

Pomme de Terre

A Frontier Outpost in Grant County

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ON A LOW, oak-studded hill overlooking a small lake between the present towns of Elbow Lake and Ashby, there stood from 1859 to 1863 an isolated building known as the Pomme de Terre station. The unpretentious log structure, which was the first evidence of white settlement in what is now Grant County, was one of several lonely stage houses built by Burbank and Company along the road from St. Cloud to Fort Abercrombie.

After the Sioux Outbreak of 1862 a detachment of troops was stationed there, and a crude blockhouse and stockade were erected. Thenceforth dignified by the name Fort Pomme de Terre, the little cluster of buildings served, during the troubled years that followed, as one of a chain of outposts which kept open the slender line of communication between St. Paul and the community of Pembina in the Red River Valley. With peace re-established, the fort became once more a hotel and relay station on the stage route, and its presence gradually attracted a few scattered settlers, who in 1874 platted nearby the village of Pomme de Terre, the first in Grant County.¹

Travel through this section of central

Minnesota had become regular long before the stage line was introduced. As early as 1823 trains of ox-drawn carts made their way from Pembina to St. Paul, and after 1844, when the enterprising trader, Norman W. Kittson, took charge of the American Fur Company's post just south of the international border, the traffic grew to major proportions. The long caravans of oxcarts, carrying furs to market and returning with supplies and trade goods, gradually established several definite and well-known trails. One of these, linking the Mississippi at St. Cloud with the headwaters of the Red River, crossed the northeastern corner of present-day Grant County, passing Elbow and Lightning lakes.²

With the creation of a United States post office at Pembina in 1857 and the building of Fort Abercrombie on the Red River in 1858, this stretch of trail assumed greater importance. Two other developments also stimulated interest in the route. In 1858 the Hudson's Bay Company began to send supplies to Fort Garry by way of St. Paul rather than via Hudson Bay, and partly as a result

¹ Constant Larson, ed., *History of Douglas and Grant Counties*, 1:499 (Indianapolis, 1916).

² Grace Lee Nute, "The Red River Trails," in *Minnesota History*, 6:281 (September, 1925); John Perry Pritchett, "Some Red River Fur Trade Activities," in *Minnesota History*, 5:409-414 (May, 1924).

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of this, definite plans were made for steamboat navigation on the Red River between Forts Abercrombie and Garry. Thus in 1859 the time seemed ripe for the opening of a stage line.³

In that year J. C. Burbank and Company of St. Paul combined with the firm of Allen and Chase to form the Minnesota Stage Company and immediately set about the task of clearing a road and building stations and bridges along the route. Russell Blakeley, who supervised the operation, later recalled that when the "collection of horses, hack drivers, station keepers, and working party, moved out to build the road, bridges, and stations over these one hundred and sixty miles of road, the people of St. Cloud, beginning to realize what it meant for them, gave us their hearty cheers and Godspeed." The work consumed three weeks, and the first two stages left St. Cloud on June 21, 1859, loaded with passengers.⁴

Pomme de Terre was among the westernmost of the stations, being the second of the customary overnight stopping places on the three-day journey from St. Cloud to Fort Abercrombie. With what seems true appreciation of a beautiful site, Blakeley's party selected a knoll overlooking a small lake in what is now the southwest quarter of section eighteen in Pelican Lake Township. It was a little over a mile east of the body of water known to present-day residents as Mill Pond Lake.

Approaching the spot from the east, the road left the Chippewa relay station, not far from present-day Evansville, and passed along the south and west shores of Pelican Lake, keeping on high ground to avoid numerous sloughs. It then swung west for two miles, which brought it to the Pomme de Terre stopping place. Going on from the station to the west it crossed the Pomme de Terre River about a quarter of a mile below Mill Pond Lake and curving northward passed along the southwest shore of Ten Mile Lake. From there it struck northwest to the crossing of the Otter Tail River, where another relay station was situated. It did

not follow the well-known path of the Red River trail, for according to Blakeley, the route "was an entirely new one and probably located in the interest of some new town sites," among which were Sauk Centre, Osakis, and Alexandria.⁵

The Pomme de Terre station building was an unpretentious two-story structure, with walls of rough-hewn logs; the crevices were filled with mortar against rain and cold. On the ground floor was a kitchen, a dining room, and a trader's store, while overhead were sleeping quarters designed to accommodate as many as twenty people. Accounts left by early travelers indicate that these were often overcrowded, and in later years it was found necessary to expand the space by erecting a lean-to.⁶

Bishop Thomas L. Grace of St. Paul, who sampled the station's accommodations in 1861, grumbled that "our 'Hotel' . . . maintained its primitive pretensions. In justice, however, [it] must be said the beds, being newer, were more tolerant of sleep than those we had the preceding night. For supper, fish; for breakfast, fish; even the shadow of meat had disappeared." He also recorded that the road to the east of Pomme de Terre was "the worst piece" between St. Paul and the Red River, being "a succession of swamps, corduroy bridges, holes and stumps."⁷

Another impression of the stage station was recorded nine years later by an uniden-

³William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:163, 164 (St. Paul, 1961); Russell Blakeley, "Opening of the Red River of the North to Commerce and Civilization," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:46-50 (St. Paul, 1898).

⁴Blakeley, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:51.

⁵Blakeley, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:50.

⁶Detailed descriptions of the station building and the fort as they appeared after 1868 were given the author by Mrs. Wilhelmina Burns and Mrs. Martin T. Johnson, both of whom lived at the site for a number of years after it was purchased and occupied by David Burns. They were interviewed on December 29, 1931.

⁷"Journal of a Trip to Red River August and September 1861," in *Acta et Dicta*, 1:169 (July, 1908).

tified clergyman on his way to Fort Abercrombie. He and his fellow travelers had just retired to the sleeping quarters when "rain and wind set in such as few of us had ever seen. Sleepers sprang from their beds, seized their clothing, and ran into a safer looking room to dress. Terror was in every countenance. The landlord was interrogated, and assured us it would stop sometime—perhaps before day—though he had never seen anything of the kind before. Meanwhile the commotion was about equally wild inside and out. Chairs were kicked over, one bedstead was broken down, a man fell part of the way downstairs, and the tempest was trumping without."⁸

DESPITE the crudities and hardships of travel, however, traffic over the stage line was heavy for the first three years, and busi-

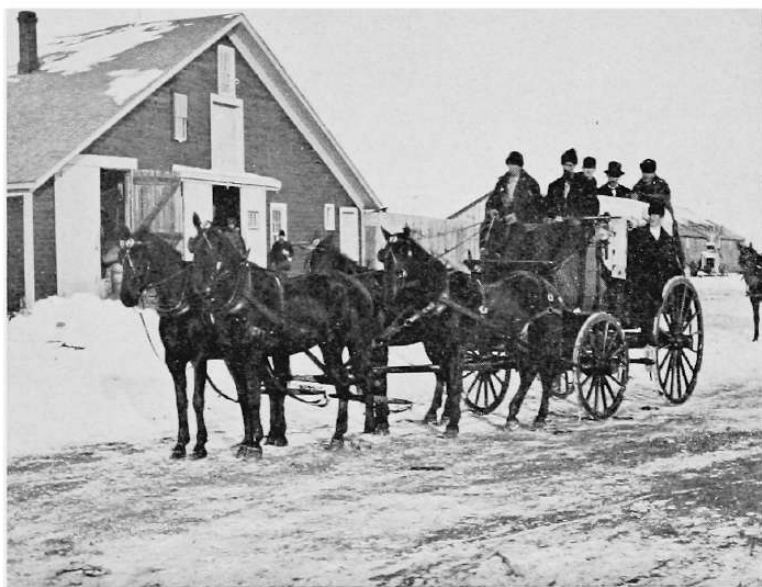
⁸ *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, May 29, 1870.

⁹ Blakeley, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:61. For a discussion of the effects of the Fraser River gold rush in Minnesota, see Willoughby M. Babcock, "Gateway to the Northwest: St. Paul and the Nobles Expedition of 1859," in *Minnesota History*, 35:249–262 (June, 1957).

ness at the stations was brisk. Steamboat navigation on the Red River materialized with the launching of the "Anson Northup" in the spring of 1859, and the discovery of gold on the Fraser River in what is now British Columbia brought a tide of adventurers and fortune seekers bound for the gold fields by way of the Red and Saskatchewan rivers. On May 15, 1862, the *St. Cloud Democrat* reported that "every stage from St. Paul brings passengers for . . . [the Cariboo mines] while a great many go through on ox and mule teams. Burbank & Co. are running a daily line of four horse coaches from this place to Red River and they cannot take all who wish to go." Earlier that spring mail service to Pembina had been increased to twice weekly.⁹

Until the summer of 1862 no serious trouble was experienced from Indians, though minor alarms and annoyances did occur. On March 29, 1860, the editor of the *St. Cloud Democrat* remarked bitterly, "Now that the winter is over and the Indians have ceased to mob and maltreat the frontier settlements, the administration has, as we are informed,

A stagecoach on the
northwestern frontier
in the 1870s



ordered three or four companies to Fort Abercrombie. . . . But just so soon as Autumn and the starving, thieving savages approach the settlements, these same troops will be sent to New York or some other safe and agreeable winter retreat." A traveler stopping at Pomme de Terre in 1861 met a coach filled with passengers from the Red River who "had heard rumors of Indian disturbances and were anxious to make all haste in the direction of St. Paul."¹⁰

A year later the danger became more than rumor. With the swiftness of a storm the Sioux Uprising swept all security from the Minnesota frontier. Though the major events and depredations of the war occurred in the Minnesota Valley, marauding bands of Sioux spread terror throughout the western part of the state. The scattered settlers within reach of Fort Abercrombie flocked there for shelter, while those farther east fled to St. Cloud and beyond. At Sauk Centre the citizens constructed a makeshift fort and prepared to defend their homes. Individuals who tarried or refused to flee often met death. A mail coach which left Fort Abercrombie for St. Paul on August 22, 1862, was plundered and its driver slain not far out of Breckenridge.¹¹

The Sioux attacked Fort Abercrombie on September 3 and again on September 6, but without success. A relief force sent from St. Cloud camped on the night of September 21 at the Pomme de Terre station and proceeded the following day to the station at the crossing of the Otter Tail River. There they found the stage house and stables burned and all their contents destroyed. Another day's march brought the troops to Fort Abercrombie where they were in time to help repel a third brief attack by the Sioux on September 26. Four days later a group of civilian refugees from the fort started for St. Cloud accompanied by an armed escort; they arrived safely on October 5.¹²

THE STAGE ROAD was traveled frequently after that, though only under military protection. The Sioux had been defeated at

the battle of Wood Lake in the Minnesota Valley on September 23 and had subsequently scattered across the plains to the north and west. Though constant vigilance against isolated forays was necessary, no large-scale attacks were to be feared. A train loaded with supplies for Fort Abercrombie left St. Cloud on November 7, and taking advantage of the armed escort, Burbank and Company sent along a hundred teams.¹³

The firm's contract to carry goods for the Hudson's Bay Company made the Burbanks anxious that traffic to Pembina be maintained with as little interruption as possible, and it was partly in response to their urging that General Henry H. Sibley stationed "a larger force at the various posts on the route from St. Cloud to, and including, Abercrombie, than can well be spared for that purpose."¹⁴

Through the winter and spring of 1863, this chain of posts gradually took shape, a process which is reflected in war department correspondence of the period. A dispatch sent from St. Paul to Fort Abercrombie on January 19 states that "Captain [William T.] Rockwood, Company 'K' 8th Minn. Vols. has been ordered to take post at Alexandria, leaving a subaltern and 20 men at Chippewa Station. A guard will be stationed at Pomme de Terre if it is absolutely necessary." Apparently the necessity was confirmed, for according to a letter dated three days later, "Means will be taken to station a small force at Pomme de Terre in a few days." On January 26 a dispatch announced that "Captain [Samuel] McLarty has been ordered from Fort Ripley with his command and will take post at Pomme de Terre and Chippewa Sta-

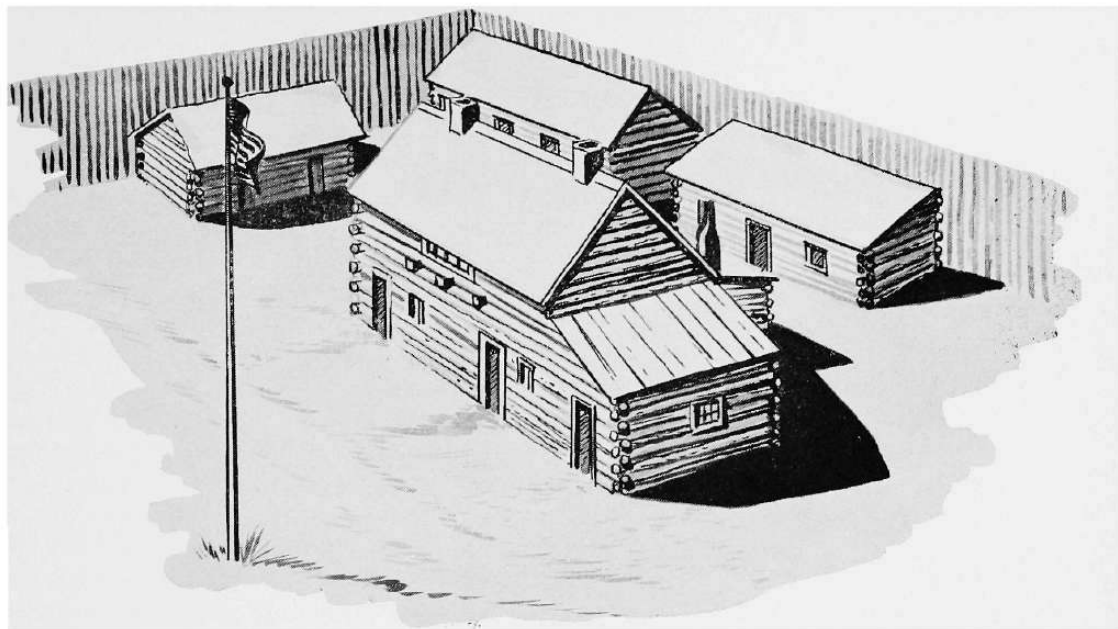
¹⁰ Joseph J. Hargrave, *Red River*, 46 (Montreal, 1871).

¹¹ Annual Report of the Adjutant General, in Minnesota, *Executive Documents*, 1862, p. 479, 484, 485.

¹² Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:165-168; Report of Adjutant General, 1862, p. 500; *St. Cloud Democrat*, October 9, 1862.

¹³ *St. Cloud Democrat*, November 6, 1862.

¹⁴ See correspondence between Sibley and Governor Alexander Ramsey in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:294, 295 (St. Paul, 1892).



THE northwest corner of Fort Pomme de Terre, sketched from a model in the Grant County Historical Society museum

tion. This additional force will secure the supplies at Alexandria and Pomme de Terre and also serve to keep the route open along the line of posts.”¹⁵

Several weeks later Captain McLarty, along with the commanding officers at similar posts, received a copy of a circular letter with instructions that he “proceed forthwith to construct a bullet proof stockade at least nine feet high which [will] serve not only for defense, but as a place of refuge to families in the neighborhood in case of attack by Indians.” Care should be taken, it continued, that a supply of water was available and that the stockade was not within range of timber or underbrush or commanded by rising ground. Upon the heels of these instructions came a directive that he call in

the detachment at Chippewa station and concentrate his command at Pomme de Terre. He was also told to “care for any mules left at your station by the trains” and to see that a damaged bridge between Chippewa and Pomme de Terre was “put in proper repair.” Thus Pomme de Terre became the principal outpost between Alexandria and Fort Abercrombie.¹⁶

CAPTAIN McLARTY’S company was mainly composed of soldiers from Fillmore County, and among them was a recruit from Chatfield named H. Adams Hair. During the spring of 1863 he wrote a number of letters to his wife, some of which have been preserved. They give an informal glimpse of a soldier’s lonely life at the frontier fort.¹⁷

Hair apparently arrived there late in February or early in March, for his first letter from Pomme de Terre is dated March 6. “I think that we shall stay here for the present,” he told his wife. “We are fortifying this place, very strong so that there is not much danger from the Indians if they do attack us. . . . The mail does not come here only once a week. I did not get that paper you

¹⁵ Rollin C. Olin, Assistant Adjutant General, St. Paul, to Captain Timothy D. Smith, Fort Abercrombie, January 22, 26, 1863 (photostatic copies), in letterbook of the Department of the Northwest, War Department Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁶ Olin to McLarty, February 13, 20, 1863, War Department Papers.

¹⁷ These letters are owned by the Grant County Historical Society, Elbow Lake. In them he spelled his name “Hair,” though the regimental roster lists it as “Hare.”



ADAMS Hair

sent me. I wish I had for we don't get many papers here now. . . . I like this place as well as any (except it is with you), and I long for the time to come when we can be together again."

A month later, on April 5, he reported, "We have got most of our work done now and tomorrow we shall commence [*sic*] to drill again twice a day, so that we shall not be idle much. I think that we shall stay here this summer to guard this place. It is quite a pleasant place now the snow is gone off though the lakes are covered with ice yet. . . . The geese are flying pretty plenty today and soon we will have some to eat (that is if we can get them)."

The little group of soldiers apparently maintained an active religious life, for Hair wrote that "This forenoon a few of us went out into the woods, and had a good meeting, the best that I have enjoyed for a long time. . . . [It] done me lots of good, and I feel encouraged to go on. I am still trying to live a Christian. . . . We are going to have meetings as often as we can when the weather will admit. We cannot have any only outdoors and if it is stormy we will have to dispense with them."

On April 9 he addressed another letter to his "Dear Frankie," telling her that "We got our stockade done, and now we are going to build a house for headquarters. That is a house for the officers so that they can be by themselves." Not all the days were passed in work and drill, however, for "I went strawberrying one day this week, and picked six quarts. . . . Then I have been hunting some, and yesterday, I went fishing and got a nice lot of pickerel, as many as we could bring home." He closed with, "[I] don't think of anything more to write now only that I would like to be at home with you, but wishing don't make it any better. You must keep up good spirits and if nothing happens we will be together again sometime, even if I have to stay my time out."

Less than a month later Hair and another soldier went hunting for goose eggs near the shores of a small lake within half a mile of the fort. There they were ambushed and shot by Indians. On the same day a cattle driver taking a herd of beef to Fort Abercrombie and a soldier detailed from Pomme de Terre to accompany him were slain near the crossing of the Otter Tail River.¹⁸

These incidents created fresh alarm along the entire route and drew Captain McLarty a sharp reprimand from his superiors for permitting his men to straggle from the post. Discipline must, however, have been hard to maintain, considering the newness of the recruits, the monotonous duties, and the stream of travelers who constantly stopped at the post. Another element making for a nonmilitary atmosphere was the presence of several wives. These eventually numbered twelve, including Mrs. McLarty.¹⁹

They added considerable gaiety to life at the fort and boarded many of the soldiers, for which they received a stipend of twenty-five cents a day and were allotted the rations

¹⁸ *St. Cloud Democrat*, May 7, 1863.

¹⁹ Olin to McLarty, May 6, 12, 1863, War Department Papers; *St. Cloud Democrat*, March 17, 1864; interview with Mrs. Henry H. Arnold, February 16, 1932. Mrs. Arnold, whose husband was stationed at Fort Pomme de Terre, lived with him there from the spring of 1863 to the spring of 1864.

of each soldier for whom they cooked. One of them recalled many years later that though she did not know how she “bucked up” the courage to go to the fort, she “never enjoyed a winter” more than the one she spent there.²⁰

Building continued until the post included, besides the old station house, a blockhouse, a commissary, an arsenal, and two rows of barracks, one for soldiers whose wives were with them and the other a “bachelors’ barracks.” All were enclosed by a stockade composed of twelve-foot logs placed upright with one end in the ground and the tops fastened securely together with wooden pegs. Large gates opened on the east and south sides and there was a small door on the west, but the north side was pierced only by loopholes. The blockhouse was located at the northeast corner.²¹

²⁰ Interview with Mrs. Arnold.

²¹ Interviews with Mrs. Arnold, Mrs. Burns, and Mrs. Johnson. See also Larson, ed., *Douglas and Grant Counties*, 1:374.

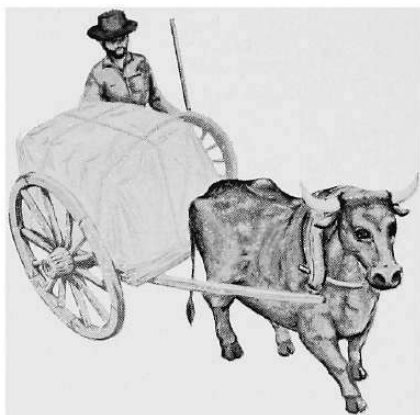
DESPITE the continuing danger from roving bands of Sioux and the need for military protection, traffic between St. Cloud and the Red River continued at an increasing tempo through the summer of 1863. Supplies were sent over the route, destined for Fort Abercrombie and for the expedition which Sibley was leading against the Sioux in Dakota Territory. With every train went an equal or greater number of Burbank and Company’s wagons, hauling goods for the Hudson’s Bay Company and others at Pembina. Trains as much as three or four miles long were common. Red River half-breeds with loaded oxcarts made their appearance in May, and by September 24 the editor of the *St. Cloud Democrat* wondered “if there are any carts left at the Red River Settlement? It seems as if all that were ever manufactured — and more too — had visited our city within the last week.” Hot, dry weather throughout the summer kept the waters of the Red River too low for navigation, but goods proceeded by oxcart and wagon never-



MARKER over graves
of the two soldiers
slain in 1863

LOOKING eastward
from the site
of the stockade





theless. An ominous accompaniment of the drought were swarms of grasshoppers, reported throughout the Red River Valley and seen in smaller numbers as far east as Pomme de Terre.²²

The threat of hostile Sioux failed also to hold back the tide of settlement. On July 9 the *Democrat* reported that "Scarcely a day passes but families from some of the older states are seen on our streets going to farms in this portion of the state. Indian troubles do not seem to deter them, as they know that these must before long be settled." Journeying to Fort Abercrombie in early September, Joseph A. Wheelock, editor of the *St. Paul Press*, noted that when he had last been over the route, four years earlier, "There was a squatter's claim here and there, and at a distance of half a day's journey, or more, a newly built log house to mark the stations on Burbank's just opened stage route here away. Now it is one almost unbroken chain of cultivated farms from St. Cloud to miles beyond Sauk Centre."²³

Pomme de Terre was still outside the line of settlement, but its days as a wilderness outpost were numbered. Wheelock was accompanying Governor Alexander Ramsey on his way to the Red Lake River, where he was to make a treaty with the Chippewa for the purchase of the Red River Valley. When Ramsey passed Fort Pomme de Terre, he noted in his diary that it was "a wretched looking place," and though he partook of "a generous dinner" at the invitation of Captain McLarty, he and his party preferred to

camp a mile and a half beyond, near the crossing of the Pomme de Terre River.²⁴

In the following month a battalion of volunteer cavalry under Major Edwin A. C. Hatch was ordered to Pembina, and the contract for transporting its supplies was awarded to Burbank and Company. The train consisted of some two hundred wagons belonging to the troops and—as was customary—a large number carrying other freight for the company.²⁵

By the close of the year 1863 the *St. Cloud Democrat* was able to announce that "Indian matters are perfectly quiet throughout this portion of the state. . . . The out-posts are, however, all well garrisoned, and every precaution is taken to preserve the present favorable condition of affairs." In the spring of 1864 the troops of the Eighth Minnesota were relieved of their duty at Pomme de Terre and Alexandria and were replaced by a company from Hatch's battalion.²⁶

LIKE 1863, the two succeeding years saw floods of traffic over the route between St. Cloud and Pembina. Its volume was swelled as a result of a grasshopper plague which left settlers in the Red River Valley dependent on imported supplies. Each year a brigade numbering around a thousand oxcarts arrived in St. Cloud toward the end of June or early in July, and many of these returned a second time in September. Their usual lading was furs and hides, of which buffalo robes constituted a large share in the 1860s. In addition there were the wagons of the transport companies, engaged in hauling military supplies to the Dakota army posts and in carrying goods for the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1864

²² *St. Cloud Democrat*, May 21, 28, June 11, July 2, 1863.

²³ *St. Paul Daily Press*, September 12, 1863.

²⁴ Ramsey Diary, September 10, 1863, Ramsey Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁵ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:290-292; *St. Cloud Democrat*, October 1, 15, 1863.

²⁶ *St. Cloud Democrat*, December 24 1863; May 26, 1864; Olin to Major Edwin A. C. Hatch, at Fort Abercrombie, May 5, 1864, War Department Papers.

the *Democrat* estimated that the latter's freight, shipped from St. Paul to Fort Garry, amounted to "about 500 tons annually."²⁷

In 1866, with the Civil War a thing of the past and the Sioux driven far onto the Dakota plains, there was a mighty movement of settlers westward. As early as May 3, the *Democrat* reported, "Immigrants are coming with a perfect rush. The town is full to overflowing with strangers. The stage company are compelled to send through extra coaches to carry their passengers." By June 14 it was clear that "the immigration to this portion of the state has not been exceeded any previous season," and the paper went on to note "A great number of Norwegians and Swedes are settling in the Chippewa Lake country and along the Pomme de Terre."

At the same time traffic along the route to Fort Abercrombie was swelled by immigrants bound even farther west. A train of 325 persons in 160 wagons gathered at the fort in June and under the leadership of Captain James L. Fisk headed overland for the gold fields of western Montana.²⁸

Between April 22 and June 22 the troops of Hatch's battalion were mustered out of service, and Pomme de Terre became once again merely a hotel and relay station on the stage route. The barracks were turned

into stables and the stockade went unmended.²⁹

That summer the Red River brigade numbered almost twelve hundred carts, but the end of this picturesque mode of transportation was near, for on September 1, 1866, the railroad was opened to St. Cloud, and in a few years it was to reach the Red River, passing to the north of Pomme de Terre.³⁰

In 1868 Henry C. Burbank sold 315 acres, including the hotel and the abandoned fort buildings, to David Burns, who announced on December 9 "to his friends, and the traveling public," that he had "the Pomme de Terre Hotel opened and in good running order, and that no pains will be spared on his part to make his guests comfortable and happy, and their stay pleasant and agreeable."³¹

For several years he continued to offer accommodations, sometimes to as many as seventy-five people in a single night, when a large wagon train passed through. A store operated within the stockade kept caps, guns, powder, and trapping equipment, most of which were traded to Indians and half-breeds in exchange for cranberries, maple sugar, game, and pelts.³²

In the early 1870s a small village grew up, centered around a gristmill on the Pomme de Terre River, a little more than a mile to the west of the old fort. The store was moved first, taking up quarters in a pretentious frame building, and before long the settlement, calling itself Pomme de Terre, also boasted a hotel, a saloon, and several other businesses. Gradually the old stage station fell into disuse, the buildings decayed or were moved, and the stockade was reportedly used up for firewood.³³

Today nothing of the fort remains, although there is a marker over the graves of the two soldiers killed there in 1863. In a few places the route of the stage road can be identified by impressions still remaining in the ground, but otherwise the site appears as farming country whose peaceful and productive appearance does not in any way suggest the colorful story of its past.

²⁷ *St. Cloud Democrat*, April 14, June 23, September 1, 1864; June 29, September 21, 1865.

²⁸ W. Turrentine Jackson, *Wagon Roads West*, 276 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1952).

²⁹ Adjutant General of Minnesota, *Reports*, 1866, p. 1.

³⁰ *St. Cloud Democrat*, June 21, July 5, September 6, 1866.

³¹ Interview with Mrs. Burns; *Alexandria Post*, December 9, 1868.

³² Interviews with Mrs. Burns and Mrs. Johnson; *Illustrated Souvenir of Grant County*, 6 (Elbow Lake, 1896).

³³ Larson, ed., *Douglas and Grant Counties*, 374, 379, 499.

THE PORTRAIT on page 68 is owned by the Grant County Historical Society. The photographs on page 69 are by Eugene Becker, and the sketch of the fort on page 67 was made by Chester Kozlak. The coach on the title page is from an advertisement in the St. Paul City Directory of 1858-59, and all other illustrations are from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.



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