

The Early History of the Milaca Area

The primary river and lake (Rum River and Mille Lacs Lake), of the Dakota (Sioux) Indians, played a major role in the development of the east central portion of present day Minnesota. The early French fur traders took ‘Minsisagaigon’, the Ojibwa (Chippewa) Indian term meaning ‘the country of all sorts of lake’, and translated it to ‘la region de Mille Lacs’, meaning ‘the region of a thousand lakes.’¹ In time, the term Mille Lacs came to be applied exclusively to the largest lake of the area. In the naming of the Rum River, the white explorers and traders misinterpreted the Dakota Indian name, Spirit River, to mean the spirituous liquor, rum.² The area through which the Rum River passes contains many historic sites which mirror different periods in Minnesota’s history. The prehistoric people, referred to as the ‘Mound Builders’, along with the later people of the Dakota and Ojibwa, used the river as a major inland water route.

Daniel Greysolon, Sieur du Luth, arrived in present day Mille Lacs County in 1679. The major thrust of his expeditions was to search for a route to the Pacific Ocean, and also to make peace between the Dakota and Ojibwa Indians. This latter goal was the most important, as Indian hostilities were a problem for the then lucrative French fur trade. DuLuth traveled as far as the Dakota headquarters encampment, on the southwest shores of Lake Mille Lacs, and on July 2, 1679, claimed the area as a possession for King Louis XIV. The Indians promised peace and friendship with the French and also agreed to attend a conference with other northwestern tribes at the head of Lake Superior.³

In February of 1860, Father Louis Hennepin, a Recollect Franciscan, Michael Accault and Antoine Auguelle (also referred to as Picard Du Gay) were sent out from Fort Crevecoeur (located on the Illinois River) by Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, to explore the upper Mississippi River country. The trio followed the Illinois River to the Mississippi where they encountered difficulty with ice cakes and strong currents of the spring thaw. They were captured on April 11 by a Dakota war party, and taken to the Dakota village located on Lake Mille Lacs. DuLuth, having wintered at Lake Superior, was on his way down the St. Croix River when he heard of the capture of the white men. Using the Mississippi-Rum River route, he again entered the Dakota village and persuaded the Indians to free their prisoners. Upon release, the entire party made use of the Rum River-Mississippi water route and ultimately returned to Montreal.

In 1750 a major battle occurred between the Ojibwa and Dakota Indians. Until this time the Dakota had sole possession of Lake Mille Lacs, and all of the lands south of the lake. The Ojibwa controlled most of the land to the north of the lake. With the use of guns and gun powder furnished by the French fur traders, the Ojibwa were victorious in driving the Dakota forever from their sacred lake and river.

After DuLuth’s party left, the only white men remaining in the territory were a few fur traders. It was not until the early 1800’s, with the building of Fort Snelling, that a new influx of whites came to the Rum River area. Since there were very few trees in the immediate area of the proposed fort site, an officer and some men were sent up the Rum River to examine the pine forests, and see if it was possible to raft logs down to the fort. The party returned with a favorable report. In the winter of 1820-21, a logging party was sent to cut the pine logs, pushing them down river in the spring. That winter, they cut down 2,000 logs by hand.⁵ The following year a saw mill was completed at the falls of St. Anthony, where logs were sawed for the building of not only the fort, but also for the

outbuildings and the furniture. This was the first logging operation of any consequence along the Mississippi River.

In 1837, land-session treaties with the Indians opened the rich pine land, of the then Wisconsin Territory, to the white settlers for the first time. This area was known as the St. Croix Triangle. This land was bordered on the east by the St. Croix River, on the south and west by the Mississippi River and reached as far north as the southern end of Lake Mille Lacs.

With the opening of this land, the Rum River and its tributaries took on a new significance. Franklin Steele was an early frontier entrepreneur in the developing lumber industry. In 1830, realizing the great power of the falls of St. Anthony to drive saw and flour mills, he set up claims in the area. Steele then engaged the services of Daniel Stanchfield to explore the Rum River area and give a report on the timber in the area. In 1847, Stanchfield and two helpers traveled in a canoe up the river, canoeing all the way to Lake Mille Lacs. During the last few miles of this expedition, he climbed a tall white pine to survey the surrounding area. According to Stanchfield's report, he saw pine "as far as the eye could see. seventy mills in seventy years could not exhaust the white pine I have seen along the Rum River".⁶ It must have been an impressive sight indeed. Steele set up a logging camp along the Rum in what is now Isanti County (just NW of present day Cambridge). Present day Mille Lacs County includes a large portion of the Rum River area, and had some of the finest white pine trees in the state. It was said that some of the larger pines in the area reached heights of about 200 feet, also measuring 3 feet in width.

In March of 1849, the Minnesota Territory was organized. During this time the present day Milaca area was located in Benton County, which extended from present day Elk River, north to Grand Rapids, and west to Long Prairie. Benton County was subdivided, establishing Mille Lacs County on May 23, 1857.⁷ Princeton, located in Mille Lacs County, became the headquarters for the many lumbering camps located along the Rum River. Since it was the only established town in the county at that time, it became the county seat.

One of the leading lumbermen in Princeton, originally hailing from Maine, was Benjamin Soule. Soule had various logging camps in the southern part of the county, and also a few to the north along the Rum. According to original land surveys, there was a tote road, which followed the course of the Rum River all the way up to Lake Mille Lacs.⁸ This road crossed the river for the first time north of Princeton, Benjamin Soule built a "stopping place" here, which consisted of a hotel like building and barn. The area, located about halfway between Elk River and the southern most point of the lake, became known as Soule's Crossing.⁹ Regularly scheduled stagecoaches traveled the tote road delivering mail, and satisfying the transportation needs of travelers.

It was also around this time that the new railroad industry was growing. The driving force behind the growth of the railroad in central Minnesota was James J. Hill, the "Empire Builder". Due to the two depressions of 1857 and 1873, the railroads experienced problems, trying to stay solvent. Hill knew that the railroads would bring settlers to the upper midwest, and in turn would be used to transport farm products, especially wheat, back to the consumer markets of the east. He sought the shortest route between the Red River wheat fields, and the area served by his St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway. Hill also sought a location for a rail north, where shipping was available at the head of Lake Superior.

The proposed rail line location had a line off the Manitoba Railway to St. Cloud, covering about sixty-miles. The line extension was in operation by December 4, 1882, even though there were still very few roads in the area. Close to where the railroad crossed the Rum River, Benjamin Soule had built a saw mill to supply the growing railway network with railroad ties. Hill, in the meantime, acquired control of a large section of the pine lands in the central part of the county, organizing a new company called the Mille Lacs Lumber Company. The Mille Lacs Lumber Company then bought out Soule's Mill. Hill then set up a large double equipped rotary, band saw, and planing mill at the newly acquired mill. The mill was said to have a capacity of sawing fifty million feet of timber per season. Not only did Hill now have his own lumber company for the purpose of supplying ties and bridge timber to his railroads, he also had a way to take advantage of the bountiful timber in the area, shipping ties and lumber out to other markets via his expanded railroad networks in the area.

Where the railroad first crossed the Rum, a settlement began to develop in 1885. This settlement was originally named Oak City. In December of that year, Charles Keith, a surveyor, was hired by the Mille Lacs Lumber Company, to survey the plat of land that would later come to be known as "Milaca" in 1886.

The following is the original text which can be found at the Mille Lacs County Courthouse:

"The undersigned, The Mille Lacs Lumber Company, a corporation under the laws of the State of Minnesota, proprietor of Milaca, does hereby certify that it has had the same laid out for town purposes as heron platted and intended, and does hereby dedicated all full and fractional streets, avenues and alleyways as shown on this plat and naught else to the public use."

- The Mille Lacs Lumber Company
- James J. Hill, President
- William Secombe, Secretary

*(This document was notarized on March 24th, 1886)

REFERENCES:

- ¹ Minnesota Department of Administration and Minnesota Historical Society, Inventory of the County Archives of Minnesota No. 48 Mille Lacs County (Milaca), (St. Paul, Minnesota, February 1942, p.11)
- ² Itasca Engineer, Inc. and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Rum River Tails, (Litchfield, Minnesota, December 1973), p.1
- ³ op cit. Inventory, p.7
- ⁴ ibid. Inventory, p.7-8
- ⁵ Herman Nelson, The Axe and the Plow, (Princeton, Minnesota, Princeton Eagle, November, 1979), p.4-5
- ⁶ Theodore C. Blegen, Minnesota, a History of the State (University of Minnesota Press, 1975), p.320-321
- ⁷ According to the Inventory, The land west of the Rum River in Townships 38 and 39 was not included at this time, but were added to the county on February 1, 1860, giving the county it's present boundaries
- ⁸ The old tote road, with a few changes, eventually became the U.S. Highway 169
- ⁹ Soule's Crossing was located a couple of miles northeast of present day Pease, Minnesota

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