

Local History

Steamboats on the Red River



Many visitors and residents of the area are amazed to find that steamboats on the Red River provided an important local transportation link 150 years ago. "The river must have been wider or deeper or straighter then," many people have suggested. Not so. Surveys from the period indicate the Red hasn't changed much. The images of steam powered paddle wheels chuffing and churning the muddy waters of our border river, difficulties with low water and tight bends, bells, whistles and the arcane jargon of the steamboat men provide one of the most colorful chapters in our local history.

Before steamboats the primary method of transportation on the Red River was the canoe. The demand for a faster way of transportation led to the development of the paddle-wheel steamboat.

With the development of the automobile in the 20th century Interstate-29 was built. It runs north to south through the valley. Trucks now carry merchandise from Winnipeg to Fargo-Moorhead in one day. The trip by steamboat took many days.



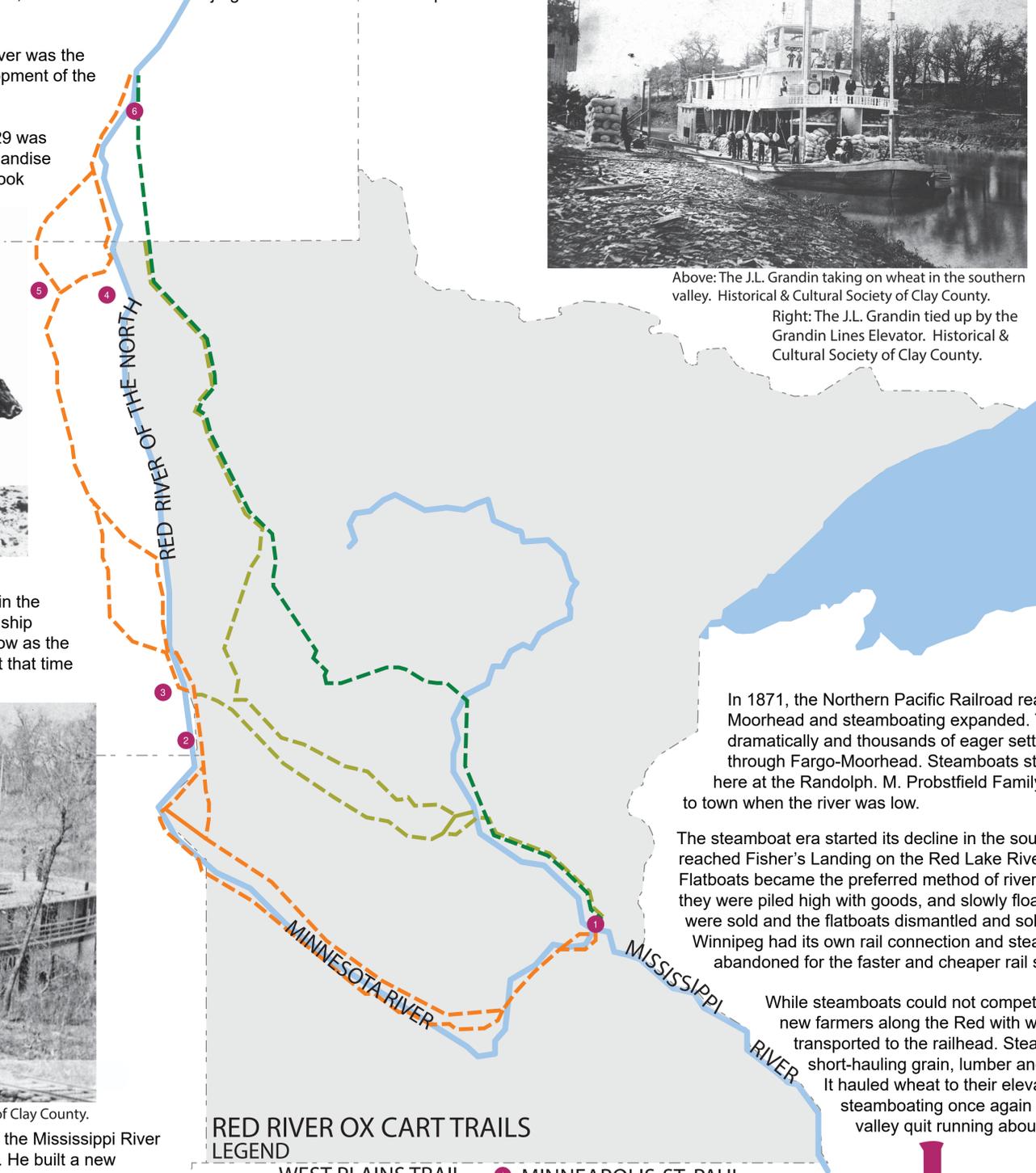
Above: A Red River cart. Historical & Cultural Society of Clay County.

In the 1850s, St. Paul and Fort Garry were the two largest settlements in the area. Minnesota merchants used horse or ox drawn Red River carts to ship goods for sale to their northern neighbors. The carts were cheap but slow as the 500 mile, one way, trip took a month. A steamboat on the Red could cut that time in half.



Above: The steamboat, International, on the Red River. Historical & Cultural Society of Clay County.

In 1859, Anson Northup dragged a steamboat's engine and boiler from the Mississippi River through a nasty Minnesota winter to the Red near Kragnes, Minnesota. He built a new steamboat and named it after himself. It wasn't much of a boat. One pilot called it a "lumbering old pine basket that had to be handled as gingerly as a hamper of eggs". The Hudson's Bay Fur Trading Company at Fort Garry built a steamboat terminal at Georgetown, Minnesota, to transfer furs and trade goods between ox carts and the boat. Soon trains of hundreds of carts were squeaking their way from St. Paul to meet the Anson Northup and the International, a second steamboat built at Georgetown in 1862. The International tied up at Moorhead, early 1870s. At 136 feet long, she was the largest steamboat to run on the US portion of the Red. The river at Moorhead was only 140 feet wide!



RED RIVER OX CART TRAILS LEGEND

- WEST PLAINS TRAIL
- EAST PLAINS TRAIL
- WOODS TRAIL
- 1 MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL
- 2 BRECKENRIDGE
- 3 FORT ABERCROMBIE
- 4 PEMBINA
- 5 WALHALLA
- 6 FORT GARRY



Above: The J.L. Grandin taking on wheat in the southern valley. Historical & Cultural Society of Clay County.

Right: The J.L. Grandin tied up by the Grandin Lines Elevator. Historical & Cultural Society of Clay County.



In 1871, the Northern Pacific Railroad reached the Red River at Moorhead and steamboating expanded. Trade with Winnipeg increased dramatically and thousands of eager settlers bound for Canada poured through Fargo-Moorhead. Steamboats stopped just down river from here at the Randolph. M. Probstfield Family Farm for food, fuel, and rides to town when the river was low.

The steamboat era started its decline in the southern valley when the railroad reached Fisher's Landing on the Red Lake River, east of Grand Forks in 1876. Flatboats became the preferred method of river transportation. Built locally, they were piled high with goods, and slowly floated to Winnipeg. The goods were sold and the flatboats dismantled and sold for the lumber. By 1878 Winnipeg had its own rail connection and steam boating was soon abandoned for the faster and cheaper rail system.

While steamboats could not compete with the railroad there were new farmers along the Red with wheat that needed to be transported to the railhead. Steamboaters turned to short-hauling grain, lumber and other wares. In 1878, the huge Grandin bonanza wheat farm near Halstad, Minnesota, built the J.L. Grandin.

It hauled wheat to their elevator in Fargo. Within a few years the railroad built branch lines up and down the banks of the Red and steamboating once again could not compete. Steamboats operated near Grand Forks until about 1910 but the big boats in the southern valley quit running about 1886. (Mark Peihl, Historical & Cultural Society of Clay County)



Left: The Pluck, a steamboat. Historical & Cultural Society of Clay County.

DID YOU KNOW?

The average trip from Moorhead to Winnipeg and back took 10 days. The International made the fastest recorded round trip at 5 days and 18 hours. Two crewmen were lost overboard on that trip. Wages were \$35-\$40 per month for the crew.