We have a habit of talking about the history of our area as if didn’t start until the arrival of the Coopers, Opheims, Lenhams, Balkans and others. Such a limited perspective is somewhat like picking up a book and starting with the latest chapter.

Although people lived in this area for thousands and thousands years before the first wagons rolled over the prairie, we tend to pay little attention to that early history. Our understanding of the early people and their culture may be limited by relatively few sources, but, I’d also argue that we simply overlook many sources. One valuable resource for understanding the early history of our area is the journals of John C. Fremont and Joseph N. Nicollet.

In 1839, Fremont and Nicollet, set off on an expedition that would take them straight through the future Griggs County. The journals they left from their expedition give us one of the earliest pictures of Griggs County.

After starting from Fort Pierre, SD, the expedition came into North Dakota following the *Riviere a Jacques* (James River). Upon reaching *Butte aux Os* (“Bone Hill”, 46° 27’ 37” , 98° 8’) near present day Lamoure ND, Fremont and Nicollet departed the James and cut over land to the Sheyenne River (named for the *Shayen*, or Cheyenne, Indians who had once lived in the area).

Once joining the Sheyenne River, at some point south of Valley City, the expedition continued northward. Their destination was the *Mini-wakan*--or the “Enchanted Water”--a lake that Euro-American immigrants mistakenly translated as “Devils Lake.” Their time on the Sheyenne, and through the future Griggs County, was the scene of a grand summer buffalo hunt that informs us the organizational skills, deep-sense of community cooperation, and general good will and friendliness of the people in the area at that time. From Fremont’s journal:

“We were met in the afternoon by two of the chiefs who escorted us to the village . . . We found the encampment made up of about three hundred lodges of various tribes--Yanktons, Yankton[ais], and Sissitons--making about two thousand Indians. . . . our guides had insured us a most friendly reception. We were invited to eat in the lodges of different chiefs; the choicest, fattest pieces of buffalo provided for us . . . The next day they made their surround [buffalo hunt]. This was their great summer hunt when a provision of meat was made for the year . . . No such occasion of this was to be found for the use of presents, and the liberal gifts distributed through the village heightened the enjoyment of the feasting and dancing, which was prolonged through the night. Friendly relations established, we continued our journey.”

Can you imagine 2,000 people all organized for a common purpose on the same day within our county? I can’t. That number of people would be nearly 2/3 of our county! Just imagine what we could accomplish. The dancing, celebrating, gift-giving, and feasting that surrounded the difficult work of harvesting and preserving the buffalo must have been an incredibly joyous time. Those early people who mixed hard work, celebration, and community goodwill certainly provide an historical example that we can use to instruct our lives today.

The complete Fremont Journal, “The Expeditions of John Charles Fremont,” can be accessed at http://archive.org/details/expeditionsofjoh01fr