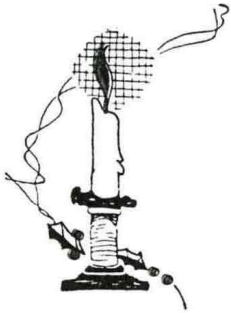
RED RIVER TRAILS



Christmas

NINETEEN HUNDRED
TWENTY-FIVE

AT this season of the year when we pause to take stock of the past and plan for the future, our surest satisfaction is in doing well things that are well worth doing. The story of a great and sudden change in the Northwest is the story of transportation, which is our work. Traders and missionaries had been among the Indians here for nearly two hundred years, when all at once a flood of settlers swept out from the East because railways had been built.

The Great Northern traces its lineage back through the St. Paul & Pacific, Minnesota's first railroad; and as the development of that road from primitive forms of travel was a natural evolution, so the valley of the Red River of the North was the cradle of the Great Northern. We learn also something of our heritage in the story of those earlier Christmas Days, and the years when imagination and courage and toil gave this land contact with the outside world and made modern comforts possible. Yours is the satisfaction of carrying on this work.

This message is one of appreciation for helping a great railway to bring more of happiness and peace and prosperity to the land it serves. May you have a Merry Christmas, and may the year 1926 be full of life's blessings for you.

Louis W. Hill
Ralph Budd

THERE is a certain hay meadow in south-western Minnesota; curiously enough this low-lying bit of prairie, often entirely submerged, happens to be an important height of land dividing the great water sheds of Hudson's Bay and Mississippi river. It lies between two lakes: One of these, the Big Stone, gives rise to the Minnesota river, whose waters slide down the long toboggan of the Mississippi Valley to the Gulf of Mexico; from the other, Lake Traverse, flows the Bois de Sioux, a main tributary of the Red River of the North, which descends for over 500 miles through one of the richest valleys in the world to Lake Winnipeg and eventually to Hudson's Bay.

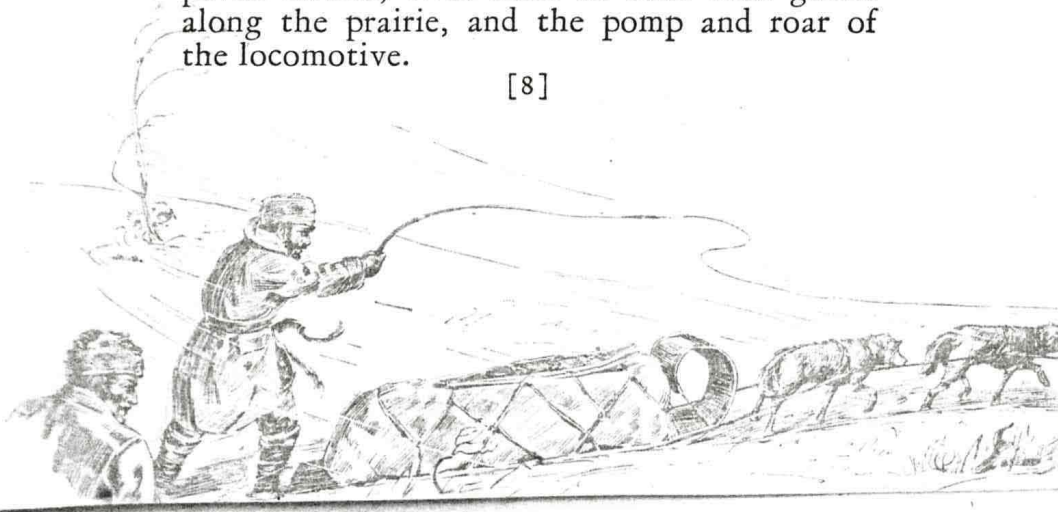
In the dim geologic past, the melting of a great glacier ground up limestone and covered this valley with fertile deposits, while the glacial Lake Agassiz subsequently levelled it to a vast flat plain.

Occasionally in spring when the rivers are exceptionally high, the meadow is flooded and becomes a lake. Then a boatman, travelling southward from the semi-arctic Hudson's Bay, could float over the divide and reach the Gulf of Mexico entirely by water route.

EARLY travellers have given romantic names to the rivers of the West, none more so than the Red River of the North. The words have a lovely and poetic sound; they suggest the cry of wild birds sounding at nightfall over far-off and empty lands. Reality, however, is very remote from the imaginative picture.

Anything less lonely than the Red river valley where farms, towns and cities and more farms succeed each other along the network of railroads and highways, can scarcely be imagined. As to poetry, while there is plenty of it wherever people live, work, love and die, it is not of the obvious kind. What there is outside the human drama must be looked for in grain elevators, chambers of commerce, model dairy farms, ferretted if possible out of gas-driven farm machinery and prize-winning hogs; while astonishing statistics add their wonder to this economic ode. Such is the romance of the Red river of today.

Turn the pages back just a few years, so few that the present becomes almost an impossibility. Gone like a dream are the fields, Fords, factories, threshing machines, cement paved streets, twin lines of steel that gleam along the prairie, and the pomp and roar of the locomotive.



Silence everywhere; a sea of waving grass through which wound the wooded ribbon of the river; groves of oak, maple and ash which made dark islands in the ocean-like prairie. Eastward lay great forests of pine, and blue lakes where masses of water fowl fed on wild rice and celery, and elk bent their proud antlers to the water's edge to drink.

In the open, shaggy buffalo scattered leisurely to graze, trampling the myriad wild flowers and staining their hoofs with the wild berries that carpeted the prairie; or, on the march, travelled single file along trails worn deep by their immemorial passing. At night only the lonely voice of loon or owl or the hungry wail of wolves broke the stillness.

At rare intervals the virgin sod had yielded to the rude plough of the Indian women—a shoulder bone of elk or buffalo—and small patches of corn had been raised. But the savages lived for the most part on game, fish and the wild fruits and grains which grew in abundance. In spring and fall they ranged the plains for buffalo, in winter retired to their villages scattered among the wooded lakes. Cold locked the river and trackless snow stretched away to the wide unbroken circle of the horizon.

Before the close of the century in which the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, French fur traders and priests had penetrated to the Mississippi and westward from Lake Superior along the chain of lakes and rivers to Lake of the Woods.

The first evidence of white men on Red river is in 1734 when fur trading posts were established under the great French explorer, La Verendrye.

In the comfort and security of our modern surroundings, it is curious to look back at three lonely Christmas Days spent on the vast plains just west of Red river valley.

There are three expeditions of particular importance in the early history of the Northwest: Each of these, one under La Verendrye, discoverer of North Dakota, one under David Thompson, first surveyor of that territory, one under Lewis and Clark, the first Americans to cross the continent, spent a Christmas in this region.

The first was somewhere on Mouse river and in the year 1738. Possibly the Frenchmen were still comfortably housed in the mud village of the Hidatsa situated near the present town of Verendrye, named in honor of the leader. Possibly they had set out on their return journey. Verendrye was not given to dwelling on hardships encountered and overcome, but from a

word here and there we learn what this journey must have been. When they left the Mandans he was ill, and wounds received many years before on the battle fields of Flanders were causing him acute suffering. Accustomed as he was to winter in the depths of the Canadian wilderness, the cold endured on this bitter journey over naked hills raked by the north wind, was found worthy of mention. The party at last reached an Indian village; there, sick and exhausted, the leader lay in the smoky leather lodge of the chief for three days, gathering strength for the remainder of the journey northward to his trading-post on the Assiniboine, (now Portage la Prairie.)

A half century passed. Once more it was winter on the North Dakota plains and a small party of white men was on the march southward toward the same villages on the Missouri. Six French free traders, a voyageur-interpreter and at their head a sturdy, black haired Englishman; instead of whiskey and trade goods he carried a Bible, an astrolabe and compass and we know him now as the greatest land geographer the world has ever seen. This was David Thompson.

In this year of 1797 the Sioux were on the war path and Christmas eve was made memorable for the white men by a narrow escape from death. "December 24th. As we approached the Dog Tent Hill we anxiously kept our eyes on the ridge and by my Telescope saw a number of horsemen riding to southwest." Thompson concealed his men as best he could and the In-

dians failed to observe them—"thus kind Providence," writes Thompson, "saved our lives and property."

This Christmas eve the party made camp in a little coulée among a few oak and elm trees. The thermometer fell to fifteen below. The snow was deep in the draw, but the trees and surrounding hills offered a precious shelter from the wind whose "sound was like the waves of the sea on a shoal shore." It was here that Christmas day was spent.

SEVEN years went by. The Missouri river no longer flowed through a colonial dependency of Spain or France. Louisiana had become a part of the United States and in 1804 we find an American party wintering on the upper Missouri.

Lewis and Clark had halted their expedition at the mouth of Knife river. Here in the Indian village, they put up a cluster of cabins and called it Fort Mandan.

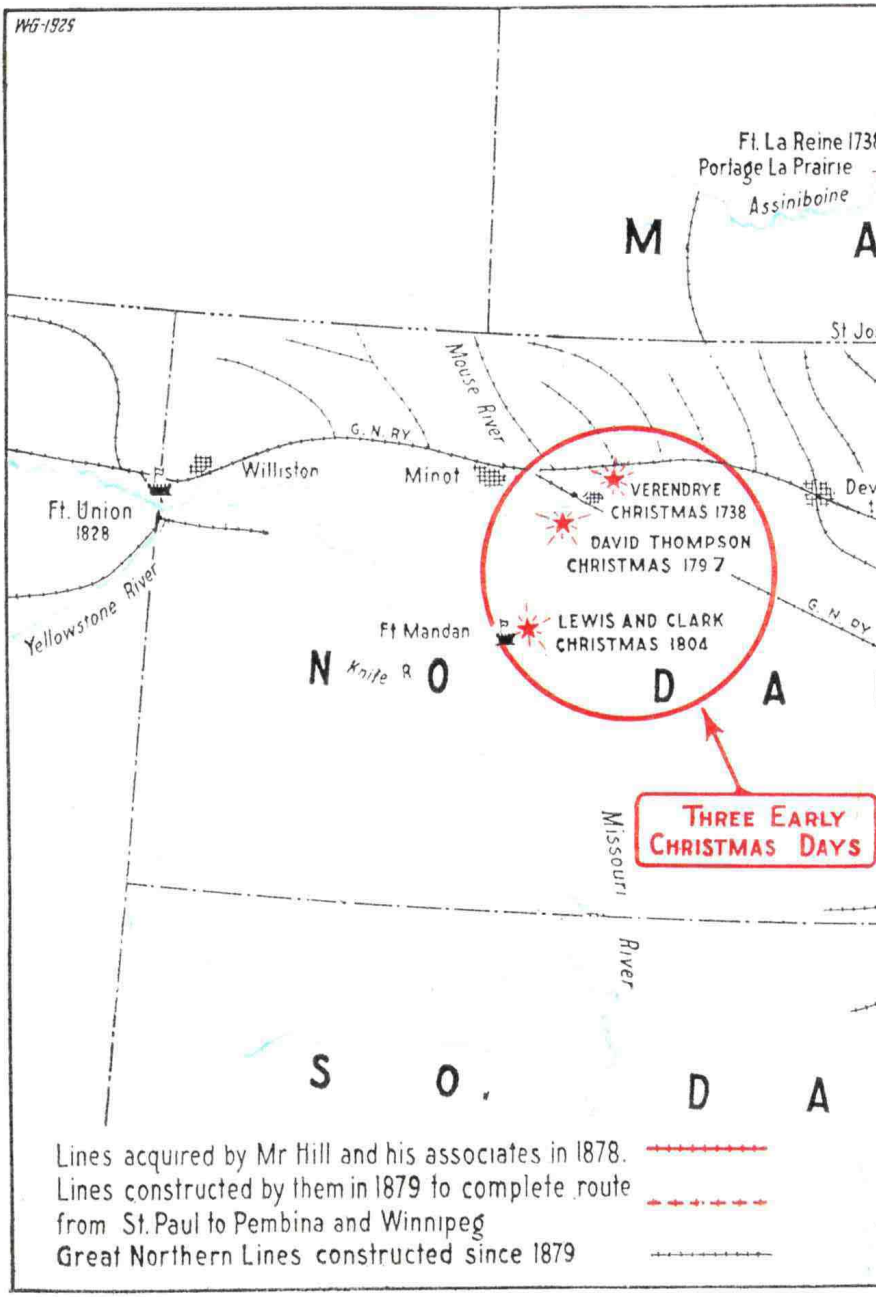
On Christmas, 1804, the village was swarming with Assiniboines who had come down on a friendly visit but the savages had been requested not to visit Fort Mandan "as it was one of our great Medicine days."

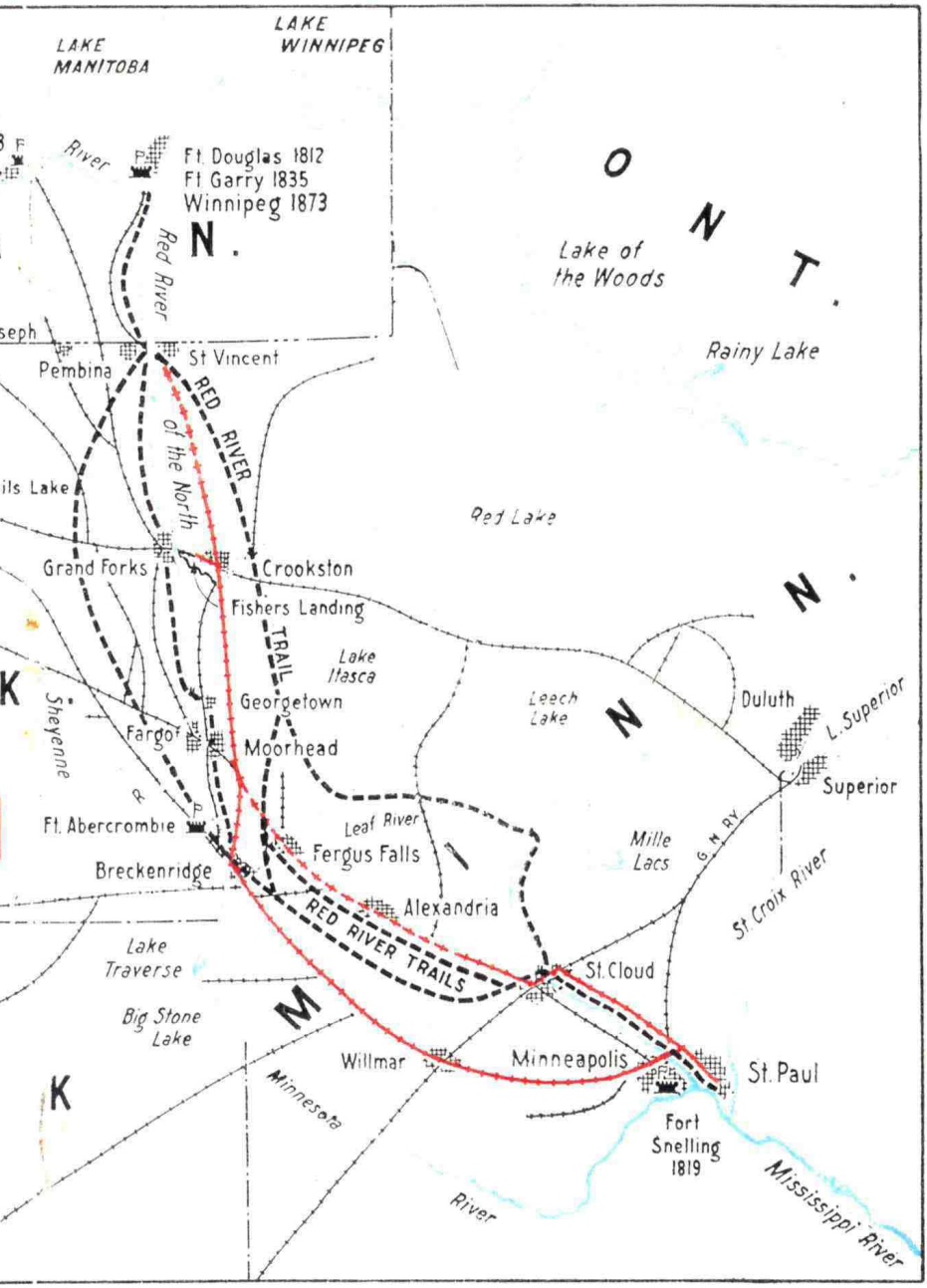
"25 December Christmas Tuesday," we find in Clark's journal, "I was awakened before

Day by a discharge of three platoons from the Party, the men merrily disposed. I gave them all a little Taffia* and permitted three cannon fired at raising Our flag. Some men went out to hunt and the others to Dancing and Continued until nine o'clock P. M." The subordinate officers contribute their testimony as to the success of the festivities. Sergeant Ordway writes "we had the Best to eat that could be had and continued firing, dancing and frolicking during the whole day." While Gass tells us that "Flour, dried apples, pepper and other articles were distributed in the different messes to enable them to celebrate Christmas in a proper and social manner."

For many years after the discovery of the Red River of the North fur traders were the only occupants and furs the only harvest of the valley. These were bought at small cost from the Indians and sold dear in markets of the world; they were light and could be shipped with profit over long waterways and difficult portages. The first routes of transportation were the chain of lakes and rivers that form the north boundary of Minnesota, thence by the

*Malay word for rum reaching the Missouri through the French by way of the West Indies.


WG-1925
Ft. La Reine 1738
Portage La Prairie
Assiniboine
M
A
St Jo
Mouse River
G. N. RY
Williston
Minot
Ft. Union
1828
Yellowstone River
VERENDRYE
CHRISTMAS 1738
DAVID THOMPSON
CHRISTMAS 1797
LEWIS AND CLARK
CHRISTMAS 1804
Ft Mandan
Knife R
N O
D A
G. N. RY
THREE EARLY
CHRISTMAS DAYS
Missouri
River
S O.
D A
Lines acquired by Mr Hill and his associates in 1878.
Lines constructed by them in 1879 to complete route
from St. Paul to Pembina and Winnipeg
Great Northern Lines constructed since 1879


LAKE MANITOBA
LAKE WINNIPEG
River
Ft. Douglas 1812
Ft Garry 1835
Winnipeg 1873
N.
Red River
O N T.
Lake of the Woods
Rainy Lake
seph
Pembina
St Vincent
RED RIVER
of the North
ils Lake
Red Lake
Grand Forks
Crookston
Fishers Landing
TRAIL
Lake Itasca
K
Georgetown
Leech Lake
N N.
Duluth
L. Superior
Fargo
Moorhead
Sheyenne R.
Superior
Ft. Abercrombie
Leaf River
Fergus Falls
Mille Lacs
G. N. RY.
Breckenridge
Alexandria
St Croix River
RED RIVER TRAILS
Lake Traverse
St. Cloud
Big Stone Lake
M
Willmar
Minneapolis
St. Paul
K
Minnesota
Fort Snelling 1819
River
Mississippi River

Great Lakes and St. Lawrence river to Montreal, two thousand miles away; or northward by Lake Winnipeg and Nelson or Hayes river to Hudson's Bay. This traffic was at its height a hundred years ago and lasted well into the past century.

BUT fur traders could not reign forever over this wilderness empire. In 1812 the first settlers other than fur traders in the entire Northwest, appeared on Red river. They did not come in the orderly course of immigration but were sent to these remote regions by the Scotch Earl of Selkirk. This puzzling and remarkable person bought over a hundred thousand acres of land from the Hudson's Bay Company, of which he was an associate. The grant was called Assiniboia and lay on both sides of the Red river and westward along the Assiniboine. Whether his purpose was solely utopian and he only wished to offer an asylum to certain evicted Scotch peasants, or whether he desired to form a colony to which officials and employees of the company could retire, or to harass the Northwest Company traders by establishing settlements in the heart of the territory usurped by them, is not certain.

At any rate, he sent several ship loads of immigrants to this place. These Selkirk settlers, as they were called, settled about the mouth of the Assiniboine and here fought their heart-breaking fight against famine and cold, floods, grasshoppers, rats and the murderous opposition of the Northwest Company; and triumphed in the end.

Gradually their farms began to prosper, their communities to grow. Other immigrants arrived. Besides these first agriculturists there were Hudson's Bay employees and officers, both active and retired, free traders and the settlements of half-breed buffalo hunters called Métis or Bois Brûlés. By 1840 there were over 5,000 people living between Pembina and the main settlement at the mouth of the Assiniboine which was first known as Fort Douglas, then as Fort Garry and today as Winnipeg.

South of the international boundary were only the posts of the American Fur Company and the small settlements of Bois Brûlés at Pembina, St. Joseph and St. Vincent.

The life of this curious half-breed population which, from all over the Northwest, congregated about the Red river settlements, forms one of the unique chapters in frontier history. The Métis were of French, Scotch, English, Irish or American descent and represented every Indian nation from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains.

Their occupation was buffalo hunting. Twice each summer cabins were locked, lodges abandoned and the entire community—men, women and children—set out on the buffalo hunt.

The vehicle was the famous Red river cart, a primitive, two-wheeled affair made entirely of wood and held together by wooden pegs and strips of rawhide; not even the linch pins were of iron and the broad wheels were without tires. The cart was strongly built and, drawn by a single ox, carried nearly half a ton over

the roughest roads or, more frequently, over no roads at all. The wail and screech of the ungreased wooden axles of a train of ox carts made strange music as they wound single file across the prairie.

IN June and again in September hundreds of swarthy hunters, with wives, children, horses, oxen and carts, and barking, fighting, wolfish dogs, streamed from all the nearby settlements to Pembina. The men were dressed in coats of rough blue cloth spangled with great brass buttons; red sashes gayly bound their waists; they wore moccasins, Indian leggings, beaded fire bags and caps of fur. Here the rules of the hunt were decided upon and captains chosen.

Then, on foot, on horseback, children mounted on household goods piled in the carts, these gypsies of the North moved westward to the great plains. Eight or nine hundred carts, over a thousand horses and oxen, and twelve or thirteen hundred human beings made up the caravans. A priest sometimes accompanied them; a strict community life was lived, and infringement of rules severely punished. At night the carts, placed hub to hub, made a vast barricaded enclosure, within which tents were put up and horses protected from raids of the ever-lurking Sioux. In North Dakota along Mouse river, the upper Missouri and into Montana they followed the buffalo, often stopping at Fort Union to trade.

The hunters achieved the greatest expertness in surrounding and killing the buffalo and when

the carts plodded back to the settlements many weeks later they were heavy with robes, pemmican, tallow and dried meat.

Civilization in the lower Red river valley depended on communication with the outside world to the east via the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence. This was a long and tedious route of many portages. The route to the north via York Factory and Hudson's Bay was equally so. The advantages of the route across the low divide between the waters of Hudson's Bay and the Mississippi river in Minnesota began to dawn upon the settlers as well as the Hudson's Bay Company itself.

In 1844 six Red river carts set out from Pembina and proceeded southward up the Red river valley. They carried the first important cargo of outbound produce shipped to St. Paul, or rather Mendota. Norman W. Kittson, the factor in charge of the American Fur Company's post at Pembina, had at last won recognition for the Red river trail to the Mississippi.

Year by year the traffic grew, the caravans lengthened to hundreds of carts. Advancing single file they dragged a long serpentine of dust or labored through what an early traveller refers to as a "smallpox of ponds, morasses and bottomless sloughs of mud."

After 1857 their numbers greatly increased, for at that time the Hudson's Bay Company definitely abandoned the difficult water routes to York Factory and Lake Superior and adopted the shorter and more economical Red river trail to St. Paul, whence by steamboat and rail its exports reached the outside world.

Because of this increased traffic and to accommodate the prospectors now pouring through St. Paul bound for the newly discovered gold fields of western Canada it was decided to attempt steamboat travel on Red river.

A steamer was sent up the Mississippi beyond St. Cloud, taken apart, loaded on ox- and horse-drawn sleighs and hauled across frozen lakes and snow-choked forests to Georgetown (near Moorhead) on Red river. There she was put together, given the name of the owner, Anson Northup, and in the high water time of spring made a round trip to Fort Garry and the Selkirk settlements. From that time until supplanted by railroads, steamboats operated regularly between Fort Garry and Fort Abercrombie (near Breckenridge), and Fisher's Landing on Red Lake river.

Carts, teams or stage coach completed the journey to the Mississippi and after 1867 met the St. Paul and Pacific railway at St. Cloud.

The valley had now become one of the important highways of the West. But still, south of the border, its amazing richness was ignored and it remained only a highway.

In 1857 an eighteen-year-old boy came from Eastern Canada to St. Paul intending to go by Red river cart train to Fort Garry. There he was to visit a schoolboy friend and perhaps journey on to the Pacific where he might work his way around the world on some sailing vessel. When he arrived, the last cart train of the year had left, so he was stranded in St. Paul until the following spring. He found work on the levée—the head of navigation—and by spring he was too hard at work to think of leaving. Later and many times he went to Red river—went by every kind of conveyance and in every kind of weather—on foot, on horseback, by dog sledge, by cart, by steamboat, by stage and finally by his own railroad, for the boy was James J. Hill.

For sixty years he was engaged in transportation in the Northwest. During the winters of the earlier period when the frozen Mississippi stopped the boats, he made trips into the north country and bought furs which came out in the spring. He also dealt in grain and salt and fuel, but always one way or another he was interested in shipping. A large part of the Mississippi river cargoes came from the Red river country, so that trade was watched with keenest interest. Nor

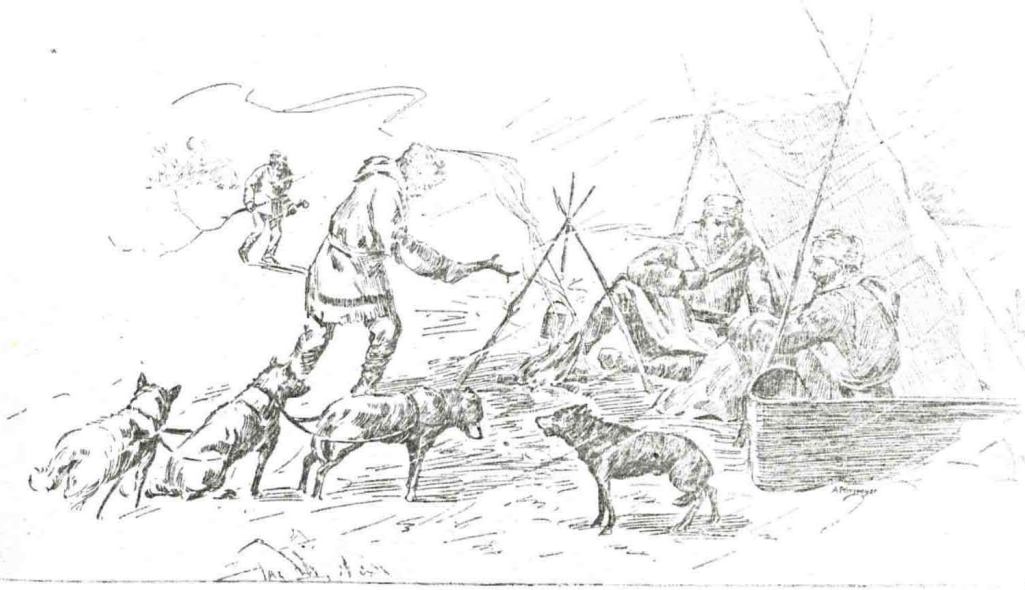
had he failed to observe that the rich glacial lake bed was potentially far more than a mere highway between Winnipeg and the Mississippi river. The heavy laden carts had cut deep ruts in a soil which would, he knew, make the Red river valley a Mecca for future agriculturists.

In the winter of 1869-70 the half-breeds combined in a revolt against the transfer of Assiniboia to the Dominion of Canada. Mr. Hill decided to go to Fort Garry, see the situation at first hand, and secure for his Red river steamer and ox cart line, as well as his Mississippi river boats, some of the Hudson's Bay Company's freight. He was certain that he could handle it for less than they could themselves. So he set out with a dog team early in 1870.

It happened that the Hudson's Bay Company had sent its ablest man, Donald A. Smith, to Fort Garry to look after its affairs in this troublous and threatening time. Having completed his work and having heard of the young man, Hill, who was so extensively in the transportation business, Smith started for St. Paul to see him. Then came a blizzard and these two men, both travelling by dog sledge on the prairie, one going north and one south, each with the same idea in mind—to see the other about improved transportation—met and made camp together in the storm.

The immediate result was a bargain for handling all the Red river freight by one company to be managed by Mr. Hill. The rate was to be lower than ever before—$1.00 per cwt. from Fort Garry to Fort Abercrombie (Breckenridge). The arrangement proved satisfactory and the friendship begun under these strange circumstances strengthened with time. This meeting was not only dramatic; in its consequences it proved one of the most important events in the history of the Northwest.

IN the meantime railway tracks had been creeping slowly and haltingly westward from the Mississippi. Railroad building was at that time financed largely by government aid and subsidy and often carried on by men more intent on speculating in land grants and bond issues than in developing either the railroad itself or the country from which its revenue must come. When the financial storm of 1873 struck the flimsy structures behind these ventures, it brought many of them to bankruptcy and ruin.



James J. Hill, experienced now in every phase of the local transportation business, had what at that time was the uncommon common sense to perceive that the worth of a railroad was its ability to earn rather than its ability to borrow. He knew the potential wealth of this northwestern country; he clearly foresaw its great future and that of its unfinished railway systems —and that the country and the railways would be dependent upon each other.

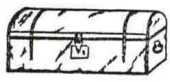
Conspicuous among the failures of 1873 was the St. Paul and Pacific, the first railroad in Minnesota. Ten miles of bumpy iron track had been built in 1862 between St. Paul and St. Anthony, and had gradually crept north and west from there. It was poorly built and staggering under a crushing load of debt, but of supreme interest to Mr. Hill because of its charter to build to and down the Red river valley to Manitoba.

Nothing but economy, experience and expert knowledge of the country could rehabilitate and complete such a road and make it pay. But, sure of his own capacities, and of the resources of the country, it became Mr. Hill's great purpose to buy this road.

His sympathetic confidant in early railroad plans was Norman W. Kittson. They had become friends and associates soon after Mr. Hill's arrival in St. Paul and later were partners in the forwarding business, owning together the Red River Transportation Company.

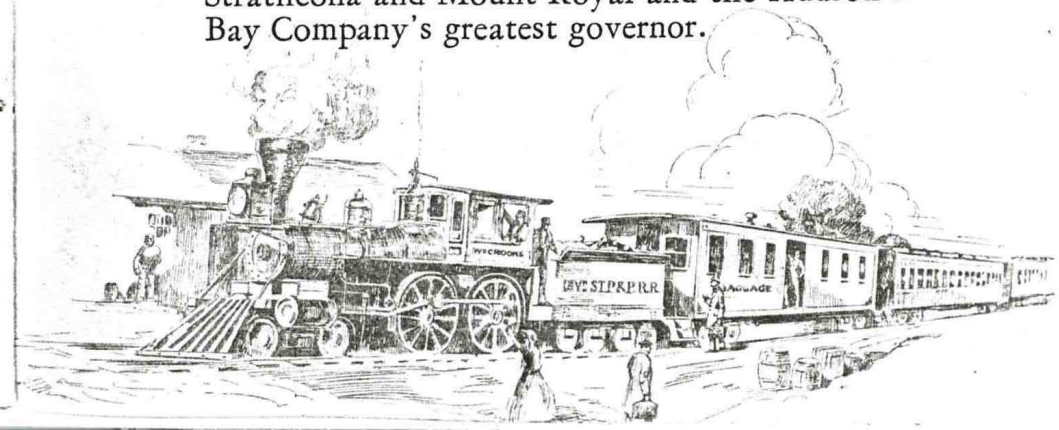
A railroad from the head of navigation on the Mississippi to St. Vincent or Pembina, which

could connect with a line built southward from Winnipeg, was as important to the growing communities north as it was to those south of the border. And we are not surprised to find the names of two men prominent in Canadian affairs in the syndicate of four which in 1878 was to buy the defunct road and create the new organization known as the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba. These four men were James J. Hill, Norman W. Kittson, Donald A. Smith and George Stephen.



Few men could have been found so well fitted for the enterprise. Smith knew the Canadian, as Hill and Kittson knew the American Northwest; this intimate knowledge of the country, their confidence in each other and in the undertaking, enabled them with the help of Stephen, whose contribution was his banking connections, to put through the project.

Two of those who thus planned an international rail line connecting Manitoba with the Twin Cities, remained Canadians throughout the long, eventful lives that were to follow. And not without due honor, for George Stephen became Lord Mount Stephen, and Smith, Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal and the Hudson's Bay Company's greatest governor.



The bankrupt road they bought had about 450 miles in all, extending by way of St. Anthony, Willmar, Breckenridge and Barnesville to Crookston. There was also a line to St. Cloud and Melrose, and other bits of track still unconnected.

Mr. Hill had built 15 miles of road from Crookston to Fisher's Landing where the boats of the Red River Transportation Company came from Winnipeg. This was in reality his first railroad.

Later these lines, knit together into a system and become the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba, were to expand through all the Red river country, all of Minnesota north of the Twin Cities, push across North Dakota and to Helena and Butte in Montana, then, becoming Great Northern, to strike out from Havre and reach the Pacific Northwest.

As the first occupation of the country—that of fur trading—gave way to permanent agriculture, old means of travel were changed for new. Cart trails gave way to steel rails. In all that country west from the Red river the railroad truly was the pioneer, blazing the way and furnishing the conveyance for colonizing the land. That country never was in any true sense a "covered wagon" country, but was settled from the immigrant train drawn by the locomotive.

The first Chief Engineer of the St. Paul & Pacific was William Crooks, the man who drove the first spike in the first railroad west of St. Paul in 1862. The famous first locomotive in Minnesota—the William Crooks—which, with its kind, had so much to do with the settling of

our Northwest, was named for him. Ramsay Crooks, his father, was one of the great figures of the fur trade. He was a member of the party which crossed the continent in 1811 to establish a trading post at Astoria. Later he was the active manager of the American Fur Company, succeeding John Jacob Astor when the latter retired in 1834. He was early to see that the railroads, which could be built almost everywhere through the country, promised to become the most important factor in our national growth and in 1833 he became President of the Mohawk & Hudson Railroad, one of the first railroad companies chartered in the United States. This road was one of the units which made up the great system of the New York Central, as the St. Paul & Pacific was the forerunner of the Great Northern.

The evolution of the railway car has aptly been traced from the invention of the wheel: "The wheel became a cart, the cart a coach, the coach a railway train." It might also have been said, "first the log became a wheel." Similarly the railway track may be traced from the foot prints of the pioneer in the wilderness; these became a path, the path a trail, the trail a railway track. Nowhere is this evolution more strikingly apparent than in the valley of the Red River of the North and no one had a greater or more honorable part in it than James J. Hill.

FINIS G.F.