

Book Reviews

Michael D. Gibson, Book Review Editor

The Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement, 1820-1870, by Rhoda R. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman, and Deborah M. Stultz. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1979. pp. vii, 105. Illustrations, reference notes, maps, index. \$6.75 paper.

As participants in a two-year research project of the Minnesota Historical Society, the collaborators have contributed to the understanding of a colorful chapter in Minnesota's history. The authors have built their research upon documentation collected by Alfred J. Hill, Minnesota archaeologist-historian and staff member of the U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers in the 1850s. Hill's papers, now in the Minnesota Historical Society, served as the starting point for subsequent historians of the Red River Trails.

In the first chapter, supervisor of research, Rhoda R. Gilman, outlines the overall history and development of the rudimentary highway system. Two explanations are suggested for the historical obscurity of the Trails. Comparing the commercial and political importance of the Red River Trails to that of the Santa Fe Trail connecting the Mississippi River and the Rio Grande, Gilman maintains that the Red River Trails remained obscure because "American expansion in the southwest was ultimately successful; in the north it was not."

Gilman's observation that the hazards of travel on the Red River cart paths were never comparable to more western routes like the Oregon or Bozeman trails is too simplistic an explanation for the disinterest of historians in the primitive roadways.

Because snow, fog, or rain could render the trails suddenly invisible, the Red River cart paths hugged large geographic landmarks. The rutted paths clung to river valleys and followed roads long-established by Indians. Oxcart travel consisted of leaps between areas where wood and water were available.

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Particularly vivid is Gilman's description of the cart trains, "a distinctive sight that caught the eye and pen of many of mid-century traveler." The carts are described as "ram-shackle, squeaky affairs;" the passengers brightly dressed, a variety of ethnic backgrounds represented in the "polyglot jabber" of their campsites.

The chapters on the individual trail sections are fascinating reading. The Manitoba Trails ran from the Red River Settlement to the U.S. border. After crossing into the United States, travelers from the Red River Settlement faced the second, and much longer lap of their journey to St. Paul. The River Trail and the Ridge Trail formed the system of Red River Trails in North Dakota.

The earliest of the Red River Trails, the Minnesota Valley Trail, remained the principal cart path throughout the 1840s and the early 1850s.

Pioneered by men going north from St. Paul to the Red River Settlement, the Woods Trail was the easternmost route, passing through many miles of forest.

The Middle Trail, the most used and complex in evolution, consisted of several tracks, each of which evolved in a different period. Twelve miles of unceasing mud, mire, bogs, and sloughs slowed cart travel on this trail. The process of getting an oxcart out of a slough is detailed in this chapter.

Named for the homesteads, inns, and "burlesque towns" springing up along the route, the Metropolitan Trail was an extension of the Woods and Middle Trails leading down the east side of the Mississippi River to St. Paul.

Each trail's itinerary is dramatically reconstructed with mile-by-mile, detailed descriptions of landmarks and physical characteristics encountered. Much of the descriptive material is derived from the letters, journals, and diaries of nineteenth century travelers on the Red River Trails.

The death knell sounded for the Red River Trails when steamboat service on the Red River began. Travel and freighting ended in 1872, when the Northern Pacific Railroad to Moorhead opened. When the cart trains vanished, the Red River Trails became obliterated in farmland.

The Trails' influence on railroad development in Minnesota is mentioned. Although steel tracks seldom followed the cart routes exactly, the old Red River trade routes were a major factor in the planning and building of railroads.

Finally, the Trails' significance to the development of St. Paul is discussed. The authors estimate that international trade generated by

Book Reviews

Red River people between 1855 and 1863 brought \$1,466,766 worth of furs and robes into St. Paul, making it the second largest fur market in America. Due to already established lines of trade, grain from the Red River Valley, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan was marketed in St. Paul and Minneapolis, bypassing available water-transportation on the Great Lakes.

Primary resource material cited by the authors includes original U.S. land survey records of Minnesota and North Dakota, archives of early railroads, reports of military expeditions, records of U.S. Topographical Engineers, papers of early traders and settlers, county maps and manuscript collections. Leaving no stone unturned, the researchers consulted local historians in the more than thirty-five counties crossed by the Red River Trails.

Lengthy footnotes are deliberately included to preserve a complete record of the sources consulted, "for the benefit of subsequent researchers." The failure of earlier scholars to do so hampered the present authors' work on the project. Reference notes are located unobtrusively at the end of the text.

Lacking a concluding chapter, the text ends abruptly. The insightful preface, which draws loose ends together and provides unification, replaces a formal conclusion.

Set forth in clear, concise writing, the book is easily read and entertains as well as informs. Map sources, picture credits, and a comprehensive index fulfill the requisites for a sound historical publication.

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Cabin on the Second Ridge, by Ralph L. Longley. New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1976. pp. 166. \$6.95.

Historical fiction is often difficult to create. The author must navigate a fine line between historical accuracy and the theme of the story. In *Cabin on the Second Ridge*, Ralph Longley succeeds in blending these two factors effectively. He explains that he worked from a diary, a rather terse account left to him by his grandmother, Eliza Ann Bartlett. From some of the additional family details and events described in the book, it appears that he also used another more complete family document, the memoir left by Eliza Ann's brother Emery for his children and grandchildren. In combination, the two sources provided the

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