

Self Guided Tour of Historic Sites along the Red River

In 1990, Gary Goodrich and Mark Peihl developed this self-guided tour of historic sites along the Red River for canoeists, bicyclists and pedestrians. The numbers in the script below correspond to numbers on the map.

1. OXBOWS AND THE CHANGING RIVER

The course of the Red River is slowly but constantly changing. As it flows, the river applies pressure to the silty soils on the outward sides of its oxbow bends. This pressure causes a scouring of the bank and a generally northward “sliding” movement of the river bed. Over great periods of time the river can cut across the narrow “neck” of an oxbow, leaving behind lakes and islands. This has already happened at Island Park and the El Zagel golf course. The neck of Gooseberry Park is experiencing the same activity today and, in time, may become an island.

2. WINTER HORSE RACING ON THE RIVER

During the 1890s, the racing of horse-drawn sleighs on the frozen Red River was an extremely popular entertainment. Nearly every afternoon and evening would find fast horses racing on the mile-long course from about 20th Avenue South (near Gooseberry Park) in Moorhead to 8th Avenue South. After the turn of the century, a ¼ mile track was laid out below the old north bridge, (west of today’s Hjemkomst Center) complete with bleachers on the banks for spectators.

3. ICE CUTTING ON THE RIVER

Before mechanical refrigeration, residents of Moorhead and Fargo used ice cut from the Red River to cool their food and drink. Companies from both cities cut huge blocks of ice from the river around Christmas, before it froze too thick. During the 1920s and 30s, for example, the Moorhead Ice Company cut from the stretch of river between 8th and 12th Avenues South. The ice was stored in their icehouse on 10th Avenue South for door-to-door summertime delivery. The ice business faded rapidly with the coming of mechanical refrigeration in the 1950s.

4. MOVING THE RIVER

Because the elevation of Fargo is generally lower than Moorhead, Fargo has always suffered more from flooding. To ease this problem in the Island Park area, in 1959 Fargo built the dike that now stretches north from near Prairie Psychiatric Center (formerly St. John’s Hospital). Early plans called for the dike to run through the middle of Island Park just west of the original river channel near 4th Street. A more workable plan was to move the river and build the dike on its present site. As a result, the City of Moorhead and the State of Minnesota actually lost about 12½ acres of land. It literally took an Act of Congress to change the state boundary to the new river bed.

5. THE OLD RIVERFRONT RECREATION AREA

What is now the Fargo-Moorhead Community Theater parking lot was once the center for recreation on the Red River. From 1917 to 1959 Frank Dommer operated a boat and canoe rental business on the Moorhead side just across from Island Park. Nearby was a public swimming area complete with diving tower and rope swing. A bit farther downstream was the original dam. A floating stage on the Moorhead side was the setting for many outdoor concerts and plays. Spectators watched from boats or from the bank on the west side of the river.

6. THE MIDTOWN DAM

With both Fargo and Moorhead relying on the Red River for municipal water, the dike project and change of the river course in 1959 necessitated the construction of a new dam. The dam controls the river level and provides a stable water supply. The present dam is a “low-head” dam designed to aerate the water as it passes over. This design is extremely deceptive and dangerous. Water flowing over the dam creates a churning underwater backwash or “hydraulic.” The falling water takes any object, (including a person) to the bottom, returns it to the surface and draws it back to the face of the dam where it is once again taken to the bottom. This can continue indefinitely. Since 1953, over 14 bodies have been pulled from the Red River between Fargo and Moorhead.

7. THE DOWNTOWN BRIDGES

The mainline of the Northern Pacific Railroad reached the Red River in 1871. The following winter the NP built the first permanent bridge over the river, creating the towns of Moorhead and Fargo at either end. In the beginning, the railroad bridge also carried pedestrian and wagon traffic, but crossing has dangerous and, officially, permission from the NP was required. In 1874, a wagon bridge was built below and just north of the railroad bridge, but it had to be dismantled every spring before breakup and then rebuilt. After years of sometimes bitter dispute, the cities built two permanent wagon bridges in 1883. The original NP Railroad Bridge was also rebuilt in 1883 when the wooden pilings were replaced with the massive stonework we see today. Like all Red River bridges built during the 1880s, the new NP bridge rotated to allow the passing of steamboats.

The south wagon bridge crossed at the present site of the Main Avenue bridge. Although this bridge was in serious need of repair by the turn of the century, it wasn't replaced until 1936. The 1936 structure was replaced in 2006 with the present Veterans' Memorial Bridge.

The Center Avenue bridge, a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project, was completed in 1938. It was rebuilt in 1987 and renamed the Bicentennial Bridge to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the United States' Constitution.

The original north bridge ran from Kennedy Street in Moorhead (just south of the present day 1st Avenue North) to NP Avenue in Fargo. After the turn of the century, this bridge also carried the Fargo-Moorhead Electric Street Railway's street cars. The north bridge was replaced in 1930 by a span connecting 1st Avenue North in Moorhead with 1st Avenue North in Fargo. Although the old north bridge was torn down for scrap during World War II, the concrete-filled iron footings are still visible. Today's 1st Avenue bridge was rebuilt in the 1980s to accommodate increased traffic.

8. THE FARGO-MOORHEAD RIVERFRONT

Steamboat traffic began on the Red River June 8, 1859, when the *Anson Northup* set out on her maiden voyage bound for Fort Garry. But it wasn't until the NP Railroad reached the river in 1871 that river commerce really came into its own. Railroad spurs reached from the mainline down to both the Moorhead and Fargo river banks. Goods bound for Grand Forks and Winnipeg were loaded directly from railroad cars onto the steamboats. In the 1880s, the Alsop Brothers Line based two famous steamers, the *Pluck* and the *H. W. Alsop*, on the Moorhead side. The Grandin Farms based their *J. L. Grandin* on the Fargo side. These and several other boats plied the Fargo-Moorhead reach of the river for over 20 years, until the spreading railroad put them out of business in the mid-1880s.

9. MOORHEAD'S SALOON DISTRICT

In 1889, North Dakota entered the union as a dry state. The state's Constitution contained a provision requiring the closing of all saloons on June 30, 1890. As of that date, thirsty North Dakotans filled the Red River bridges as they flocked to the Minnesota side. A thriving saloon district quickly sprang up on the banks of the Red. To be as close to North Dakota as possible, several saloons were built on piers and actually hung out over the river. The saloon business boomed until 1915 when Clay County finally went dry. Today, except for lingering rumors of bawdy houses and connecting tunnels, all that remains is the occasional broken bottle eroding from the river bank.

10. THE MOORHEAD TOURIST CAMP

With improved roads and more reliable automobiles, vacationers in the 1920s tried something new: auto camping. To cash in on this craze, Moorhead built a tourist camp near its downtown riverfront. The camp included tent sites, a recreation center, laundry facilities and, for the less adventurous, cabins. During the crunch following World War II, many returning GIs and their families used the main lodge as temporary housing. Today, all that remains are sections of the concrete apron that lined the river bank in front of the camp.

11. THE POINT

This sharp bend in the river was Moorhead's original residential district. In the 1870s, Moorhead's early elite built substantial homes on the high ground in the center of the Point. Working class families occupied modest homes on the wooded floodplain nearby. As the 1870s drew to a close, most of the wealthy residents had moved to more fashionable (and drier) areas of the city.

Victimized by repeated spring flooding the homes fell into disrepair and vacancy. In 1971, homes on the Point were leveled in an urban renewal project.

The Point remained vacant until the Hjemkomst Center was built on the site in 1986. Today the area is maintained as Viking Ship Park. However, there are still a few scattered fire hydrants and the trees that lined Elm Street and 3rd Avenue to remind us of the Point's residential past.

12. THE GREAT NORTHERN BRIDGE

During the winter of 1880-81, a second railroad reached the Red River and had a significant effect on Moorhead and Fargo. James J. Hill's St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba gave the Northern Pacific immediate competition by building branch lines in all directions throughout the Red River Valley. This system linked several smaller communities and made Fargo-Moorhead a key transportation hub. The St. P., M. & M. became the Great Northern in 1889. Today it's the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe. Notice the iron-clad timber barrier built to protect the bridge from spring ice damage.

13. THE MOORHEAD BREWERY

In 1875, the Larkin brothers of Winnipeg built a brewery almost exactly on the site of today's tennis courts in Moorhead's Riverfront Park. They soon sold their business to hotel owner John Erickson who served the local brew in his saloon. Erickson also shipped kegs and bottles of the suds up and down the NP Railway line. Ole Aslesen bought the brewery in the late 1890s and continued the operation until it burned in 1901.

14. THE AMERICAN LEGION HALL – USHER'S HOUSE

The Moorhead Legion Hall was built in 1936 as a WPA depression relief project. The WPA mandated that the project put as many people to work as possible and the cost of the materials be kept to a minimum. With that mandate in mind, architects George Carter and Allen Meinecke decided to teach workmen to cut fieldstone -- donated by area farmers -- into square building blocks for the exterior walls. The idea worked so well that the WPA hired Carter and Meinecke to design similar buildings all over the region. Today the Legion Hall is home to the Broken Axe Bar.

15. THE BERGQUIST CABIN

In 1870, a year before Moorhead was established, 18-year-old Swedish immigrant John Bergquist homesteaded this site along the river. He cut logs in what is now Fargo's Oak Grove Park and skidded them across the frozen Red to build his cabin. In addition to farming, Bergquist made -- and lost -- a fortune manufacturing bricks from local clay. The Bergquist Cabin is Moorhead's oldest structure on its original location. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places and is owned by the Clay County Historical Society.

16. THE TOLL BRIDGE

The toll bridge joining Moorhead and Fargo's north side is the only privately owned bridge on the Red River. The span was completed by The Bridge Company in 1988 at a cost of \$1.9 million. It was the first privately funded toll bridge built in the United States since 1948. The toll bridge is designed as a floodable structure, with removable lights and toll booth. Incidentally, the toll is 75 cents per vehicle. Pedestrians and bicycles cross for free.

17. THE NORTH DAM

Built as a depression relief project, the north dam was completed in 1936. Nearly half a million tons of rock and concrete holds back a seven foot head of water. Deep holes just downstream help make this a popular fishing spot. The concrete building just upstream from the dam on the Moorhead side is a pumping station for the American Crystal Sugar plant. Water is pumped from the river for sugar beet processing.

18. CHIMNEY BEND FLOOD CONTROL PROJECT

In addition to the downtown dike and dam construction, 1959 also saw a flood control project on Fargo's north side. To hurry flood waters out of the city, engineers cut channels across the necks of three oxbow bends. The channels over two are stabilized by concrete weirs which allow high water to rush through the artificial channels but keep the river in its natural bed during normal flows. The third, named "Chimney Bend" by 19th century steamboat pilots, was cut off completely requiring the transfer of about 10 acres of Minnesota to North Dakota.

19. THE PROBSTFIELD FARM

German immigrant Randolph Probstfield was one of the first permanent white settlers in what is now Clay County. Arriving in 1859, he went to work for the Hudson's Bay Company at Georgetown. In 1868 he built a log home on this point and began farming. Probstfield experimented with a wide variety of vegetables and other crops including his own tobacco. The Probstfield house is on the National Register of Historic Places and is owned by the Probstfield Living History Farm.

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