

Summer conference 2016 article series

Well, I had not thought of that.

I have done so now, and yes, I will.

I think I will write a little about the Texas summer conference and Board meeting. Then a lead-in to next summer's conference.

My Gail had some good suggestions about topics for a series leading up to next summer.

1. Elk River was named for the elk herd that Zebulon Pike hunted at the mouth of the river. That was during his exploration of the upper Mississippi in 1805. Did you know Jefferson sent Pike up the Mississippi the same time he sent Lewis and Clark up the Missouri? Westerners know Pike from later explorations. Pike reported "emmense (sic) herds of buffalo and elk" on the eastern side of the Mississippi as he looked south east from the location of Little Falls.
2. The Holiday Inn and Rockwoods are about ¼ mile from a unique ox-cart crossing of the Mississippi. The ox-cart trail connected traders in St. Paul to Pembina, the Selkirk Settlement, and Winnipeg. I can tie Canada into that. The Mississippi ox-bows just below Elk River. The ox carts cut the ox bow by crossing the river twice and actually trailed in a broad, shallow stretch of the river. There is a wayside park there now just north of the hotel.
3. The earliest route of that trail (1820') crosses our farm and is clearly visible through my pasture. It is documented in Nicolet's map of the "Hydrological Basin of the Upper Mississippi." Nicolet the great French cartographer, made his exploration in the 1830's.
4. We will bring the bison skeleton home from Becker for the summer conference. I can write an article about bison on and under this Anoka Sand Plain.

If I write these, will you accept them in the Bison News?

Best regards

Tom

p.s. It is raining a little. We can use it.

**First letter promoting the 2016 NBA Summer Conference, published in MN Bison News July 2015.
NBA 2016 Summer Conference to be held in Minnesota.**

The following information is all tentative subject to approval by Minnesota Buffalo Association.

The 2016 NBA Summer Conference will be sponsored by the MNBA and held in Elk River, Minnesota.

Elk River is in central Minnesota, about mid-way between Minneapolis and St. Cloud.

The dates are June 20, 21, and 22, Monday through Wednesday. The date is a bit later than recent meetings. Kids everywhere are out of school by this date.

The venue is family and kid friendly. The main hotel has a very nice water park and many game rooms. We hope to increase family attendance. The time and site should appeal not just to parents with children but grandparents and grandchildren.

There are numerous other attractions. I will emphasize other attractions in subsequent letters.

About Elk River.

Elk River is a town of 24,000 located where the Elk River flows into the Mississippi. The River was so named by Zebulon Pike. Pike hunted Elk at the mouth of the river.

Pike explored the upper Mississippi in 1805. That was contemporaneous with Lewis and Clark's expedition up the Missouri and to the Pacific Ocean.

Pike was a 26 year old army officer at the time. His expedition had several objectives. One was to locate a site for a US fort in the north. The site he selected at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers later became Fort Snelling and the city of Minneapolis. A second objective was to locate the source of the Mississippi. He got close but the drainage around the Mississippi headwaters is complex. Like many others, he picked the wrong lake.

The timing of the exploration was poor. Pike left St Louis with 20 men on August 9th. The plan was to reach the source of the Mississippi and return south before winter. That was never a possibility. Pike reached central Minnesota at the time of freeze-up. On the prairie, south east of Little Falls, he hunted "droves of elk" and reported "emmense (sic) herds of elk and buffalo." The buffalo were wintering on the east side of the Mississippi. Those buffalo were soon exterminated. Herds of bison were never again mentioned on the prairies east of the river.

Pike remained as active as possible during the harsh Minnesota winter, traveling extensively to meet Indian leaders and traders.

His work was considered a success. The following summer he was commissioned to explore the southwestern Rocky Mountains and to locate the source of the Arkansas River. In doing so, he left his name on Pikes Peak near Denver.

Pike died a Brigadier General and a hero in the War of 1812.

He died leading his troops in the victorious battle for Toronto of 1813. The British blew up their ammunition supply as they retreated. Pike was fatally stricken by flying rocks. Apparently, Pike liked to be close to the action.

More to come. Plan to be in Minnesota next June. Tom Barthel, Region

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

The 2016 NBA Summer Conference sponsored by the MNBA will be held in Elk River, Minnesota. From June 20 to the 22nd.

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

In the first article, I wrote about Zebulon Pike, his Mississippi exploration of 1805, and how Elk River got its name. In case you missed that edition, 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 area between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. The result was Nicollet's map of 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 connecting settlements of the future Winnipeg, the "Selkirk Settlement") in British North America with trading posts in the future St. Paul.

The trails were in use by the 1820s. The heaviest use was from the 1840s to the early 1870s, when they were superseded by railways. Until then, these trails provided the primary means of transportation between the Red River Colony of Canada and the outside world. 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 trade developed by and along the trails enabled the settlement of Minnesota and North Dakota in the United States. The trails also accelerated the settlement of Canada to the 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, a well documented expedition by the Minnesota Territorial governor encountered only one bison between St. Paul and Pembina on the Canadian border. 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 high in gravel. To the east toward St Paul and to the west is the Anoka Sand Plain.

The flat 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.

Nicollet shows the 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 probably got 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 are used to keep the river flow adequate to supply water for the city.

The area where the ox trail followed the Mississippi river bed is to the west of the present four lane bridge. 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.

There is a nice statue of Charles Babcock in the park. In 1917, Babcock was appointed Minnesota's first Commissioner of Highways. Charles was an Elk River native.

In the next article I plan to write about the route of the earliest ox-trail and why it stayed in the woods, avoiding the open prairie.

Plan to be in Minnesota next June. Tom Barthel, Region 5 Director.