Fremont and Nicollet passed through the area that would become Griggs County in 1839. Fourteen years later Isaac Stevens would lead a railroad surveying expedition through this area.

The first steam locomotive had begun operation in the United States in 1830. It went back and forth on a 13 mile track between Baltimore and Ellicott's Mills. It wasn't established to earn a profit but just to see if a steam locomotive might be feasible. At that time there was less than 30 miles of railroad track in the United States, primarily horse powered carts in mining areas.

The steam locomotive proved so feasible that a short 23 years later the United States was making plans for a trans-continental track from the Mississippi River to the Pacific. The government commissioned 5 separate surveys to find the best route. Isaac Stevens was hired to lead the survey of the northern most route, which would go from St. Paul to the Puget Sound/Seattle area be through the future Griggs County.

Even though this route was not chosen for the first route, the expedition provided many journals of information on the new territory along this route.

he country, before reaching one of these rivers on which he expects to camp, to catch a few frogs, for the purpose of fishing in these streams, which abound in pike, pickerel, and large catfish. Frogs are by far the best bait that can be used.

About dusk we raised the American flag, made of white and red shirts contributed by the party and sewed together by Boulieau. As it went up the assembled command gave it three hearty cheers, and then indulged in some refreshments in honor of the day, ending the evening with songs and story telling.

In the region through which the expedition was passing, the Sheyenne River makes its great southward bend; consequently, on July 7, the travelers again found themselves upon the banks of this stream. Here they encamped for a short time.

July 9. — . . . An accurate return was made of the provisions on hand, so as to regulate its weekly distribution. Our flour is fast diminishing, and the issue was reduced to half a pound per day to each man. This state of affairs caused considerable grumbling in camp. We are fast approaching the buffalo country, and then shall be expected to do with much less. About 2J/2 p.m. the main train, under Mr. Osgood, crossed the river without unloading any of the wagons or doubling the teams, and moved forward to a good camping place, carrying with them a supply of firewood, as none would be found again before reaching Lake Jessie. . . .

About 3 p.m. Mr. Tinkham came into camp and reported that he had been to the Butte Micheau and Lake Jessie.17 They found buffalo to be very numerous on our route. Paul Boulieau and Rummel killed some four or five coming back, without going out of the way. . . .

July 10. — Most of our camp arose at 2j4 o'clock. After partaking of a cup of coffee at 3 o'clock, our littie train, consisting of an ambulance and spring wagons, with a cart loaded with charcoal, had crossed the Shyenne by sunrise. . . . About 7 o'clock we reached the main train, encamped some seven miles off. The train was preparing to move, and soon after we came up it started. At 8 o'clock we followed and passed them. About five miles from camp we ascended to the top of a high hill, and for a great distance ahead every square mile seemed to have a herd of buffalo upon it.

Their number was variously estimated by the members of the party — some as high as half a million. I do not think it is any exaggeration to set it down at 200,000. I had heard of the myriads of these animals inhabiting these plains, but I could not realize the truth of these accounts till to-day, when they surpassed anything I could have imagined from the accounts which I had received. . . .

The timber bordering on Lake Jessie was distinctly visible ahead, and between us and it were countless herds of buffalo, through which we were compelled to pass. The train moved on till 11 o'clock, when we all halted, drew up into line, and picketed the loose animals. About half a mile ahead a large herd was to be seen. Six of the hunters, Boutineau, Menoc, Le Frambois, the two Boulieaus, and Rummell were mounted upon the best horses in the command, some of which were specially reserved, and rode off in fine style, keeping together till ready to dash in among the herd. The immense sea of flesh remained quiet until their approach, and then separating, they rode in among them, selected the fat cows, and riding around until the proper time to do execution, the quick succession of shots announced the fact that our supplies of meat were fast being added to. In less than an hour a wagon or two was called into requisition to collect the choice pieces of nine buffalo cows. While we were resting several small bands came within firing distance of our train. One or two dragoons, on foot, gave one a chase, but the buffalo of course distanced them. The most amusing scene was the dog Zach, of the dragoon detachment, dashing into a whole herd and following them a considerable distance. We arrived at Lake Jessie about 3 o'clock p.m., the bluff shore on which we encamped being some sixty-four feet above the level of the lake. . . .

Between 1 and 2 o'clock at night a herd of buffalo approached our camp, and it required all the exertion of the guard, assisted by many of the men, to prevent an entire stampede of all our animals. As it was, some got loose, though none were lost. The buffalo were followed a considerable distance, and some ten or a dozen shots were fired before the animals without were entirely driven off.

July II. — . . . Having proceeded about four miles, a small band of buffalo started off ahead of us. Le Frambois's horse and four loose mules near the head of the column started in pursuit, the horse taking the lead. Boutineau, Le Frambois, Menoc, Guy, Lindner, and Paul Boulieau .. . all well mounted, gave chase in hopes of recovering them. But by this time they had mixed up in the herd, and though they were followed some twelve or fifteen miles, their efforts were entirely unavailing. About a mile further we encountered a very severe slough, the approach to which was marked by a very great curiosity, in the form of a buffalo trail; at least 100,000 must have crossed here by the foot prints and marks visible, and I determined on crossing the slough at the same point which the instinct of these animals had selected. . . .

July 12. — .. . About eleven miles from camp we crossed a deep slough. The water here being good the train stopped an hour and lunched. About a mile further on we crossed a fine little stream, which I took to be Beaver Lodge creek. Shortly afterwards Boutineau killed a fine buffalo cow, not twenty feet from the compass line. The dispatch and dexterity with which these men cut up buffalo is truly astonishing. Before the train came up the animal was entirely butchered, and had only to be thrown in the cart.

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The final report said that "the northern line, is very favorable, and must be allowed to be superior to all the others, both in its grades and the small sum of ascent and descent. Were there no other questions to be taken into consideration, this route would certainly be preferable to all the others as regards facility of construction. The objections to it are, its high northern latitude, leaving almost the whole United States territory to the south of it; its requiring a tunnel at Cadotte Pass four and a half miles in length; its terminating in a remote corner of the country at a great distance from the commercial centre of the Pacific coast".

The Northern Pacific would complete its trans-continental route in 1883 and the Great Northern would complete a different in 1893.

<http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHistoryMagazine/articles/7/v07i02p127-149.pdf>

Fourth of July. — The train started at 6 a.m. I remained behind to get off a mail, and the engineers remained with me. . . . Got off about lo and followed the Red River trail some twelve miles, when we left it altogether. . . . It would be an excellent plan for an emigrant travelling through the country, before reaching one of these rivers on which he expects to camp, to catch a few frogs, for the purpose of fishing in these streams, which abound in pike, pickerel, and large catfish. Frogs are by far the best bait that can be used. About dusk we raised the American flag, made of white and red shirts contributed by the party and sewed together by Boulieau. As it went up the assembled command gave it three hearty cheers, and then indulged in some refreshments in honor of the day, ending the evening with songs and storytelling.

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July 10. — Most of our camp arose at 2½ o'clock. After partaking of a cup of coffee at 3 o'clock, our little train, consisting of an ambulance and spring wagons, with a cart loaded with charcoal, had crossed the Shyenne (sic) by sunrise. . . . About 7 o'clock we reached the main train, encamped some seven miles off. The train was preparing to move, and soon after we came up it started. At 8 o'clock we followed and passed them. About five miles from camp we ascended to the top of a high hill, and for a great distance ahead every square mile seemed to have a herd of buffalo upon it. Their number was variously estimated by the members of the party — some as high as half a million. I do not think it is any exaggeration to set it down at 200,000. I had heard of the myriads of these animals inhabiting these plains, but I could not realize the truth of these accounts till to-day, when they surpassed anything I could have imagined from the accounts which I had received. . . .

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July 11. — . . . Having proceeded about four miles, a small band of buffalo started off ahead of us. Le Frambois's horse and four loose mules near the head of the column started in pursuit, the horse taking the lead. Boutineau, Le Frambois, Menoc, Guy, Lindner, and Paul Boulieau . . . all well mounted, gave chase in hopes of recovering them. But by this time they had mixed up in the herd, and though they were followed some twelve or fifteen miles, their efforts were entirely unavailing. About a mile further we encountered a very severe slough, the approach to which was marked by a very great curiosity, in the form of a buffalo trail; at least 100,000 must have crossed here by the foot prints and marks visible, and I determined on crossing the slough at the same point which the instinct of these animals had selected. . . .

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On this day the party traveled on the plateau between the Sheyenne and the James rivers. Stevens determined the " course N. 85° W., with instructions to Boutineau to keep in advance and point out the way, which was not to be abandoned except in crossing sloughs, and then to return immediately. This is the first day we have run according to the compass, and it succeeded admirably." The next day "we struck James River, and crossed over a good ford. . . . Noticing that the river ran very nearly in the course of our compass, we followed it, and again crossing it some five miles above we encamped." On July 14 the travelers pushed westward, approaching the Sheyenne for a third time. That night they encamped "at the bank of a fine lake."

July 15. — At daybreak . . . I dispatched Osgood and Kendall to a high hill to reconnoiter and look for a new camp. The guides and hunters were also sent on to the Shyenne to ascertain the distance. . . .

The men are much interested in the labors of Dr. Suckley, the naturalist. It is amusing to see each one making his contribution of snakes, reptiles, birds, bugs, &c.

Near noon Osgood and his party returned, having been to the Shyenne, where they found no wood, poor grass, and swarms of mosquitos. Soon after the guides returned, announcing that they had seen a party of Sioux of 1,000 lodges, not more than nine miles in advance of us. Boutineau's manner was full of fear, and his public announcement spread alarm through the whole camp. I at once gave orders to make ready, with the intention of visiting their camp; and calling Boutineau to my tent, asked him whether they were not the Red river hunting party. He assured me indignantly that "he knew half-breeds from Indians, and that they were certainly Sioux."

I suggested that they might be friendly Sioux, who, being engaged in the hunt and hearing of our approach, were coming forward to meet us, to receive the usual presents and gratify their curiosity. He still insisted that they were hostile Sioux. . . . We were, in his opinion, to be surrounded and cut off.

After dinner, as the alarm was spreading throughout the command, the arms were inspected and ammunition distributed, and orders given to have the train in readiness to move at once. I sent Boutineau, Le Frambois, and Menoc to the top of a high ridge as a lookout, while a flag was prepared to be sent forward if necessary.

Word soon came that the country was alive with Indians, who were fast surrounding us; and I sent scouts to hills on the right and left, having the lake to protect our rear. Mounting my horse I rode to the hill in front, and saw two horsemen rapidly approaching. Our flag-bearers rode forward to meet them, and soon discovered that they were two of the Red river hunters, and that their camp was three miles beyond the Shyenne. Having discerned our party, they came to invite us to visit them, and express their kindly feelings for us.

The train, which, before this, was in motion, arranged in a double line with the pack and loose animals between, proceeded two miles, where there was better water, and encamped.

The agreeable disappointment established a fine feeling throughout camp. . . . The men to-day showed a good spirit, and, although there was naturally some anxiety, they obeyed every order with alacrity.

Thus ended the apprehensions of the command concerning Indians, and was the first and last difficulty of the kind which occurred in camp on the trip.

RED RIVER HUNTERS

July 16. — . . . About 2 p.m. the whole Red river train came in sight, and, as they approached, fired a succession of volleys of firearms as a salute, which we returned with three rounds from the howitzer. The train consisted of 824 carts, about 1,200 animals, and 1,300 persons, men, women, and children, the whole presenting a very fine appearance.

They encamped nearby, and the close yard which they formed presented quite a contrast to the open camp adopted by us. They make a circular or square yard of the carts, placed side by side with the hubs adjoining, presenting a barrier impassable either to man or beast. 'The tents or lodges were arranged within, at a distance of about twenty feet from the carts, and were of a conical shape, built of poles covered with skins, with an opening at the top for the passage of smoke and for ventilation. They were 104 in number, being occupied generally by two families, averaging about ten persons to the lodge. Skins were spread over the tops of the carts, and underneath many of the train found comfortable lodging places. .

The animals were allowed to run loose during the day to feed, but were driven into the corral at dark. Thirty-six of the men are posted as sentinels, remaining on guard all night. We have but twelve guards, three reliefs, not more than four men being on guard at one time.

As our camps were only about two hundred yards apart, there was much visiting between them. I was struck with the good conduct and hospitable kindness of these people. A small band of Prairie Chippewa Indians, who accompanied this party, visited our camp during the evening, and entertained us with one of their national dances.

I was much pleased with Governor Wilkie, who is the head of the expedition. He is a man of about sixty years of age, of fine appearance and pleasant manners. This party are residents of Pembina and its vicinity. When at home they are engaged in agriculture, raising wheat, corn, potatoes, and barley. The land yields about twenty-five bushels of wheat to the acre, their farms averaging about 15 acres each. They are industrious and frugal in their habits, are mostly of the Romish persuasion, leading a virtuous and pious life. They are generally accompanied by their priests, and attend strictly to their devotions, having exercises every Sabbath, on which day they neither march nor hunt.

Their municipal government is of a parochial character, being divided into five parishes, each one being presided over by an officer called the captain of the parish. These captains of the parish retain their authority while in the settlement. On departing for the hunt they select a man from the whole number, who is styled governor of the hunt, who takes charge of the party, regulates its movement, acts as referee in all cases where any differences arise between the members in regard to game or other matters, and takes command in case of difficulty with the Indians.

In the early part of the year, till the middle of June, these people work at agriculture, when they set out on their first hunt, leaving some thirty at the settlements in charge of their farms, houses. Stock, &c. They start out to the southward in search after buffalo, taking with them their families, carts, animals, &c. These carts, when loaded, contain about 800 pounds, and are used in common. There were 336 men in the present train, of whom over 300 were hunters. Each hunt, of which there are two every year, continues about two months, the first starting in June, the second about the middle of October. Their carts were already half full, and they expected to return to their homes in the latter part of August. On their first trip the buffalo are hunted for the purpose of procuring pemmican, dried meat, tongues, &c.; the skins, being useless for robes, are dressed for lodge skins, moccasins, &c. In October the meat is still better and fatter, and they procure a like quantity of dried meat, reserving sufficient for a year's provision, which is about one-half of the whole amount procured; they dispose of the rest at the trading posts of the Hudson Bay Company.

The meat which they carry home finds it way, through the Red river traders of the [American] Fur Company, to Fort Snelling, where it is exchanged for goods, sugar, coffee, &c., at the rate of fifteen cents a pound.

The trade of this company is all in dry goods, sugar, tea, ammunition, &c. Notes are also issued by the Hudson Bay Company, which are currency among them. Several of these, of the denomination of five shillings, payable at York Factory, and bearing the signature of Sir George Simpson, were offered in change to various members of the expedition on purchasing various articles.

The skins collected in the summer hunt are usually retained by the hunters for their own use, while the robes collected in the fall hunt are a staple of trade with the Fur Company, and also with the Hudson Bay Company, which latter company do a large business in this portion of the country, supplying the settlers with most of their clothes, groceries, &c.

The Red river settlements are made up of a population of half-breeds, traders of the Hudson Bay and Fur Companies, discharged employees of these companies, and Indians, representatives of every nation of Europe, Scotch, Irish, English, Canadians, and speaking a jargon made up of these dialects, intermingled with. Chippewa and Sioux, patois French being the prevailing tongue.

These settlements, started some twenty-five years since, now number, in the vicinity of Pembina Mountain, some four thousand people. The men are generally much finer looking than the worn-en. On the latter depend all the drudgery of camp duties, pitching the tents, attending to animals, cooking, &c. The men dress usually in woolens of various colors. The coat generally worn, called the Hudson Bay coat, has a capot attached to it. The belts are finely knit, of differently colored wool or worsted yarn, and are worn after the manner of sashes. Their powder horn and shot bag, attached to bands finely embroidered with beads or worked with porcupine quills, are worn across each shoulder, making an X before and behind. Many also have a tobacco pouch strung to their sashes, in which is tobacco mixed with kini-kinick, (dried bark of the osier willow scraped fine,) a fire steel, punk, and several flints. Add to these paraphernalia a gun, and a good idea will be formed of the costume of the Red river hunter.

The women are industrious, dress in gaudy calicoes, are fond of beads and finery, and are remarkably apt at making bead work, moccasins, sewing, &c.

We purchased from the train a supply of pemmican, dried meat, sugar, and other things, some of the men buying moccasins, whips, and other necessaries.

I engaged the service of Alexis Le Bombard, who was in company with this encampment, as guide to the Yellowstone. He is represented as having a thorough knowledge of the country, which was apparent from his conversation. He came from the Yellowstone this season, and the impression gathered from my interview with him, as well as the representations of others, satisfied me that he will be extremely valuable as a guide.

Shortly after the Indians left. Governor Wilkie and several of the principal men came over to my tent. I had a very pleasant conversation with them in regard to the Indians, hunting, &c. During the conversation, I made some inquiries as to their views concerning the establishment of a military post in this vicinity, say at Lake Miniwakan.18 The suggestion met with their hearty approval, and Governor Wilkie assured me that were one located there, the people would remove and settle near it, cultivating sufficient land to keep the post supplied with vegetables and provisions. Governor Wilkie dined with us, after which the train prepared to move, and at 2 ¼ p.m., accompanied by our new guide, Le Bombard, we bade adieu to our Red river friends and moved forward on their trail. Our guide avoided crossing the Shyenne by going around one of its bends, and after travelling ten miles, which we accomplished with ease in two hours and a quarter, we reached a good camping place on the side of a lake where the grass was excellent.

17 The map published with Joseph N. Nicollet's Report Intended to Illustrate a Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River (25 Congress, 2 session, Senate Documents, no. 237 — serial 380) shows "Butte Michaux " just south of Lake Jessie near the west bank of the Sheyenne.s

18 On the south shore of Devil's Lake, Fort Totten was established in 1867. An earlier military post in the Red River Valley is Fort Abercrombie, which was built in i860. A. T. Andreas, Historical Atlas of Dakota, 104 (Chicago, 1884); William W. Folwell, A History of Minnesota, 2:164 (St. Paul, 1924).

<http://www.botany.si.edu/colls/expeditions/expedition_page.cfm?ExpedName=6>

The Stevens Pacific Railroad Survey brought three naturalists into the wilderness of Washington Territory. The expedition significantly enhanced our knowledge of the environment of the northwestern United States, where vast tracts of land sat uninhabited and little scientific exploration had occurred. Naturalist James G. Cooper, described the landscape as being strikingly different than that of the Atlantic coast and inexpressible in its majesty. He states, “this noble scenery is found to be accompanied by a proportionately gigantic vegetation, and, indeed, everything seems planned on a gigantic scale of twice the dimensions to which we have been accustomed.” He goes on to say, “Nothing seems wanting but the presence of civilized man, though it must be acknowledged that he oftener mars than improves the lovely face of nature.”

This insight was expressed in 1853; that same year, Congress allotted $150,000 towards six expeditions to find the most practical path to carry a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Governor Isaac I. Stevens led the northern-most survey along the 47th to 49th parallels.

Due to the difficult terrain, the expedition was divided into two divisions, which later converged at the Columbia Basin. The eastern division was led by Stevens and was accompanied by Naturalist George Suckley. The division traveled east of the Rocky Mountains, documenting three new species and one new genus (Endelopis) along the way. Since this area had been explored previously, many species, such as Veronica peregrine and Rumex venosus, had already been described. These specimens, however, were still interesting to compare to those collected by the western division, and were sent to the Smithsonian.

The western division, which commenced from Washington Territory and explored potential passes through the Cascade Mountains, was led by Captain George B. McClellan and was accompanied by naturalists George Gibbs and James G. Cooper. Cooper compiled his observations of the expedition in many papers, including one entitled “Report on the Botany of the Route.” As the expedition progressed westward, Cooper described the Cascade Mountains as, “a scene probably unsurpassed in magnificence by any in America.” Unfortunately, Cooper did not have adequate time to fully document the beautiful region. He did, however, notice the subalpine plant Juniperus communis, several varieties of berries (including the newly discovered Vaccinium membranaceum), and many colorful flowers that dotted the landscape and led Cooper to observe that it “looked more like a garden than a wild mountain summit covered for nearly half the year with snow.”

Next, the expedition moved into the Great Plains region near the Columbia River. Many of Cooper’s observations pertained to agricultural possibilities, such as where irrigation would be needed and the quality of the soil. He collected two new plant species, Astragalus miser var. serotinus and Crepis cappillaris, in this region.

Cooper documented 360 species west of the Cascades, including the bellflower Campanula scouleri, gathered from under the shade of fir trees. 150 of these species were unique to the prairies. The prairies were bordered by forests with mature trees and Cooper observed that “from February to July [the prairies] look like gardens, such is the brilliancy and variety of the flowers with which they are adorned. The weary traveler, toiling through the forests, is sure to find in them game, or, at least, some life to relieve the gloomy silence of the woods.”

Perhaps the gloomy silence of the forest became a bit more bearable when Cooper declared that the forest was “one of the principal sources of commercial wealth to the Territory.” He describes the Oregon cedar (Thuja plicata) as a lightweight and soft tree. The Indians chopped it using stone hatchets and crabapple wedges and formed the trunk into canoes. He states that, “A backwoodsman, with his axe alone, can, in a few days, make out one of these cedars a comfortable cabin, splitting it into timbers and boards with the greatest ease.” Other trees could be utilized as well; the sap of the white maple (Acer macrophyllum) could be used for sugar and the wood of Oregon alder (Alnus rubra) could be used to make furniture. Botanists were just beginning to understand the many treasures that could be found in the northwestern United States during the time of the Stevens Expedition.