

The Rum River was an important landmark for Minnesota Indians and early explorers searching the Mississippi River valley. The river valley and its dense pine forests played an even more important role as the spur to economic development in the area during the mid-1800s.

Named after its source, Mille Lacs Lake, the Rum River was called Mde Waken or Spirit Lake by the Dakota Indians who lived in that region. (To the early pioneers, the word "spirit" connoted the rum they sold to the Indians and that name for the river has remained ever since.)

The Ojibway, who lived in what is now Anoka County, had come to Minnesota with the French fur traders. The Ojibway and Dakota lived peacefully for a short time, often trading and occasionally intermarrying. White settlement of the east, however, eventually pushed the Ojibway onto Dakota lands. And the French traders apparently instigated feuds between the two tribes to establish the Ojibway as their allies.

The Battle of Kathio, fought between the Dakota and Ojibway in 1750, demonstrated the early advantage the Ojibway established by bartering with white traders for muskets. The Dakota, armed with bows and arrows, were defeated and many moved to the Minnesota and lower Mississippi river valleys.

The feud between these two Indian nations flared in a battle near Mille Lacs Lake in 1758 when the Ojibway drove the Dakota from Mde Waken and took control of the Rum River valley.

The Battle of Rum River, perhaps one of the bloodiest skirmishes between the two tribes, began July 4, 1839 near Round Lake, a few miles north of present day Anoka. The Dakota, seeking revenge for the murder of a Dakota hunter, waited near an Ojibway camp until the men left to hunt. The Dakota then opened fire. Nearby Ojibway men, hearing the attack, rushed back to the camp to defend the women and children. But before the hunters could return, the Dakota had fled. Seventy Ojibway, mostly women and children, had died. The Dakota had lost 17 warriors.

The Rum River was discovered and charted by white explorers during their many quests for the source of the Mississippi River. Although Lake Itasca was not identified by Henry Schoolcraft as the source of the mighty river until 1832, the Rum River valley was well known to white men many years before that.

Daniel Greysolon, sieur du Luth, was sent to the region of the "thousand lakes" in 1676 by the Governor of New France, Count Frontenac, who hoped to establish new trapping grounds and wrest domination of the fur trade industry from the British. Du Luth left Montreal and eventually reached the southern shore of Mille Lacs Lake which he named "Baude" in honor of Count Frontenac. Discovering the village of the Dakota (who called themselves the "Isanti" meaning the

“country of the knife” or the “people who are adapted to using the knife”), Du Luth named it “Izatys,” later transcribed “Kathio” because of a misreading of Du Luth’s original manuscript. The French explorer wrote: “On the second of July, 1679, I had the honor to set up the arms of his majesty in the great village...where no Frenchman had ever been.”

Du Luth eventually mapped three large Dakota village sites. Kathio, the largest, was located where the Rum leaves Mille Lacs Lake and was the home of a succession of powerful Dakota chiefs who ruled the Dakota tribe for centuries. Chief Little Crow was the last descendant of what was to be called the Little Crow Dynasty. It is believed that chiefs Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull also came from this family.

The second village Du Luth charted was on the west side of the Rum River near Lake Onamia.

The third village was named Island Aquipagentin after the chief that captured another early French explorer, Jesuit priest Father Louis Hennepin.

During his explorations, Du Luth heard many rumors of “White Spirits” traveling with the Dakota farther to the south. Traveling down the Rum River with a small party, Du Luth met Hennepin on July 25, 1680. The two explorers stayed together briefly at a Dakota camp where Hennepin had lived the previous winter.

Hennepin had come to Canada in 1675 and within a few years had found his way to the Rum River valley. Hennepin and his party were captured by the Dakota in early 1680 near Lake Pepin, which the priest had called “The Lake of Tears” because of his harsh treatment by the Indians. The Dakota brought Hennepin up the Mississippi and Rum (which the priest named the St. Francis River) to the Dakota village on the shore of Mille Lacs Lake. Hennepin traveled extensively with the Indians and gradually became accepted into the tribe. In 1683, after he left the Dakota, Hennepin published an account of his adventures, explaining Dakota culture and history.

Englishman Jonathon Carver explored portions of the Mississippi and Rum rivers in 1767; nearly a century after French explorers first penetrated the area. Carver was particularly impressed with the abundant wildlife in the area.

The United States laid claim to the Rum River valley when the Louisiana Territory was purchased in 1803. Lt. Zebulon Pike, under orders from the U.S. Army “to proceed up the Mississippi with all possible diligence,” left St. Louis, Missouri, August 9, 1805 with a small detachment of men and reached St. Anthony Falls in late September. His immediate duties were to record topographical observations, to note the “populations and residence” of Indian tribes, to seek positions suitable for military posts and find the source of the Mississippi River. Although Pike’s search for the headwaters of the Mississippi was unsuccessful,

his observations added to what was known of the area surrounding the Rum River Valley.

Furs and lumber brought settlers to the land. The fur trapping industry extended its roots deeper into the region's history, beginning with the rivalry between the French and the British to discover new trapping grounds. The Indians, angered that trappers were claiming so much of their game, forced a decline in the fur trade industry. Following the War of 1812, the United States banned foreign fur companies in the country. The American Fur Company was chartered in 1816 and once treaties were established with the Indians, trappers again came in great numbers to the Rum River valley.

During the 1840's, the fur trade attracted settlers from the Eastern United States to the confluence of the Rum and Mississippi rivers. The first house and a trading post were built in what was to become Anoka County in 1844. With the arrival of new settlers, logging and agriculture soon became the chief industries of the Rum River valley.

Daniel Stanchfield was the first lumberman to extensively explore the pine forests of the Rum River valley with the intent to log them.

Stanchfield and a lumber crew of 22 men launched canoes on the Rum River on September 1, 1847. Stanchfield later wrote: "On a tributary which enters the Rum from the northeast about four miles north of the present town of Cambridge, I found a small lake and good white pine on every side. This was afterward called Lower Stanchfield Brook. I logged there two years which was the first lumbering upon a large scale on the Rum River." Stanchfield and his crew built two large lumbering camps on the Rum River in 1848. During the winter of that year, the men at these camps cut 2.5 million board feet of lumber.

In 1850, logging began on both branches of the Rum River and more than six million board feet of timber were floated down the river to the St. Anthony sawmill in Minneapolis. By 1852, 22 logging camps operated on the Rum River and its tributaries.

One of the area's most prominent lumbermen was David M. Clough, Minnesota's 13th governor. In the late 1860's, Clough and his brother operated a logging company in Isanti County, sending their logs to mills in Minneapolis and Stillwater. Before long, they operated their own sawmill in Minneapolis.

Throughout the late 1800's, logging flourished in the Rum River valley. One logging firm reported that it "sawed day and night, in season, for 15 years on one project."

Although the timber industry dwindled as the pine forests were cleared, settlements continued to grow. As Stanchfield stated in his memoirs, logging in

the Rum River valley was “heralded throughout all the states and Canada, brought immigration from every state, and changed this part of the territory from barbarism to civilization.”

Settlers worked their farms for potatoes and corn during the warm months and logged during the winter. The region’s first flourmill was built in the settlement of Anoka in 1855.

At first, farm goods were carried to market on temporary roads by “Red River” carts (the first government road was not constructed until 1855). The ox carts were ferried across the Rum River. The first ferryboat crossing of the Rum River was in 1851 in the community of Anoka.

As settlers came to the Rum River valley, counties were established and cities platted. Here are brief descriptions of how these settlements originated:

Mille Lacs County: Established May 23, 1857, and named after Mille Lacs Lake, meaning “the thousand lakes.” Milaca, the county seat, was incorporated April 19, 1854, and platted the following year. Milaca originally was called Oak City, but the name was changed to a derivative of Mille Lacs.

Isanti County: Established February 13, 1857, one year before Minnesota became the 32nd state. The name of the county and the city within it was derived from Du Luth’s name for the region – “Izatys.” The city of Cambridge, incorporated in 1876, was named by the settlers for Cambridge Township in Maine.

Sherburne County: Established February 25, 1856, and named in honor of Moses Sherburne, associate justice of the Supreme Court of the Minnesota Territory from 1853 – 1857.

Anoka County: Established May 23, 1857, and named for the city of Anoka. The name is derived from a Dakota word meaning “on both sides.” (The city of Anoka was platted on both sides of the Rum River.) St. Francis was organized in 1857 and has the name given the Rum River by Hennepin in 1680. Ramsey, first named Watertown, was settled in 1850 and organized in 1857. The town was given its present name in honor of Alexander Ramsey, the first governor of the Minnesota Territory. Andover was organized in 1857 and was named Round Lake. The town was incorporated on December 12, 1974.

From – A Management Plan for the Rum River. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, March 1977.

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