

Biographies of Riverside Old Settlers
Alexander Saunders

Alexander Saunders was born November 2, 1854, in the parish of Tyrie, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. As a small boy he tended sheep, and one of his first remembrances is of herding two cows. He worked as a groom of race horses, and was the first man to race for Murry of Fauchfold, who was an extensive breeder of racing horses. Later he worked for a retired East India tea merchant where he cared for fancy driving horses. At the age of nineteen he decided to come to America. From his reading he had always wanted to see the world, and had a strong inclination towards New Zealand. But he had relatives and friends living near Brogueville, Ontario. In 1848 his maternal grandfather and grandmother, Mr. and Mrs. Jas. Warnder, and their two sons, James and Alexander, left Scotland for Canada. Their daughter's fare was also paid, but at last she decided to stay and marry George Saunders, who later came to North Dakota.

When Alexander Saunders was ready to leave Scotland friends took him and his trunk in a wagon to Turriff, where he took the train to Glasgow. He left Glasgow on the steamship Manitoba, a vessel named in honor of the newly formed province of Manitoba. The commanding officer of this vessel was Captain Wylie, who was also a lieutenant of the British royal fleet.

Mr. Saunders left Glasgow the first week in May, 1873. The trip occupied fourteen days. This was the first ship to come up the St. Lawrence that spring, and as late as it was, it became caught in the ice and was delayed for four or five days. The steamship company was making a trial trip with the Manitoba, for this was the first trip since she had been overhauled, cut in half and fifty feet added to the middle in the Glasgow ship yards that winter. The passengers saw scores of whales and icebergs, and at one place the seals were so numerous that the crew amused themselves by throwing beerbottles at them. Shortly after landing he was taken sick with scarlet fever, which he had contracted on the ship.

The first winter after he recovered his strength, Mr. Saunders worked in the "shanty pinery" along the Ottawa river, then known as the Grand river, and still so known by the lumbermen. He occasionally worked in the saw mills until he went west.

In 1878 a party of land seekers having a special train, came west over the Grand Trunk and the Wisconsin Central railroads to Fisher's Landing, where the road ended. (Fisher's Landing is now called Fisher, Minnesota. See Collections of State Historical Society of North Dakota, Vol. 1., p. 96.) The party went by old style stern wheeler flatboat down Red Lake river and the Red river to Winnipeg, arriving there May 14, 1878, while the town was celebrating the queen's birthday. Mr. Saunders took up land in the Turtle mountain region, eighty miles west of the Red river and sixteen miles north of the boundary. That same summer he rented land in Pembina county a mile from Neche and near Smuggler's Point. (So called because at that place the timber of the Pembina River extends in a long V-shape across the international boundary and was a favorite resort of smugglers.) He raised two crops of wheat there. Because of hard winters and a grasshopper pest, several of the necessities were very high. At Neche salt pork was 36 ¢ a pound, flour \$12 a sack, and seed wheat \$3.50 a bushel. The prices of flour and meat

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were controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company. These were lowered as soon as the boats came in the spring. In May, 1880, Mr. Saunders and John H. Atchison, a pioneer resident of Pembina county, decided to look for land. They went to Glenden, Minnesota, to take the train, and from there to see the land near Valley City. They looked over the land near LaMoure, but did not like it. Mr. Atchison then went to Brookings, South Dakota, to see the land there, while Mr. Saunders left Valley City with a pack made of grain sack covered with oil cloth, and containing provisions, a rain coat and a blanket. A stone was tied in one corner to prevent the straps from slipping off. He carried a compass and a book with the land survey, and having timber land in mind, marked in it such land as he thought desirable. On leaving Valley City he followed the Sheyenne river for about sixty-five miles. The first night he spent at Sibley Crossing with Frank Abbott, and next day, May 24, 1880, he saw his present home for the first time. That night he stayed at Pioneer Nelson's. (The name is Amon Nelson or Amon Ophime. The present spelling of Ophime is probably a corruption of Opheim, meaning upland home. Mr. Nelson came to Dakota in 1879 with three other men whose names are forgotten. He tried to bring a Norwegian colony, but failed because nearly all of the desirable land was taken before his settlers could come. His home was a well-known stopping place in the early days.) From there he crossed to the Goose river, and followed its fourteen or fifteen miles to a settlement of Norwegians. On his way north he crossed all the rivers tributary to the Red river. At the Goose river he waited a short time for the completion of a foot bridge. The Forest river he crossed on two logs. In crossing the others he rolled his clothing into a bundle and waded. The Pembina, Turtle, and Goose river land was settled; the Forest river land was light and sandy; the Sheyenne river land suited best. Mr. Saunders, and his brother-in-law, Alexander Chalmers, immediately started for the chosen land with a Red river cart, a yoke of young oxen and plows for breaking. They followed the Indian trail for twenty-five or thirty miles. They passed through St. Joseph and crossed the Pembina river on a rafttrail bridge. They had both yoke and harness for the oxen. While traveling the Indian trail they used the harness by taking out the shafts and putting on a pole of Mr. Saunders' making. The yoke was easier on the cattle on the prairie. Shortly after their arrival Mr. Chalmers returned to Pembina to harvest their crop, bring his family and Mr. Saunders' cattle and goods. After Mr. Chalmers had gone, Mr. Atchison appeared, after having been to South Dakota. He liked the land near Mr. Saunders', and also returned to Pembina for his family. That was a busy summer for Alexander Saunders. He broke ten or twelve acres, and planted a few potatoes and turnips in the sod. He built his first house in the bank of the river. It was lined with poles about the size of an ordinary stovepipe. The roof was of poles covered with hay, bark and dirt. This house was 14x22, and one of the warmest he had ever lived in.

After harvesting his crop in Pembina county, Mr. Chalmers returned, bringing his family and goods, two oxen, a wagon, a cow and four pigs (one of which was of stock imported by the Hudson Bay company) for Mr. Saunders. That fall a trip was made to Valley City for flour and seed wheat, and another trip to the Goose river settlement for potatoes.

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In November, Mr. Saunders went to Pembina with his Red river cart for goods left behind by Mr. Chalmers. Part were at Pembina and the rest at an Icelander's where Mr. Chalmers had had a breakdown. On coming over the steep bluff of the Sheyenne river, he suddenly came upon four large elk. They seemed too frightened to run, and parted just enough for him to pass. The rest of the journey down was without noteworthy event. The first night of the return journey he stopped at the home of an acquaintance. The second day it turned cold and began to snow. That night he spent at the home of an Icelandic family, which consisted of a man and a woman and two girls, the eldest of whom spoke English quite well. They had but little room in their newly made pole house, but they hospitably shared it with Mr. Saunders. The next morning it still snowed, but he thought it best to push on before the snow became too deep. Just at night he came in the storm to a house in the timber, and asked for shelter that night, if not for himself, at least for his weary team. The man attempted to drive him away with a pitchfork. It was night, a snowstorm raged, the oxen were exhausted. The man had plenty of room and fodder. There was but one thing to do. Mr. Saunders drew a revolver and stayed. At the Goose river he stopped over night with a man and woman past middle life, who had sheltered him when he went north. It was clear the next morning, and he started on his way. Soon the storm again broke, and finally he became lost when about ten miles from his home. In the storm he met the driver of the Star mail route, who also was lost. They compared notes and started on. The mail carrier's horses were overcome by the storm and hard driving and reported to the government as killed by Indians. After passing the carrier, Mr. Saunders lost his direction again, and also broke a wheel off his Red river cart in a snow bank. The cart and the goods were left in a snow bank. At about 3 a. m. he came to the house near what is now known as the Fluto bridge. In the morning he returned home, and with his other team and wagon recovered his goods. The cart was abandoned and was destroyed by a prairie fire the next spring.

In 1882, Mr. Saunders built a large comfortable log house, in which he is still proud to live.

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