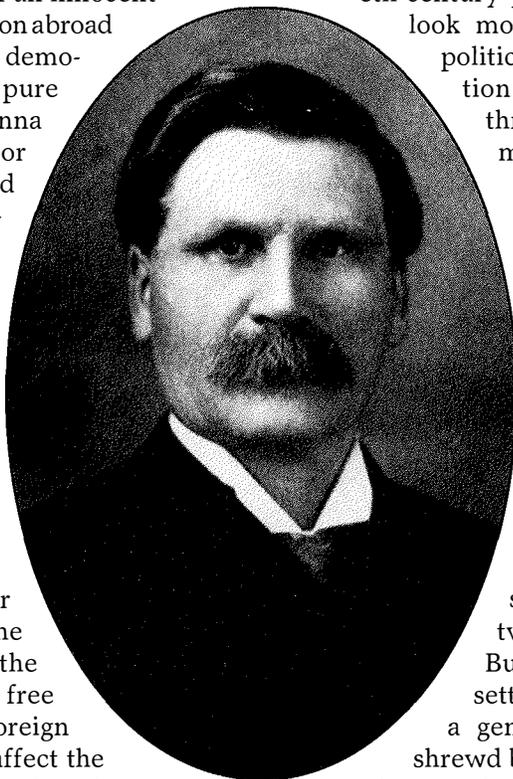

North Dakota Senator Asle J. Gronna and the Isolationists, 1915-1920

by Leonard Schlup

Asle J. Gronna, United States senator from 1911 to 1921, was a prominent North Dakota politician who gained national recognition as an isolationist during the early years of the twentieth century. He is primarily remembered in history for his arguments against United States' military intervention prior to American participation in World War I and his opposition to America's membership in the League of Nations after the conflict. A product of his times and the northern plains environment, Gronna venerated the idea of an innocent America committed to nonintervention abroad while maintaining a strong faith in democratic institutions and a morally pure character as a nation at home. Gronna defended his stand without rancor or misrepresentation, but he neglected to see the necessity of altering foreign policies in a time of transition. In spite of this limited vision, however, Gronna was a man of passion, courage, and conscience, dedicated to what he believed was in the best interests of the United States in general and North Dakota in particular.

North Dakota has had its complement of public figures opposed to American intervention in world affairs. Strong anticapitalistic fervor and the state's remoteness from the ocean left its national politicians, in the early years of the twentieth century, free to develop their own views on foreign policy issues that did not directly affect the economy of the plains region or North Dakota agriculture. Some of these North Dakota independent thinkers on American diplomacy from 1898 to World War II included Senator William N. Roach, Congressman Henry T. Helgesen, Senator Edwin F. Ladd, Senator Lynn J. Frazier, Congressman Usher L. Burdick, Senator Gerald P. Nye, and Senator William Langer.¹



Like many of the other North Dakota politicians of this era, Gronna has not been the subject of a published biography and, in addition, no work has ever exclusively addressed his position on the politics of isolationism. To be sure, the senator's name does appear in some specialized studies dealing with the period. Largely, however, these books have listed isolated fragments of his life and have been marked by limited perspectives. In light of renewed interest by scholars in early twentieth-century political history, historians need to look more closely at the lives of regional political figures. Certainly Gronna's position on foreign policy issues from 1915 through 1920 deserves further treatment and recognition, for this particular time constituted a significant juncture for him and for all North Dakotans who faced the challenges of World War I.²

Born in Iowa in 1858, Gronna moved with his parents, recent Norwegian immigrants, to Minnesota, where he worked on the family farm. The family later moved to Houston County, Minnesota, where he attended public school and the Caledonia Academy. Gronna taught school in Wilmington, Minnesota, for two years, and in 1879, he relocated to Buxton, North Dakota. He eventually settled at Lakota in 1887 and purchased a general merchandise store. Gronna's shrewd business sense and engaging personality worked in his favor, and he became a successful farmer, banker, newspaper owner, and merchant. He and his wife, Bertha Marie Ostby, were married in 1883 and had five children; the family lived in a large, modern twelve-room home in Lakota.

Ambitious for political office, he was elected in 1889 as a Republican to the North Dakota House of Represent-

tatives, a position that whetted his appetite for service in Congress. By cooperating with Alexander McKenzie, boss of North Dakota's Republican political machine, Gronna succeeded in winning a seat in the United States House of Representatives in 1904, replacing Burleigh F. Spalding, a conservative Republican who later served as the chief justice of the North Dakota Supreme Court. The first North Dakota congressman to become a national figure, Gronna, known for his independence of mind and spirit, earned a reputation for integrity and industry in the House of Representatives. He served in the House until his election to the United States Senate in 1911 to fill the unexpired term of Martin N. Johnson, a conservative and former chairman of the first Republican state convention, who died at Fargo in 1909. In 1914, Gronna won reelection for a full six years.³

Gronna's forthright stand on issues gained him respectability on Capitol Hill. He achieved recognition for his efforts to provide a better deal for wheat farmers and others engaged in agricultural pursuits. Gronna also championed participatory politics to allow the people to have a more responsible role in their government. In doing so, Gronna turned against Alexander McKenzie and other conservative North Dakota Republicans and aligned himself with progressive Republicans in Congress. Gronna also displayed a strong antipathy toward eastern industrialists and financiers on whom he placed the blame for the subordinate economic and political status of North Dakota.

Gronna was an able congressman and senator, steadfastly loyal to the interests of his region. He acquired fame as a proponent of economic, social, and political reform during the Progressive Era, 1910-1919. A transitional period, characterized by massive industrialization, rapid urban growth, and immense social change, the Progressive Era not only helped to reshape society, but also marked the beginning of contemporary American institutions, policies, and values. During this era, Gronna favored direct presidential primaries, popular election of United States senators, a graduated income tax, women's suffrage, the initiative and referendum, railroad regulation, workmen's compensation, actions



Home to Senator and Mrs. Gronna and their five children, this house, built around the turn of the century, was the largest in Lakota at the time with twelve rooms. From Lakota . . . 100 Years, 1883-1983, p. 355. On previous page, a portrait of Asle J. Gronna who served in the U. S. Senate from 1911 to 1920.

to curb the growth of giant monopolies, and measures to clean up corrupt practices in elections and limit campaign contributions and expenditures. Gronna supported President Theodore Roosevelt's reforms. He refused, however, to abandon Roosevelt's successor, President William Howard Taft, the beleaguered GOP standard-bearer, in the 1912 presidential contest. Opposing any attempt to splinter the party, the senator believed that Taft deserved a second term. The American electorate rejected both the incumbent Taft and Roosevelt who, after serving from 1901-1909, wanted a third term. Instead they sent Woodrow Wilson, Democratic governor of New Jersey, to the White House.⁴

With the outbreak of World War I in Europe in 1914, President Wilson issued a proclamation of neutrality, which Gronna supported wholeheartedly. This policy, however, was difficult to maintain. Great Britain's blockade of Germany and Germany's announcement that the waters around the British Isles constituted a war zone heightened tensions and increased the dan-

1. Information on this topic can be gleaned from Paul W. Morrison, "The Position of Senators from North Dakota on Isolation, 1889-1920" (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Colorado, 1954) and Robert P. Wilkins, "The Nonpartisan League and Upper Midwest Isolationism," *Agricultural History*, XXXIX (April 1965).

2. There is no large collection of Gronna's personal and political letters. Some of his correspondence relating to business matters can be found in the Ralph T. Fulton Papers, North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo, and the Isaac P. Baker Papers and the Erastus A. Williams Papers, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck. Many of Gronna's letters are in the manuscript collections of contemporaries. See, for example, Asle J. Gronna to Woodrow Wilson, January 30, 1913, October 6, 1920, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Division of Manuscripts,

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

3. Fountain L. Thompson was first appointed to fill Johnson's seat, but he resigned two months later. Appointed next was William E. Purcell who was defeated by Gronna in the 1911 election. *Lakota . . . 100 Years, 1883-1983* (Grafton, ND: Associated Printers, n. d.), pp. 354-355. Additional information on Gronna's life can be obtained from the *Biographical Directory of the American Congress* and from two unpublished studies: William W. Phillips, "The Growth of a Progressive: Asle J. Gronna" (M.A. thesis: University of North Dakota, 1952), and William M. Phillips, "The Life of Asle J. Gronna: A Self-Made Man of the Prairies" (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Missouri, 1958).

4. Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 271-272.

gers for neutral ships and for American passengers traveling on belligerent ships. On May 7, 1915, a German submarine torpedoed the British transatlantic steamer, *Lusitania*, off the Irish coast. This act, resulting in the loss of 128 American lives, precipitated an outpouring of public opinion against Germany. In light of this incident, Wilson demanded that Germany abandon its policy of unrestricted submarine warfare.⁵

Gronna vigorously advocated a policy of nonentanglement in foreign affairs. His views on avoiding a European quagmire were in keeping generally with the wishes of the people of North Dakota who cherished a strong desire for peace. Hostile to outside interests and geographically protected from both coasts, North Dakotans, especially those of German and Norwegian ancestries, ideologically distrusted financial classes. They blamed eastern munitions makers for instigating the preparedness movement and selfishly promoting war. After President Wilson's reelection in 1916, North Dakota constituents flooded their elected representatives with telegrams and petitions for peace. Governor Lynn J. Frazier notified Gronna and his Republican colleague, Senator Porter J. McCumber, that patriotic North Dakotans felt that war with Germany was not necessary to vindicate America's honor.⁶

Relations between Germany and the United States had steadily deteriorated by early 1917. Unrestricted submarine warfare resumed on February 1. Two days later, diplomatic relations with Germany were severed. Fearful that Wilson would react too impetuously, Congressman Henry T. Helgesen of North Dakota, Gronna's isolationist colleague in the House of Representatives, offered a resolution on February 16, 1917, to provide for a national war referendum, thereby permitting the electorate to vote on the question of war or peace.⁷ Convinced that voters would reject war, Gronna endorsed Helgesen's proposal, which in no way would

have legally superimposed the electorate's advisory opinion over the constitutional right of Congress to declare war or impair the president's power to conduct foreign policy.⁸

Seeking to prevent a hostile act which would precipitate a conflict, Wilson, on February 26, asked Congress for authority to arm American merchantmen, those ships used in commerce. His message for an armed ship bill met with a negative response from Gronna, who, like Helgesen, objected to Wilson's request for several reasons. The two men branded as "manifestly unneutral" the president's solicitation for authority to arm American merchantmen for protection against German submarines while leaving the other belligerent, Great Britain, free to continue its obstruction of American foreign commerce. Gronna, emphasizing strict neutrality, did not distinguish between an English mine and a German submarine, contending that the United States could voluntarily defer some of its rights temporarily without relinquishing any of them permanently. Agreeing with Helgesen that national honor was a spiritual quality that could never be vindicated by force, Gronna also believed that war would not be for principles but for commercialism to enrich the traffickers in war materials.⁹ "Many want war, for they hold British bonds," he said.¹⁰

On March 1, 1917, the House of Representatives passed the Armed Ship Bill by an overwhelming vote of 403 to 13. Helgesen was the only North Dakotan to vote against the bill. Most of Helgesen's twelve colleagues in the House who also registered opposition to the bill represented Midwestern states.¹¹

Affirming that the arming of American merchant vessels was inconsistent with the peaceful declarations of a neutral nation, Gronna and eleven other senators, known as the "Willful Twelve," prevented, by means of a filibuster, the Armed Ship Bill from passing the

5. Wilson's foreign policy is examined closely in Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonian Statecraft: Theory and Practice of Liberal Internationalism During World War I* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1991).

6. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, pp. 355-357. See also Robert P. Wilkins, "North Dakota and the European War, 1914-1917: A Study of Public Opinion" (Ph.D. dissertation: West Virginia University, 1954). The *Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota*, X (October 1919), is devoted entirely to articles on North Dakota during World War I. Wilson carried North Dakota in the 1916 presidential election. See *Grand Forks Herald*, November 5-9, 1916.

7. *The New York Times*, February 17, 1917; *Grand Forks Herald*, February 14-18, 1917; *Jamestown Daily Alert*, February 23, 1917; and *Bismarck Tribune*, February 24, 1917. North Dakota newspapers of the larger towns generally endorsed the diplomatic break with Germany, and the *Grand Forks Herald*, on record in opposition to the socialistic Nonpartisan League, supported war. This should not be taken as an accurate barometer of the situation, for Helgesen's stand enjoyed widespread support across the state. After Wilson severed diplomatic relations with Germany, the Senate passed a resolution endorsing his action by a vote of 78 to 5. Gronna voted against it. See

U.S., *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., 2d Sess., February 7, 1917, LIV, Part 5, pp. 2749-50. Also, *The New York Times*, February 4-8, 1917.

8. Robert P. Wilkins and Wyonna Huchette Wilkins, *North Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 153-77; *The New York Times*, February 18-27, 1917.

9. U.S., *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., 2d Sess., March 1, 1917, LIV, p. 4659.

10. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, p. 356.

11. *The New York Times*, March 2, 1917; Richard Lowitt, "The Armed Ship Bill Controversy: A Legislative View," *Mid-America*, XLVI (January 1964), pp. 38-47; *The American Review of Reviews*, LV (April 1917), pp. 350-51; and Leonard Schlup, "Henry T. Helgesen and American Neutrality," *Research Journal of Philosophy and Social Sciences* (1993), pp. 37-48. Nearly a half century before the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, and later the War Powers Act in response to Vietnam, Helgesen and Gronna, denouncing clandestine diplomacy and plans of intrigue, worried about Congress surrendering or weakening its war-making power.

THE LAKOTA AMERICAN.

Volume 11.

Lakota, Nelson County, North Dakota, Thursday, October 29, 1914

Number 4

A. E. PAULSON, of Kenmare, N. D., Says:

"If all the Democrats in the country were to come to North Dakota they could not defeat A. J. Gronna for United States Senator."

— From last week's Kenmare News.

Voters Are Indifferent

About Senator Gronna the Mandan Pioneer Says: "He is a Loyal American First and a Republican Afterward"

The voters of North Dakota are very indifferent to the efforts being made to divert their attention to politics. Perhaps the big crop, with little time for anything else but work is responsible to some extent, but there is no question that there is a feeling of satisfaction with the present administration that the most virile efforts of the Democrats seem unable to disturb.

It is understood that the Democrats are planning on bringing in both Bryan and Burke to arouse the people and aid their candi-

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In 1904, Gronna bought a controlling interest in the Lakota American. That same year, he was elected to Congress. In 1911, he was elected to the Senate to fill the unexpired term of Martin N. Johnson and was reelected in 1914. On the left, an undated portrait of United States Congressman Henry T. Helgeson. He and Senator Gronna shared an isolationist viewpoint in opposing the country's entry into World War I and the League of Nations. On the right, Alexander McKenzie, the Republican political boss in North Dakota, from 1883 to 1906.

CONG. HELGESON IS COMING.

Popular Congressman to make Six Addresses in Nelson County Friday.

Hon. H. T. Helgeson, Congressman from the first district, who is a candidate for re-election will address the voters in Nelson County on Friday, Oct. 30, as follows:

Aneta, 11 a. m.
Kloten, 1 p. m.
McVillie, 2 p. m.
Pekin, 3:30 p. m.
Tolna, 5 p. m.
Lakota, 8 p. m.

As many as possible should

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REV. HAATVEDT IS MARRIED

Happy Event Occurred at Home of Bride's Mother in San Francisco.

A wedding of more than ordinary interest to Lakota people occurred in San Francisco, Cal., on Sunday, Oct. 12, when Rev. L. A. Haatvedt, the popular pastor of the Lakota Lutheran church, and Miss Marie Hoas, one of Lakota's most popular young ladies, were united in marriage, the happy event occurring at the home of the bride's mother.

Mr. and Mrs. Haatvedt arrived in Lakota last Friday.

They have the congratulations and best wishes of a host of friends.

School Notes

The total enrollment of the schools is now 301. Of this number 222 are in the grades and 79 in the high school.

Big Republican Rally Monday

There will be a Rousing Big Republican Rally in Lakota on Monday night, commencing at 8 o'clock, which will be the winding up of the campaign for the next day in election day. It is expected that most of the candidates will be present. Senator Gronna will also be present at the meeting.

The candidates are planning on holding a number of meetings in the county Friday night and Saturday. There will be a meeting in Clara twp. Friday night. There will be a meeting at Whitman Saturday noon and Dahlen at 2 p. m. A big rally will be held at Petersburg at 8 o'clock the same evening.

the breeds of horses, their characteristics, and vitality.

Edward Vobeland and Mabel Fuleso entered the 8th grade Monday.

Catherine Cranna had 100 per cent in fifth grade spelling last week.

Beatrice Hollett entertained the seventh grade club last week.

Zella Moutzish entertained the eighth grade club last week.

Laura Kelly is suffering from an accident to her knee.

STATE SUFFRAGE RALLY Thursday, October 30th

Leading the parade, with the band, were four marshals on horseback, Misses Aldyth Ward, of Washburn, Hageman, Geiser and Knutson. The speakers of the day were Mesdames Lutz, of St. Paul, Frank Simpson, of Minneapolis, and E. M. Darrow, of Fargo, and the car in which they rode was beautifully decorated with yellow chrysanthemums and yellow streamers.

The officers of the Bismarck league rode in another handsomely decorated car, and the W. C. T. U. is still another one, trimmed in white. Many school children, all waving yellow pas-



Senate.¹² This action earned the wrath of the president, who issued the statement: "A little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own, have rendered the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible."¹³ Advised by Secretary of State Robert Lansing, President Wilson quickly declared that, by law, he could arm merchant ships without the consent of Congress.

Events moved swiftly after that episode. On March 1, the State Department released the Zimmermann Note after it had been intercepted by British naval intelligence and transmitted to Walter Hines Page, United States ambassador to Great Britain. This coded message, dated January 19, sent by the German foreign secretary to the German minister in Mexico, proposed an alliance with Mexico if war erupted between Germany and the United States. If it helped to defeat the United States, the telegram promised, then Mexico would regain its lost territory in New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona.¹⁴

One month later, Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, predicting it would be an operation to end all wars and make the world safe for democracy. The war resolution passed the Senate on April 4 by a vote of 82 to 6.¹⁵ House approval came on April 6 with a tally of 373 to 50.¹⁶ In the Senate, the six senators opposing the declaration divided equally between the two parties. Democrats William J. Stone of Missouri, Harry Lane of Oregon, and James K. Vardaman of Mississippi joined Republicans Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, George W. Norris of Nebraska, and Gronna, who cast the first "no" vote. "I shall vote against war," he told his Senate colleagues, "because I believe it would have been possible to maintain an honorable peace with all the nations of the earth."¹⁷ Interestingly enough, North Dakota's senators split on the war proposition. Senator Porter J. McCumber, a Republican from Wahpeton, sided with the majority in supporting Wilson.

Although Gronna remained convinced that war was unnecessary, he loyally supported his country and did nothing to embarrass the Wilson administration. Accepting the inevitable, Gronna's prewar pacifism turned to wartime patriotism. Still, his speeches prior to the

war declaration bothered some activists. After the capitulation of Germany in November 1918, the National Security League, a private organization established in 1914 to encourage military preparedness, assailed the senator for his earlier stand. On November 24, 1918, Charles D. Orth, chairman of the League's congressional committee, warned that certain senators, including Gronna, could conceivably exert efforts to gain practical control of the Senate by wielding the balance of power on crucial postwar decisions.¹⁸

On December 4, 1918, Wilson sailed for Europe to participate in the peace conference. Republicans not only criticized his decision to attend the meeting but also condemned his judgment in excluding senators and prominent Republicans from the American peace commission. In addition to Wilson, the United States peace commission consisted of Secretary of State Robert Lansing; General Tasker Howard Bliss; Edward M. House, a Texas Democrat and Wilson's intimate adviser who served as the president's chief deputy in Paris; and Henry White, a diplomat and former ambassador. White was a nominal Republican who served both parties, but Wilson selected no member of the Senate to accompany him.

At Paris, the "Big Four"—President Wilson, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Italian Premier Vittorio Orlando, and French Premier Georges Clemenceau—made the decisions. Attached to the treaty, at Wilson's insistence, was the Covenant of the League of Nations, which provided for an Assembly, Council, and Secretariat, permanently located at Geneva, Switzerland. Wilson's greatest diplomatic coup in making the League an indissoluble part of the Treaty of Versailles turned out to be his most costly political mistake.¹⁹

The Senate, having a constitutional obligation to approve or reject treaties, divided into four groups on the League issue in 1919 and 1920. First, the pro-League senators and supporters of Wilson, led by Senate minority leader Gilbert M. Hitchcock of Nebraska, favored United States participation in the League.²⁰ Second, the mild reservationists, headed by Frank B. Kellogg of Minnesota, were willing to accept the treaty with minor alterations and clarifications.²¹ Third, the strong

12. See Thomas W. Ryley, *A Little Group of Willful Men: A Study of Congressional-Presidential Authority* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1975), pp. 143-170.

13. Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson, Life and Letters* (8 vols.; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1927-1939), VI, p. 481.

14. *The New York Times*, March 2, 1917. An excellent account of this subject is Barbara Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

15. *The New York Times*, April 5-7, 1917.

16. Ill at the time and absent from the house floor, Helgesen did not vote. He died on April 10, 1917. The other North Dakota Congress-

men, George M. Young and Patrick D. Norton, both of whom were Republicans, supported the war declaration.

17. U.S., *Congressional Record*, 66th Cong., 1st Sess., October 24, 1919, LVIII, Part 7, p. 7431. Also, George W. Norris to Gronna, April 7, 1917, George W. Norris Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

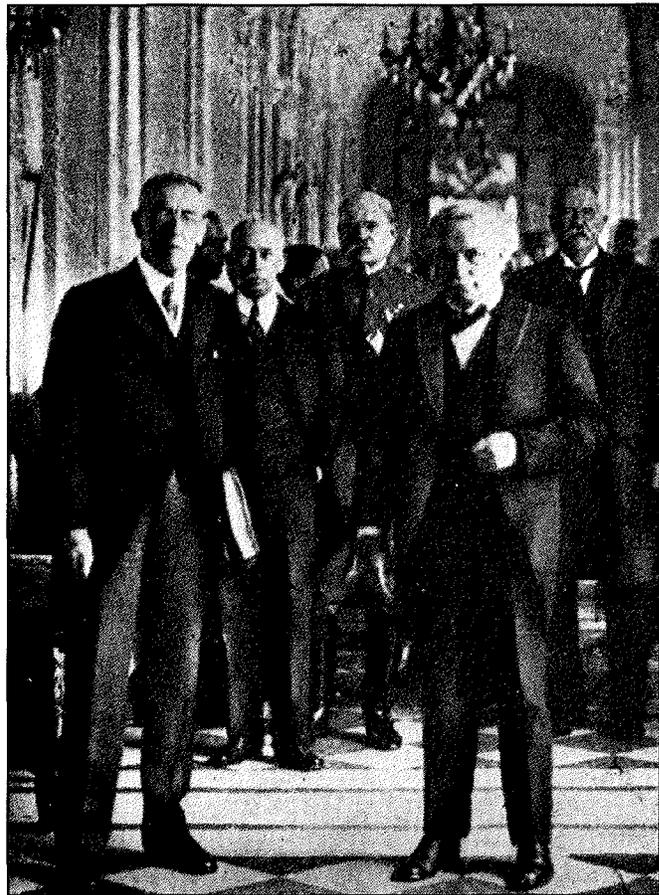
18. *The New York Times*, November 25, 1918.

19. Books on the League include Denna Frank Fleming, *The United States and the League of Nations, 1918-1920* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1932) and Warren F. Kuehl, *Seeking World Order: The United States and International Organization to 1920* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969).

reservationists would approve the treaty only with major amendments to protect American interests and traditional policies, thereby proposing certain nullifications. Their leader was Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, the Republican chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in a Senate controlled by Republicans.²² Fourth, the sixteen senators who advocated complete rejection of the covenant were known as the irreconcilables, and Gronna was among them. Other important irreconcilables included William E. Borah of Idaho, Hiram W. Johnson of California, and Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin.²³

The irreconcilables consisted of a heterogeneous group of men geographically dispersed across the nation. Often referred to as the "Bitter Enders" and the "Battalion of Death,"²⁴ they represented a band of politically divergent legislators who believed in America's uniqueness, moral superiority, and the foundations of American foreign policy as outlined by Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Monroe. In his farewell address in 1796, Washington advised the nation to steer clear of permanent alliances with foreign nations and to trust temporary alliances only for extraordinary emergencies. Jefferson reiterated this idea in 1801 in his inaugural address when he stressed the necessity for peace, commerce, and friendship with all nations, but entangling alliances with none. In 1823, in a message to Congress, Monroe stated that there existed in the Americas a political system essentially different and separate from that of Europe, and that the United States would not interfere in the internal affairs of European nations or take part in European wars of solely foreign interest. Regarding these dogmas as the cornerstone of American foreign policy, Gronna and the other irreconcilables counseled the American people to exercise caution before plunging into world diplomacy. "There never was a moment," remarked Vice President Thomas R. Marshall, "when those who had said they would not stand for the League of Nations could have been induced, under any circumstances, to vote for the ratification of the Treaty."²⁵

During the debate over the League of Nations, Gronna was one of Wilson's strongest critics. He grilled the



President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) described the senators who opposed his politics "a little group of willful men." He is pictured here, left, with other members of the Peace Delegation in Paris in 1919. From *Review of Reviews*, July 1919, p. 16.

president and his supporters endlessly about the treaty and countered their arguments point for point. Gronna interpreted American membership in the League to mean a complete break with past policies and the termination of America's freedom of action. A traditionalist who wished to preserve American institutions, Gronna claimed that America's self-interest demanded insulation from the political intrigue of the Old World

20. Gilbert M. Hitchcock to William Jennings Bryan, November 30, 1919, William Jennings Bryan Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress; William Howard Taft to Hitchcock, July 21, 1919, Gilbert M. Hitchcock Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress; Porter J. McCumber to Taft, July 2, 18, 24, 31, 1919, William Howard Taft Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress; Lansing Diary, 1919, Robert Lansing Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress, and League material in the Henry White Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress, and in the Atlee Pomerene Papers, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio. Pomerene, an advocate of the League, was United States senator from Ohio from 1911 to 1923.

21. The mild reservationists have been the subject of a study by

Herbert F. Margulies, *The Mild Reservationists and the League of Nations Controversy in the Senate* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989). See also Leonard Schlup, "The Unknown Senator: Selden Palmer Spencer of Missouri and the League of Nations," *Research Journal of Philosophy and Social Sciences* (1991), pp. 15-32; Charles E. Hughes to Frederick Hale, July 24, 1919, Charles Evans Hughes Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress; and Elihu Root to Henry Cabot Lodge, December 1, 1919, Elihu Root Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

22. Lodge recorded his views in Henry Cabot Lodge, *The Senate and the League of Nations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925). In addition, see Frank B. Brandegee to Lodge, November 27, 1919, Philander C. Knox to Lodge, March 17, 1919, Henry Cabot Lodge

or the United States could be dragged into European conflicts. He was not swayed from his position by modifications that were suggested: the excepting of regional understandings such as the Monroe Doctrine from the League's jurisdiction; the elimination of the League's interference in the making of United States tariff and immigration policies; or the recognition of the right of Congress to declare war. "I am for America for Americans," Gronna protested, adding that he would not approve anything that would "take from Americans the control of their own country."²⁶

Gronna joined thirty-six Republican senators in signing the Round Robin on March 4, 1919. This resolution, blocked by Democrats from becoming an official record, warned Wilson about the difficulty in ratifying the treaty without amendments. In their senatorial declaration, the Republicans insisted on considering the League separately.²⁷ A furious Wilson defied this resolution, and Gronna instantly responded to the chief executive. "I for one will die," he stated, "before I will vote for the League of Nations in its present form. . . . If the President thinks there is an overwhelming sentiment for the League of Nations he ought to take a look over my mail [from North Dakota]."²⁸

On October 6, 1919, Gronna, who favored a national advisory referendum on the peace treaty, informed the Senate of the letters and petitions he had received concerning the League of Nations. For example, a group of Lutherans who had convened at Valley City, North Dakota, in September, passed a resolution urging Gronna to use his influence against the League. Contending that they believed in "America first and Americanism only," the ministers branded the League as a vehicle to become entangled with European affairs and as an organization out of harmony with the goals and ideas of the founding fathers.²⁹

Gronna delivered his most important speech on the League of Nations on October 24, 1919. Addressing his Senate colleagues, he listed his reasons for opposing the covenant and treaty, which he referred to as a "double-headed contract." First, he maintained that Wilson's proposal would create an international organization invested with "arbitrary and almost unlimited power."

The senator was unwilling for the United States to become a partner in "this colossal enterprise" and "world business," calling the executive council a "super-government with unlimited powers defined in vague indefinite language."³⁰ Second, denying that the covenant embodied a new theory of promoting peace, Gronna charged that the Holy Alliance, ratified in 1815 by Russia, Austria, and Prussia, was superior in form to the League. Third, he asserted that joining the League would be tantamount to surrendering American sovereignty and the control of questions affecting its vital interests. He said:

So let us not attempt the impossible, but let us proceed in a sane and practical manner; let us



Titled "Senatorial Improvements," this cartoon was reprinted in *Review of Reviews*, November 1919, p. 482, from the *Detroit News*.

Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

23. An excellent book on the irreconcilables is Ralph Stone, *The Irreconcilables: The Fight Against the League of Nations* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970). See William Hard, "The Irreconcilables," *The New Republic*, XXII (March 31, 1920), pp. 148-50; Hiram Johnson to William E. Borah, July 1, August 26, 1920, William E. Borah Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

24. Albert Sidney Burleson to Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, January 28, 1920, in Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (69 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-1993), LXIV, p. 338.

25. Thomas R. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall: Vice*

President and Hoosier Philosopher (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1925), p. 364.

26. *The New York Times*, May 2, 1919; *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 2, 1919. With some changes, Gronna would have voted for the Versailles peace treaty as a separate entity. It was the League of Nations that he opposed vehemently.

27. *The New York Times*, March 4, 1919.

28. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1919. Actually, there was considerable support for the League of Nations in North Dakota. The state legislature had passed resolutions in favor of United States membership.

29. J.F.L. Bohnhoff to Gronna, September 29, 1919, in U.S., *Congressional Record*, 66th. Cong., 1st Sess., October 6, 1919, LVIII, Part 7, p. 6428.



Bismarck crowds enthusiastically greet President Woodrow Wilson and his wife, Edith, September 10, 1919. Bismarck was one of many stops for President Wilson on his campaign to promote the signing of the peace treaty and membership in the League of Nations. Riding with the president was North Dakota Governor Lynn J. Frazier and his wife, Lottie.

protect our own people first . . . Whatever we do in the future should be done with the sanction and approval of our own people, and not at the command of some autocratic or despotic foreign power . . . It should be left to the free will of the American people; it must be approved or disapproved through the representatives of the people of the United States of America.³¹

Finally, Gronna found the tenth article to be the most objectionable part of the covenant. Under Article X, member nations pledged to preserve and guarantee the political independence and territory of all members under attack.

Horrified by its possible repercussions, Gronna condemned its inclusion in the covenant. He complained:

How any red-blooded American who loves American liberty and American independence can subscribe to a proposition of this sort is beyond my comprehension. With the existing

inequalities and the discriminations prevailing if this covenant is adopted, it seems to me unthinkable that any real American should be willing to agree to a provision so eminently unfair and so dangerous and destructive of our American Government.³²

The treaty suffered defeat four times in the Senate in late 1919 and early 1920. On November 19, the Senate rejected the treaty in three tests. First, on the question of ratification with reservations, the senators voted 39 in favor to 55 against, with Gronna belonging to the latter group. Next, a second vote occurred on the same question, revived by a motion to reconsider. This time the result was 41 to 50, with Gronna once again voting against the motion. Third, on the question of ratification without reservations, the outcome was 38 to 53. Gronna adamantly opposed this unconditional acceptance.³³

The fourth and final vote took place on March 19, 1920. A substantial majority favored approval with reservations, but they fell seven votes short of the necessary two-thirds majority needed for ratification.

30. *Ibid.*, October 24, 1919, p. 7418.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 7419.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 7424.

33. *The New York Times*, November 20, 1919.

34. *Ibid.*, March 20, 1920; *Akron Beacon Journal* (Ohio), March 21, 1920. McCumber voted for the treaty and League. North Dakota was the only state having two Republican senators who took opposite stands on both the question of war in 1917 and the League in 1919-1920.

35. Warren G. Harding to Cornelius Cole, August 12, 1919; Harding

to Frederick Gillett, August 4, 30, 1920, Warren G. Harding Papers, Ohio Historical Society Library, Columbus.

36. *The New York Times*, May 24, 1919, July 3, 9, 1920, October 17, 1920.

37. Johnson to Bryan, September 14, 1920, Bryan Papers.

38. William Allen White to Ray Stannard Baker, December 28, 1920, William Allen White Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress. Also, William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946), p. 496.

By a vote of 49 to 35, the Senate defeated the treaty, meaning that the United States would not enter the League and that technically it was still at war with Germany. Ironically, a combination of Wilsonians and irreconcilables found themselves on the same side as they voted against the covenant with reservations. Had those Democrats stood by their president and voted for the League with reservations, the treaty would have carried the Senate.³⁴

Wilson hoped that the presidential election of 1920 would be a solemn referendum on the League. James M. Cox, the Democratic nominee from Ohio, endorsed American membership in the League. The Republican presidential candidate, Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio, spoke vaguely of an international association of nations to prevent war. Once in the White House, however, President Harding promptly abandoned all endeavors to have the United States enter the League, stating his personal view that nothing could be stamped with more finality than American nonparticipation in the world body.³⁵

In 1920, the year of Harding's victory, Gronna lost his bid for renomination for another term in the United States Senate. He sustained defeat in the GOP state primary in July, losing to Edwin F. Ladd, a former chemist, professor, food commissioner, editor, and president of the North Dakota Agricultural College at Fargo, who served in the Senate from 1921 until his death in 1925. The political defeat in 1920 was a great personal loss for Gronna, who at the time was chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee.³⁶ He died only two years later at Lakota, North Dakota, in 1922.

Gronna's years of service in the Senate coincided with a period of transition that marked a turning point, not only in the history of the plains region and the United States, but also that of the world. An era of political, economic, and social reform within the nation gave way to a global conflict. World War I ended the progressive movement at home and led to a conservative restoration in the 1920s, a decade fundamentally different from the American society of the previous ten years. Senator Hiram Johnson lamented that "war and those things that go with war" had extinguished the spirit of progressivism.³⁷ William Allen White, a prominent Kansas editor, concluded that war was "the Devil's answer to progress."³⁸

During the period from 1915 to 1920, Gronna emerged as an important figure in the debate over military intervention in Europe and American membership in the League of Nations. He sought to devote the entire efforts of the United States to its own advancement and to keep the nation at peace by avoiding foreign entanglements and responsibilities. The senator wanted the United States to exercise its moral influence to promote

peace, and along this line, he surely would have favored the Kellogg-Briand Pact in 1928 to outlaw war. But Gronna reasoned that America could make no commitment to support collective security. Unlike Wilson, who tried to internationalize Americans too rapidly, Gronna did not foresee a new international order in which the United States would play a role in supporting the principles of justice and freedom. Instead he enunciated a noninterventionist doctrine.

Although he espoused isolationism, Gronna never denied the power of the United States. Nor did he want to isolate it from world commerce. He believed that America, instead of entrapping itself in an alliance, possessed the capacity to act alone on matters stemming from European struggles, if those problems ever impinged on America's security and interests.

Gronna's progressivism on domestic issues contrasted with his conservatism on foreign affairs. Old-fashioned in his Americanism, he reflected the idea that alliances could lead to unwanted turmoil. Yet Gronna failed to realize that the nation he envisioned was still following the course George Washington had set when the United States was a young and struggling country. The advice Washington offered in his farewell address was not a permanent admonition against intervention; rather, he counseled neutrality only for a temporary time to allow the nation to grow strong and large enough to defend itself. By 1919, American maturity had reached that plateau, and the course proposed by Washington was no longer defensible.

Though Gronna and his fellow isolationists were unsuccessful in their efforts to keep the United States out of World War I, they prevailed in blocking the country's membership in the League of Nations. History best remembers Senator Gronna for his strong rhetoric and unwillingness to compromise in his fight against military intervention and world diplomacy in the years 1915-1920, a position that reinforced the national image of North Dakota as a political hinterland.

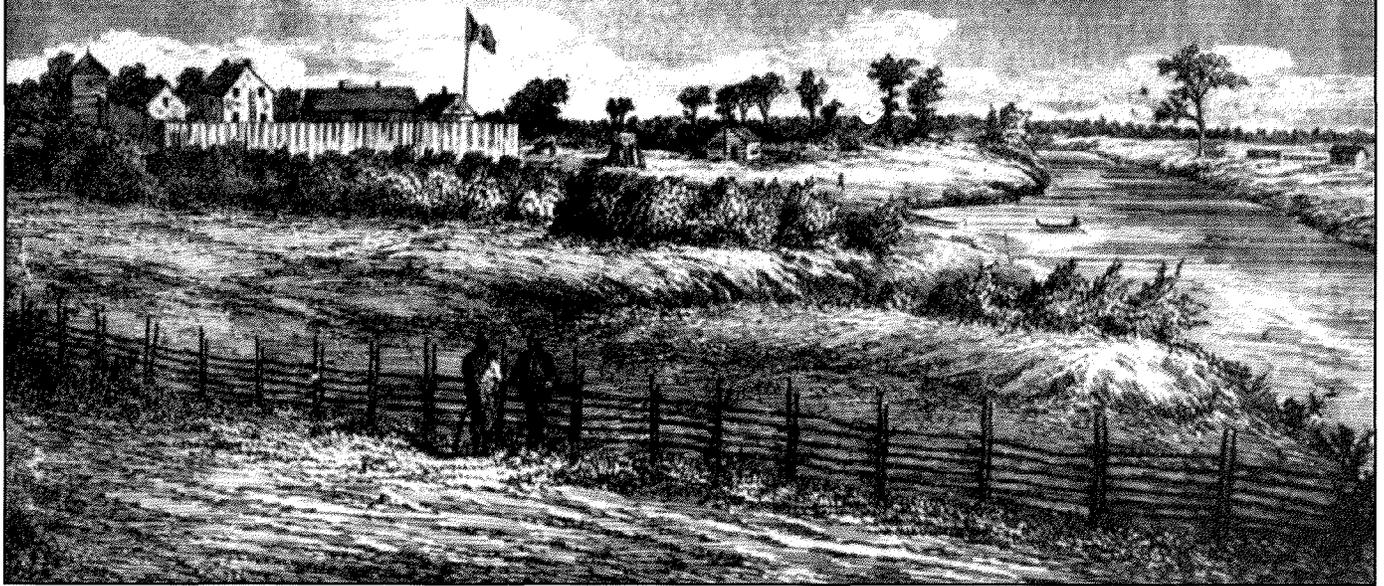
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Commerce and Conflict

A History of Pembina, 1797-1895

by Gregory S. Camp



This early illustration of Hudson Bay Company's fort at Pembina was printed in the Canadian Illustrated News, 1871. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

The small prairie community of Pembina offers a unique mosaic—a microcosm, if you will—of some of the influential forces that have helped to shape the region and the state.¹ During the course of its first hundred years, Pembina, located on the Red River in what is today northeast North Dakota, found itself at the center of controversy in a number of arenas. For the fur trade business, it was the site of fierce, sometimes violent, competition. For the Métis, it became an important staging area and one of many symbols of their growing sense of nationalism. International politics also played a brief role along the 49th parallel, with the fate of a reborn Pembina community one of the chief sources of contention. It benefited from good economic times, suffered during busts, feared the floods and droughts, and worried about the possibility of Indian attack. First home to several tribes of native peoples, the area where Pembina was established ran the gamut of the frontier experience: fur trade site, colony, river town, shipping center, scene of international tensions,

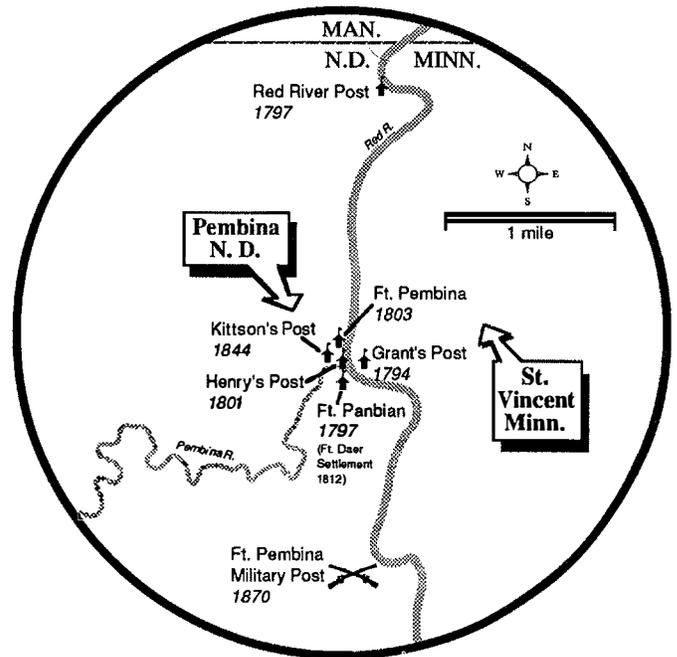
and finally, military outpost. In short, the Pembina region rode the tide of changing fortunes on the northern Great Plains. This article addresses the almost one hundred years between the establishment of the first fur trade post in Pembina in 1797, and the end of its era as a military post with the closing of Fort Pembina in 1895.

In the 1780s, when the young United States was struggling with the Articles of Confederation and foreign intrigue west of the Appalachian Mountains, another story was unfolding in the middle of the North American continent. Here, along the Red River of the North, British fur traders from the North West Company of Montreal were sounding the economic waters for the positioning of a fur trade post in what to that point had been Yanktonai Sioux territory. Fully cognizant of the French fur traders' interdependence on the Chippewa and Cree, the North West Company sought to encourage these tribes to migrate to the prairie where the fur trade had heretofore been unexploited. Alexander

Henry the Elder was among a host of traders to see the possibilities in this remote area. He knew, too, that Chippewa and Cree participation was of the utmost importance. Although the 1780s proved to be a bit too early for a concerted effort in the Red River Valley of the North, the fur trade became quite active in the next two decades.²

Beginning in 1793, the North West Company erected a semipermanent post under the control of Peter Grant at what is today St. Vincent, Minnesota. The Yanktonai Sioux, however, forced Grant's post out of the Red River Valley. Undaunted, the North West Company simply waited a few years before giving approval for yet another venture at the confluence of the Pembina and Red rivers. In 1797, Charles Jean Baptist Chaboillez erected a small post on the south bank of the Pembina River at the point where it meets the Red River. Chaboillez sought to immediately expand his operations by establishing small subposts at strategic locations across the Red River Valley. It was at this time reports were received concerning the virtually untapped fur-yielding Hair Hills (now known as the Pembina Mountains) and the Turtle Mountains, which convinced company officials of the potential of this remote part of North America. Indeed, Chaboillez was not the only trader in the region. In his journal, Chaboillez notes another post, confirmed by David Thompson's report of a site known as "Roy's" or "Le Roy's" near the confluence of the Salt (now known as the Forest River) and Red rivers in 1798. In addition, John MacDonell had a fur trade post as far west as the Souris River at the same time. By 1799, however, stepped-up Sioux attacks eventually forced Chaboillez and other traders to abandon their places of business. Despite these setbacks, the economic die had been cast for further exploitation of the region.³

The return of the fur trade in strength to the Red River Valley is perhaps best embodied in the person of Alexander Henry the Younger. The nephew of the



As this map of the Pembina area indicates, the early fur trade posts were clustered near one another. In 1812, the Fort Daer Settlement was built on the ruins of Fort Panbian, originally constructed in 1797. Map by Brian Austin.

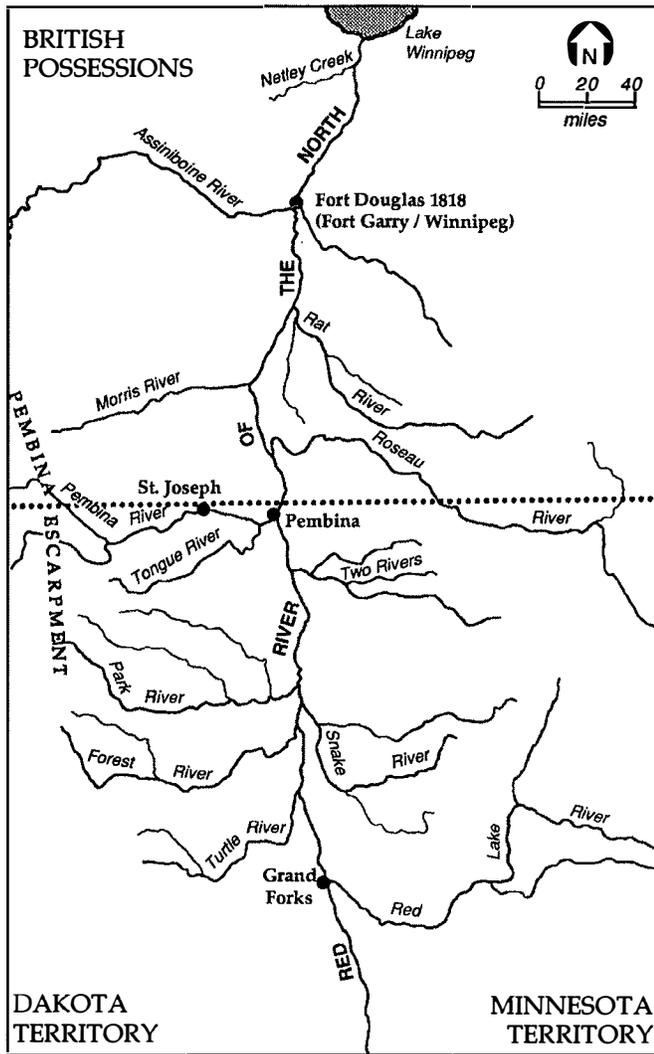
already famous Alexander Henry the Elder, this intrepid trader left some of the best records available of the fur trade era on the northern plains. Arriving first in 1800, Henry cautiously made his way up the northerly flowing Red River in search of a location for a proper headquarters. His Chippewa trading partners were understandably nervous about the prospect of meeting a Sioux war party. Still, the party pressed on until coming upon the confluence of the Park and Red rivers. Henry constructed his headquarters approximately one-quarter of a mile from the mouth of the Park; within a

1. The name "Pembina" is thought to be derived from a Chippewa word (Panbinan) referring to the edible red berries found along the banks of the Pembina and Red rivers at the time. For an excellent history of the fur trade at Pembina, see Lauren W. Ritterbush, "Fur Trade Posts at Pembina: An Archeological Perspective of North Dakota's Earliest Fur Trade Center," *North Dakota History*, vol. 59, no. 1, (Winter 1992), pp. 16-29.

2. See Alexander Henry, the Elder, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the Years 1760 and 1776*, (Boston: 1901) and Charles M. Gates, *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest, Being the Narrative of Peter Pond and the Diaries of John Macdonell, Archibald N. McLeod, Hugh Faries, and Thomas Conner*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1933) for company accounts of these early days in the woodlands of Minnesota and the Red River Valley of the North. The Chippewa accounts of these formative days come primarily from William Warren's *History of the Ojibway People*, (St. Paul: Borealis Press, 1984), a reprint of the original version found in the *Collections of the Minnesota Historical*

Society, vol. 5, 1885.

3. J.B. Tyrell, *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812*, (Toronto: Publications of the Champlain Society, vol. 12, 1916), p. 25n.; Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur Trading Area, 1660-1855," *Minnesota History*, vol. 11, no. 4, (December 1930), p. 367; Elliot Coues, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journal of Alexander Henry, fur trader of the Northwest Company, and of David Thompson, official geographer and explorer of the same company, 1799-1814*, (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897) vol. I, pp. 80-81. Peter Grant offers a look at the Sautaux (Chippewa) Indians in L.R. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, (New York: Antiquarian Press, LTD, 1960), vol. I, pp. 307-366. Between 1797 and 1798, the Goose River was apparently the unofficial "boundary" between the Chippewa and Sioux hunting territories. See Harold Hickerson, "Journal of Charles Jean Baptist Chaboillez, 1797-1798," *Ethnohistory*, vol. 6, 1959, pp. 286-287.



This map shows the branch rivers that flow into the Red River of the North between Fargo and Lake Winnipeg. Map by Brian Austin.

few months, however, the site proved to be a less than ideal spot for directing the trade. For one thing, the various Chippewa bands who were trading with Chaboillez were not willing to venture that far south for fear of incurring the wrath of the Yanktonai Sioux. As a result, Henry packed up his goods and moved northward to Pembina, a familiar site to both the North West Company and its Chippewa friends. From this location, Henry began his operation which literally changed the

face of this part of the northern plains. The trade at once encouraged the Chippewa to return to the Dakota prairie, furthered competition with the Hudson's Bay and XY companies, and helped to establish Métis identification with the Red River Valley as a homeland.⁴

As it turned out, Henry's choice of Pembina was a good one. The Sioux were, by and large, absent during the next half decade or so, which provided Henry and his Indian trading partners some time to put down roots and grow. Henry's abilities as an administrator became immediately apparent when he began to exploit the fur-producing regions, first around his headquarters, then at some distance from it. For instance, Henry was wise enough to realize that overtrapping was a very real danger in an operation of the size he envisioned. As a result, the North West Company trader authorized the building of many substations at strategic sites. Some of these small, seasonal posts included operations in the distant Turtle Mountains, the Pembina Mountains, near Devils Lake, and on the Park, Goose, Salt, Rat, and Buffalo rivers. When one site showed signs of overtrapping, Henry shut it down to allow for natural restocking. With this technique, Henry hoped to be able to harvest furs indefinitely.⁵ Henry's fur trade post in Pembina, fed by its chain of substations, became the North West Company's largest and most important fur trade operation in the Red and Assiniboine river region. Evidence of the success of the Pembina-based exchange is perhaps best seen in the many rival posts that sprang up to compete for the fur trade in this area.⁶ The years 1801-1805 helped to solidify Pembina as a primary place of exchange for the next several decades, despite the vicissitudes of the fur market. Still, the "Golden Age" in and around Pembina would not last forever.

As early as 1808, it became apparent to Henry and his trading partners that Pembina could not sustain the large fur harvests of earlier years. There were a number of reasons for this decline. The population of the participating Cree and Chippewa at Pembina had increased significantly. Indeed, Pembina was now something of a hub community, with its economic spokes making their way north, west, and south. This put a strain on food supplies in the region. By 1808, most of the food was still obtained through hunting, although the Chippewa were increasingly engaged in planting around Pembina itself. Also of importance were the increasing number of Sioux attacks after 1805. Although the Chippewa and Cree were numerous enough

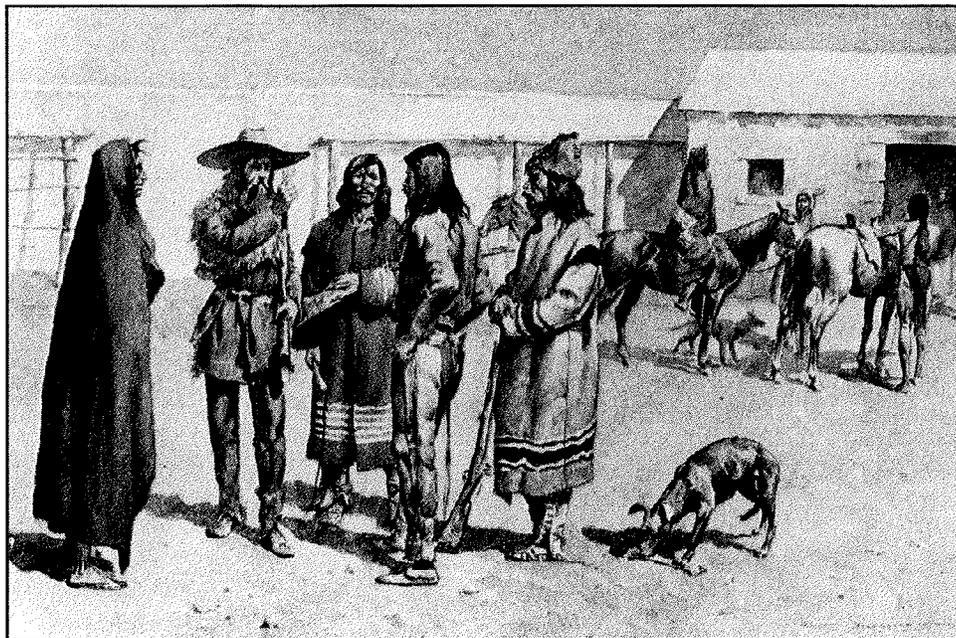
4. The XY Company was also known as the New North West Company; it merged with the North West Company in 1804. Coues, ed., *New Light*, I, pp. 64-93; Harold Hickerson, "The Genesis of a Trading Post Band: The Pembina Chippewa," *Ethnohistory*, vol. 3, no. 4, (Fall 1956), pp. 311-312; Gregory S. Camp, "The Chippewa Transition from Woodland to Prairie, 1790-1820," *North Dakota History*, vol. 51, no. 3, (Summer, 1984), pp. 43-44.

5. Hickerson, *Ethnohistory*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 315-117; Coues, *New Light*, I, p. 250; Gregory S. Camp, "The Chippewa Fur Trade in the Red River Valley of the North, 1790-1830," in *The Fur Trade in North Dakota*, Virginia Heidenreich, ed., (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1990), pp. 38-39.

6. Coues, *New Light*, I, pp. 187-188.

7. Hickerson, *Ethnohistory*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 322-323.

"French Half-Breeds in a Trading Post" is a drawing by Frederick Remington from 1892.



to defend themselves and their gains in the valley, they were nonetheless now constantly on guard against attack. Pelt yields also showed signs of decline between 1806 and 1812. Still, the end of the first phase of Pembina's history was not entirely wrapped up in the fur trade; there were other forces at work which proved even more unpredictable.⁷

At the outbreak of the War of 1812, the Red River Valley, in general, and Pembina, in particular, were about to undergo dramatic changes. One of these changes was the growing population and influence of a group known as the *bois brules*, or Métis, the French word for "mixed-blood." Joining first the French and then British traders, Chippewa and Cree women, in particular, intermarried with the Europeans and produced a sizable mixed-blood population. Many of these mixed-bloods worked in the fur trade as hunters and trappers or general laborers.

By the end of Henry's tenure, the Métis considered themselves neither Indian nor white; indeed, a good many considered themselves superior to both. They adopted the bison culture, with modifications, from the Plains groups around them. They incorporated European religion, primarily Roman Catholicism, and they emphasized education. By 1812, the Métis had become

important players in the economic and social life of the Red River Valley. When the fur trade waned, they remained as first-rate hunters. It was not surprising that by the second decade of the nineteenth century, the Métis referred to themselves as the "New Nation." Métis identity was awakened, to a certain extent, by another highly important part of the Pembina story: the Selkirk Colony.⁸

In 1811-1812, settlers under the sponsorship of Thomas Douglas, Fifth Earl of Selkirk, began arriving in what is today Manitoba to establish an agricultural colony in the Red River Valley. Selkirk was a major stockholder in the Hudson's Bay Company, and his ambitious plan to place a colony in the midst of a North West Company stronghold was understandably resented in Montreal. Because of logistical problems, the small group of colonists put up at the confluence of the Pembina and Red rivers and called their settlement Fort Daer. The North West Company still used this site as a trading center, so the establishment of an agricultural "station" so close to their property was disconcerting. The new structures for the colony were built on top of the old Chaboillez post (1797-1798), and were literally a stone's throw from the Nor'Westers, the term given to the rugged employees of the North West Company, who were located across the Pembina River.

8. Marcel Giraud, *The Canadian Métis*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), I, pp. 380-389; Jacquelyn Peterson, "Gathering at the River, The Métis Peopling of the Northern Plains," in *The Fur Trade in North Dakota*, Virginia Heidenreich, ed., p. 48; G.F. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellion*, (London: 1936), p. 10; Arthur S. Morton, "The New Nation: the Métis," in *The Other Natives, the Métis*, Antoine S. Lussier and D.

Bruce Sealey, eds., (Winnipeg: Manitoba Méti Federation Press, 1978), I, pp. 27-29. See also Jacquelyn Peterson, "Many Roads to Red River: Métis Genesis in the Great Lakes Region, 1680-1815," and Olive P. Dickason, "From 'One Nation' in the Northeast to 'New Nation' in the Northwest: A Look at the Emergence of the Métis," in *The New Peoples, Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, Jacquelyn Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds.

It was apparent that it was only a matter of time before the two representatives of opposing fur trade interests would clash. By 1812, the fur trade in general had undergone something of a decline in the western reaches of the Hudson's Bay basin. The areas yet to be successfully or fully exploited lay to the west. Both the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company coveted the Red River Valley more for its strategic location as a middle ground between eastern and western Canada than for any remaining fur harvests which might be taken.

In the midst of this corporate war came the Métis. They saw the valley and Pembina not as an important cog in a corporate machine, but as a place to call home. Nonetheless, their abilities as hunters and soldiers made them invaluable to the Nor'Westers. In many regards, however, the Métis were pawns of the warring factions, especially the North West Company. After events such as the Proclamation of 1814, in which the infant colony sought to regulate bison hunting and trade in general, the Métis saw themselves less as part of a fur trade rivalry and more in a fight for their own land and interests.⁹ Despite the conflict between fur trade interests, known as the "Pemmican War," Pembina had already made its mark on the region. Indeed, as a result of negotiations between the United States and Great Britain, the residents of this remote part of North America witnessed the drawing of a tentative boundary at the 49th parallel. This imaginary line was all but ignored by both white and Indian inhabitants, not to mention the two governments. White civilization, however, was making its slow but inexorable march westward and had, at last, reached the center of the continent. Another sign of this intrusion was perhaps quieter, but no less powerful in its long-term influence.

The introduction of organized missionary efforts at Pembina opened a new chapter for that community. Since Henry established his post in 1801, Pembina had grown to prominence in the plans of both the Hudson's Bay and North West companies. With this rise in economic stature and the growth of a non-white population there, organized Catholic missionary agencies expressed interest in establishing a presence among these people. Since establishment of the "border" in 1818, there was some confusion as to which diocese or jurisdiction the Métis and Chippewa should belong.

Indeed, the exact location of the 49th parallel was in question and would be measured and remeasured a number of times between 1823 and 1872. For the church, however, the exact location of their new wards was less important than the condition of their souls.¹⁰

In an attempt to address both location and population considerations, the first Catholic missionaries sent to the Red River Valley established a headquarters at Fort Douglas, which became Fort Garry and is now Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1818. They built a smaller mission at Pembina shortly thereafter. According to tradition, Lord Selkirk was apparently impressed with a messenger from Pembina who traveled to Montreal to see him, despite great hardships. When asked what reward he might bestow on the messenger, the traveler was said to have asked for a priest for his colony at Pembina. At any rate, during the spring of 1818, Fathers Norbert Provencher and Severé Dumoulin and a teacher named William Edge went to the Red River Valley with the intention of serving the settlers and proselytizing amongst the Indians and mixed-bloods. When crop failure forced many of the whites from Fort Douglas back to Pembina that same year, this small outpost of Catholicism found itself host to more than three hundred parishioners—many times larger than the congregation at Fort Douglas. To the delight of the missionaries, the Métis people were eager to learn all they could of Catholicism and proved to be among the most devout followers of the faith in the West.¹¹

The first mass at Pembina was served on September 18, 1818, in a temporary residence set up for the occasion. The school building, another temporary shelter, doubled as Father Dumoulin's place of residence. During a special Christmas service in 1818, the priest proposed constructing a permanent building to serve as church and school for the growing community of mixed-bloods and whites. By May 1821, the new church was opened with prayers of thanksgiving and celebration. Still, the parish was very poor. The resources of the small mission were strained further during the winter of 1821-1822 when 150 newly arrived Swiss settlers faced the very real possibility of starvation. All of Father Dumoulin's hard work was headed for an abrupt conclusion, however, as workings in the political world once again made their impact on distant Pembina.¹²

During the winter of 1822, the Hudson's Bay Company came to the conclusion that the Pembina settle-

9. Arthur S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 536; Douglas Hill, *Opening of the Canadian West*, (New York: John Day Company, 1967), p. 35; John Pritchett, *The Red River Valley, 1811-1849*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), pp. 138-146; Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), p. 162; Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State*, (Minneapolis: Ross

and Haines, 1957, reprint edition), pp. 52-62.

10. J.M. Belleau, *Brief History of Old Pembina, 1818-1932*, document in possession of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, rare document vault; H.V. Arnold, *History of Old Pembina*, (Larimore: 1917), pp. 96-101; James Reardon, *George Antony Belcourt: Pioneer Catholic Missionary of the Northwest, 1803-1874*, (St. Paul, North Central Publishing Company, 1955), pp. 32-34.

11. Belleau, *History of Old Pembina, 1818-1932*, pp. 5-7.



Father George Belcourt arrived in the Pembina and Turtle Mountain area on June 19, 1831, and stayed for eighteen years. A missionary to the Indians and Métis, he spoke several Indian languages fluently.

ment was indeed in American territory. Stephen Long's visit to Pembina in 1823 on behalf of the United States government's survey team verified this finding also, and only served to hasten British withdrawal. When Father Dumoulin was thus forced to withdraw again north to Fort Douglas, he promptly transferred back to Montreal. In the wake of this turn of events, it appeared for a time that Pembina as a village and a parish were doomed. A sizable number of Pembina settlers moved northward, while still others moved further south, some of them later helping in the establishment of St. Paul, Minnesota. Nonetheless, some residents refused to leave the place that had become home. For approximately twenty years, between 1818 and 1838, Pembina was served by mission priests and did not have permanent parishes.¹²

Between 1823 and 1838, life in Pembina was a threadbare existence. No longer a primary trade site for the Red River colony to the north or for the fur trade of a generation before, the small community fell into disre-

pair and poverty. The mixed-bloods who chose to stay worked for whites to the north as farmhands or as hunters. In fact, it was the Métis bison hunt that helped to keep Pembina alive during these lean times. Prior to one of their massive hunts, the Métis would often cross the line and muster their forces on the familiar prairies around Pembina in preparation for the bison chase. The Métis developed specific rules as to the taking of bison during these hunts, rules which would ultimately help provide further definition of their nationhood. As it was, the bison hunt was the quintessential Métis activity, glorifying and embodying all that the mixed-bloods held dear. These chases, in which the entire family would take part, would at times even involve participating clergy—much to the chagrin of the Hudson's Bay Company. Father George Antoine Belcourt, who was himself to establish a church at Pembina and then St. Joseph, is perhaps the best example of this. During the 1840s, however, a combination of Métis nationalism and free trade collectively helped to revitalize Pembina.¹⁴

Although the fur trade in Pembina and the area along the ill-defined border between American and British possessions never completely died after the Pemmican Wars of the second decade of the nineteenth century, it was not until near the middle of the century that the fur trade was revitalized. This time, however, there were forces at work which were quite new, and this combination of the old and new created a situation far-reaching in scope.

In 1843, Norman Wolfred Kittson, at the behest of his trading partners in the American Fur Company, established—or reestablished—a fur trade post headquarters at Pembina. Located just a few yards from Alexander Henry the Younger's 1801 post, Kittson and his sponsors hoped to tap what promised to be a rich fur trade market from the Mouse River in the west to Rainy Lake River in the east. This operation, along the 49th parallel, would also take advantage of Métis dissatisfaction with the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly on trade in the Red River colony. Kittson was quite aware of the mixed-blood bison hunts on the plains to the south and west of his headquarters. What better place than Pembina for one seeking to trade with the Métis?¹⁵

12. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

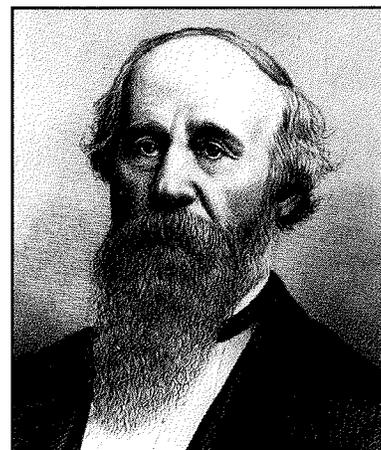
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

14. G.F. Stanley, *The British of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellion*, (London, 1936), p. 10; David P. Delorme, "History of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa," *North Dakota History*, vol. 22, no. 2, (July 1955), p. 125; V. Harvard, "The French Half-Breeds of the North-West," *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880), pp. 318, 322-323; Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State*, 2nd edition, (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1972), pp. 249-250.

15. Clarence W. Rife, "Norman W. Kittson: A Fur-Trader at Pembina," *Minnesota History*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1925, pp. 225-226; see also Article of Agreement between Norman Kittson and Henry H. Sibley, May 22, 1843, *Henry Hastings Sibley Papers*, microfilm copy at the State Historical Society of North Dakota of the originals located at the Minnesota Historical Society. Hereafter, reference will be made to *Sibley Papers*, and *Peter Garrioch Diary*, B12, State Historical Society of North Dakota; Alvin Gluek, Jr., *Minnesota and Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 48-62; John Pritchett, *The Red River Valley, 1811-1849*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), pp. 138-146.



Norman Kittson was a well-known trader who founded the American Fur Co. post at Pembina in 1843.



This 1863 photograph shows Norman Kittson's Trading Post which served as the post office and customs house for Pembina, Dakota Territory.

To augment his opportunities, Norman Kittson established subposts at Pembina Mountain, the Turtle Mountains, on the Mouse River, and to the east, at Rainy Lake. These posts would offer cash or trade scrip in return for Métis and Indian pelts and hides. Because the Hudson's Bay Company had limited power to act, any attempts made to stop the free trade would have to involve the mixed-bloods, something the British company would rather have avoided at that time. Moreover, in the tense political atmosphere of the 1840s, the leadership of both the Hudson's Bay Company and the British government were concerned about U. S. expansionism and wondered if this was but another Yankee ploy. The American Fur Company was aware of British concerns and also used it to their advantage.¹⁶

Norman Kittson's plans for the Pembina operation included making it a major source of trade competition for the Red River colony to the north, encouraging illegal trade across the 49th parallel, and allowing the community to become a warehouse for furs brought from north of the border. Central to his plan were the Métis and the importance of Pembina to that group. Kittson's trading partners and his choice of headquarters did not prove a disappointment. By 1845, the Red River colony was complaining of the American pres-

ence at Pembina and the heavy Métis involvement there. "Kittson's Fever" was the disparaging term the British used to describe the problem, while the Métis happily exclaimed, "Le commerce est libre!" [Commerce is free!] Indeed, by 1849, when the issue of free trade was pursued in court between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Métis, the latter won. During a trial of free traders, or smugglers, as the British referred to them, the colony courthouse where proceedings were held was surrounded by hundreds of Métis. While the verdict was guilty, no penalty was assigned. It thus appeared that the mixed-bloods could take on the powerful Hudson's Bay Company and have its own way. It was a heady experience for the increasingly independent Métis, but was ultimately short-lived. On the American side of the 49th parallel, events at Pembina were changing yet again.¹⁷

In 1849, Pembina was host to another United States' military survey team, led by Major Samuel Woods and Captain John Pope. The expedition's objective was to once again measure and mark the exact location of the 49th parallel. This visit was in part to "show the flag" in the face of heightened tensions along the border, but it also served as a harbinger of a future permanent mili-

16. Rife, *Minnesota History*, pp. 229-230; Nancy L. Woolworth, "Gingras, St. Joseph, and the Métis in the Northern Red River Valley: 1843-1875," *North Dakota History*, vol. 42, no. 4, [Fall 1975], pp. 18-19; Gluek, *Minnesota and Manifest Destiny*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 48-49; Joseph Brown to Sibley, January 23, 1836, *Sibley Papers*.

17. Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Strange Empire*, (New York: William Morrow, 1951), pp. 59-60; W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), pp. 77-78; Elwyn B. Robinson,

History of North Dakota, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 76-77.

18. "Report of Major Wood, relative to his expedition to Pembina Settlement, and the condition of affairs on the North-Western Frontier of the Territory of Minnesota," *House Executive Document 51*, 31st Congress, 1st Session, 1850, Serial 577, pp. 18-21, 22-30.

19. See Ross, *Red River Settlement*, pp. 391-408, for a vitriolic rebuttal of the criticisms leveled against the colony in Captain Pope's report.

tary post at Pembina. Both Henry Hastings Sibley, Minnesota's territorial congressional delegate and employee of the American Fur Company, and Alexander Ramsey, Minnesota's first territorial governor, wanted a military fort at Pembina as a precursor to negotiations with the Pembina and Red Lake Chippewa bands for ceding lands in what is today North Dakota and Minnesota.¹⁸ Just across the Red River to the east, Minnesota had been named a territory in 1849 and was growing so quickly that it became apparent that statehood was not far behind. Indeed, six new counties were created in Minnesota Territory, including part of what is today North Dakota, between 1849 and 1851. One of them was a massive tract of land known as Pembina. When the territorial governor, Alexander Ramsey, visited the community in 1851, he was surprised to find a town of some 1,100 people, most of them Métis, with more than two thousand acres under cultivation. Ramsey realized that this area had true market potential for St. Paul. In his mind, the vast tracts of land in the northwest had to be ceded in preparation for the coming white settlers.

The officers in charge of the 1849 operation to mark the 49th parallel surveyed the location of the border between Canada and the U. S., spoke to several Indian and Métis residents, and even stopped by for a visit at a Hudson's Bay post just north of the line. The verbal and written report the two officers prepared was anything but complimentary of the British and their treatment of the Indians and Métis in the Red River Valley. Colonial leaders, most of whom considered the unrest among the Métis to be largely the fault of Norman Kittson and his business practices, were particularly incensed when told about the verbal attacks made against their administration concerning their treatment

of the Indians. Still, the company's worst fear, a permanent American military post, was not realized. After their survey was complete, the U.S. forces withdrew; a fort would not be constructed near Pembina until 1870, and then for different reasons.¹⁹

Although Norman Kittson's Pembina operation enjoyed some good years between 1843 and 1849, it decreased in productivity after 1849. Flooding, a yearly spring threat along the Red and Pembina rivers, had done its share of damage to this border post. Even Father Belcourt moved from the community of Pembina to the Pembina Mountains in the west as a result of rising water. Kittson followed suit, but still maintained a post at Pembina. Kittson hoped that a treaty between the United States and the Pembina and Red Lake Chippewa would help to solve many of the problems he was having with his Indian trading partners. The Métis, too, were hopeful that the United States would provide them with some recognition of their claims in the Red River Valley. Many looked upon the meetings between U.S. representatives, led by Alexander Ramsey, and the Chippewa in 1851 at Red Lake Crossing as a solution to a persistent problem. The treaty Ramsey negotiated that year was never ratified in the U. S. Senate, however. It would not be until 1863 that a treaty was finally worked out between the Chippewa and the United States. Under this agreement, the Métis were not given independent status but were instead lumped together with their full-blooded relatives in the negotiation procedures. This was not to the liking of either the full bloods or Métis. The most the Métis received were promises of land scrip for 160 acres each in the area to be ceded. While Pembina continued as a hub for a waning fur trade operation, its place as a center for

A Métis family gathers for the photographer in front of their Red River carts, n.d.



westward-moving white settlers would have to wait.²⁰

Norman Kittson realized that the lucrative profits of the 1840s were not to be repeated in the 1850s. It was the Red River cart trade that would increasingly take the place of the fur exchange as the main source of revenue in that decade. The cart trade had in fact begun several decades before, and had proven a reliable mode of transportation on the rugged prairie. Built entirely from wood, the Red River cart was a marvel of engineering simplicity and pragmatism. An enduring symbol of the Métis and Red River settlement, descriptions of the cart can be found as far back as Henry's journal in the first decade of the nineteenth century. At that time it was used for moving supplies from one subpost to another, or for returning prepared pelts to the factories in the north. By the 1840s, the Métis were using these carts in their bison hunts and in the trade that cropped up between the Red River colony in Manitoba and the infant town of St. Paul. By the 1870s, the Red River cart trails were clearly marked on the open prairie and followed the western edge of the Red River Valley, the shoreline of the ancient glacial bed of Lake Agassiz. Another route went along the eastern shore of this lake and into the woods, presumably to avoid contact with hostile Sioux bands. For Kittson and the Pembina community, these Red River cart caravans marked the decline of the fur trade and the advent of a time of commerce.²¹

St. Paul continued to grow as a result of the cart trade making its way south from Pembina and the Red River. By 1857, Canadian fears were very real concerning a possible American takeover of the Red River Valley. This takeover occurred, however, not as a result of military action, but by the sheer force of numbers which toppled the British hold on the region. To many, the Hudson's Bay Company's top-heavy policies favor-

ing the eastern part of Canada were to blame; that, and their insensitivity toward the Métis. When reports circulated that the Métis had petitioned the United States for military help from Fort Snelling, the British sat up and took notice. However, the real threat to British power was not military but economic.²²

Besides the Red River carts, riverboats were to play a small but meaningful role in the history of the valley in general and Pembina in particular. After the United States established Fort Abercrombie in 1857, a stage and freight route blazed between the river fort, two hundred miles south of Pembina on the Red River, and St. Paul. The Hudson's Bay Company had set up Georgetown down river (just north of present-day Fargo on the east side of the Red River) as a stopoff point for the steam vessels that made their way northward toward Pembina and ultimately, Fort Garry. The steamboat trade was not to last long, however, as it proved too costly for the St. Paul sponsors to maintain. The colony also tried to continue service between Pembina and Fort Garry, but, in the end, they, too, were unsuccessful. Nonetheless, a custom house was established in Pembina to act as a center for what would optimistically be a lucrative business for the Yankee traders at that border town and in St. Paul.

By 1861, Pembina consisted of only around a dozen or so log buildings used in an official capacity or occupied by those involved in business or church-related activities. Nonetheless, a good many Métis still frequented the area during the hunts. The rest tended to reside to the west in the vicinity of St. Joseph in the Pembina Mountains where Fathers Belcourt and LaCombe had moved their mission. Still, Pembina continued to act as an important port of entry in the trade between Red River colony and St. Paul. Only the blindest company and government officials in Montreal and London failed to realize that the Red River colony's



Red River cart trains made regular runs between Fort Garry and St. Paul. This one is pictured near the Canadian border, n.d.

Members of the boundary commission of 1872-1874 are drawing water from the river. They were one of many expeditions sent out to determine the exact location of the 49th parallel, separating Canada from the American territories to the south. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society Collections.



trade now flowed south to St. Paul instead of north to the factories of the Hudson Bay. Such a turn of events was clearly unacceptable, and, as a result, the British government revoked the charter of the increasingly inefficient Hudson's Bay Company, a charter that had been in effect since 1670.²³

Although the Hudson's Bay Company had fallen on bad times with the revocation of their charter, Pembina, too, was in an economic downspin. Prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War, Pembina and the large region around it anticipated the arrival of the railroad and the settlement which inevitably would follow. The war, however, changed this upbeat assessment of the village and its economic potential. There were other contributing factors as well. During the decade of the 1850s, the community of St. Joseph (today known as Walhalla) in the Pembina Mountains had taken Pembina's place as a major gathering site for the Métis and what remained of the fur trade. While the cart trade continued after 1860, the town of St. Cloud, Minnesota, took on increased importance as a stopoff point before reaching St. Paul, and Pembina's role as host to the fur trade and cart traffic was reduced. In Pembina itself, a

postmaster (Joseph Rolette and Charles Cavalier both served in this position) and a custom house were still maintained, although they became less necessary with the passing of the years. Surveying parties made their way to Pembina after a county bearing the same name was created in 1867, occupying most of what would become northeastern North Dakota. St. Joseph was designated the county seat with the usual array of county government officials, some of the best-known personalities of the region. Once again, though, events outside the community itself, in particular Indian-white relations in the wake of the 1862 Minnesota uprising, would affect the history of Pembina.²⁴

For white settlers living in Minnesota, the early 1860s were a time of tension and fear. Rumors of Indian uprisings had been rampant for some time before the actual outbreak of hostilities in 1862, and were intensified with the bad news of Union defeats and horrendous casualty counts in the early days of the Civil War. When the outbreak did occur, the Santee Sioux lashed out at whites for a variety of reasons, ranging from the latter's cultural arrogance to their squatting on Santee land. On

20. For an account of Ramsey's voyage to the region in preparation for treaty negotiations, see J.W. Bond, *Minnesota and Its Resources*, (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1854), pp. 255-359. Although this treaty was never ratified, it did provide the basis for the 1863 and 1864 treaties with the Red Lake and Pembina bands of Chippewa. See Charles Kappler, *Laws and Treaties*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), vol. II, pp. 853-855, 861-865 or *Documents Relating to the Negotiation of Ratified and Unratified Treaties with Various Indians, 1801-1869*, RG 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Microcopy T-494 treaty no. 330 (1864); House Executive Document, 1, 34th Congress, 3rd Session, Serial 893. See also Martha Ellis, "The Métis and Land Fraud in Minnesota Territory," Seminar Paper, Department of History, University of New Mexico, (Fall 1984), p. 4.

21. Vera Kelsey, *Red River Runs North!* (New York: Harper and Sons, 1952), p. 120; Grace Lee Nute, "The Red River Trails," *Minnesota History*, vol. VI, (September, 1925), pp. 279-282; Howard, *Strange Empire*, pp. 52-56. See also Ross, *Red River Settlement*, pp. 234-274, and Marcel Giraud, *The Métis in the Canadian West*, 2 vols., for a comprehensive look at the Métis.

22. Howard, *Strange Empire*, pp. 67-71.

23. Kelsey, *Red River Runs North!* pp. 126-132; See Lewis Henry Morgan, *The Indian Journals, 1859-1862*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), pp. 106, 112-130, for an account of a voyage aboard one of these early steam vessels on the Red River between Fort Abercrombie and Fort Garry.

24. Arnold, *History of Old Pembina*, pp. 142-143.

A photograph of the community of Pembina inundated during a particularly severe spring flooding of the Red River of the North, April 29, 1893. Photographers: Steele and Wing Studio, Winnipeg, Manitoba. From the William Moorhead Collection, SHSND.



August 18, 1862, the powderkeg finally exploded, sending shockwaves as far away as the prairie around Pembina. Fear of an imminent Indian attack was the topic of conversation and the object of preparations. This threat of war exacerbated the decline in Pembina's efforts to regain its stature as a center of trade. Ironically, the Métis, among the bitterest enemies of the Sioux, had made peace with their prairie foes in 1860 in an effort to end their long-standing differences. The mixed-blood settlement at St. Joseph and what remained of Pembina were the unofficial capitals of the Métis, and they were understandably concerned about protecting them. Nonetheless, the United States government entered the picture almost a decade later and began construction of a fort to protect American interests from the Sioux. By the time the government got around to planning the fort in question, the chosen sites had been narrowed to either St. Joseph or Pembina.²⁵

The recent problems with the Sioux Indians were not the only reason for the desire to construct a post in Pembina County. The future course of the railroad was another consideration, as were events north of the border. In 1870, the Hudson's Bay Company ceased to

operate as a political entity when Canadian troops arrived in August. Because their status had never been decided to the Métis' satisfaction, a series of confrontations collectively known as the Riel Rebellions swept Manitoba and points west. The sizable population of Métis living in the Pembina and Turtle mountains were understandably interested in the outcome of events in Canada. Moreover, Canadian officials had expressed concern to Washington about the possibility of cross-border interaction in the event of the outbreak of hostilities.²⁶

Colonel George Sykes and Captain David Heap, who had been sent on yet another mission to redraw the location of the 49th parallel, relied on reports of periodic flooding and came to the conclusion that Pembina was an unsuitable place for a large post. Therefore, St. Joseph was chosen and construction began on the fort. There was, however, a considerable protest over the selection of St. Joseph from the Pembina residents who naturally saw real economic opportunity with a military post nearby. Citizens, especially those with business interests to be served, wrote letters to a number of government officials, among them General William T.

25. Roy W. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, pp. 114-115; See also Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch, *A History of the Great Massacre of the Sioux Indians in Minnesota*, (Cincinnati: Rickey and Carroll, 1864) and Isaac V. Heard, *History of the Sioux War and Massacres of 1862 and 1863*, (New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1863) for period accounts of the uprising.

26. Howard, *Strange Empire*, pp. 111-114, 132-140.

27. William D. Thomson, "History of Ft. Pembina: 1870-1895,"

North Dakota History, vol. 36, no. 1, (Winter 1969), pp. 19-20; Robert W. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), third edition, pp. 112-113; see also *Ft. Pembina Post Returns*, State Historical Society of North Dakota, microfilm copies of the originals located in the National Archives, Washington, DC, roll 1, July 1870.

28. Thomson, *North Dakota History*, vol. 36, no. 1, p. 30.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-36.

Sherman, listing the shortcomings of a post at St. Joseph. Chief among the complaints were the difficulties encountered trying to resupply the fort via the shallow Pembina River. There was support for moving the fort nearer to Pembina from other sources, as well. Alexander Ramsey, whose experience in the region during the past two decades garnered respect, wrote to General Sherman of the sagacity of a fort nearer to Pembina. The correspondence had its desired effect. The recently begun construction near St. Joseph was halted, and in July, the War Department made the decision to build the fort in Pembina. By August of 1870, construction had begun south of town on what passed for high ground there.²⁷

At the time the fort was constructed, there was little at Pembina in the way of permanent buildings. These included the custom house, a mission outpost, and the cabins of Cavalier and the other very small number of white residents—not much different, in fact, from what had been reported nearly ten years earlier. In the meantime, to the south, small settlements had taken root in Grand Forks and Fargo since the time of steamboat trade. By 1871, telegraph poles and lines were stretched from Fargo to Pembina; moreover, stagecoach service also arrived at Pembina around the same time, a result, no doubt, of the construction of the fort and the rising interest settlers were showing in the Red River Valley. In addition, the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railroad Company began construction of a line from Winnipeg southward in conjunction with the Canadian Pacific Railroad Company on the eastern side of the Red River. The same railroad company had tracks already as close as Crookston, Minnesota, in 1871, with grade work taking place well to the west of that. By 1873, Pembina had more than five hundred residents and forty permanent buildings, including eight saloons and other stores. Marshal Judson LaMoure now kept law and order. The custom house, previously on the verge of falling into disuse, now thrived with business.

Built in 1870 just south of the town of Pembina, Fort Pembina stood sentry on the west side of the Red River of the North until a fire nearly destroyed the fort twenty-five years later.

There is little doubt that the construction of the fort marked a watershed period for Pembina's evolution as a community.²⁸

Fort Pembina continued to serve its purpose—maintaining order and providing stability—for more than twenty-five years. In 1895, however, when a fire swept the fort and destroyed a sizable portion of it, the War Department made the decision to discontinue its operation and sold what was left of the structure at public auction.²⁹ During the decade of the 1890s, Pembina had grown beyond the need for or at least its dependence on the fort. Still, when the fort was gone, it marked another turning point in the history of the community. The Red River Valley was being touted in the East and in Europe as among the most fertile land in North America. Settlers from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds were swelling the population of the Red River Valley in general, and the Pembina region shared in that new boom. As a center for the fur trade, home to the Métis, and a military post, the town had come through a tumultuous adolescence and was now entering adulthood as a farming community. At the turn of the twentieth century, Pembina would have a new role to play in the life of the new state of North Dakota, in the northern plains, and in the expanding United States.

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