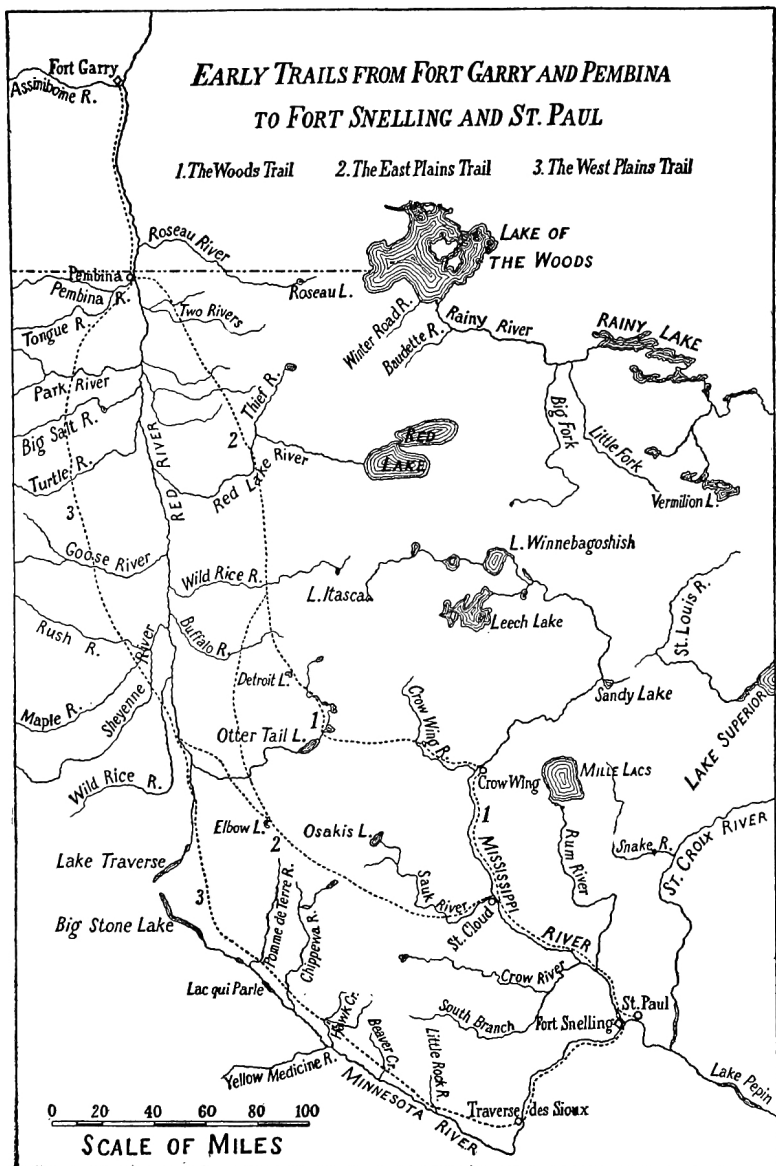


1. The Woods Trail 2. The East Plains Trail 3. The West Plains Trail

1. The Woods Trail

2. The East Plains Trail

3. The West Plains Trail



NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE RED RIVER TRAILS

The accompanying map, showing the three chief trails from Fort Snelling and, later, St. Paul to Pembina and Fort Garry, has been made to meet the numerous demands for authentic data on these old trails.¹ Most writers on the history of the Red River Valley tacitly assume that their readers know exactly what is meant when the Red River trail is mentioned and so do not explain the term. That three trails were well defined and generally recognized appears to have been overlooked by most of them.

It does not seem possible at this time to determine the origin of any of these trails. It is probable, however, that there was little communication between the traders on the St. Peter's or Minnesota River and those at the mouth of the Pembina River prior to the establishment of Lord Selkirk's colony on the present site of Winnipeg in 1812. After Fort Snelling was located in 1819 at the junction of the St. Peter's and Mississippi rivers communication with the Red River settlements became common, and by the time that Minnesota Territory was organized in 1849 all the trails had been opened and were in more or less constant use. From the middle forties until railroad cars offered a speedier mode of covering the distance, the Red River trails were traversed year after year by patient traders and more patient oxen, the latter drawing carts famous alike for their noise and for the fact that they were constructed entirely of wood.²

The *raison d'être* of these trails was the growing colony on the banks of the Red River from Pembina to Fort Garry. As

¹ The drafting of the map has been done by Dr. Warren Upham, archeologist of the Minnesota Historical Society.

² A brief description of the Red River carts is given in William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 226 (St. Paul, 1921).

time went on, the traders and farmers of this colony found themselves possessed of superfluous furs, skins, pemmican, and farm products which they could no longer market to advantage by means of the annual ship dispatched from Hudson Bay to England by the Hudson's Bay Company. At the same time a market was growing in the United States with St. Paul as the entrepôt, and despite all the efforts of the Hudson's Bay Company to the contrary the Red River trails were marked out more clearly each succeeding year by an ever-increasing number of oxen, carts, and men.⁸ The arrival and departure of the Red River brigades became a characteristic feature of life in the young city of St. Paul, and the newspapers of the day often reported them.

Some traders preferred one trail, some another. As a rule only two epithets were used to distinguish them — the "woods" trail and the "plains" trail. The former name afforded no chance for ambiguity. The latter, however, was employed in speaking of either of two routes: the trail from St. Cloud that the woods trail joined near the crossing of the Wild Rice River at what was known as the "forks"; and the route which ascended the valley of the Minnesota, crossed the Bois des Sioux, and continued northward on the west side of the Red River. To distinguish between the two plains trails, the arbitrary names of "east" and "west" have been used on the map.

The first detailed account of a trip made over one of the Red River trails was that of Major Stephen H. Long's expedition of 1823. Though the route up the valley of the St. Peter's and beyond to Lake Traverse and Big Stone Lake differs in details from the regular west plains trail as indicated on the map, the remainder of the journey from the mouth of the Bois des Sioux River to Pembina is identical with the east plains trail. In his diary Major Long maps the route with great accuracy. He also indicates that a more or less

⁸ For a thorough discussion of the development of trade between St. Paul and Pembina, see John P. Pritchett, "Some Red River Fur-trade Activities," *ante*, 5: 401-423.

regular freighting business by cart was carried on as early as 1823 between Pembina and Big Stone Lake via this route.⁴

The next account worthy of mention may be found in Martin McLeod's diary, kept on his trip from Pembina to Fort Snelling in the winter of 1837. McLeod followed the west plains trail, traveling by dog sled as far as Lake Traverse and by horse and cart the remainder of the journey. Captain John Pope in 1849 followed the east plains trail to a point a little beyond Elbow Lake, then crossed the Red River and pursued his way to Pembina along the west plains route. This combination of trails was frequent. Governor Ramsey's party of 1849, charged with making a treaty of cession with the Red Lake and Pembina Indians, journeyed down the west side of the river and returned over the same route. These four are the chief early expeditions which made use of the Red River trails, and on the accounts of them we are dependent for our knowledge of the routes.⁵

There is some evidence that the woods trail was marked out in 1844 by traders who wished to avoid unfriendly Sioux by going through Chippewa territory.⁶ Apparently none of the

⁴ Major Long's diary in three small volumes is preserved by the Minnesota Historical Society. It has not been printed.

⁵ McLeod's diary is printed *ante*, 4: 351-439. Captain John Pope's expedition is described in his *Report of an Exploration of the Territory of Minnesota* (31 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 42—serial 558); in Samuel Woods, *Report of Major Wood[s], Relative to His Expedition to Pembina Settlement, and the Condition of Affairs on the North-Western Frontier of the Territory of Minnesota* (31 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 51—serial 577); and in the manuscript record cited *post*, n. 7. Accounts of Governor Ramsey's expedition are to be found in J. Wesley Bond, *Minnesota and Its Resources*, 253-358 (New York, 1853), and in Ramsey's report in 32 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 284-288 (serial 613).

⁶ A letter from Mr. John K. West to the Hudson's Bay Company at Winnipeg, dated at Detroit on June 7, 1923, a copy of which is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, refers to a party of the company's employees who cut out this trail in the year 1844. A reply from the company on June 16, 1923, supports Mr. West's statement, though contemporary documentary proof is not adduced owing to the recent transfer of the archives of the Winnipeg office to London.

government expeditions made use of the woods trail. That it was used extensively, however, would be inferred from the following remarks by Alfred J. Hill:

In territorial times, when the general government made roads for the people of the frontier this line of communication [*the Red River trails*] was not neglected, though not attended to till the other 'military roads' had been for years in process of construction. But as the plains trail, because it was over a plain or prairie region generally, was a passably good road, the woods trail, being through heavy forests, was the one preferred and appropriation was accordingly made. In 1856, under orders of Capt Simpson, the U. S. engineer in charge, Mr. Holmes a civil engineer of St Paul made a hasty reconnaissance of the line as far, I think, as Otter Tail lake. Next year, under Capt. Thom, another engineer, Mr. Belden, made an elaborate survey and established a line for purposes of construction, and proposals being made the contract was let and work began. The location line followed generally the old trail, scarcely diverging from it otherwise than to shorten it by cutting off innumerable bends and turns around the marshes.⁷

Statehood put an end to road-building by the federal government and the road was constructed only as far as the present site of Motley.

Thus the Red River trails fill an interesting and important rôle in the early history of Minnesota and of the Red River Valley. It is hoped that the accompanying map will remove the confusion that has been occasioned by the absence of just such a simple portrayal of the different routes as this map purports to be.

GRACE LEE NUTE

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

⁷ Copies of the maps drawn in great detail and on a large scale by Captain E. A. Holmes and of similar maps and of field notes made by Captain George H. Belden are among the Hill Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. There also may be found a copy of the minute record kept by Captain Pope on his expedition to Pembina. Hill was the author of a short manuscript sketch of the Red River trails from which the excerpt given in the text is quoted.



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