

Red River Valley Transformation
A Review Essay By Kathleen Brokke

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Before 1840, grasses grew "high enough to cover a man on a horseback" in the Red River Valley (Murray, 8). Poplar, scrub oak, willow, basswood, wild plum, and chokecherries flourished along the Red River tributaries. Buffalo, elk, red deer, black bear, fox, beaver, mink raccoon, muskrat, and bobcats thrived in the valley. Native Americans, the Dakota, Assiniboine, Cheyenne, and Chippewa, for example, hunted, fished, and subsisted on the animals and plants within the region. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, European fur traders discovered the region's rich resources and initiated a market economy for furs. As the wildlife dwindled by the mid 1800s, sporadic agricultural change slowly engulfed the entire Red River Valley. Underneath the height of the tall grass prairie lay a deep, rich soil for commercial crop cultivation. How Euro-Americans transformed the valley into a profitable agricultural enterprise was researched

and addressed by historians Norman Stanley Murray, Hiram Drache, George Lamphere, and Vera Kelsey. Scientists J. H. Shepherd and H. L. Bolley with others in The History of the Red River Valley and the North Dakota Farmer's Institute added their insights in the history of agriculture. How transformation occurred in the Red River Valley with the rise of agriculture is part of the topic of this paper. What these historians and scientists wrote about initial agricultural development is the other issue addressed in this review.

Published in the 1960s, two regional histories of the Red River Valley described agricultural development. Hiram Drache's history concentrated on the bonanza farms. Stanley Norman Murray's history began with a historical overview of the geological and environmental Red River Valley landscape with a slight prehistory of the fur traders. The major part of his history entailed agricultural development. Within his history, about a third comprised the bonanza farms. Murray explained the Red River Valley, as part of the tall grass prairie, was not a part of the semi-arid prairie that Walter Prescott Webb described in his history of The Great Plains. Instead, due to its climate, topography, and soil, the Red River Valley was the transition area between the western prairie and the eastern forests. In Murray's history, like Webb's map of the Great Plains, boundaries detailed the entirety of the Red River Valley from Traverse Lake in South Dakota to Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba. Hence, the valley embodied 320 miles in length and forty to fifty miles in width on either side of the Red River. Murray encompassed those 320 miles in his history of the first farmers in the Selkirk settlements from 1812 to 1870 to the crops and livestock in the lower valley from 1889 to 1920. He noted that previous historians have written a history of the first settlers and bonanza farmers in the Red River Valley.

His history went beyond earlier histories with the inclusion of the province of Canada. He also historically dealt with the shift from large-scale, one-crop farming to more small farm operations of diversification. Murray explained how Fargo scientists experimented with diversified farm methods in the Red River valley. They advocated these methods for both eastern and western farmers in North Dakota. Murray believed this diversification of agriculture by the early 1920s existed to the publication of his history in the 1960s. He also mentioned that only half of the Red River valley land was used for crop production up to 1920. Until farmers drained the wet sections of the valley and diversified their operations, a major portion of the valley was unusable for agriculture (175). An irony existed in how agriculture matured from the bonanza farms into a diversified livestock, small grain and corn crop enterprise. With scientific help from the Agricultural College in Fargo, farmers received not only a better seed but also more variety of seed to plant. Chemical weed sprays for crop disease and weed control, crop rotation education, and animal and dairy husbandry benefited the farmer in the early 1900s. The earlier monoculture of wheat had contributed to a major weed infestation. As diversification in agriculture turned into the modernization rally cry, the irony lay in the fact that the early Selkirk farmers might have been ahead of their times. In the mid 1800s, they diversified in crops and livestock. Their only reason for failure was they farmed too far away from a market for a profit. Plus, transportation for farm products was still in its infancy.

The bonanza boom farm years that initiated tremendous land cultivation for later farm diversification Murray suggested began in 1879 and peaked through 1885. Both

Murray and Drache credited James B. Power for the rise of the bonanza farms. Hiram Drache added more to Power's influence. Drache titled Power as the 'father of North Dakota agriculture'(68). Since his history is about the bonanza farms, Drache elaborated more on the mystique of bonanza farms with anecdotal evidence and advertisements. He declared a uniqueness in bonanza farms in North Dakota from the 1870s to the 1890s. He elaborated:

. . . [bonanza farms] carried on in an extremely business-like manner using strict managerial supervision. . . No experience or knowledge of farming was required of the labor force because supervisory help directed them. Bonanzas employed the factory technique of mass use of large scale uniform machinery for greatest efficiency. They used the latest and most advanced methods available. . . they secured advantages in dealing with manufacturers, grain companies, and financial and transportation agencies. . . [and] their influence was all out of proportion to their number and acreage in the agriculture of the Red River Valley(69).

Part of the bonanza farm uniqueness rose in their legendary stories. The farms symbolized the innovative and technological expertise of the capitalistic mind. Plus, on a massive scale, the laborers quickly changed the diverse grassland landscape into one gigantic monoculture of wheat. Newspaper accounts, letters, and fantastic stories spread the victory over the prairie and the profit garnered in one season by the enterprise. Tall tales and boom literature created excitement in man's conquest of a century's old landscape. The tallest tales involved the length of the furrow. For instance, one newspaper reported a man plowed a straight furrow until fall. On his return trip he harvested his wheat (71). The local newspapers touted North Dakota as the land of big farmers. Hiram Drache clarified other states actually contained larger farms. For instance, a few in California exceeded 60,000 acres. In North Dakota, the Dalrymple bonanza farm

reached its peak in 1896 with 22,000 acres. The Grandin brothers totaled 75,535.24 acres in 1912. Perhaps because they were brothers and part of their land holdings were in Minnesota, they were considered an exception to California's 60,000 acres. The Amenia and Sharon farm in 1875 purchased 27,931.66 acres for their stockholders(72-74). Both historians Hiram Drache and Stanley Norman Murray gave detailed accounts about these bonanza farms. They derived their research from records, letters, and business material of these farms and others from the Institute of Regional Studies in Fargo.

Murray suggested the low wheat prices, discouraging crop conditions, and lack of adequate drainage brought an end to the Red River bonanza boom in the late 1880s (196). Drache acknowledged the first two conditions and added more. He stated nothing about land drainage. Other reasons lay in the fact that most bonanza owners realized it was a temporary enterprise. With the increase in labor problems plus taxation, profit declined. The farmers continual struggle with loss of crops due to poor weather or low prices if harvests were excellent contributed to the advisability to sell land in small parcels. With promises in better farm production through diversification and the rise in land values, profits turned to rent or sale of the land in smaller acreage. Not emphasized in both of these histories was the soil exhaustion of the monoculture crop. Mentioned briefly in both as one of the reasons for a dwindling yield and the need for crop diversification, the bonanza monoculture depleted the soil. Drache alluded to soil depletion as he concluded that North Dakotans are still guilty of soil exploitation. Due to heavy mechanization from its initiation of bonanza farms up to the 1960s, the monoculture in crops continued to exploit the land. While the bonanza farm no longer existed in the 1960s, he suggested

even afterwards, the habitual pattern of one crop persisted throughout agriculture in North Dakota. Hence, while Murray suggested bonanza farms cleared the grasslands for diversified agriculture, Drache indicated a differing pattern. Even though diversification developed, most farmers cultivated monoculture crops on a smaller scale.

Another regional history addressed the bonanza farm excitement but contained more information about the northern sector in Red River Runs North. In 1951, Vera Kelsey thought similarly as Stanley Murray about the entirety of the Red River Valley. From Lake Traverse to Lake Winnipeg flowed the Red River. Hence, the history of the valley comprised the entire region. Since much of the valley's earlier history began in the north with the fur trade, much of her history narrated the explorers, fur traders, Native Americans, and metis from the 1660s up to the Euro-American settlers in the 1900s. In the early 1600s some of the Dakota tribes moved from the Minnesota forests to the buffalo hunting grounds of the Red River Valley. Those who moved were identified by the ones they left as a 'Nation of the Beef' (23). The buffalo gave them everything they desired. They had no need to farm. They either traded for corn with others or dug native vegetables, like prairie turnip, from the prairie for their diet.

Agriculture entered the Red River Valley when Lord Selkirk, previously mentioned by Murray, was granted 116,000 square miles at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in 1811. His grant gave him the Valley proper all the way to Lake Traverse. Fur traders learned Selkirk obtained two rich valleys in his grant. Both the Roseau and Assiboine Valleys contained wild rice, berries, fish, wildfowl, and the coveted beaver besides many other animals. Irregardless of a bountiful area in natural

resources or because of it, the agrarian settlers experienced tremendous difficulty. Kelsey suggested many Red Riverites moved from their original site to found St. Paul, Minneapolis, Stillwater, and other towns in Minnesota. The major portion of her history described the turmoil of the fur trade versus the farmers interspersed with the metis and Native American conflicts. When she addressed the Bonanza farms, she briefly mentioned Mr. Powers. The world sweep of interest in the bonanza farm happened after Oliver Dalrymple planted 2500 defaulted acres with wheat and realized \$40,000 in profit(205). As more entrepreneurs planted the land in wheat, Minneapolis, the recipient of the No.1 Hard, transformed into a flour manufacturing center and Duluth into a Great Lakes shipping terminal. So intent were bonanza farmers on raising wheat, much of their food, including butter and eggs were imported. Kelsey proposed that not only were these bonanza owners feudal lords but they made little contribution to schools, roads, churches, and the government in their communities. Their benefit to the valley was the publicity of their part in the 'Gilded Age.' Their demonstration of the fertility of the land brought more than 200,000 Americans, Canadians, and Europeans to homestead or buy land for their own farms. She pointed to the railroad owners who used the bonanzas as bait to lure settlers to purchase their lands and transport their wheat. Both railroad and bonanza farm owners reaped profits from their sale and promotion of the land.

Another history of the Red River Valley barely gained a historical perspective in which to write its history. Published in 1909 in two volumes, The History of the Red River Valley, Past and Present contained geological, topographical, political, economic, biographical, and agricultural topics besides others. Written by a variety of historians and

scientists, these two volumes comprised a thorough historical overview of important events and issues in the Red River Valley. Photographs also illustrated personages, landscapes, farms, and buildings of the early 1900s. Besides the original topography of the valley, several chapters focused on botanical investigations and the history of agriculture, wheat, and harvesting machines in the valley.

In the introduction lay the thesis of the history. “Everything is a growth – a development – a passing from the simple to the complex”(5). Agricultural in their pursuits, the Euro-American settlers commenced to change an open grassland valley into a storehouse and granary for the world. This history documented their western civilizing actions to domesticate the earth for future generations. Professor H. L. Bolley explained the botanical investigation in North Dakota. Native grasses were collected and exhibited at the World’s Fair in Chicago. The exhibit proved to eastern and southern states that grass grew on the North Dakota prairies(186). In a continuation of this theme, even after the Selkirk colony grew excellent wheat in 1820, doubt persevered in the agricultural capabilities in the tallgrass prairie. Previously Vera Kelsey and now J. H. Sheppard, who wrote the agricultural history of the valley, noted an incident which changed initial entrepreneur’s minds. In 1871, while businessmen conversed in Moorhead about the sour, cold valley soil, a soldier from Fort Abercrombie carried a bulky grain sack into the bar. He opened the sack and poured out the high quality vegetables on the bar. The amazed businessmen asked innumerable questions about where he obtained the vegetables. He stated he grew them on the prairie. And, yet, it took four more years before many saw the possibilities of the soil. Mr. Dalrymple’s large harvest of wheat convinced many

doubters to embrace agriculture in the Red River Valley. All four writers, Murray, Drache, Kelsey, and Sheppard, agreed on this pivotal moment in history for the national recognition of agriculture on the grasslands. Besides this agreement, Shepherd, undoubtedly from his scientific discipline, added a different perspective in his history. He introduced L. H. Haynes as the person responsible for the foundation stock for seed grain. He included the other crops and livestock offered for agricultural diversification like potatoes, red clover, and poultry. And, he concluded with the various organizations which influenced farmers through their membership and education within it. This detailed information continued in the 'Harvesting Machines of the Red River Valley.' Though written by an anonymous, uninspired writer, the harvester history contained another important aspect of how farmers quickly succeeded in crop production. Drache and Murray concurred with the chapter's significance in industrialization for agricultural development. For instance:

This great valley is the birthplace of many of the . . . improvements . . . on agricultural machines during the last quarter of the century. It is here the manufacturers sent their new machines for field trials, because they knew full well that if a machine would work successfully under the varying conditions to be found here it would work successfully anywhere(358).

The future history of Walter Prescott Webb emphasized a similar importance of agricultural industrialization on the Great Plains. The benefits of improved mechanization can not be overstated in the transformation of the grasslands to agriculture.

In George N. Lamphere's history, he first described the topography of the land and the Selkirk settlers experience as the first agriculturists in the Red River Valley. A more descriptive history with settler memoirs, Lamphere's history better illustrated the

difficulties of the first agriculturists. For instance, grasshopper gluttony ravaged several years of excellent crops. In 1854, Mr. Cavalier related how grasshoppers even ate his saddle and the top of his boots (8). Through the Selkirk efforts and harvests, though, other settlers and entrepreneurs gained the awareness of the land's fertility. Lamphere noted, "Through them we learned that the Dakota lands were not the barren wastes and howling desert of dry, drifting sand that our school books had taught us, and that the Red River valley contained a mine of wealth greater than any discovered mine of silver and gold"(8). Though slow in their realization, he credited the Dalrymple bonanza farm and the publicity of it in 1875 as the major factor in the awareness of the grassland's potential for agriculture (21). Potential to profit happened so rapidly that by 1899 Lamphere accounted a thirty-nine million dollar production of wheat from the Red River Valley to the flour and bread product. In spite of this, he also explained how diversified farming would much better benefit the region. Though a shorter history than the other four, Lamphere's history included several aspects not mentioned in the others. Like Kelsey and Murray, Lamphere embraced the totality of the Red River Valley which included Canada. His history was slightly different from the others with more emphasis on personal interviews with the earlier settlers. He also introduced other individual wheat farmers not as known as Dalrymple and Grandin but just as noteworthy for their part in the history of the Red River Valley. Written in the early 1900s like the History of the Red River, Past and Present, his intent was to record history from those who had been involved in it. He also wrote to help others to learn from history. Besides this similarity to other historians, he provided statistical analysis of the profits in wheat production, the increase in acreage

cultivated for wheat, and the increase in farms in the 1890s up to the 1900s.

Another historical source which should not be overlooked in agricultural history of the Red River Valley are the North Dakota Farmer's Institute Annuals. Written as educational annuals for farmers in the early 1900s, the annuals provided scientific essays which advocated diversified farming in various crops, crop rotation, and livestock. An outgrowth from educational farm meetings in differing communities, the annual provided the latest science in farm techniques from the Agricultural College in Fargo and other institutions. Most of the articles are written by agricultural scientists but there are several articles from farmers and their experiences besides. By 1907 the agricultural statistics gave an overview in numbers of the significance of agriculture. It also provided evidence of the change from the prairie grasslands to crop cultivation statewide. Out of 45 million acres in the state, 11 million acres were in cultivation. Close to 60,000 farms contained over \$171 million in value of products. Livestock of cattle, hogs, and sheep sold for market shipped out of state sold for \$3 million(18). While this entailed the entire state, the Red River Valley comprised at least one third of these statistics. Included at the end of this review is an unusual poem inserted after these statistics. It seems out of place in this annual but gave evidence of an undercurrent of nostalgia. While modern science charged into the future for agriculture, the poem eulogized what now no longer existed.

Little nostalgia existed in these histories of the Red River Valley, though. The histories that briefly evidenced nostalgia were the closest to the era – History of the Red River Valley, Past and Present and 'History of Wheat Raising in the Red River Valley' in the Minnesota Historical Society collection. The other three histories written in

the 1950s and 1960s provided a wider regional overview of the Red River Valley and the agriculture that transformed the grasslands. Both agricultural historians Hiram Drache and Stanley Norman Murray provided extensive detail from primary documents of letters, farm records, and journals for their regional history. Both focused their writing from their expertise in agriculture. Hiram Drache wrote over eleven histories in agriculture, management, and pioneers in the Red River Valley. His master's thesis was the 'Day of the Bonanza.' A historian – in – residence at Concordia, his focus of regional, agricultural history continued throughout his career. Historian Norman Stanley Murray taught at North Dakota State University and later at the University of North Dakota. Murray's success in his history lay in the blend of two different countries for a history of one region. A sociologist, Vera Kelsey combined her prolific writing career of fiction, nonfiction, and mysteries to include the history of the Red River Valley. George N. Lamphere, who bought the Moorhead Daily News in 1883, wrote several histories – one the United States Government. The agricultural scientists at North Dakota State University, J. H. Shepherd and H. L. Bolley contributed their histories of the mechanics of plants, livestock, and diversification for successful farming techniques on the grasslands. If one combined all these histories, one could integrate an environmental history of the transformation of the grasslands to agriculture.

What arose as a general consensus in all the histories was of the need to diversify agriculture. The spotlight on bonanza farms briefly ignited agricultural interest and proved underneath the grassland fertile land existed. Not as well known was one needed money to make money. Tremendous capital lay behind the success of the bonanza farm

enterprise. Historian Hiram Drache detailed the need of capital to make capital. Irony lay in several layers within these histories. In differing ways, all historians noted the devastation to the grasslands and its fertility as year after year more land was planted in wheat. Land diversification would be the saving grace for the bankrupt soil. Part of the Red River Valley could not be cultivated at all. A major part of the valley was wetlands. Until farmers or governmental employees dug drainage ditches at least half of the valley could not be cultivated in time for a crop to mature for harvest. The final irony was how previous views of the 'desert' image kept many from agriculture in the rich valley. All these historians termed the Red River Valley as the 'Nile' of the North. It wasn't until publicity of the Dalrymple's huge profit that this desert image changed into an oasis with dollar signs.

The power of an image or several words like 'the desert' gave the valley a slight reprieve from the agricultural frenzy of the bonanza farms. The image was replaced by photographs of massive industrialization on the prairie and the words of profit. Photos of rows of plows and harvesters depicted a land open to mechanization on a large scale. The diversified grasslands changed almost overnight into miles and miles of wheat. The epic of the grasslands changed into what Walter Prescott Webb discussed in the Great Plains. Though not technically the Great Plains, a similar transformation occurred on the tall grass prairie to an agricultural state. The historians in this review wrote similarly of these transformations with differing perspectives. Their overall intent was for the reader to learn from the past and apply it to present agriculture. All believed diversification was the best form of agriculture for the Red River Valley. While Murray suggested the 'Valley

Came of Age' in agricultural diversification, Kelsey noted otherwise. She maintained the lesson needed to be relearned by the potato kings of the valley. Drache agreed with her in his stance of the habitual monoculture on a smaller scale. Though there was an overall consensus on the need for diversification to ensure future crop growth, there is still debate in how much was learned and has been applied to agriculture. This debate continues on how agriculture can flourish on what was once a century's old grassland. What is not at debate is less than one per cent of the grassland now exists.

Sunset on the Prairies

North Dakota Farmer's Institute

J. W. Foley

They have tamed it with their harrows; they have broken with their plows;
Where the bison used to range it someone's built himself a house;
They have stuck it full of fence posts, they have girded it with wire;
They have bridged its gullied rivers; they have peopled it with men;
They have churched it, they have schooled it, they have steepled it – Amen.
They have furrowed it with ridges, they have seeded it with grain.
And the West that was worth knowing I shall never see again.

They have smothered all its campfires, where the beaten plainsmen slept;
They have driven up their cattle where the skulking coyote crept;
They have made themselves a pasture there the timid deer would browse,
There the antelope were feeding they have dotted o'er with cows;
There's a yoke's tuneless whistling down the bison's winding trail,
Where the [Indian's] arrow fluttered there's a woman with a pail
Driving up the cows for milking; they have cut its wild extent
Into forty-acre patches till its glory is all spent.

I remember in the sixties, when as far as I could see,
It had never lord or ruler but the buffalo and me;
Ere the blight of man was on it, and the endless acres lay
Just as God Almighty left them on the restful Seventh Day;
When no sound rose from its vastness but a murmured hum and dim
Like the echo void of Silence to an unheard Prairie hymn;
And I lay at night and rested in my bed of blankets curled
Much alone as if I was the only man in all the world.

But the prairie's passed, or passing, with the passing of the years,
Till there is no West worth knowing and there are no Pioneers;
They have riddled it with railroads, throbbing on and on and on,
They have ridded it of dangers till the zest of it is gone;
And I've saddled up my pony, for I'm dull and lonesome here.
To do westward, westward, westward, till we find a new frontier;
To get back to God's own wilderness and the skies we used to know -
But there's no West; its conquered – and I don't know where to go.