NPS Form 10-900-b
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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

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NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Minnesota Red River Trails

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Minnesota Red River Trails, 1835-1871

C. Geographical Data

State of Minnesota

☐ See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

Signature of certifying official: Ian R. Stewart — Date: 12/11/90

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

State or Federal agency and bureau: Minnesota Historical Society

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

for Signature of the Keeper of the National Register: Patrick Andrus — Date: 2/6/91

RED RIVER TRAILS IN MINNESOTA, 1835-1871

SUMMARY

From the 1830s to 1871, the Red River Trails carried commerce from the Red River region to St. Paul. The trails were initially used by the fur trade and were instrumental in ending the Hudson Bay Company's monopoly over the commerce of the Red River region. Eventually the trails became the major overland thouroughfares for commerce and emigration, and helped to establish St. Paul as the center of trade and travel in the Upper-Midwest. The trade founded by the trails ultimately led to the inuaguration of wagon roads, steamship lines, and railroads. In essence, the trails laid the foundation for transportation and commerce throughout the northern and western sections of the state. The trails were eventually replaced by the railroads in the 1870s.

HISTORY OF THE RED RIVER TRAILS[1]

Until the construction of railroad lines in the 1870s, overland travel throughout Minnesota was extremely limited and difficult. The Red River Trails were among the first regularly used route systems to cross the state, and for many decades were widely used for travel and commerce. Initially, the trails were primarily used to carry the fur trade from the Red River region to American trading posts on the Mississippi. The principal Red River settlement had been founded in 1815 by Lord Selkirk, a Scottish nobleman. Situated at the mouth of the Assiniboine River, the colony made a struggling attempt at agriculture, but its chief industries were hunting and trapping for hides and furs. The main American enclave was located approximately 400 miles south of the Red River Colony, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. In 1819, the United States had established a fort, later named Fort Snelling, at the mouth of the Minnesota River. Within a few years, American traders established the Village of Mendota across the river from the fort. Mendota became the region's principal commercial center, and its traders carried on an active business with the local Indian tribes, soldiers and independent trappers.

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, there was little regular commerce between the Red River Colony and Mendota. Occassionally, supplies were transported from Mendota or some point lower on the Mississippi to the Red River Colony. A steady stream of colonists also trickled up the Red and down the Minnesota Rivers during the 1820s, seeking a more hospitable place to settle. For the most part, however, the region's trade was controlled by the British-based Hudson Bay Company.

According to its royal charter issued in 1670, the company was the only legal outlet for pelts gathered in the fur-rich region tributary to Hudson Bay. The colony's isolated location enforced the Hudson Bay Company's monopoly, for the company was the only practical source for supplies and outlet for trade.

Throughout the 1820s, the American traders at Mendota sought to break the Hudson Bay Company's control over the Red River region. The largest and most successful firm was the American Fur Company, which was founded by John Jacob Astor in 1808. In an effort to limit the Hudson Bay Company's activities and to draw Canadian furs over the border, between 1820 and 1826, American Fur opened a line of posts along the boundary from Grand Portage to Pembina. In 1827, it absorbed the Columbia Fur Company, which had been founded in 1821 and operated a string of posts along the Minnesota River Valley up to Lake Traverse, the head of the Red River. These actions gave the American Fur Company a virtual monopoly over the American fur trade in the Upper-Mississippi Valley, and expanded its area of operations up to the limits of the Hudson Bay Company's territory.

During the 1830s, the population of the Red River Colony grew large enough to produce more furs and hides than it could profitably dispose of through the limited market offered by the Hudson Bay Company. After years of struggle, the colony also finally established its agricultural industry, and began to seek outlets for its surplus grain, livestock and other products. The American Fur Company trading posts along the border became welcome markets, but in 1833, after years of price warfare, the Hudson Bay Company induced the American firm to close its border operations for an annual payment of 300 pounds. The Red River free traders thus had the choice of either dealing with the Hudson Bay Company, or traveling farther south to the remaining American posts on the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. Invariably, the traders chose the Americans.

In 1835, a group of Red River traders made the long journey to Mendota, signalling the start of regular trade between the two points. Other free traders appeared at American posts throughout the 1830s, offering hides, furs, livestock, and agricultural products in exchange for groceries and manufactured goods. The development of this trade was encouraged by the growing American presence at the mouth of the Minnesota River. In 1838, Congress ratified a treaty with the Ojibway and Dakota Indians which opened most of the land east of the Mississippi to white settlement. Since this region was no longer considered Indian land, traders could operate without the restrictions of government licenses, as was required at Mendota and areas west of the Mississippi. Within the

year, settlers and traders founded the City of St. Paul which replaced Mendota as the main commercial center.

Commerce between the Red River and St. Paul was carried by a network of trails. The main trail from Pembina, in use by the free traders since the 1830s, followed a ridge across the plains of North Dakota which marked the ancient west shore of glacial Lake Agassiz. An alternate route ran up the west bank of the river. However, traders preferred the "Plains Trail," which was normally drier and easier to travel. Both routes eventually turned eastward into the Minnesota River Valley, where, in the 1820s, the Columbia Fur Company had established several trails to link its fur posts. Later traders continued to use the trails to reach Mendota and St. Paul at the mouth of the river.

Although well-established and easy to follow, the Minnesota Valley Trail passed through lands controlled by the Dakota Indians. Many of the Red River traders were "mixed bloods," or "Metis," with Ojibway ancestry. Since the Dakota and Ojibway were traditional enemies, the Red River caravans were occassional sources of conflict. In an attempt to find a safer and shorter route, the traders opened the "Middle Trail" in the early 1840s. This path left the Red River near the current site of Breckenridge. Skirting the northern edge of Dakota lands, it ran across country to the present location of St. Cloud. From that point, trade items could continue by ox cart down the east bank of the Mississippi to St. Paul, or be transfered to boats for the remainder of the journey.

In 1844, a skirmish between a group of Dakota and Metis temporarily closed the Middle Trail. A band of Red River traders stranded in St. Paul at the start of hostilities returned home by opening a third pathway, called the "Woods Trail", through the northern forests of the Ojibway. Ascending the Mississippi River from St. Paul to the mouth of the Crow Wing River, they laid out a trail almost due west to Detroit Lakes, and then northwest to Pembina. The trail was extremely wet and heavily wooded, however, and never gained popularity after relations improved with the Dakota.

Although trade between the Red River and St. Paul steadily increased throughout the 1830s, its development was hindered by the American Fur Company's agreement not to open posts near the border, where it would have drawn more business away from the Hudson Bay Company. The agreement finally dissolved in 1842, when the American Fur Company failed and was reorganized. The "Western Outfit," which had managed the Upper-Mississippi region for American Fur, was transferred to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company of St. Louis. Henry Hastings Sibley and Hercules

Dousman, both of whom had worked for American Fur, continued to manage the Western Outfit, and with the reorganization they moved quickly to increase the new company's presence on the border. In 1843, Sibley contacted Norman W. Kittson, a Canadian trader, to manage several new posts in the Minnesota Valley and on the northern and western plains. In addition, Kittson was to open a post just south of the border at Pembina, now in North Dakota. Kittson established the Pembina post in 1844, and within a few years he was sending regular shipments of pelts and other items to Mendota and St. Paul.

With Kittson's new post at Pembina, trade between the Red River region and St. Paul assumed a regular basis and grew steadily in volume and profitability. Each spring, Kittson organized a large caravan of ox carts to carry the pelts he had collected during the winter. The caravan would usually depart from Pembina in May and follow the Plains Trail to the Minnesota River. Although by the mid-1840s most free traders preferred the Middle Trail, Kittson relied on the Minnesota Valley Trail until 1854 in order to visit the posts he managed for the Western Outfit at Big Stone Lake and Lac qui Parle. At Traverse des Sioux, on the Minnesota River near modern-day St. Peter, Kittson loaded his pelts into boats for the remainder of the trip to Mendota and St. Paul. The carts were then filled with trade goods and returned to Pembina.

The steady growth of trade with St. Paul, and the sudden entry of Kittson into the border region, threatened the Hudson Bay Company's commercial supremacy in the Red River Valley. To stem the enthusiasm for American imports, the company imposed a high tariff in 1836. It could not enforce its authority, however, and furs and merchandise continued to be smuggled over the border. In 1846, therefore, the company persuaded the crown to send troops to the Red River Colony.

The arrival of the British force largely halted smuggling, but it did not end trade. The Western Outfit and Kittson discovered that the population had grown large and prosperous enough to create a legitimate market for hardware, groceries, and other manufactured goods. The troops actually benefitted trade by introducing much-needed hard currency to the economy. In the end, the troops also failed to establish the Hudson Bay Company's authority over the region. In 1849, four Metis were arrested for smuggling. The company sought to hold a public trial as an example to other free traders. However, on the day of the hearing a crowd gathered and threatened violence. Fearing a riot, the charges were quickly dismissed. The company abandoned its efforts to control the border, and free trade resumed. In 1857, at least 500 carts arrived in St. Paul, carrying approximately $146,400 worth of pelts. In the same year, the Red

River Colony acquired half of its imports from St. Paul. Other towns and cities shared St. Paul's prosperity. St. Cloud and Crow Wing, in particular, became important transfer points, where Canadian trade items were exchanged for American goods.

The utility of the trails increased dramatically in the 1850s, as St. Paul became a major transportation hub with access to markets throughout the eastern seaboard. In 1852, for example, scheduled packet service began on the Mississippi. Two years later, the first railroad reached the Mississippi at Rock Island, Illinois. Trade goods from the Red River could be carried over the trails to St. Paul, and then be transported to nearly any eastern point by steamboat and railroad. Merchandise flowed just as readily from the east over the trails to the Red River. Recognizing this fact, the Hudson Bay Company in 1858 abandoned its long-established practice of shipping its merchandise northward through Lake Winnipeg and Hudson Bay. Instead, it arranged to ship its pelts over the trails to St. Paul, where they could be shipped eastward more quickly and at less expense. The change signaled the trails' emergence as the principal commercial arteries of the Upper Midwest and Canada.

In addition to trade, the Red River Trails carried countless travellers, and for many years were the main overland routes north and west of St. Paul. The federal government, in particular, relied on the trails for many military and scientific expeditions. The first occured in 1823, when Major Stephen H. Long of the U.S. Army led a scientific party northward over the trails to determine the exact location of the Canadian/U.S. boundary. His report gave the first offical account of the trail system. During the late 1850s and 1860s, the trails also carried west-bound emigrants and gold seekers. So popular were the trails, that in 1860 a correspondent from Harper's New Monthly Magazine travelled to Pembina and reported his adventures.

By the 1860s, the era of the primitive ox cart trails was drawing to an end. The trails were insufficient to carry the burgeoning traffic, and they were slowly improved and replaced. As early as 1849, the Minnesota Legislature requested federal funds to improve the trails. The next year, the government replaced the trail along the east bank of the Mississippi with a new military road to Fort Ripley. In 1855, additional federal funds were appropriated to replace the Red River trail from Fort Ripley to the Village of Old Wadena. The federal improvements highlighted the military significance of the trails as the only overland routes running into the northern and western portions of the territory.

The private sector also undertook transportation improvements. In

1859, the Minnesota Stage Company constructed a stage road parallel to the Middle Trail, running from St. Cloud to Fort Abercrombie on the Red River. The road carried a brisk freighting business, and proved instrumental in settling the northwestern sections of the state. In 1860, a steamboat began regular operations on the Red River. Taking advantage of the new facilities, the Hudson Bay Company in 1859 contracted with a subsidiary of the Minnesota Stage Company to haul its freight. The final blow to the trails came when railroads began to push westward from St. Paul in the mid-1860s. Each year, the tracks extended farther across the plains, and the old network of trails became obsolete as the oxcart caravans ran to meet them. When the first rails reached the Red River at Breckenridge in 1871, the era of the trails ended entirely.

Despite their eventual demise, the Red River Trails were tremendously significant in developing commerce during Minnesota's territorial period and early years of statehood. In particular, they were instrumental in establishing St. Paul as the state's principal commercial center and the gateway to the Upper-Midwest. The trails also carried inumerable travelers to settle the interior of the state and to reach western and northern lands. On the whole, the trails established the general lines of transportation throughout the state, with the Red River trade inaugurating several roads, steamship lines and railroads.

END NOTES

1. The Red River Trails have long been recognized for their significant role in shaping Minnesota history. This historic context is intended to provide a general sketch of the history of the trails, and has been drawn from several standard sources. The main sources were: Rhoda R. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman and Deborah M. Stultz, The Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement, 1820-1870 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1979); Arthur J. Larsen, The Development of the Minnesota Road System (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1966); Larsen, "Roads and Trails in the Minnesota Triangle, 1849-60," Minnesota History, V.11 (December 1930), Pp. 387-411; Larsen, "Roads and the Settlement of Minnesota," Minnesota History, V. 21, N. 3 (September, 1940), Pp. 225-244.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTY TYPES

I. Name of Property Type: Red River Trail Fragment

II. Description

The Red River Trails carried trade from the Red River region to St. Paul. Generally speaking, the trails were no more than natural paths, and tended to vary from season to season in location and appearance. Certain sections of trail, however, were used for long periods of time and are still visible today. These trail fragments are normally visible as faint stretches of wheel ruts, or as swales or bank cuts. In some cases, sections are still used as primitive roads or beaten paths.

III. Significance

From the 1830s to 1871, the Red River Trails carried trade from the Red River region to St. Paul. The trails were initially used by the fur trade and were instrumental in ending the Hudson Bay Company's monopoly over the commerce of the Red River Region. Eventually the trails became the major overland thoroughfares for commerce and emigration, and helped establish St. Paul as the center of trade and travel in the Upper-Midwest. The trade founded by the trails ultimately led to the inauguration of wagon roads, steamship lines and railroads. In essence, the trails laid the foundation for trade and travel throughout the northern and western sections of the state. The trails were eventually replaced by the railroads in the 1870s.

IV. Registration Criteria

It is possible to identify hundreds of sites in Minnesota which reveal some evidence of the Red River traffic, or which have some association with the old trails. Clearly it is not desirable to nominate all of these sites, but to select only those which have the highest integrity and so best represent the resource. According to National Register guidelines, integrity is composed of several factors: design, setting, location, material, workmanship, feeling and association. However, the Red River Trails were generally no more than unimproved, natural paths, and so lacked any real structure. Consequently, several of these criteria--namely, workmanship, material, and design--lose their value in judging the overall integrity of the trails. Does a water worn gully

possess the workmanship or design of the original trails? Does a bare patch of ground reflect the trails' original material? Clearly, these criteria have little meaning in relation to the trails, and so integrity must be based on considerations of feeling, association, and setting.

The following factors have been developed to select sites which seem to best evoke a sense of the historic trails:

-Route. It must be possible to document that the site was used on a regular basis to carry long-distance trade between the Red River region and St. Paul. In general, establishing that a Red River Trail passed near the area is sufficient proof.

-Physical condition:

a) The site should recall the primitive, unimproved character of the Red River trails. Improved roads, either paved or gravel surfaced, are generally incompatible with the original appearance of the trails.

b) The trail fragment should be clearly visible and differentiated from its surrundings. It should be possible to trace the route of a trail fragment without tremendous difficulty; and a trail site should consist of more than a water worn gully in a river bank marked by dozens of similar gullies.

-Environmental condition. In the best of circumstances, the surroundings should be characteristic of the site's period of significance. In general, the site should be set in a rural or undeveloped area with no modern intrusions, such as roads or buildings.

-Sense of function or destination. The site should evoke a sense of its past use. A trail fragment should appear to lead somewhere. A six-foot section of ox cart ruts does not strongly evoke a sense of the trails. As a general rule, a person standing at one end of a trail fragment should not be able to see the other end.

-Other associational qualities. The integrity of a trail fragment may be improved if it is linked to some feature significant to the history or development of the trails. Such features may include proximity to a prominant geographic landmark which served as a guide to travel, or an historic site.

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

[x] See continuation sheet

H. Major Bibliographical References

[x] See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- [x] State historic preservation office
- [ ] Other State agency
- [ ] Federal agency
- [ ] Local government
- [ ] University
- [ ] Other

Specify repository: _____

I. Form Prepared By

name/title Demian Hess, Historical Consultant

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IDENTIFICATION AND EVALUATION METHODS

Administration

Sponsored by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) of the Minnesota Historical Society, this study of the Red River Trails was initiated by means of a contract between the Minnesota Historical Society and the firm of Jeffrey A. Hess, Historical Consultants. Susan Roth of SHPO served as the project director, and Jeffrey A. Hess, historical consultant, served as the principal investigator. Research, field survey, and report preparation were completed by Demian Hess, research historian for the firm, who holds a B.A. in American Civilization from Brown University.

Selection of Field Survey Sample

The research team drew heavily on work previously performed by the Minnesota Historical Society, which in 1975 began a study of the history and routes of the Red River Trails. The project supervisor for the MHS study was Rhoda Gilman, and the research assistants were Burton Cannon, Deborah Stultz, and Carolyn Gilman. From 1975 to 1977, Gilman et al performed an exhaustive examination of historic maps and travelers accounts to establish and document the location of the Red River Trails. Their work was published by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1979 as a monograph entitled: The Red River Trails.

Since the routes of the Red River Trails have been well established, the firm of Jeffrey A. Hess, Historical Consultants, confined its task to locating preserved portions of the trails. If time and money were no obstacle, the most thorough method of locating trail fragments would be to examine every area through which the trails passed. More practically, the researchers chose to rely on local informants and other documentation to establish which areas should be surveyed. Toward this end, they examined Gilman's research notes (stored in the MHS Archives) to determine where sites had been visible in the 1970s. Phone interviews were then conducted with members of local historical societies to confirm whether these or other sites were still present. The researchers also sent letters to historical societies in all of the counties traversed by Red River Trails. Follow-up phone interviews were conducted with all respondents.

Field Survey and Inventory Form Preparation

By these methods, the research team identified 16 counties which

reportedly contained Red River Trail sites. Due to time and budgetary constraints, the field survey sample was limited to sites in ten counties. All of the counties selected lay in the less developed west-central and northwestern sections of the state. The researchers met with local informants and inspected reported trail fragments. All trail sites were documented by means of 35mm black-and-white photographs, 35mm color slides, and field notes. During the survey, it was discovered that two counties actually did not contain sites. Nevertheless, nine sites were located in the remaining eight counties. The identified trail fragments were recorded for the SHPO on appropriate inventory forms. A separate form was prepared for each geographically distinct fragment.

Additional Research

The significance of the Red River Trails is widely recognized, and only limited research was necessary to prepare a general history of the use and development of the trail system. The major references for this historical sketch include: Rhoda Gilman, Deborah Stultz, and Carolyn Gilman's The Red River Trails (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1979); and Arthur J. Larsen's The Development of the Minnesota Highway System (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1966).

More problematic was the development of criteria for assessing the integrity of the individual trail fragments. Toward this end, consultations were held with the staffs of the National Register, the Wyoming SHPO, the Arizona SHPO, and the Utah SHPO. All of these sources were able to provide information on previous route-studies, and to offer suggestions on assessing historic trails in Minnesota.

Development of Registration Criteria

It was necessary to take several considerations into account while developing registration criteria for the Red River Trail fragments. The first consideration is the fact that the Red River Trails have a non-specific appearance. The trails were simply natural paths, and so any gully, beaten track or old logging road could conceivably represent the remains of the ox cart routes. Therefore, the criteria require that it be possible to document that a trail fragment was used to carry long distance trade between the Red River region and St. Paul. Fortunately, the work of Gilman et al can be used to determine where the Red River Trails were located. In most cases, it is only necessary to show that the trail

fragment lies near one of these routes.

Another consideration is that the Red River Trails lacked any real physical structure. As a result, judgments of integrity based on materials, design or workmanship are largely meaningless. Integrity must therefore hinge on matters of feeling, association and setting. Trail fragments must evoke a sense of an unimproved trail. As a result, the criteria were written to exclude improved roads, as well as badly deteriorated trail fragments. Neither a paved road or a barely visible depression give the viewer an impression of an historic trail. Even dirt or gravel surfaced roads, if they are wide, graded and ditched, do not evoke an appropriate sence of historic association.

In addition to being unimproved, a trail fragment should also seem to lead somewhere. The trails, after all, were significant for their role in carrying trade beteen two widely separate points. The criteria thus require trail fragments to be of sufficient length to evoke a "sense of travel." A person standing on a trail fragment should feel that it leads to a destination.

The criteria also require that a trail fragment be in an isolated or rural setting to better evoke a sense of the historic trails. This requirement was added to disqualify segments which pass through or near heavily developed areas. Generally speaking, however, any long, visible trail fragment is almost certain to be in a suitable setting.

Finally, an allowance was made for sites which had some undefined quality which associated them with the historic trails. These sites should still possess the other qualities discussed to a suitable degree. However, the final criterion can strengthen the integrity of a fragment which, perhaps is not particularly long or in good physical condition, if it is located near a significant geographical landmark, or some other site, which was significant to the history or develoment of the trails.

Site Selection

Using the developed criteria, four Red River Trail fragments were found to be eligible for nomination. Natonal Register forms were completed for two of these sites. The two selected fragments are the longest and most intact trail fragments in the state. The nomination forms are intended to serve as a model, and it is hoped that eventually all eligible sites will receive National Register designation.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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_____. Telephone Interview with Beth Boland, National Register. 14 February 1989.

_____. Telephone Interview with Rheba Massey, Wyoming SHPO. 31 January 1989.

Reports, National Register Nominations, etc.

Adwers, Bob, and Kathleen Fimple. National Register Nomination Form for the Licoln Highway, Nebraska, unpublished, 1987; copy on file at the Nebraska SHPO.

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Wyoming SHPO. "Guidelines for Identifying, Evaluating, and Protecting Historic Properties." Unpublished manuscript, 1987; copy on file at

the Wyoming SHPO.

SOURCES CONSULTED FOR SITE LOCATION AND SELECTION

To determine whether a county contained sites, the researchers of this Multiple Property Documentation form relied heavily on interviews and correspondence with local informants. All letters and interview notes are now held in the files of the Minnesota SHPO. The following is a partial listing of interviews and correspondence from this project. For further information, refer to the project files.

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_____. Telephone Interview with Ron Miles, Regional Naturalist,

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. 24 October, 1988.

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_____. Telephone Interview with Mrs. Oscar Nordine, Granville Township, Kittson County, MN. 26 October 1988.

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