

“AN UNVARIED PLAIN” TO AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN:

The Great Transformation in Norman County to 1881

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Over a roughly 300 year period from 1600 to 1900, individuals transformed Minnesota from a land populated by Native Americans and their ways of life to a neo-Europe. This so-called “Great Transformation” occurred at very different times in the different regions in the state. The Great Transformation in Norman County happened between 1872 and 1881. The spreading transportation web of the railroads and the interconnected rise of agriculture drove the Great Transformation in Norman County. Without agriculture, Norman County would never have been organized and it would not exist today. The physical transformation of Norman County is largely manifested in agriculture. The two dates used to bookend the Great Transformation are the arrival of the railroad in Ada, the seat of Norman County, in 1872 and the formal establishment of Norman County in 1881. In order to understand when, why, and how the transformation occurred, one needs to address the experiences and motivations of the American explorers and the Ojibwe, the French and the *Metis*, the steamboats and the ox carts, the government surveyors and the formal establishment of the county, and the early Scandinavian settlers of Norman County. Additionally, there are several key individuals who drive the transformation of Norman County including the early settler John Shely, the Red River steamboat captain Edwin Bell, and (perhaps most importantly) the transportation tycoon James J. Hill. But it is truly the railroads that drive the Great Transformation as without those reliable, consistent transportation networks the prospects for settlement in the region were grim. In order to better grasp the transformation of Norman County, we must first get a pre-transformation picture of the land from the early explorers Major Stephen Long and Brevet Captain John Pope.

Pre-Transformation Norman County

Much of the information for pre-transformation Norman County comes from two explorers: Stephen Long and John Pope. Prior to and coincident with the growth of trade and

transportation in Norman County in the mid nineteenth-century, these men explored the land and described it in writing. Major Long and Captain Pope's explorations were driven by the United States government's vested interest in discovering and recording the resources, inhabitants, and potential for settlement of the Red River Valley. The United States in 1818 signed a treaty with the United Kingdom, establishing nominal U.S. control over the Red River Valley, although Canadian fur traders continued to ply the Red River.¹ But the treaty and the westward expansion of the United States created an impetus for exploration in the region, in order that the surveyors could follow soon thereafter and then the settlers in rapid succession.

Major Stephen Long, a topographical engineer with a background in education, and Brevet Captain John Pope, who would go on to infamy as the losing Union general during the 1862 Second Battle of Bull Run, provided much of what we know about the region that became Norman County. Major Long made two exploratory expeditions to the Minnesota territory in 1817 and 1823 and was in what is now Norman County during his 1823 expedition in which he followed the Red River of the North to the border with Canada. He was accompanied by several notables including the astronomer James Calhoun (a cousin of Secretary of War Calhoun) and, for a time, the Italian trader Giacomo Beltrami.² When he was in the future Norman County, Long described "an unvaried plain" that was populated by "innumerable buffaloes...and a large herd of elk" which Long and his party seemed to have had a constant desire to kill.³ He also described the "considerable...Wild-rice river" and how the "woodlands of this country are mere

¹ "Convention of Commerce between His Majesty and the United States of America.--Signed at London, 20th October, 1818," *University of Montreal*, October 4, 1999, http://web.archive.org/web/20090411212640/http://www.lexum.umontreal.ca/ca_us/en/cus.1818.15.en.html.

² Stephen H. Long, *The Northern Expeditions of Stephen H. Long: The Journals of 1817 and 1823 and Related Documents*, ed. Lucile M. Kane, June D. Holmquist, and Carolyn Gilman, (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1978), 26-27.

³ Long, *Northern Expeditions*, 176.

fringes along the watercourses.”⁴ Major Long also discussed his party’s run-in with a group of “35 indians of the band called the Gens de la feuille,” who were most likely Dakota men pushed westward by American expansion. The group demanded presents and while Long’s party was able to refuse, they felt threatened enough to break camp in the dark of night and push on.⁵ Long also mentions that the Wild Rice River was a source of bitter contention between the Ojibwe and the Dakota as the Ojibwe claim all the land north of it but the Dakota “are desirous of extending their claims” as far north as Grande Fourche (current-day Grand Forks, ND).⁶ As early as 1823, Long detected conflict simmering between the Dakota and the Ojibwe over land, which would be a recurring theme in the history of the region.

Brevet Captain John Pope, at the time working as a topographical engineer, came to Norman County 26 years after Major Long in the summer of 1849. During the period interceding Long and Pope’s respective expeditions, Minnesota began to draw its first white settlers and contained about 4,500 residents by 1849. Henry Sibley with the support of Senator Stephen Douglas convinced Congress to create the Minnesota Territory in 1849. The new territory thus necessarily needed to be explored, surveyed, and eventually settled by whites in order to continue the United States’ westward expansion and Pope’s expedition was a direct result of that necessity. Pope’s stated purpose was “to describe [for potential settlers]....the geographical and physical features of the country, the comparative amount of prairie and timber to be found within its borders, the nature of the soil, and its capacity for the production of the different kinds of grains...” as well as any navigable waters, “channels of communication,” and the “character of

⁴ Long, *Northern Expeditions*, 178-179.

⁵ Long, *Northern Expeditions*, 176.

⁶ Long, *Northern Expeditions*, 178.

the present inhabitants” and “numerous emigrants who are daily arriving in the Territory.”⁷ Captain Pope described the land in great detail, talking about the “almost unbroken level of rich prairie, intersected at right-angles by all the heavily timbered tributaries of the Red River...the Red river itself running nearly due north...and heavily timbered on both banks with elm, oak, maple, [and] ash...” He also went on to attempt to dispel the two main objections to the idea of the Red River Valley as unsurpassed wheat country, “the coldness of the climate, and...its distance from market,” stating that in the northern Red River Valley in Canada they have had success growing wheat in a similar climate and that “a little attention from the government can entirely remedy” the problem of its distance from market.⁸ He recommended huge grants of land be given to railroad companies in order to form a sort of triangular trade route between the Red River Valley, St. Anthony and St. Paul, and Lake Superior, or at the very least that good wagon roads be built between the three locations.⁹ Pope pontificated that the “[v]alleys of [the] Wild Rice and Sheyenne [rivers are] as fertile as any in the country” and also described the “immense quantities of wild fowls... [and] elk [that are] numerous along the wooded banks” of the rivers.¹⁰ Significantly, he mentioned that the “Wild Rice river is so named from the immense quantity of wild rice found along its shores.”¹¹

Pre-Transformation Inhabitants: The Ojibwe

Before the arrival of Europeans in the region, the Norman County region was part of the seasonal migration patterns of the Rice Lake Band of Ojibwe due to the wild rice which used to grow along the Wild Rice River in Norman County and in the lakes of nearby Polk County.

⁷ Brevet Captain John Pope, *Report of the Secretary of War, communicating The report of an exploration of the territory of Minnesota*, in U.S. Congress, *Senate Executive Journal*, 31st Congress, 1st session, (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1850), 3.

⁸ Pope, *Report of the Secretary of war*, 7.

⁹ Pope, *Report of the Secretary of War*, 8-12.

¹⁰ Pope, *Report of the Secretary of War*, 23-24; 36.

¹¹ Pope, *Report of the Secretary of War*, 24.

Additionally, hunters would come through Norman County hunting bison and elk (at least until the bison herds east of the Red River were largely killed off). The seasonal migrations of the Ojibwe are well-documented; Norman County's role in these migrations was as part of the late summer ricing. At the end of every summer, Ojibwe women would take the lead and lay claim to a portion of the wild rice. The men would paddle the canoes while the women gently knocked the ripe rice loose with poles and gathered it in the canoe, ensuring to drop enough kernels in the mud to ensure a bountiful harvest the next year. Wild rice was a huge part of the Ojibwe diet and provided enough nutrients that they could live almost solely off of it. The sloughs of the Wild Rice River as well as the lakes of Polk County were prime ricing locations. After the ricing was done, the women would return to their summer camp to harvest produce and the men would leave for their fall hunts. Prior to the arrival of the French fur traders, their hunting was for subsistence but that changed with the arrival of early Europeans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to a form of commercial hunting/trapping of bison and beavers.¹²

The Beginnings of European Influence in Norman County

Prior to the Great Transformation, the first Europeans in Norman County were fur traders who set up trading posts in both Polk County and in Clay County, to the north and south of Norman County, respectively. These posts and the traders who populated them were the first signs of the drastic changes to come. In Polk County, just north of Norman, Baptiste Cadotte established a trading post on behalf of the Northwest Fur Company as early as 1798.¹³ In 1825, traders from the Hudson's Bay Company were setting up shop at Sarsfield, now Georgetown, in Clay County although a permanent post was not built there until 1859. Georgetown was named

¹² Melissa L. Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889-1920*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 26-27.

¹³ T.M. McCall, *Centennial History of Polk County*, (Crookston, MN: McGarry Printing Co., 1961), 35.

for Sir George Simpson, an early overseas governor for the Hudson's Bay Company and the traders at Georgetown drew a significant amount of trade from dozens of miles around.¹⁴ The fur trade opened Ojibwe access to manufactured European goods including the famous blankets as well as cooking utensils and other metal goods while the Ojibwe quest for furs intensified their westward shift and heated the already simmering conflicts between the displaced Dakota and the Ojibwe discussed above.¹⁵ The search for furs took the French trappers throughout Norman County and also engaged the Ojibwe population, who frequently trapped and hunted themselves in order to trade the furs and hides for trade goods. Although the influence of the fur traders did change the patterns of Native American life in the area in some ways, the lack of substantive changes to the land and the lack of a complete transformation of Native American ways of life indicates that, while pushing Norman County on the path to the Great Transformation, this is still prior to the Great Transformation. Even though Norman County was never itself home to any Northwest Fur Company or Hudson's Bay Company posts, the trappers and traders of the fur trade influenced the lives of the Ojibwe peoples in the area immeasurably and did lead to some relatively short-term French settlers in Norman County.

French Settlers in Norman County

Prior to the arrival of waves of permanent settlers, there appear to have been a number of French settlers. The primary evidence of their existence comes from the recollections of other settlers who came soon after them. According to Turner and Semling, authors of a 1918 history of Norman County, in Hendrum Township, there was a cemetery "where a number of the French were buried;" it was important to them to make the distinction that these "French" people were

¹⁴ Western Minnesota Steamthreshers Association and the Red River Valley Historical Society, *Clay County Family Album: A History of Rural Clay County, Minnesota*, (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1976), 241.

¹⁵ Norman K. Risjord, *A Popular History of Minnesota*, (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 30-31.

not “actual settlers,” but rather they were “only residents” due to their lack of improvements to the land.¹⁶ Additionally, a group of early Norwegian settlers travelling across what became Norman County in 1870 encountered a couple of different groups of “French” people on their journey.¹⁷ There is also the story in Turner and Semling’s history relayed by an early settler of Flom Township, Edward Engen, of three huts and a patch of potatoes that were tended by some “Frenchmen” from the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1871 when Engen arrived in the area.¹⁸ A final piece of evidence for these French settlers is from the account of a 1920’s farm boy named George Haroldson. He was plowing on the slope of the aptly-named Frenchman’s Bluff in Flom Township when he discovered a skull. Haroldson mentioned rumors that a Frenchman and his family had “mysteriously disappeared [from this land] in the early or late 1860’s.” The bones seemed to show signs of foul play; locals who arrived on scene thought that the father, mother, five children, and a dog found there buried in a shallow grave might have been the work of the “Sioux Indians.”¹⁹

What is not entirely clear though is the exact nationality and ethnicity of any of these “French” settlers; whether they are truly “French” or French Canadian or *Metís*, a unique ethnic blend of French, Scottish, and Ojibwe, is never made entirely clear. Their unclear ethnicity in the eyes of the Scandinavian settlers could be connected to the idea of religion as the “French” settlers were thought of as Catholic and not Protestant which could potentially affect the view of their ethnicity and their lack of “whiteness.” But if they are in fact working for a fur company or as voyageurs, it is highly likely that they are in fact *Metís* and not French. This could go a long

¹⁶ John Turner and C.K. Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties Minnesota: Their People, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis, Indiana: B.F. Bowen & Company, 1918), Volume I, 504.

¹⁷ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 506-507.

¹⁸ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 523.

¹⁹ Norman County Heritage Commission and Norman County Historical Society, *Norman County History*, (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1976), 455-456.

ways in explaining why the various twentieth-century sources refer to anything done by the Norwegian/Swedish settlers as milestones for white people (e.g. the first white baby born, the first white permanent settler, etc.). These milestones seem silly if in fact the settlers who these historians consistently refer to as “Frenchmen” are in fact French. There is no doubt that the *Metís* were in fact in Norman County and influencing it on the path to the Great Transformation through the fur trade and, even more so, the oxcart trade.

The *Metís* Culture and their Influence on Norman County

The mingling of European and Native American peoples led to the creation of a new cultural group called the *Metís*, the descendants of fur traders and their Native American wives. *Metís* culture was one of the more unique features of the Red River Valley and as Grace Flandrau, an early historian and author working for the Great Northern Railway, puts it, “one of the most interesting features of the ever absorbing story of the valley.”²⁰ The *Metís* were the impetus behind the ox cart trade which soon connected the Red River Valley (including Norman County) to the rest of Minnesota and the world. The rise of the oxcart trade and the rise of agriculture in Pembina and Winnipeg that it was connected to were directly related to jump-starting the Great Transformation in Norman County. The original purpose of the oxcart trails in the 1840s and 1850s was to trade furs and hides from the Red River Settlement (modern Winnipeg) and Pembina (now in North Dakota) with St. Anthony and St. Paul and on to the rest of the world. Later, the trails also carried huge quantities of wheat grown by Scottish immigrants to those settlements. The influence of the *Metís* on the Great Transformation in Norman County is their role in trade and transportation; the railroads came through Norman County primarily as a way of expediting the trade with Pembina and Winnipeg that the *Metís* had started and without

²⁰ Grace Flandrau, *Red River Trails*, (St. Paul: McGill-Warner Co., 1925), 20.

the precursor of the oxcarts, it is unclear if men like James J. Hill and other entrepreneurs would have taken the interest that they did in expanding transportation through the Red River Valley. So an understanding of the *Metís* is necessary to understand the transportation networks that drove the Great Transformation in Norman County. Captain Pope writes about the *Metís* in great detail as he had many encounters with them and traveled with several of them for a good amount of time.

Pope recorded that they style themselves as “*Les gens libres*” or “the free people” and wrote that “a more industrious and intelligent, subordinate, and law-abiding people I have never seen...[, they have] an air of reckless and confident daring...which is strangely fascinating.”²¹ He said that their diet is primarily bison meat and opines that they “would make the finest soldiers in the world” in the event that the U.S. has to fight Great Britain for control of the area.²² At the time there was a real thought that the United States and Great Britain may well have to go to war over the border between the United States and what is now Canada. Pope’s map of the region is also interesting in that it includes the “Half Breed Trail” which runs through eastern Norman County.²³ On this trail, the *Metís* drew their unique carts with oxen, horses, and the occasional cow.

The *Metís* carts were made of wood and lashed together with rawhide and could carry between 700 to 1,000 pounds. In the event of a stream that was too deep to cross, the *Metís* could detach the wheels from the carts and use them to float it across. The ungreased wooden axle produced an “incessant screech” and the lack of suspension caused a bumpy ride for passengers and cargo alike.²⁴ Around the beginning of summer, up to one thousand of these carts would

²¹ Pope, *Report of the Secretary of War*, 31.

²² Pope, *Report of the Secretary of War*, 31.

²³ Pope, *Report of the Secretary of War*, appendix.

²⁴ Flandrau, *Red River Trails*, pg. 22.

leave Pembina and travel through Minnesota, including Norman County, to St. Paul, loaded with furs at first and later with wheat. The women and children would travel with the men on these journeys which took most of the summer. The *Metís* would return to their winter homes with the manufactured and trade goods to get them through the winter.²⁵ These traders not only travelled through Norman County, but served to invigorate the Minnesota economy and helped lead to the growth of the railroads through Norman County. The *Metís*' other role in the Great Transformation in Norman County was in their yearly hunting expeditions which often led them through the area of modern Norman County.

The bison hunts of the *Metís* smack of legend but are well-documented enough that they are merely incredible. Historian Carolyn Gilman wrote that while shouting in a variety of tongues including "French, Gaelic, English, Cree, Ojibwe, and their own language...*mitchif*" which is a hodge-podge of those other languages, but primarily French and Ojibwe, the *Metís* would encircle the herd of bison with their horses. They would then proceed to ride directly into the herd, since their guns "had to be close enough to graze the monster's shaggy side in order to have any effect." After the slaughter was complete, hunters would claim the bison they killed and begin the process of butchering. Gilman also wrote that "they *could* use virtually every part of the buffalo, they *did* use very little of most carcasses...while the rest was left to rot."²⁶ Eventually, the bison east of the Red River were driven to extinction and the hunts moved to the west side of the river. But during the apex of *Metís* culture in the 1850's, they had a tremendous influence on trade and the wildlife in Norman County and its transformation due to their work in the oxcart trade and their hunting patterns. During the 1850s and 1860s, the land of the *Metís* and

²⁵ Harper's, "The People of the red River," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January, 1859, 175.

²⁶ Carolyn Gilman, "A Day in the Life of The Gens Libres," in *Making Minnesota Territory 1849-1858*, ed. Anne R. Kaplan and Marilyn Ziebarth (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1999), 24-25.

the Hudson's Bay Company (nebulously encompassing the majority of the Red River Valley) came under the control of the United States through a number of treaties with the Native Americans of the region and Norman County is made up of two treaties specifically.

Ceding the Land: Native American Treaty Negotiations

Norman County is comprised of land from two separate treaties signed in 1855 and 1863, respectively. The reasoning behind the United States seeking to make these treaties was westward expansion. With Minnesota's population expanding rapidly after it became a territory in 1849 and a state in 1858, it was clear that white settlers would need more land in the northwest of the state. When Minnesota became a state it was still largely made up of land claimed by Native Americans and so it became a high priority for the United States government to reach treaty deals to ensure that settlers in the new state would not have problems with conflicting land claims. The first treaty, signed in 1855, was signed in Washington, D.C. Involved in it were George Manypenny, the Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs during the Pierce Administration, and sixteen leaders from the different Ojibwe bands in north central Minnesota (the treaty refers to them as the "Mississippi bands of Chippewa Indians"), the most notable of whom is Hole-in-the-Day, an influential Ojibwe leader.²⁷ In exchange for a huge swath of modern Minnesota, the Ojibwe nations received the typical annuities both as cash and in the form of necessary goods and services. The other treaty that contributed to the formation of Norman County was an 1863 treaty in which Moose Dung, a leader of the Red Lake band of Ojibwe, along with other Ojibwe leaders met with Alexander Ramsey (who had just resigned his governorship upon being elected to the U.S. Senate) and Ashley Morrill, a minor Minnesota politician. Moose Dung and the others signed away a large piece of northwestern Minnesota in

²⁷ Charles Kappler, *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), vol. II "Treaties," 685.

exchange for \$20,000 per annum for 20 years and the creation of the Red Lake Reservation.²⁸ Also present at the treaty signing was Pierre Bottineau, a pioneering frontiersman and explorer who was partially responsible for the founding of several cities across Minnesota and North Dakota. Bottineau is notable at least partially due to his numerous successes as an envoy and translator between the United States government and Native American tribes as well as all of the settlements he was instrumental in founding despite his *Metís* descent (his father was a French-Canadian descended from Huguenots and his mother Ojibwe) in a world marked by deep-rooted prejudice against anyone who society identified as anything other than white.²⁹

Government Surveyors in Norman County

In 1859, with part of the land that comprised Norman County ceded by the Ojibwe, the U.S. government began the process of formally mapping and surveying the land into the one mile by one mile sections that dominate the landscape of Norman County to this day in order to facilitate the sale of the land. At the time, Norman County was still a part of Polk County. Polk County was formed in 1858, coinciding with Minnesota gaining statehood, but was not established until 1873. The difference in formation and establishment dates is due to the fact that Minnesota organized the state into counties when it became a state but few whites actually lived in the county to necessitate the formation of a formal structure of county government. When Polk County was formed, it was still technically “owned” by the Red Lake Band of the Ojibwe in the eyes of the United States government and so first had to be gained by treaty in order to survey it. Oscar Taylor and Edward Atwater were two of the original surveyors in the area, operating out of St. Paul. Overall, the area they found was relatively uninhabited and the landscape similar to

²⁸ Kappler, *Laws and Treaties*, 853-854.

²⁹ “History,” *City of Osseo*, 11/23/2014, <http://www.discoverosseo.com/about-osseo/history/>; Jane Halberg, Barbara Sexton, Mary Jane Gustafson, Ben Heath, Darryl Sannes, *Pierre Bottineau: A Founder of Osseo, Minnesota: The Kit Carson of Minnesota: The Walking Peace Pipe*, (Brooklyn Park, MN: Brooklyn Historical Society, 2013).

that described by Long and Pope. One of the more interesting things discovered by them is on Frenchman's Bluff, the highest point in Norman County. There they discover "[t]wo houses... [with] no occupants at this time."³⁰ This (along with the bones mentioned above) seems to indicate that the seemingly apocryphal stories of French/*Metis* settlers on Frenchman's Bluff has some significant truth to it. It took thirteen years for the surveying to be completed (in 1872) and all of the land in the county to be made available for sale to all those who wanted it, coinciding with the first railroad in Norman County and the heyday of steamboats on the Red River. In order for settlers in Norman County to transform the land, they needed forms of transportation both to get them to the valley and to transport their raw agricultural goods to market and bring back manufactured goods from St. Paul.

Steamboats on the Red River

Prior to widespread white settlement and the growth of the railroads, there was a brief window of time where the steamboats were a dominant form of transportation on the Red River. In 1859, the first steamboat on the Red River, the *Anson Northrup*, was disassembled and hauled by oxcart from "the upper Mississippi...to Lafayette, a point on the Red River opposite the mouth of the Cheyenne [Sheyenne]" river.³¹ Despite intermittent service at first due to a lack of freight and a string of inept owners, freight soon began moving from St. Paul to Georgetown via the Minnesota River to the Red River which connect at Big Stone Lake at the current border of Minnesota and South Dakota and then up the Red River to Winnipeg. The *Anson Northrup* ultimately sank during the winter of 1861-62 but a replacement, the *International*, was ready at

³⁰ Bureau of Land Management, "General Land Office Records," *U.S. Department of the Interior*, 11/20/2014, http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/details/fieldnote/default.aspx?dm_id=230762&s_dm_id=115825&sid=1moxj5d1.n4, 249.

³¹ Marion H. Herriot, "Steamboat Transportation on the Red River," *Minnesota History Magazine* 21, no. 3 (1940): 248.

hand and launched in the spring of 1862.³² But that summer, when drought conditions made navigating the river impossible and with the Dakota War raging, the *International* ended up stranded at Fort Abercrombie, near present-day Wahpeton, ND. However, in 1864 the Hudson's Bay Company had a vested interest in transporting their goods on the river from Winnipeg to St. Paul and then on down the Mississippi and so bought the steamer. There was not much traffic on the Red for the next five years or so, but the completion of the railroad from St. Paul to Moorhead in 1870 helped spur its resurgence. Norman Kittson and his Red River Transportation Company was eventually able to form a monopoly on the river and freight and passenger prices skyrocketed.³³ As the railroad expanded northward and eventually connected Winnipeg to the eastern United States, the steamboats did a brisk business in steel rails and the other tools necessary for building the railroads.³⁴ Ultimately the railroads would render the steamboats obsolete. But the steamboat traffic on the Red River did lead to some of the first white people in Norman County for purposes other than trapping and trading with the Ojibwe, as wood was needed to keep the steamboats' paddlewheels turning and the steamboats offered at least a glimmer of hope for would-be farmers looking for an easier market for their grain. For these reasons, the steamboats play an integral role in the beginnings of the Great Transformation in Norman County and Edwin Bell's story serves to illustrate the all too brief zenith of steamboating on the Red River and its importance.

Captain Edwin Bell was a steamboat captain who got his start on the Minnesota River in the mid-1850s and only later moved to the Red River of the North in 1865. He traveled from St. Paul to Lafayette, a now-defunct steamboat stop on the Red River a few miles north of present

³² Herriot, "Steamboat Transportation on the Red River," 250.

³³ Herriot, "Steamboat Transportation on the Red River," 254.

³⁴ Herriot, "Steamboat Transportation on the Red River," 260.

day Moorhead, MN, where he was informed that the *Anson Northrup* had already left for Georgetown, the Hudson's Bay Company post several miles further north on the Red. So he and a number of deckhands raced by stagecoach to Georgetown, where they overtook the boat. Captain Bell took command of the boat, and discovered that the stagecoach carrying the provisions for their trip to Ft. Garry (modern Winnipeg) had in fact broken a wheel and was waiting for a replacement from the steamboat company's headquarters in St. Cloud, leaving the boat short on food. Bell and the steamboat continued downriver anyway and ran into new problems with some large boulders which they solved by digging under the boulders and using the hull of the boat to push them down into the holes. Soon thereafter, the boat got stuck on a sandbar and the crew had to unload all the freight to lighten it enough to get over the sandbar. This did not work so Captain Bell decided to build a dam to try and raise the level of the water and push them over the sandbar, knowing full well that if they failed it "would be starvation, for [their] provisions were nearly exhausted and [they] were a long way from civilization." The dam eventually worked and they found some fishing line to try and alleviate their food shortage as well as buying some geese off a group of hunters.³⁵ Eventually the boat did make it Ft. Garry, but Bell's story serves to illustrate the inaccessibility of the Red River to steamboats even in their prime and the necessity of expanding railroad service if settlers were to have any realistic chance of being commercially successful or even viable. Despite the inaccessibility of pre-railroad Norman County, there were a few white settlers who made their way there in order to stake a claim on the land.

Pre-Railroad White Settlement in Norman County

³⁵ Captain Edwin Bell, "Early Steamboating on the Minnesota and Red Rivers," in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections, Volume X, Part I, 1900-1904*, ed. Minnesota Historical Society, (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1905), 93-96.

Most of the earliest settlers in Norman County in 1870 and 1871 were from Norway. There were a number of reasons driving their immigration in to the United States: huge population growth in Norway coupled with little arable land in the largely mountainous country. Many young Norwegians worked as day laborers but had little chance of ever owning their own farm. Widespread crop failures and food shortages in Norway in the 1860s made conditions even worse and inspired large numbers of Norwegians to leave their homeland and emigrate to the United States.³⁶ These Norwegian immigrants were desirous of maintaining a rural way of life, ideally a more prosperous one, and saw the Red River Valley as a potentially perfect place to do so.

Non-French white settlement began with a trickle of hardy souls in 1870-71, when the U.S. government began selling land patents, but accelerated dramatically from 1872-1886 because of the completion of the railroads in the region. Turner and Semling recount the tale of some of the first non-French white settlers in their work and it is a relatively representative story for pre-railroad settlers. In 1870, a small group of Norwegian immigrants settled on claims in Ottertail County which they had been assured would be opened to them. But when they arrived at the Alexandria land office, they discovered that the land they had settled on was not in fact open for settlers. So they packed up their wagons and went to the Red River Valley until they hit the bridgeless Wild Rice River, upon which a “colony of Frenchmen [likely *Metis* in fact] had settled along the south side of the river near the present village of Hendrum.” Since the settlers wanted a more wooded area and professed a desire to be away from the group of Frenchmen, they built their own bridge and crossed the river. Near the current site of Halstad, they encountered two Swedish woodcutters who were working for the steamboat companies. Soon

³⁶ Carlton C. Qualey and Jon A. Gjerde, “The Norwegians,” in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups*, ed. June Drenning Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 220.

thereafter they ran into another “Frenchman named C. Trumbley” who recommended they settle where the prairie ran into the woods on the banks of the Red River, which they did in May of 1871, a few months before it was surveyed.³⁷ This story hits a lot of common themes for pre-railroad settlement in Norman County: Norwegians and living at least one place in the Midwest prior to coming to Norman County, although this particular story is unique in that most immigrants to the area had family or at least acquaintances in the area where they eventually settled while this particular group obviously did not. Additionally, due to the unforgiving nature of the journey to Norman County and the relative inconvenience of trade and getting the necessities of life, relatively few settlers made the arduous trek to far-off Norman County. That is, until the advent of the railroad.

The Growth of the Railroads in Norman County

Railroads in the United States gained steam with the passage of the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862, which authorized the creation of a railroad and telegraph line through the central United States, to connect the east coast with the west coast.³⁸ In Minnesota, the first railroads were built in 1862 by Jay and Henry Cooke, a pair of brothers from Philadelphia involved primarily in banking but seeking to enlarge their fortune in the burgeoning railroad industry, and others in order to access Minnesota lumber and agricultural products but soon immigrants were streaming into Minnesota and settling in small towns in southern Minnesota. While the railroad was important in white settlement throughout Minnesota and the United States, it was of particular significance in Norman County.

³⁷Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 506-507.

³⁸ “Pacific Railroad Acts – Act of July 1, 1862,” *Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum*, September 24, 2009, http://www.cpr.org/Museum/Pacific_Railroad_Acts.html.

Prior to the completion of the three branches of the railroad in Norman County, there was no consistent, year-round, stable form of transportation to and from the region. Because of that, migration and immigration to the region proceeded at a crawl until the railroads connected the area to the eastern United States. Grace Flandrau describes the pre-railroad “nightmare roads of the period” and writes that the Red River Valley “never was in any true sense a ‘covered wagon’ country, but was settled from the immigrant train drawn by the locomotive.”³⁹ Not only did the railroads allow the settlers to get to the area and trade with the rest of the country, they also sold the land around their railroads that they had been given by the state at “low prices to bring in settlers as rapidly as possible.”⁴⁰ And bring in settlers they did. In 1875, the population of the part of Polk County that is now Norman County was 369. By 1880, it was 3,500 and by 1885 it was 8,335.⁴¹ Prior to the railroads, settlers had to go as far as Alexandria, MN to sell their grain, although some settlers did trade at Georgetown, the early Hudson’s Bay trading post in Clay County. After the railroads came through, they had specials where they would charge one dollar to get from New York to Chicago and all of a settler’s goods could be shipped from St. Paul to Fargo for \$35.⁴² Life in Norman County was not easy for these early white settlers. Floods, grasshopper plagues, tornadoes, fires, droughts, and farm foreclosures dominate the historical record. But these early white settlers were nothing if not persistent and John Shely illustrates that point.

John Shely was among the first group of permanent non-French white settlers in Norman County and saw the Great Transformation from start to finish. The son of Irish immigrants and born in Vermont, in 1870 he settled in the northwestern corner of Norman County near the

³⁹ Flandrau, *Red River Trails*, 22 and 43.

⁴⁰ Norman County Historical Society, *Norman County History*, 2.

⁴¹ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 517.

⁴² Norman County Historical Society, *Norman County History*, 3.

Marsh River in order to begin trapping after working for several years hauling supplies from Fort Snelling to the various forts scattered throughout the region. Prior to working for the government he had held jobs as “cabin boy on the Mississippi, worked in a[n] Eau Claire sawmill, and was an assistant wagon-master.”⁴³ He was there so early that he actually “paced off and staked out his own claim.”⁴⁴ After apparently having little success as a trapper, he moved to the burgeoning village of Ada and opened a store which promptly went out of business in 1879 (but not before ensuring that the town which sprang up around his original homestead, Shely, MN, bore his name, albeit a misspelled version).⁴⁵ Prior to the failure of his store, he began managing the new grain elevator in Ada, one of many elevators being built at intervals along the new railroad lines. Farmers from miles around brought their wheat to Ada since it was the first point in Norman County easily accessible by railroad, first being connected to Glyndon, MN (which is about nine miles east of Moorhead) and the rest of the country by the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad in 1872. With the support of Shely and other businessmen, Ada soon grew into a significant railroad town and was actually first platted in 1881 by James J. Hill, then the vice-president of the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Company.⁴⁶ Shely died in 1898, but not before seeing the separation from Polk County and the formal establishment of Norman County in 1885, as well as the establishment of schools, churches, post offices, and (arguably most importantly to the development of the county) railroads.⁴⁷

The railroads in Norman County had arguably the largest impact on shaping the landscape of the county and its patterns of immigration and settlement. Although John Pope

⁴³ Lenora I. Johnson, *Under Prairie Skies: A Centennial History of Ada, Minnesota*, (Ada, MN?: City of Ada, 1976), 2.

⁴⁴ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 504.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Prairie Skies*, 5.

⁴⁶ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 516.

⁴⁷ Norman County Historical Society, *Norman County History*, 2.

talked extensively about his vision for the railroads in 1850, construction did not actually start until 1870. But Henry Cooke, an Ohioan businessman and brother of Philadelphia financier Jay Cooke who at the time was serving as Governor of the District of Columbia, was so eager to expand his railroad northward from Moorhead and Glyndon that he purchased huge swathes of land rather than waiting for the government to grant him the land as expected.⁴⁸ While Cooke certainly had an influence on the Great Transformation in plotting the eventual location of the railroads and thus the settlements that sprang up around and because of them as well as purchasing much of the land for the railroads in Norman County, perhaps no single man had a greater effect on the transformation in Norman County than James J. Hill.

James J. Hill was born in Ontario in 1838 to Scotch-Irish parents and spent his youth touring much of the eastern and southern United States before eventually ending up in St. Paul in 1856.⁴⁹ There he quickly became heavily involved in the trade surrounding the Mississippi steamboats, first in warehousing and later in steamboats themselves. Hill's influence on the transformation of Norman County was first felt when he purchased a steamboat on the Red River, the *Selkirk*, which plied the river for much of the 1870s, carrying passengers and manufactured goods north to Winnipeg and wheat and furs back south. In 1872, Jay and Henry Cooke's St. Paul and Pacific Railroad intending to connect St. Paul to Winnipeg, fell into receivership with the line only partially completed. Through some legal maneuvering, Hill took control of the railroad and connected it to Crookston, in the process completing the central line that runs through Ada in Norman County. At the same time Hill built another branch south from Crookston to Fisher's Landing, a settlement on the Red River in Polk County, setting up the

⁴⁸ Bureau of Land Management, "General Land Office Records," *U.S. Department of the Interior*, 11/20/2014, <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/results/default.aspx?searchCriteria=type=patent|st=MN|cty=107|sp=true|sw=true|sadv=false#resultsTabIndex=0&page=3&sortField=6&sortDir=0>.

⁴⁹ Stewart H. Holbrook, *James J. Hill: A Great Life in Brief*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 7-11.

eventual Moorhead & Northern Railroad which would connect Moorhead to Fisher's Landing. Hill's goal in connecting Polk County to Moorhead was to open up the land there for settlement and agricultural development in order to ensure the long-term financial success of his railroad ventures in the area with the intent of having Moorhead and Crookston as hubs for that network. Additionally, Hill secured Canadian partners to build the Canadian Pacific Railway, ensuring that goods could reach Hudson's Bay with a similar goal of spurring agricultural development along the railway in order to achieve maximum profitability by providing a route to the sea.⁵⁰ He consolidated these holdings into the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway Company, and eventually his further holdings into the Great Northern Railway. Hill's influence on the transportation infrastructure of the Red River Valley cannot be understated. The lines built by Hill and his associates are still relied upon today by Norman County farmers to transport their grain to global markets and without this infrastructure the Great Transformation could not have happened in Norman County.

On the western border of Norman County, the Moorhead & Northern was extended through Perley, Hendrum, Halstad, and Shelly in 1883. Some of these towns were existing settlements that the railroad was built through and others were purpose-built for the railroads. The railroads certainly defined the pattern of settlement in the county as some small villages clustered around general stores, post offices, or churches now found themselves cut off from the railway and were soon abandoned. The final rail connection through Norman County was on the eastern edge of the county, built in 1887 from Fergus Fallsthrough Syre, Twin Valley, and Gary in order to connect to Red Lake Falls.⁵¹ These three branches (all of which were eventually

⁵⁰ Albro Martin, *James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 114-173.

⁵¹ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 331.

owned and operated by the Great Northern Railway) opened up all of Norman County to a stream of immigrants looking to build their own homesteads and farm the land. But these immigrants did not always just come to Minnesota by happenstance; James J. Hill and his Great Northern Railway supported the immigrants wholeheartedly and tried to coerce settlers to purchase the land surrounding their railroads to ensure their long-lasting prosperity.

Hill knew that if he wanted to be successful in the long run, he needed settlers on the land surrounding his railways and he needed these settlers to be prosperous. Unlike the Northern Pacific Railway, which was also comprised largely of Jay and Henry Cooke's prior holdings and was run at the time by Frederick Billings, which spent much of its time and money on advertising both domestically and abroad, Hill's Great Northern Railway primarily focused on the betterment of the farmers living in the regions around their railroads. The agricultural potential of the land was already clear by this time; the only other major issue standing in their way was the poor drainage of the Minnesota side of the Red River which somewhat dimmed the long-term prospects of farming in the county and remains an issue to this day. The railroads had done extensive ditching as they built in order to prevent the rail beds from being undermined every time the river flooded (roughly every 3 years) but this was not enough to ensure that the flooding did not severely impact agricultural success. So in 1888 Hill donated \$5,000 to kick-start a government-funded drainage program, and later \$25,000 more when it became bogged down in red tape. This program dug thousands of miles of ditches as well as teaching early Red River Valley farmers how to properly dig their own ditches.⁵² In addition to issues of drainage, Hill and his partners in the railroad functioned much as the University of Minnesota Extension

⁵² Stanley N. Murray, "Railroads and the Agricultural Development of the Red River Valley of the North, 1870-1890," *Agricultural History* 31, no. 4 (October, 1957), 64, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3740486>.

office serves today, educating farmers on crop rotations and diversification into livestock while researching the feasibility of different types of crops in the area. This came about after Hill became dismayed when he saw farmers planting solely wheat, knowing that a one-crop system would soon exhaust the soil. So Hill began a program giving away livestock to promote the raising of livestock in addition to farming in exchange for the farmers learning about crop rotation. He would also send his best bull from his personal farm around the Red River Valley, attempting to improve the area's livestock through breeding.⁵³ The use of familial and regional ties in settling the region of Norman County is well-documented and Hill and the Great Northern instead relied on these networks to ensure that they had a steady supply of farmers and farm families to settle the land around their railroads.

Growth of Agriculture in Norman County

If the railroads were the most significant transportation development in the Great Transformation in Norman County, then agriculture is the most significant trade development in the Great Transformation in Norman County, indeed in the entirety of the Red River Valley. The two were tied inextricably together as agriculture could not grow until the transportation infrastructure was there and transportation was built based on the promise of future agricultural bounties. George N. Lamphere, the first planter of wheat in the Red River Valley and a sort of Jeffersonian gentleman farmer, wrote that without the railroad to enable the spread of agriculture, the Minnesota side of the Red River Valley would be “practically unpopulated and undeveloped.”⁵⁴ Once the railroad went through, there was nothing stopping the spread of

⁵³ Murray, 65; Hill would go on to donate the land on which the present-day University of Minnesota – Crookston sits for the purpose of agricultural research.

⁵⁴ George N. Lamphere, “Wheat Raising in the Red River Valley,” in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections, Volume X, Part I 1900-1904*, ed. Minnesota Historical Society (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1905), 20.

agriculture. Back in 1850, Captain Pope wrote almost prophetically about the potential for the land with its “perfect uniformity of surface, richness of soil, and unlimited supply of wood and water, is among the finest wheat countries of the world.”⁵⁵ Though some of the early experiments with winter wheat in the Valley proved a failure due to the extreme winds of the region which do not provide for adequate snow covering for proper germination and growth, initial concerns about the shortness of the spring planting season for spring wheat soon proved unfounded as agricultural production of spring wheat exploded.⁵⁶

In 1881, there were 24,784 acres of wheat in the County and by 1886 that number had nearly tripled to 69,319 acres.⁵⁷ Even as wheat prices fluctuated and natural disasters including grasshopper plagues every year from 1872 to 1875 and again sporadically until 1890, floods like clockwork every three years, and occasional droughts hit the region, wheat production continued to rise.⁵⁸ In addition to wheat, Norman County early on grew a significant number of oats (4,008 acres in 1881 and 14,425 acres in 1886), raised many sheep (450 in 1881 and 1700 in 1883), as well as a number of other ventures including butter, barley, cheese, potatoes, apples, and hay. Two of the three most common crops in Norman County today, corn and soybeans, are notably absent from this list as perceptions of where those crops could be grown changed over time (initially it was believed that corn could only be grown further south).⁵⁹ Again, the importance of agriculture to the transformation of Norman County cannot be overstated. Farmers and the builders of the railroads were the two most important groups in the transformation of Norman

⁵⁵ Pope, *Report of the Secretary of War*, 6.

⁵⁶ Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State with some account of The Native Races and Its General History to the Present Day*, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1856), 112-113.

⁵⁷ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 337-338.

⁵⁸ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 337.

⁵⁹ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 338.

County. A county organization and government would not be necessary if not for the fertility of the soil and the efforts of the men and women who worked it.

Formal Establishment of Norman County

In 1881, Norman County was formally separated from Polk County and established as its own county, the final domino in the “Great Transformation.” In order for a county to be organized politically and become self-governing, it had to achieve a population threshold. With the growth of agriculture and the railroads in Norman County, it did that in 1881. Originally, Norman County included all the land of modern Norman County as well as that of modern Mahnomen County, including the White Earth Reservation. The Minnesota legislature passed the act by which the county was established on February 17, 1881 and appointed “commissioners, judge of probate, and an auditor...to serve until their successors were elected and qualified.” The men first appointed by Governor Pillsbury included a mixture of men from different areas of business in Ada. The first priority for them (for unbeknownst reasons) was to name the *Ada Alert* (now the *Norman County Index*) as the official newspaper. Since Norman County had previously been a part of Polk County, the townships were already largely organized and so there was little organizational work for the first county officials to do.⁶⁰ At first, they met in a hall owned by Peter Ramstad (elected as their first chairman) but moved into a permanent building built by O.H. Myran, owner of a hotel in Ada, in January 1884.⁶¹ Despite some attempts to move the county seat to Twin Valley, a town on the eastern edge of the current boundary of Norman County (undoubtedly a more central location in the County, especially with the inclusion of Mahnomen County until 1906), the seat remains in Ada to this day. The fight to move the county seat is an interesting one with barbs being traded in town newspapers throughout the county and

⁶⁰ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 303.

⁶¹ Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 304.

intrigue involving the county attorney (a Twin Valley man) failing to correctly draw up his petition as well as the residents of the far-western portion of the county supporting Twin Valley since they thought it increased their chances of getting their own county with Halstad as its seat. Interestingly, these political lines were drawn relatively in tandem with the railroad lines of Norman County perhaps indicating the family and regional/ethnic ties that tended to bring these towns together to oppose each other. At stake here was the power of being the county seat and the economic development that that inherently brought as well as the prestige. Regardless, in 1906 it came to a vote and Ada remained the seat by a margin of 1,438 votes to 1,167.⁶² Early political turmoil aside, the establishment of Norman County was the final stroke of the Great Transformation in Norman County.

By 1881 Norman County looked like a different planet than the one through which John Pope and Stephen Long had traveled to back in 1823 and 1850, respectively. Wheat had replaced prairie flowers; railroads had replaced Ojibwe trails and *Metís* oxcart trails; sheep and cows had replaced bison and elk; and Norwegians and Swedes had replaced the French and the Ojibwe. The landscape and peoples of Norman County were irreparably changed. The Great Transformation in Norman County happened between 1872 and 1881. The Ojibwe, the explorers, the French and the *Metís*, the Native American treaties, the steamboats and the railroads, the government surveyors, the growth of agriculture, and the formal establishment of the county are all important pieces of pre-transformation life. The spreading transportation web of the railroads and the interconnected rise of agriculture along with the flood of Scandinavian immigrants those two events brought drove the Great Transformation in Norman County. Individuals such as Henry Cooke and James J. Hill drove that transformation. The intersecting

⁶² Turner and Semling, *History of Clay and Norman Counties*, 304-308.

nature of agriculture, the railroads, and immigration are the three main factors though in the Great Transformation in Norman County. With no railroads, fewer immigrants would come and fewer crops would be produced. With no agriculture, there is little reason for the railroads to build through Norman County and less reason for the immigrants to come. With no immigrants, the railroads hemorrhage money and agricultural production is significantly handicapped. These three interconnected things are both the markers of and drivers of the Great Transformation in Norman County, both in the changes to the landscape and in the peoples who populated the land. Open prairies and wild rice-laden marshes are a far cry from one mile by one mile sections with occasional shelter belts of trees visible, just as Ojibwe and *Metís* are worlds away from Norwegians and Swedes. The impact of this transformation is complete and Norman County will truly never be the same.

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