,” wrote an observer in 1851, “are barns and stables, haystacks, etc., with numerous horses and cattle feeding, and a general appearance of thrift, comfort, and industry pervades the scene.”⁹ In 1851, Kittson, alarmed by the flood of 1851, moved his headquarters to St. Joseph (present-day Walhalla).

Kittson traded with the Chippewas and métis, as well as with free traders from north of the boundary. He found the Chippewas as destitute—generally without traps, ammunition, or even axes, and living through the winter largely on fish. When in 1849 and 1850 the corn and rice crops failed and an epidemic wiped out the rabbits, the Indians became desperate. When conditions improved in 1851, many were too enfeebled to hunt. The métis supplied Kittson with pemmican. They expected a year's credit on their purchases and frequently did not pay their debts. Kittson stopped giving them credit in 1850.

He made a determined effort to take the trade of the region away from the Hudson's Bay Company, writing once that he was sparing “no trouble in giving them the ‘Devil.’” He placed outposts along the boundary: to the west, one in the Turtle Mountains and another on the Mouse River for buffalo robes and pemmican; to the east, one on Lake of the Woods and another on Rainy Lake for the finer furs of the fisher, marten, and lynx. He usually kept four outposts; at one time he had one on Rush Lake to the west and another on Red Lake to the east.

The Hudson's Bay Company fought back. It put an able man in charge of its post just north of Pembina, built posts to match Kittson's along the boundary, paid high prices for furs, and even brought in rum. Kittson may not have used liquor; he and Sibley could have lost their trading license if they had. Kittson complained about its use by the Hudson's Bay Company and by some Cree traders who smuggled in twenty barrels of whiskey from St. Paul in 1847.

But Kittson was in a losing game. He had to pay high prices in cash for furs, well knowing that his customers might use the money to buy merchandise from the Hudson's Bay Company.

⁹ Clarence W. Rife, “[Norman W. Kittson, A Fur-Trader at Pembina](#),” *Minnesota History*, VI (September 1925), 225-252.

It had the goods most esteemed by the Indians, and at a lower cost than Kittson could offer. Though he took business away from his competitor, he lost money steadily and gave up in 1854 to return to St. Paul. Rolette took charge in his place.

Kittson had done much to consolidate trade between the Red and Mississippi rivers. By coming to Pembina, he had brought the American market to the door of the Red River settlement north of the boundary and had also helped the métis to destroy the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly. The crux of the matter was that Kittson and the American market would take the métis' buffalo robes and pemmican, the chief products of the plains. The Hudson's Bay Company would not, for it could not use buffalo robes; the difficult water route to Hudson Bay, with its many portages, forbade such an arrangement. And the company could buy only a limited amount of pemmican.

Products of the buffalo hunt demanded a market. "Pembina is the natural gate," wrote Major Samuel Woods in 1849, "through which all intercourse between the U.S. and the Hudson Bay territories will find its passage." Pembina united the complementary economies developing on the Northern Plains and the Upper Mississippi through the Red River Valley. Along it the products of the grassland were carried cheaply in the unimposing yet sturdy Red River carts.

The métis built the carts entirely of wood, simply and inexpensively. They used two large wheels, wrapping them with buffalo rawhide instead of iron tires. Such wheels would not sink into marshy ground as readily as ordinary ones. The boxlike body of the cart, resting on the wooden axle, rode high, making the fording of streams easier. A single ox (or horse or mule) could pull a cart with a load of eight or nine hundred pounds. One métis usually drove from two to six carts. Except for the ox pulling the first cart, each would be tied, by means of a strap about its horns, to the tail of the cart ahead. Though crudely made and noisy because of the wheels' screeching on the wooden axles, the carts provided effective transportation. They were a means of conquering distance, of overcoming the remoteness of the Red River country. They and the level, treeless plain made it possible to carry freight to St. Paul and Mendota for a fraction of the cost of transporting an equivalent amount by water to Hudson Bay. The métis and their carts found outside markets for the Red River settlement.

Except for fine furs, Selkirk and the Hudson's Bay Company had failed to do so.

The cart trains might follow one of three trails. The earliest led up the Red River from Pembina to Lake Traverse and then followed the Minnesota River to Traverse des Sioux. There the métis unloaded the carts, placing the cargo on keelboats or steamers for river shipment to Mendota. They then reloaded the carts with merchandise from the Traverse des Sioux warehouses and turned back toward Pembina. This route came to be known as Kittson's Trail. It might go either east or west of Red River, but it passed within twenty miles or so of the river in order to make the crossing of the Red's tributaries easier. The disadvantage of Kittson's Trail was the uncertain passage from Traverse des Sioux to Mendota. Low water might make the river un-navigable; marsh and forest made overland travel difficult.

Kittson continued, however, to use the route when others were turning to the Sauk Valley or Plains Trail from St. Paul to Pembina. St. Paul had better port facilities for steamboats from the south than had Mendota; it was also well located to be the metropolis for the northern trade. A high, dry road ran north along the east bank of the Mississippi to Sauk Rapids and St. Cloud. Cart trains followed the road, forded the river at St. Cloud, and drove up the Sauk Valley to the northwest. They could either cross the Bois des Sioux River to join Kittson's Trail west of the Red (easier travel) or go down the east side to Pembina (approximately present-day U.S. 52). In 1851 a steamboat began to operate between St. Anthony and St. Cloud, after which cart trains could be accommodated at St. Cloud. This route, the Sauk Valley or Plains Trail, became the most traveled one. Later it was used by the stage line linking the Mississippi and Red River steamboats. Another route, the Woods Trail, went up the Mississippi to Crow Wing and joined the others near Moorhead (roughly U.S. 10). The Woods Trail, which had more sloughs and wetter ground, was traveled more in winter by dog sled. Kittson used it when he attended sessions of the legislature at St. Paul.¹⁰

¹⁰ Grace Lee Nute, "[The Red River Trails](#)," *Minnesota History*, VI (September 1925), 279-282; "The Red River Trail," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, XVIII (April 1859), 602-620, and XIX (June 1859), 37-54.

By whatever route, the cart trains would leave Pembina in mid-June when the trail was firm and the grass ready to furnish grazing for the oxen. The métis loaded the carts heavily, protecting the cargo of furs and pemmican with a buffalo robe. The carts started each day at dawn, moved in a single file, and covered some fifteen miles a day. The creaking and groaning of their greaseless wheels could be heard for miles.

A month of travel brought them to St. Paul, a journey of nearly five hundred miles. The colorful arrivals and departures of the carts excited the town, for much of its early wealth came from the goods they carried. As the number of cart trains increased, St. Paul gathered in more and more of the riches produced on the distant prairies. Kittson sent six carts over the trail in 1844; by 1850, hundreds of carts were going to St. Paul each summer.