Red River Valley Transportation

Boat → Oxcart → Steamboat → Railroad

Thomas Douglas, the Earl of Selkirk, established an agricultural colony at today’s Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1811. This young colony was dependent on imported food and equipment from England. The Hudson Bay could not be accessed by boats year-round so Thomas Douglas looked for another way to import goods. Wooden oxcarts were the solution. Goods came by boat from England to New Orleans, up the Mississippi to St Paul, MN and then overland by oxcart to the Selkirk Settlement in today’s Manitoba, Canada. Steamboats could move goods faster and replaced the oxcart. In 1858 Anson Northup purchased the North Star steamboat, which was running on the Crow River. He had the steamboat disassembled, transported to Lafayette, MN (10 miles north of today’s Moorhead), and reassembled. He launched the steamboat under the name the Anson Northup in 1859. Some well known steamboats of the Red River were the International, the Selkirk, the Manitoba, and the Minnesota. Steamboats could operate between April and October; but not during the winter. Railways could move goods year-round and so eventually replaced steamboats. The railroad arrived in Moorhead in 1871 and Winnipeg in 1879. The last two paddlewheel steamboats on the Red River were the Grand Forks and the Fram; both sank in 1912. For 53 years (1859-1912) the call of the steamboat captain “Steamboat ‘round the bend” was heard to herald the arrival of paddlewheelers. With the loss of the Grand Forks and the Fram, that call was no longer heard. Yet, if you use your imagination you can still hear that call as you sit on the banks of the Red River of the North in the Greenway between Grand Forks and East Grand Forks.