

Second letter promoting the 2016 NBA Summer Conference, published in MN Bison News September 2015

This is the second in a series of articles about Elk River.

The MNBA is sponsoring the 2016 NBA Summer Conference.

The Conference will be held in Elk River, Minnesota, from June 20th to the 22nd.

In the first article, I wrote about Zebulon Pike, his Mississippi exploration of 1805, and how Elk River got its name. Pike reported “emmense herds of elk and bison” (sic) east of the Mississippi. He hunted elk near the mouth of the river. The Indians called the Elk the “Parallel River.” It runs roughly parallel to the Mississippi from east of Saint Cloud until it meets the Mississippi. In fact, the Elk runs in an ancient bed of the Mississippi. The course of the Mississippi changed to its present bed following the most recent glacial age.

This article is about another famous explorer, Joseph Nicollet. Nicollet was a brilliant mathematician and professor of astronomy in France. His personal life collapsed after the French Revolution of 1830. He was on the wrong side politically. To make things even worse, he suffered complete financial ruin in the subsequent economic turmoil.

In 1832, he arrived penniless in Washington. DC. He had great ideas about topographical and geological surveys of our new country. He met with scientists and government officials to promote his ideas.

Nicollet had a rare combination of brilliance, sophistication, and likeability. He was also a very hard worker.

Nicollet was appointed to head the newly formed Corps of Topographical Engineers. His assignment was to map the drainage area of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. The result was Nicollet’s “Map of the Hydrological Basin of the Upper Mississippi,” published in 1843. That map, a superb piece of work, was instantly recognized as the most important map of the American interior. All subsequent maps are based on it. Unfortunately, Nicollet died in 1843. In Minnesota, his name has been given to streets, a county, an island, lakes, and shopping malls.

I mention Nicollet because his map illustrates the area of Elk River and specifically a once crucial oxcart trail.

The **Red River Trails** were a network of ox cart routes. The trails connected settlements in the area of the future Winnipeg with trading posts in the future St. Paul.

The trails were opened around 1820. The trails gave the people of the Red River Valley, in Minnesota, North Dakota, and southern Canada an outlet for furs and a source of supplies. The heaviest use was from the 1840s to the early 1870s. Around 1870, they were superseded by railroads.

The trails enabled the settlement of northwest Minnesota and eastern North Dakota. The trails also accelerated the settlement of Canada west of the rugged barrier known as the Canadian Shield.

The drivers of the ox-carts and many of the Red River people that the ox trails served were Métis. The Métis are people of mixed Indian and European blood. The Métis of the Red River region descended mostly from Indian marriage with French trappers and traders. At the time of the ox-trails, these Plains Métis followed a semi-settled life style. They organized great bison hunts for hides and meat.

In 1848, an expedition by the Minnesota Territorial Governor encountered only one bison between St. Paul and Pembina on the Canadian border. The Red River herds were already gone. By then, the Métis were traveling deep into Dakota to find bison.

Nicollet identified the route of the earliest Red River Trail on his map. It passed just north of the Elk River Holiday Inn. The Holiday Inn that will house the 2016 Summer Conference.

The historic village of Elk River is on the north bank of an ox-bow of the Mississippi. Geologically that ox-bow is caused by a north-south ridge of glacial deposits. That ridge divides the Anoka Sand Plain which extends east to St Paul and west to St. Cloud.

The sand plain was easy traveling for oxen. The glacial ridge was a problem. Oxen are good steady workers. Because of their complex stomachs, they can live off the land better than horses. Oxen do not

do well on steep inclines, however. They cannot produce great bursts of energy like horses. Climbing steep banks meant unloading the carts and making several lightly loaded trips.

Nicollet shows the ox cart trail cutting through the north end of the river's ox bow, in the water.

For years, I thought that was a map production error. Then I found an old report about ox carts walking the beds of rivers when low. The Mississippi water level was much lower during the summer and fall in the 1800s.

Late in the 1800s, several enormous Minnesota Lakes were set-up as reservoirs for Minneapolis. Those reservoir lakes, Winnibigoshish, Leech, and Pokegama, are tapped to keep the summer and fall flow high enough to meet the city's needs.

The area where the ox trail followed the Mississippi river bed is west of the present four lane highway bridge. That is, the bridge where Highway 169 crosses the Mississippi. There is a nice little park on the north side of the river. Babcock Memorial Park. You can reach the park easily from Highway 10, west of the 169/10 clover leaf.

In 1917, Charles Babcock was appointed Minnesota's first Commissioner of Highways. He was the architect of the Minnesota highway system. There is a statue of Babcock near the park. Charles was an Elk River native.

In the next article, I will explain why the early trail kept to the woods, and why it avoided the open prairie.

Plan to be in Minnesota next June. Have a good Fall. Tom Barthel, Region 5 Director.



Charles Babcock
D. M. Hinckley