

HIST 467J: Cartography, Territory, and Identity  
Professor William Rankin

Evading the Map: The Power of Cartographic Ignorance at the White Earth and Red Lake  
Ojibwe Reservations

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In July 1889, the United States government sent a commission to northwestern Minnesota to council with the Ojibwe of the White Earth and Red Lake Indian Reservations. The object of these visits was straightforward: to negotiate the terms of the newly established Nelson Act, *An act for the relief and civilization of the Chippewa Indians in the State of Minnesota*. The ambiguous title fails to convey its insidious intentions. The commission was charged to “negotiate...for the complete cession and relinquishment in writing of all [the Ojibwe’s] title and interest in and to all the reservations...except the White Earth and Red Lake Reservations.” The lands of White Earth and Red Lake would “be allotted...in severalty...in conformity with” the General Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Act. Any lands remaining after granting Ojibwe allotments would “be disposed of by the United States to actual settlers only under the provisions of the homestead law.”<sup>1</sup> While the Ojibwe at White Earth and Red Lake retained the “privilege” of remaining on their own reservations, forcing privatized land allotments upon the Ojibwe implicates the Nelson Act in the nineteenth-century project of dispossessing indigenous peoples in the service of settler colonialism.

The terms of the act met different degrees of success on the two reservations. The White Earth Ojibwe, after thorough negotiation, fully complied with the act. In the council minutes documenting the commission’s meetings with members of White Earth, Chief Wah-

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<sup>1</sup> *An act for the relief and civilization of the Chippewa Indians in the State of Minnesota*, Public Law, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 24 (1889): 642-6. “Chippewa” was the term contemporarily used by the federal government to refer to the Ojibwe people. The Ojibwe, all of one Nation, cohered into several distinct bands that inhabited different reservations in Minnesota. Please note that maps discussed throughout the paper are only cited with the figures (not additionally in footnotes).

on-ah-quod proclaimed, “If I was a young man and had the advantages now thrown open to these young men...I should actually overflow with joy.” Another chief, John Johnson, agreed to sign because of the opportunity “to conquer poverty by our exertions” in assuming a sedentary, agricultural existence upon allotted lands. From the moment the councils commenced, the White Earth Ojibwe’s main concern was “there would hardly be enough land” for everyone to receive his or her respective allotment.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, by the end of the meetings, the Ojibwe agreed to the assimilatory project.

The Red Lakers, in contrast, remained staunchly opposed to the act throughout their councils with the commission. Statements such as “your mission here is a failure” and “we do not believe it is to our interest to comply with [your] request” frequent the chiefs’ speech. The Red Lakers not only expressed their resentment of the act, but they also succeeded in resisting some of its terms. Chief May-dway-gon-on-ind dug in his heels, saying “I will never consent to the allotment plan. I wish to lay out a reservation here where we can remain with our bands forever.”<sup>3</sup> And indeed, the Red Lake Ojibwe never consented to allotment, nor were they forced to. Red Lakers ceded almost three million acres during the negotiations, but they held their unceded lands in common—Red Lake remains one of the only reservations nationwide that successfully resisted allotment.<sup>4</sup>

Analyzing maps of Minnesota from this period assists in understanding the political divergence between White Earth and Red Lake during the Nelson Act negotiations. On General Land Office (GLO) and atlas maps from the mid to late nineteenth century, the gridded township plats indicating Euroamerican legibility—via surveying—unfurl across the White Earth Reservation. The Red Lake Reservation, however, eludes the grid, and the varied visual representations of Red Lake itself reveal the degree to which the United States government remained ignorant of the reservation’s topography and ecosystems (see Figures 1-4). In *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance*, Robert Proctor coins the term “agnotology” to describe the process of the creation of ignorance. The concept responds to

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<sup>2</sup> “Minutes of Councils Called to Accept the Act of 1889,” White Earth Councils, Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, White Earth Agency, Record Group 75, Box 50, National Archives at Kansas City, MO; 80, 83, 33.

<sup>3</sup> “Minutes of Councils Called to Accept the Act of 1889,” Red Lake Councils, Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, White Earth Agency, Record Group 75, Box 50, National Archives at Kansas City, MO; 6, 10, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Anton Treuer, *Warrior Nation: A History of the Red Lake Ojibwe* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2015), 89, 97.

the theory of epistemology, and Proctor argues that the production of ignorance has just as much power as the production of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This paper employs the framework of agnotology to interrogate how and why Red Lake evaded the map, and to perceive how this cartographic invisibility accorded Red Lakers power in their negotiations with the federal government.

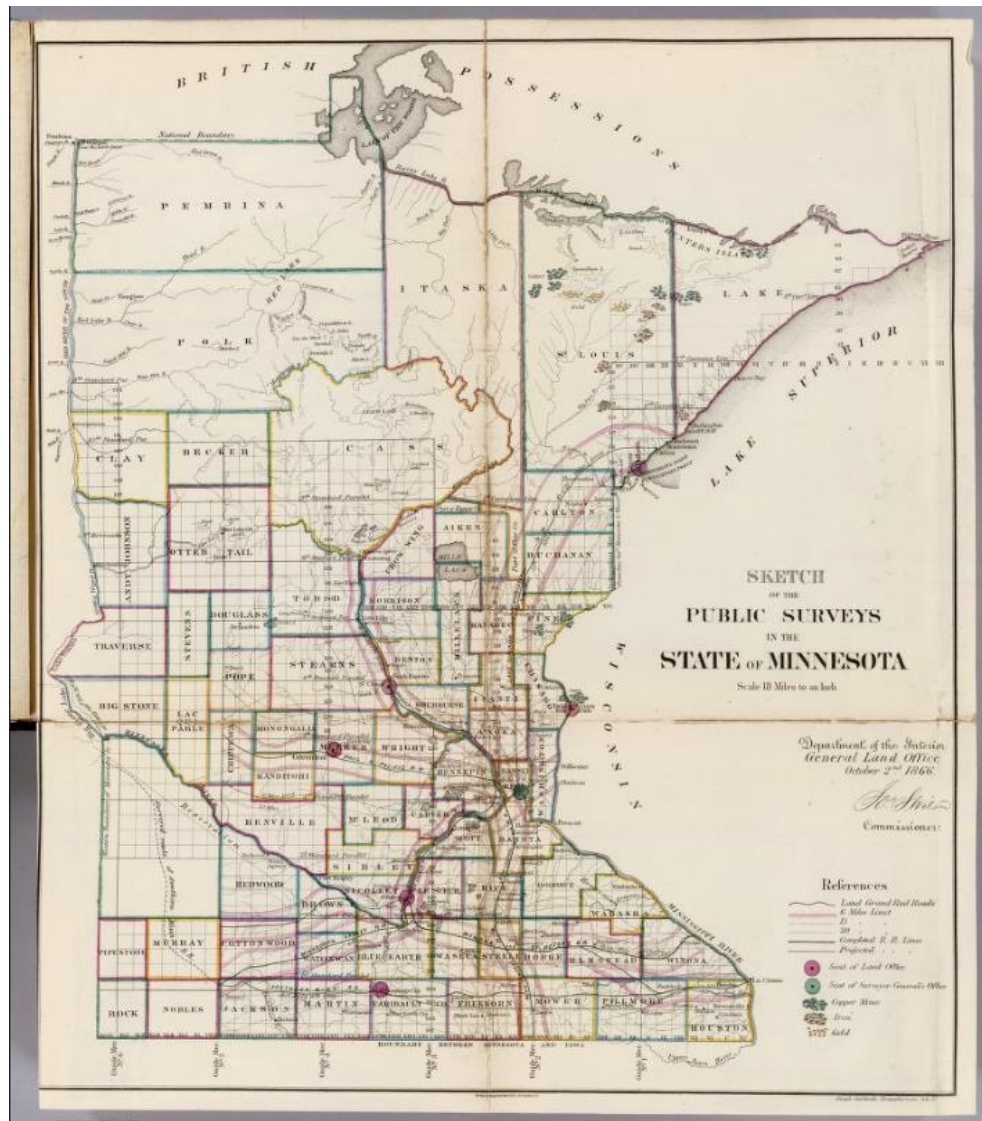


Figure 1: This map, compiled from public survey notes, exposes which lands the federal government chose to survey (indicated by the grid) by 1866. Notice that the traditional lands of the Mississippi Band of Ojibwe (region around Mille Lacs Lake, which appears in grey) were already surveyed by this point. The Ojibwe's removal to the White Earth Reservation in

<sup>5</sup> Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds. *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 1.

1867 reveals that federal knowledge of their land enabled its expropriation. The faint pink lines drawn in parallel on the map represent railroad land grants; that is, land the railroads could sell to prospective settlers. Note how the surveys appear to facilitate the anticipated railroad routes. The White Earth Reservation lay just beyond the furthest extent of surveys in Becker County. Red Lake, far north in Minnesota, remains outside the purview of surveys and railroad interests. Image citation: U.S. General Land Office, *Sketch of the Public Surveys in the State of Minnesota* [map], 1:1,140,480 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Land Office, 1866).



Figure 2: This county atlas map, produced almost 20 years after the map in Figure 1, shows how public surveys encompassed the lands south and west of Red Lake but not Red Lake itself. Notice, once again, how the trajectory of railroad lines corresponds to which lands were surveyed. Compared to Red Lake, the White Earth Reservation (listed on the map, but difficult to read) experiences close encounters with railroad lines. Notice how differently Red

Lake appears on this map compared to the map in 1866, highlighting the degree to which this region was not known well by Euroamericans. That the lands east of Red Lake also remained unsurveyed suggests that they possessed similarities that made them unappealing to contemporary economic and settlement interests. Image citation: H.R. Page & Co., *Map of Minnesota* [map], 1:1,260,000 (Chicago, IL: H.R. Page & Co., 1885).

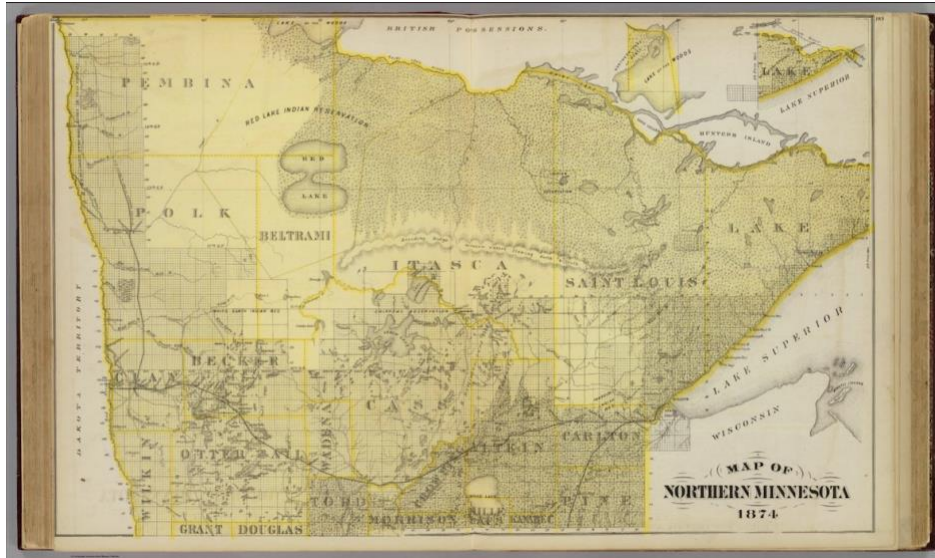


Figure 3: This atlas map, from 1874, reiterates the themes of Figures 1 and 2. This map shows more clearly the process by which the White Earth Reservation was surveyed; its northeastern portion was yet to be surveyed. Considering how far north surveys had extended in the Red River Valley (far western portion of Minnesota), the more gradual survey process at White Earth and other northern regions in the state suggests the lands were less coveted. The representation of tree cover surrounding Red Lake and extending east reveals the Euroamericans' expectations for what comprised these northern lands, even though they had not been surveyed. Image citation: A.T. Andreas, *Map of Northern Minnesota, 1874* [map], 1:760,320 (Chicago, IL: A.T. Andreas, 1874).



Figure 4: This GLO map from 1878 sheds light on the same trends and themes introduced in the first three figures. This map assists in understanding the locations and sizes of Red Lake and White Earth. Red Lake encompasses the large swath of land far north in the state (surrounding Red Lake), while White Earth is the square slightly south and west of Red Lake. Image citation: U.S. General Land Office, *Map 8 – Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan* [map], 1:1,267,200 (New York: Julius Bien, 1878).

When viewing the maps, it is tempting to explain the differences between White Earth and Red Lake's legibility in terms of geographic isolation. In the far north of Minnesota, Red Lake lies out of easy grasp of Euroamerican settlers, so this seems a reasonable assumption. White Earth was first surveyed in the 1870s; Red Lake not until the 1890s.<sup>6</sup> In fact, one of the Nelson Act commissioners told the Red Lakers that "it would be impossible to make the individual allotments" for their reservation in the same manner as for White Earth, as "your reservation has not been surveyed."<sup>7</sup> Lack of surveying, however, is not only a product of geographic isolation.

Reading the GLO and county atlas maps alongside other historical sources exposes a more nuanced narrative. The environmental differences between White Earth and Red Lake, the varying political situations of the Ojibwe bands (at the two reservations), and the evolving Euroamerican interests in the economic potential of Minnesota's northern lands all defined the United States' cartographic ignorance of Red Lake in the late nineteenth century. As geographic knowledge enables expropriation, the absence of this knowledge afforded Red Lakers greater autonomy than their fellow Ojibwe at White Earth.

Scholars have studied the effects of the Nelson Act at White Earth and Red Lake, but none has delivered a large-scale comparison between the two reservations, nor has anyone heavily consulted cartographic sources to inform their research. In *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889-1920*, Melissa Meyer interrogates the long-term effects of allotment at White Earth. She argues that the opening of reservation lands to Euroamerican settlement enabled the rapid dispossession of the Ojibwe, leading over eighty percent of lands to be in the hands of Euroamerican

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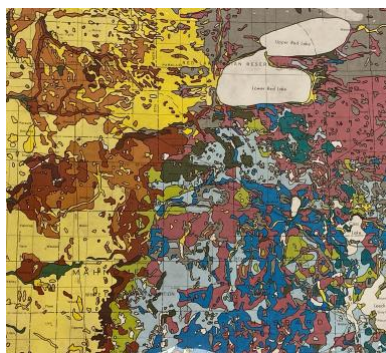
<sup>6</sup> "Survey Details – BLM GLO Records," Township 144 N – 41 W, Original Survey (1871), Bureau Land of Management, General Land Office Records, U.S. Department of the Interior, Accessed November 8, 2019, [https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm\\_id=234111&sid=ryx0vnfb.gal#surveyDetailsTabIndex=0](https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm_id=234111&sid=ryx0vnfb.gal#surveyDetailsTabIndex=0); "Survey Details – BLM GLO Records," Township 154 N – 38 W, Original Survey (1892), Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, U.S. Department of the Interior, Accessed November 8, 2019, [https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm\\_id=49167&sid=a1xfocpc.cvt](https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm_id=49167&sid=a1xfocpc.cvt).

<sup>7</sup> "Minutes of Councils Called to Accept the Act of 1889," Red Lake Councils, 24.

homesteaders, speculators, and timber tycoons by 1909.<sup>8</sup> Anton Treuer, in *Warrior Nation: A History of the Red Lake Ojibwe*, frames his narrative of Red Lake around exceptional leaders in the Ojibwe band's past. While he discusses a variety of factors that defined Red Lake's historical trajectory, Treuer emphasizes the persevering, “warrior” character of the Red Lake people as setting them apart from other Ojibwe bands in Minnesota.<sup>9</sup> This paper draws upon these existing narratives while intervening with a cartographic bend to facilitate a comparison between the White Earth and Red Lake Ojibwe Reservations.

### Forests and Fields

The White Earth and Red Lake Reservations reside in different ecosystems. When Francis Marschner compiled the original survey notes of Minnesota into a vegetation map of the state in the early twentieth century, he crafted a source that illuminated the environmental contexts of White Earth and Red Lake in the era of the Nelson Act (see Figures 5 and 6). Upon the map, White Earth straddles three distinct ecozones—grasslands, deciduous forests, and coniferous forests. When the United States government relocated the Mississippi Band of Chippewa Indians (Ojibwe) to White Earth in 1867, federal agents established a reservation that spanned the three ecosystems to facilitate the Ojibwe's transition from a hunter-gathering to agricultural lifestyle.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the Red Lakers' ancestral homelands (and eventual reservation) occupied a region rich in coniferous forests, though the western edge of their reservation transitioned to the grasslands that comprise the fertile-soiled Red River Valley. While 1880s White Earth consisted of forests and fields, Red Lake was largely forested.



<sup>8</sup> Melissa Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 142-160.

<sup>9</sup> Treuer, *Warrior Nation*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy*, 19, 69-72.

Figure 5: This zoomed-in view of the Marschner map shows the different environmental conditions at Red Lake and White Earth. The lower left corner of the image shows White Earth, encompassing terrain represented in yellows, reds, greens, and blues. Red Lake largely occupies territory of greys, pinks, and blues. Yellows represent grasslands; reds and greens hardwood forests; and greys, pinks, and blues coniferous ecosystems. Image citation: F.J. Marschner, *The Original Vegetation Map of Minnesota* [map], 1:500,000 (St. Paul, MN: North Central Forest Experiment Station, Forest Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1930). This is a 1974 colored version of the 1930 original.

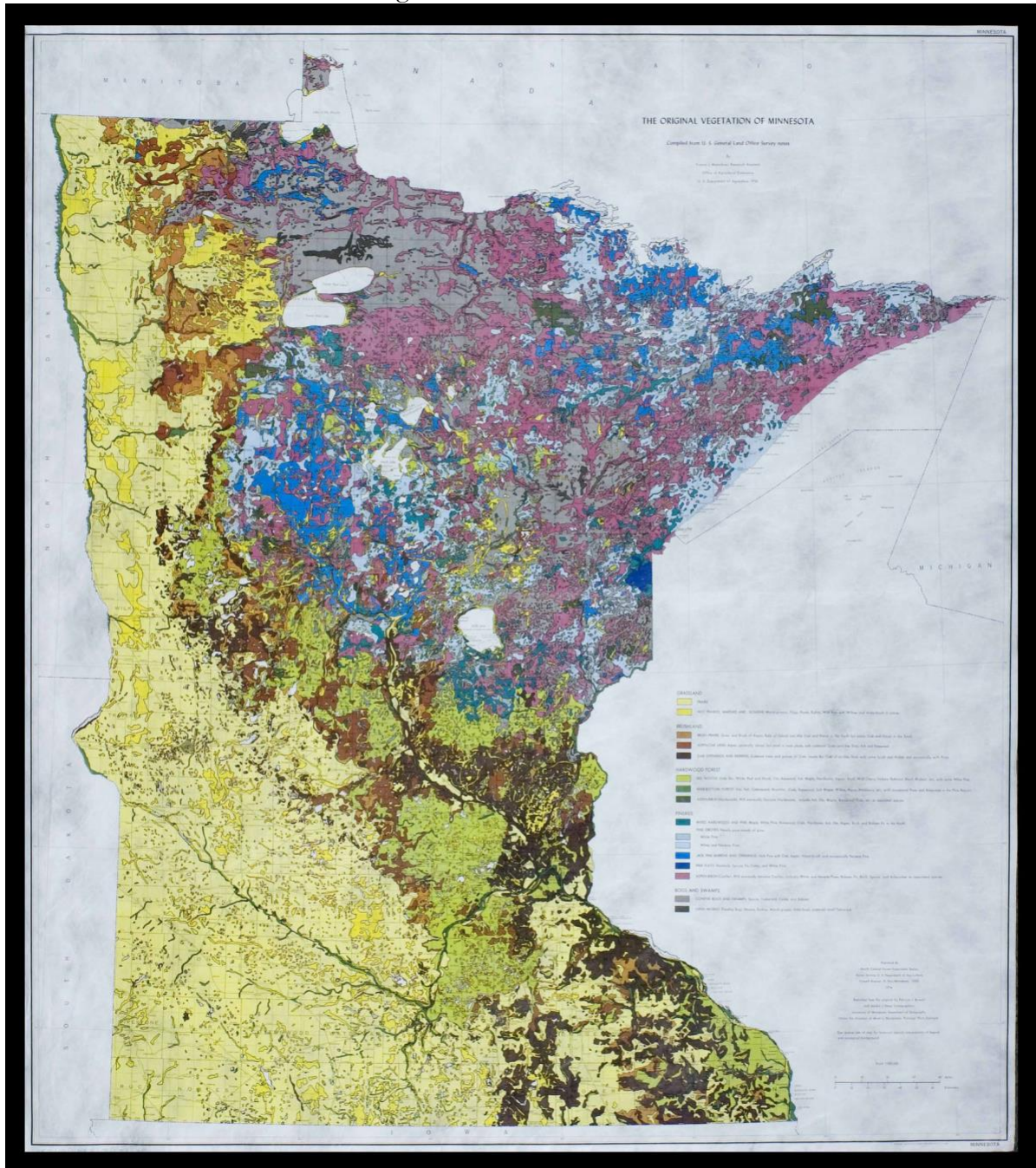


Figure 6: The Marschner map assists in understanding which lands were covered by Euroamericans in the mid nineteenth century. The yellows represent the grasslands—which



would yield agricultural harvests—and these lands extended to the Red River Valley west of Red Lake. Reading this map alongside railroad maps and land surveys of Minnesota explains (in part) the different experiences of the Ojibwe at White Earth and Red Lake. Image citation: F.J. Marschner, *The Original Vegetation Map of Minnesota* [map], 1:500,000 (St. Paul, MN: North Central Forest Experiment Station, Forest Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1930). This is a 1974 colored version of the 1930 original.

Understanding the environmental differences between the two reservations lays the groundwork for evaluating their differing visibility on federal maps. Not only do forests and fields create different experiences in traversing the landscape, but they also hold more or less interest to Euroamericans depending on contemporary economic incentives. Tracing Ojibwe-Euroamerican encounters and their relationships to the land from the fur trade to the reservation era elucidates the role the environment played in Red Lake’s evading the map.

### **1800s-1850s: The Fur Trade and Exploring the Mississippi “To Its Very Sources”**

The map William Clark completed in 1810 (that hangs in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library) shows Red Lake with acute interest. Lewis and Clark never ventured as far north as Minnesota, but Clark drew on existing geographical sources to fill in the details of regions he never visited. While geometrically inaccurate on Clark’s map, the lake is clearly labelled “Red Lake.” A swarm of other words surround the lake: some indicate latitudes, others list “NW Co.,” and others name lakes that form a chain leading southeast from Red Lake (see Figure 7). The presence of locations marked as “NW Co.”—representing the North West Company—reveals the degree to which Euroamerican geographic knowledge of Red Lake in the period converged with fur trade interests.



Figure 7: This zoomed-in view of Clark’s 1810 map shows Red Lake and surrounding waterways. The labels, such as “NW Co.,” indicate the fur trade knowledge that led to Red Lake’s appearance on the map. Notice how the chain of lakes running southeast from Red Lake conveys the experience of navigating these regions (as opposed to surveying them for commodification purposes). Image citation: William Clark, *Clark’s Map of 1810* [map], no scale given, from Lewis and Clark Expedition Maps and Receipt, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Euroamerican geographic knowledge of Red Lake from the fur trade emerged out of navigating the land. Before the fur trade became economically extinct in the 1840s, the northern forests of Minnesota abounded with trading posts where Ojibwe trappers exchanged furs for coveted items such as guns. Relations between early fur traders (especially of French origin) and the Ojibwe resulted in a new ethnic group, the Métis (mixed bloods). The Ojibwe, Métis, and European traders coexisted in what Richard White terms the “middle ground.”<sup>11</sup> The middle ground describes the process by which Europeans and Ojibwe mutually depended on each other for resources and survival, and the geographic

<sup>11</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy*, 28-35.

information that adorns European maps from this period grew out of these partnerships.<sup>12</sup> The chain of lakes on Clark's map linking Red Lake to nearby lakes did not develop from a settler colonial desire to survey the land (see Figure 7). Rather, fur trade companies created maps to navigate the waterways to manage the outposts that facilitated their economic success. In this way, Red Lake's visibility on fur trade-era maps did not threaten the Ojibwe's autonomy. While Red Lake's forested ecosystems came under European and Euroamerican scrutiny for the resources they could provide, the extraction of furs did not coincide with the national project of legibility for land commodification.

In the final years of the fur trade, the Louisiana Purchase redefined the United States' geographic interest in Minnesota. The parties sent to traverse this northern region were tasked with exploring the "Mississippi river...to its very sources."<sup>13</sup> The first of such explorers, Zebulon Pike, heeded orders from Thomas Jefferson "to make a survey of the river Mississippi to its source" in 1805.<sup>14</sup> Similar expeditions soon followed, and maps and travel narratives of the expeditions illuminate the type of geographic knowledge coveted by the federal government. Maps produced by Henry Schoolcraft in the 1830s and Joseph Nicollet in the 1840s illustrate attempts at depicting geometric accuracy of the curvature of the Mississippi and its tributaries (see Figures 8-10). The negative space surrounding the waterways on these maps indicates the degree to which these early expeditions focused more on surveying the immediate waterways and their banks than on the interior lands.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Congress, House, *Report intended to illustrate a map of the hydrological basin of the upper Mississippi River, made by J.N. Nicollet, while in employ under the Bureau of the Corps of Topographical Engineers*, January 11, 1845, 28<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1845, S. Vol. 2, serial 464, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Zebulon Pike, *An account of a voyage up the Mississippi River, from St. Louis to its source; made under the orders of the War Department by Lieut. Pike of the United States Army, in the years 1805 and 1806*, in *The Boston Review*, v. 4, appendix, pp. 25-52 (Boston, MA: Munroe and Francis, 1807), 25.

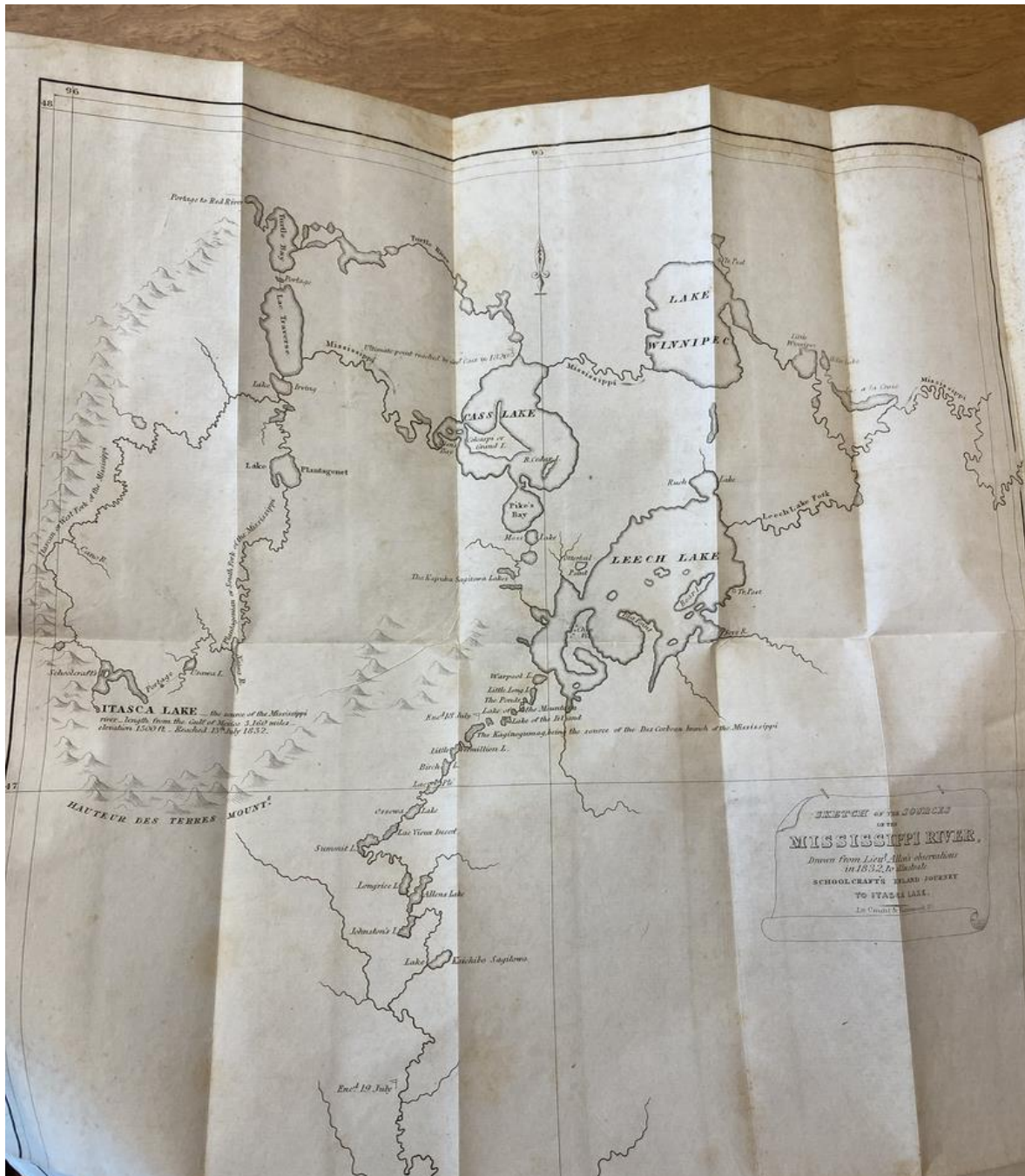


Figure 8: This map, prepared by Henry Schoolcraft from his 1830s travels along the Mississippi River, highlights the federal government's interest in documenting the geometric accuracy of the river and its surrounding waterways. On one of the peninsulas extending into Leech Lake, Schoolcraft marks the presence of an Ojibwe village, thereby making the group visible in this early survey of Western territory. Notice the absence of Red Lake from the map. Image citation: Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Sketch of the Sources of the Mississippi River* [map], no scale given, in *Narrative of an expedition through the upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1834).

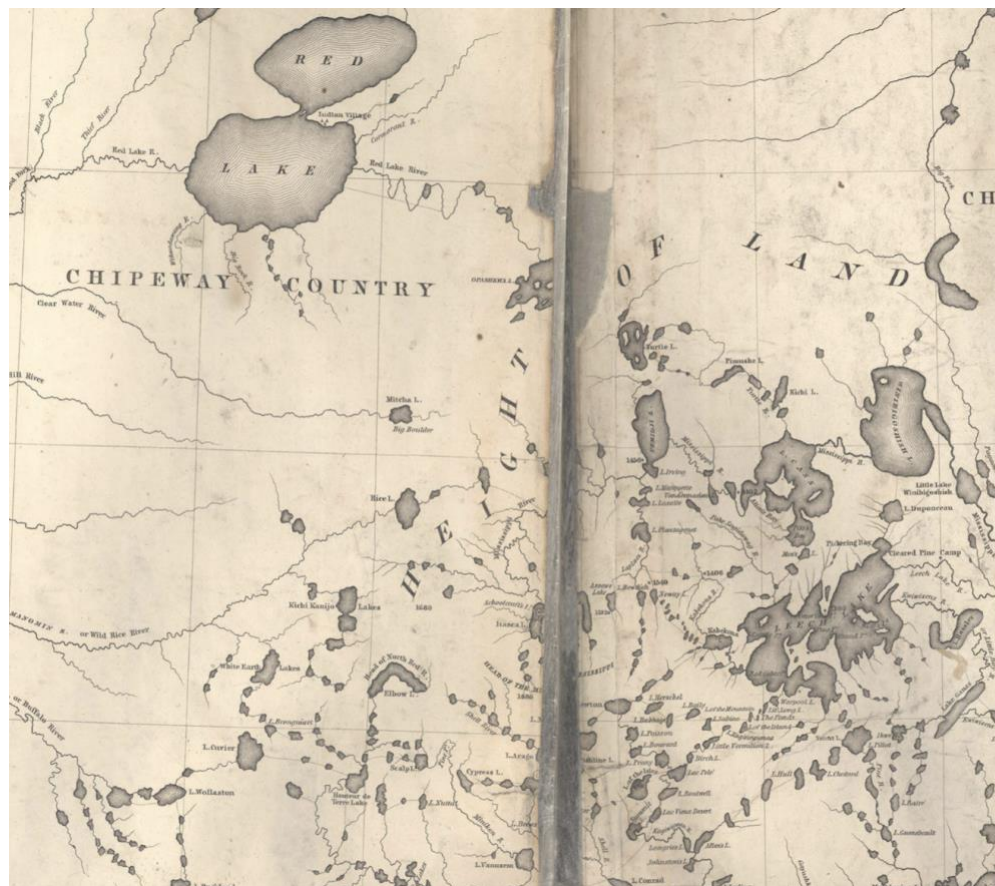


Figure 9: This close-up image of Joseph Nicollet’s survey of the Mississippi River region elucidates the extensive geographic knowledge accumulated about the Upper Mississippi as opposed to Red Lake (waterways not nearly as detailed at Red Lake). Nicollet labels the land at Red Lake as “Chipeway Country,” while the absence of this descriptor in the Upper Mississippi suggests this land lost its status as “Indian country” during the early surveys. Image citation: J.N. Nicollet and J.C. Frémont, *Map of the hydrological basin of the Mississippi River* [map], 1:600,000 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Congress, Senate, 1842).

The travel narratives, however, illuminate the other types of knowledge collected. The War Department “directed [Schoolcraft]” to record “all the statistical facts he can procure” about the indigenous peoples occupying the lands adjacent to the Mississippi River.<sup>15</sup> Schoolcraft’s 1834 expedition served as a surveillance mission to record the contemporary Ojibwe occupants of the land. Upon closer inspection, Schoolcraft’s map lists the precise location of the Ojibwe village he visited in the region surrounding Lake Itasca (the headwaters of the Mississippi River) (see Figure 8). The identity of these Ojibwe sheds

<sup>15</sup> Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Narrative of an expedition through the upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1834), iii, v.

light on their future dispossession: they are the Mississippi Band of Chippewa Indians, the band that experienced a forced relocation to the White Earth Reservation in 1867.<sup>16</sup> By marking them on his map in his “survey” of national territory, Schoolcraft initiated the project of legibility that would enable their removal.

Schoolcraft not only documented the Ojibwe’s presence, but he also coopted their geographic knowledge. He hired them as guides, “request[ing] [them] to delineate maps of the country” and asking them “to furnish the requisite number of hunting canoes and guides.”<sup>17</sup> By guiding Schoolcraft to Lake Itasca, where he “erect[ed] a flag staff” to claim the land for the United States, the Mississippi Band Ojibwe became unwitting partners in their own dispossession.<sup>18</sup> Other contemporary maps, such as those prepared by Nicollet, feature Ojibwe place names alongside English and French names (see Figure 9). Although this may signify Nicollet’s respect for the indigenous inhabitants, the visibility of Ojibwe names nevertheless indicates their complicity in working with the federal government to document the land.

Unlike the Mississippi Band Ojibwe, the Red Lakers lay outside the federal government’s immediate geographic interest. Schoolcraft’s map in his 1834 narrative does not even show Red Lake. And while Nicollet features Red Lake, the detail of the upper Mississippi River region does not carry over to Red Lake or to the waterways surrounding the lake. Nicollet does note the “Indian Village” at Red Lake, but the map gives the impression that the Red Lakers remain isolated. After all, “Chipeway Country” labels Red Lake, while the intricately depicted waterways of the Upper Mississippi region no longer bear such an epithet (see Figure 9). A different Schoolcraft map (created with “Lieut. J. Allen” in 1832) recognizes Red Lake’s heritage as a fur trading hub, documenting a chain of lakes reminiscent to what appears on Clark’s map and labeling it “Traders Route to R. Lake” (see Figure 10). These depictions highlight the degree to which Red Lake remained in the federal government’s consciousness because of its historical fur trade prowess. Nevertheless, the dawning era of Western settler colonialism led the federal government to favor the Mississippi River regions instead of the forested lands of northern Minnesota.

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<sup>16</sup> “Treaty between the United States of America and the Chippewa Indians of the Mississippi: concluded March 19, 1867; ratification advised, with amendment, April 8, 1867; amendment accepted April 8, 1867; proclaimed April 18, 1867,” *Treaties between the US and the Indians*, No. 196, Washington, D.C., 1867.

<sup>17</sup> Schoolcraft, *Narrative of an expedition*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

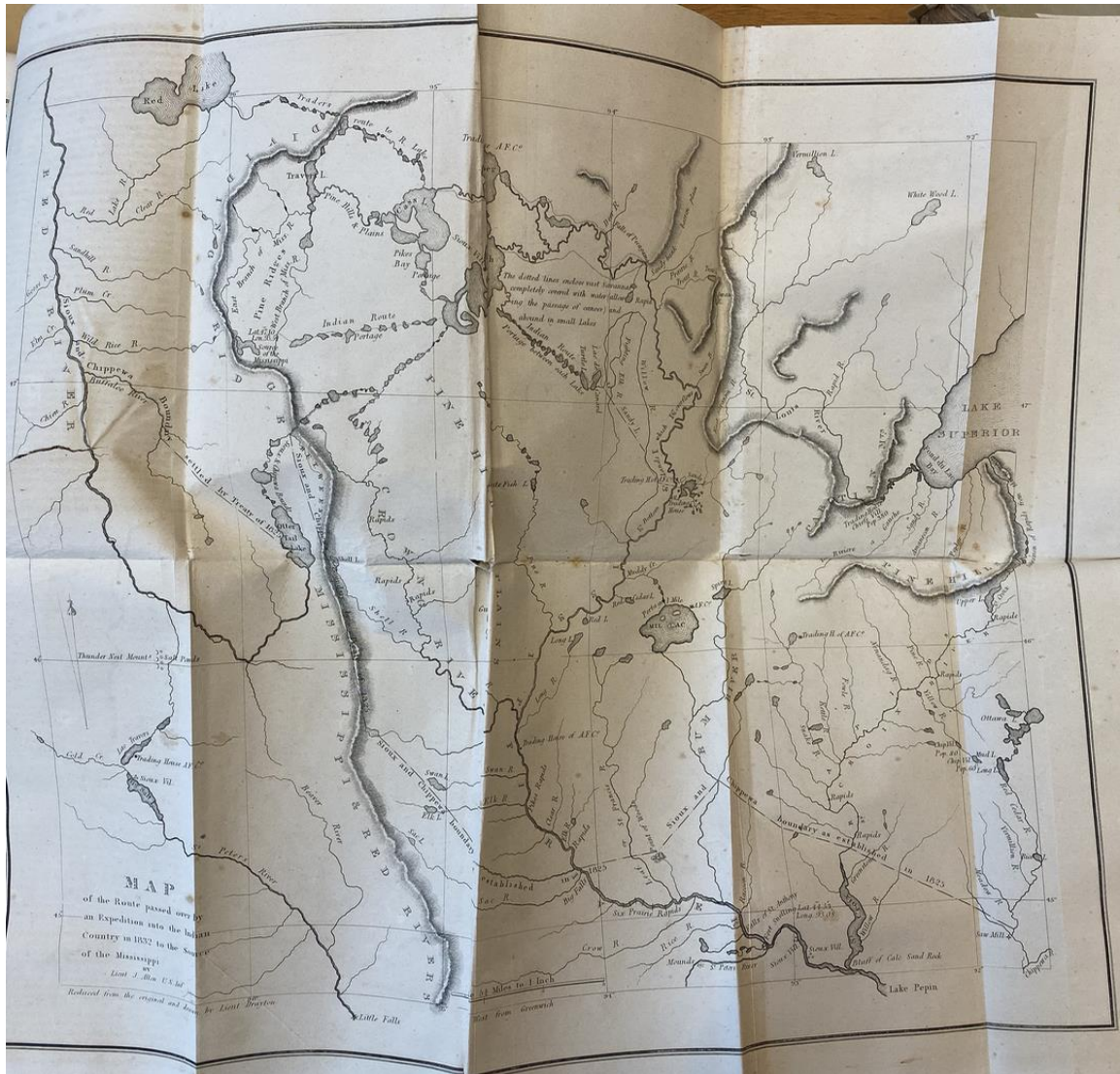


Figure 10: This Henry Schoolcraft map shows Red Lake. Notice how its geometric shape differs significantly from the portrayal on Clark’s map and Nicollet’s map, indicating the lack of extensive survey knowledge in the region. Schoolcraft uses a string of lakes to describe the “Traders route to R. Lake,” thereby recognizing the region’s value during the fur trade. Image citation: Henry R. Schoolcraft and J. Allen, *Map of the Route passed over by an Expedition into the Indian Country in 1832 to the Source of the Mississippi* [map], no scale given, in *Schoolcraft and Allen—expedition to northwest Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Gale & Seaton, 1834).

A travel narrative from 1824 suggests that Red Lake posed challenges for travel that outweighed visiting the region and its inhabitants in the early years of surveying. While Major Long, who led the expedition discussed in the narrative, was “proposed to travel along the northern boundary of the United States to Lake Superior,” local settlers informed him “that such an undertaking would be impracticable; the whole country from Red Lake to...Lake Superior, being covered with small lagoons and marshes” that would impede travel by

horse.<sup>19</sup> Such insight suggests that not geographic isolation, but rather environmental conditions, made Red Lake less relevant for Euroamericans to know in the era of surveys. Moreover, William Keating (the author of the narrative) writes that instead of fur trading, the region west of Red Lake must “with a view to the future improvement of the country” focus on producing “agricultural resources.”<sup>20</sup> The Euroamericans’ evolving designs for the land slowly erased Red Lake from cartographic consciousness.

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed how the Mississippi Band and Red Lake Ojibwe pursued varied relations with Euroamerican entities. While the Mississippi Band engaged in councils with Euroamerican expeditions, Red Lakers sent offerings to these meetings but restrained from visiting. As Schoolcraft recounts, a Red Lake man sent the federal party a peace pipe “as a token of friendship” in “remembrance of the power that permitted traders to come into their country to supply them with goods.”<sup>21</sup> As Red Lakers lived out the final years of middle ground trading relations, removed from initial federal surveys, the Mississippi Band Ojibwe unified to assist the federal project of documenting their ancestral lands.

### **1860s-1889: Railroads Carving a “Route Through Her Own Valleys”**

Before railroads wended their way across the Minnesota terrain, a system of oxcart trails traversed the landscape when the earliest Euroamerican settlers began to populate Minnesota. Assessing the trails’ routes alongside Marschner’s vegetation map of Minnesota underscores Keating’s conjecture that the future of the country’s “improvement” lay in its “agricultural resources.” While some trails, such as the Woods Trail, briefly cross the Upper Mississippi, most trails hug the western border of Minnesota and entirely bypass Red Lake (see Figure 11). The trails, termed the “Red River Trails,” have the Red River Valley as their destination: a region, according to Marschner’s map, of “prairie” and “wet prairie” that lent itself to agricultural pursuits (see Figures 6 and 11). Oxcart bounces along these trails, delivering agricultural yields to the burgeoning Twin Cities markets. The object of these trails foreshadowed the function of railroads in succeeding years.

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<sup>19</sup> William Keating, *Narrative of an expedition to the sources of St. Peter’s River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, etc.*, Volume 2 (Philadelphia: H.C. Carey & I. Lea, 1824), 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Schoolcraft, *Narrative of an expedition*, 71.



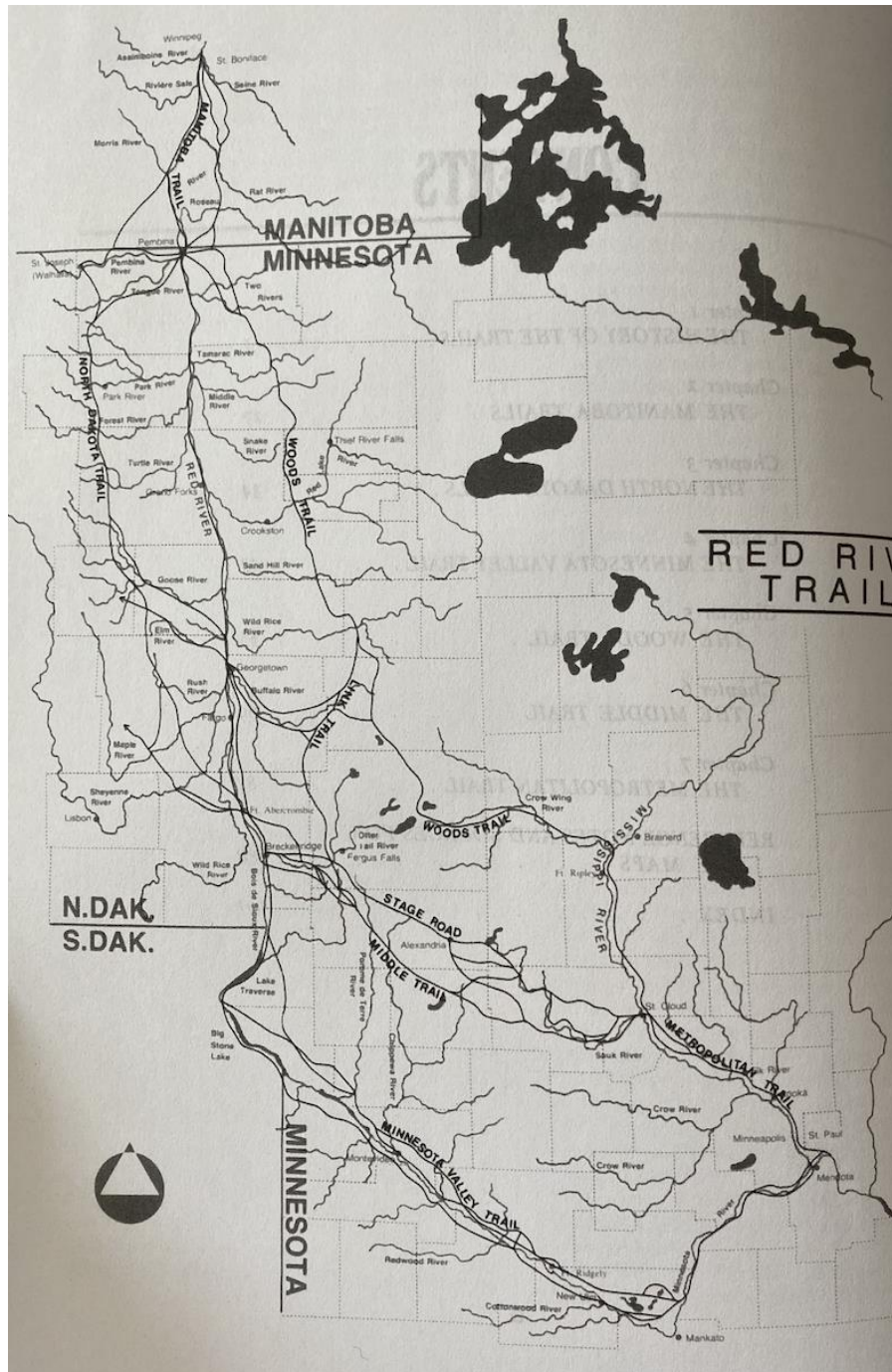


Figure 11: This map reconstructs the routes of the oxcart trails that preceded the earliest railroads in Minnesota. When viewed alongside the Marschner map (Figure 6), it is clear that the trails traverse the grasslands that yielded agricultural produce. Notice how some of the trails cross lands near the Mississippi Band Ojibwe's homelands; all trails steer clear of Red Lake. Image citation: Rhoda R. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman, Deborah M. Stultz, *Red River Trails* [map], no scale given, in *The Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement, 1820-1870* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979).

Indeed, soon after Minnesota gained statehood in 1858, Governor Alexander Ramsey praised the benefits of railroads in his *Inaugural Address*. Ramsey declared that “a railroad to the Pacific from some proper point in the Mississippi valley, is already regarded as too important to be longer delayed. It would be most advantageous to...Minnesota...that the question should be determined in favor of the route through her own valleys.”<sup>22</sup> Ramsey’s quote anticipates the geographic route the transcontinental line would take (to the Pacific) as the young state helped build the national empire from coast to coast (see Figures 16 and 17).

The oxcart trails also defined the railroads’ routes. While Minnesota contributed to the transcontinental railroad goal, the railroads also functioned locally to deliver prospective homesteaders to farmlands and to shuttle produce to Twin Cities and Eastern markets. In *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, William Cronon argues that the railroads’ ability to forge “intimate linkages” between city and country allowed Chicago to emerge as an economic power.<sup>23</sup> The agricultural produce, such as grain, streaming in from the hinterlands empowered Chicago, and this model can also be applied to the Twin Cities in the mid nineteenth century. When the federal government passed the Homestead Act in 1862—granting anyone willing to settle and farm 160-acre plots of land in the West—Minnesota’s population exponentially increased by 45% in three years.<sup>24</sup> The converging demographic shifts and railroad expansion in the state determined the rapidity and patterns of settlement.

The process by which the land was surveyed and granted to railroads comes to bear on the experiences of the Mississippi Band and Red Lake Ojibwe in the 1860s and 1870s. In 1864, Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act, granting the Northern Pacific Railroad (based in St. Paul) a large tract of public land on which to construct their transcontinental line.<sup>25</sup> The act also allowed the railroad company to sell acreage to settlers on either side of their to-be-constructed line as reimbursement for their enterprise.<sup>26</sup> The railroad land grant and terms of the Homestead Act required the land to be officially surveyed, and therefore

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander Ramsey, *Inaugural Address* (St. Paul: Minnesotian and Times Printing Company, 1860), 22.

<sup>23</sup> William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), xv.

<sup>24</sup> *An Act to secure Homesteads to actual Settlers on the Public Domain*, Public Law, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 12 (1862): 392-393; Jocelyn Wills, *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul, 1849-1883* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 108-9.

<sup>25</sup> *An Act granting Lands to aid in the Construction of a Railroad and Telegraph Line from Lake Superior to Puget’s Sound, on the Pacific Coast, by the Northern Route*, Public Law, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 13 (1864): 365-372.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

legible, to the federal government. The initial, exploratory surveys that the Mississippi Band Ojibwe participated in decades earlier reached new heights in the 1860s to appease white land hunger and railroad developments.

Turning to Figure 1, it is clear that the Mississippi Band's ancestral lands were fully legible to the federal government by 1866. When read alongside a map of the railroad lines completed in Minnesota by 1870, the surveys appear to facilitate the routes of the railroads (see Figure 12). The Ojibwe's legibility also enabled dispossession, and curiously, the Mississippi Band was relocated to the White Earth Reservation (that lay just beyond the furthest extent of the surveys) only a year after this 1866 map was prepared.<sup>27</sup> By relocating the Mississippi Band to White Earth, the federal government divorced the Ojibwe from the ancestral lands they willingly shared with explorers decades earlier.

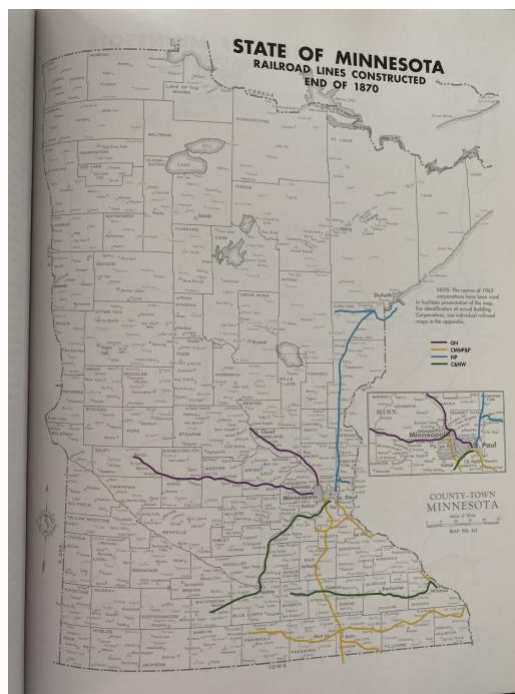


Figure 12: This map shows the railroad lines that were completed by 1870 in Minnesota. Notice how closely the railroads encroached upon the Mississippi Band Ojibwe's ancestral lands. Compare to Figure 1 to view in context of surveys and railroad land grants. Image citation: Richard S. Prosser, *State of Minnesota Railroad Lines Constructed End of 1870* [map], in *Rails to the Northern Star: A Minnesota Railroad Atlas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> "Treaty between the United States of America and the Chippewa Indians of the Mississippi: concluded March 19, 1867; ratification advised, with amendment, April 8, 1867; amendment accepted April 8, 1867; proclaimed April 18, 1867," *Treaties between the US and the Indians*, No. 196, Washington, D.C., 1867.

In a milieu of rapid Euroamerican settlement and railroad expansion, the federal government resorted to an assimilatory reservation policy in their establishment of White Earth. While granting the White Earth Ojibwe a swath of land encompassing grasslands served to encourage their transition to agriculture, setting aside coveted agricultural lands for the Ojibwe's benefit also placed the White Earth Ojibwe in the line of fire. By the 1870s, the Northern Pacific Railroad passed only 20 miles south of White Earth—through Detroit—and Euroamerican settlements sprang up along the line, leading to white encroachment at the reservation.<sup>28</sup> An 1887 map advertising the Northern Pacific Railroad's lands for sale near Detroit shows White Earth at the top of the map, and the extension of the railroad's land grant within reservation lines highlights the shaky security the reservation offered to its inhabitants in a region under high demand from railroads and settlers (see Figure 13). A Northern Pacific Railroad guide book, *The Great Northwest*, even features the White Earth Reservation as a tourist destination. The book urges Euroamericans to visit “this beautiful reservation, as fair a country as the sun ever shone upon,” stressing that visitors “are always received with kindness.”<sup>29</sup> The reservation's proximity to coveted lands, in addition to ploys by the railroad to entice Euroamericans to the lands in and around the reservation, exposes the power Euroamerican land interests had in endangering indigenous land sovereignty.

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<sup>28</sup> *Description of the lands and country along the line of the Northern Pacific Railroad* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1884).

<sup>29</sup> *The Great Northwest: A guide-book and itinerary for the use of tourists and travelers over the lines of the Northern Pacific Railroad, its branches and allied lines* (St. Paul: W.C. Riley, 1889), 94-96.

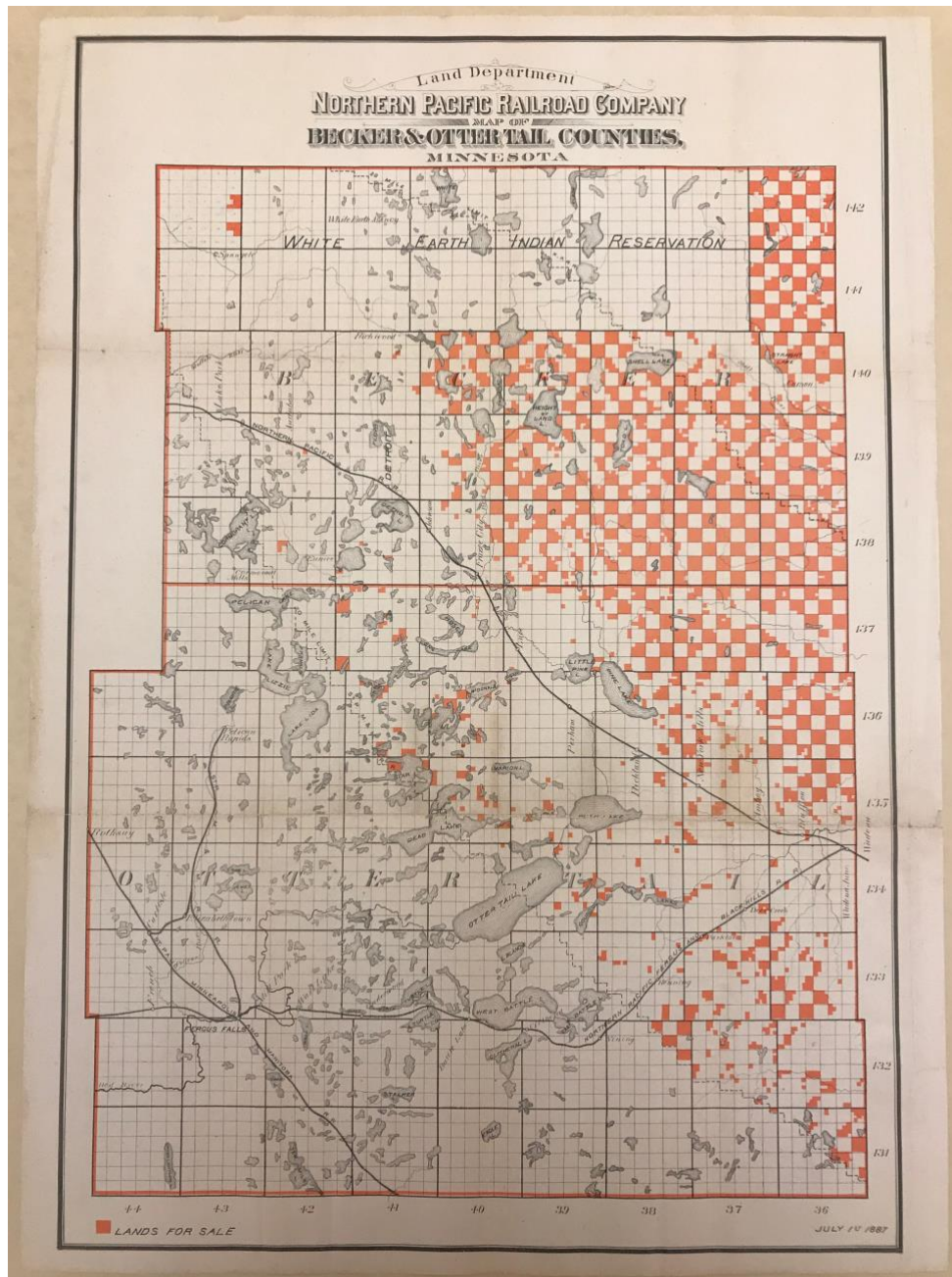


Figure 13: This map shows lands for sale by the Northern Pacific Railway to encourage settlement along their line. Notice the White Earth Reservation at the top of the map; the land grant extends into the reservation (represented by the staircase line). This map emphasizes that White Earth land was highly coveted by Euroamericans, and consequently made visible and available for commodification through the joint pursuits of railroad companies and public surveys. Image citation: Northern Pacific Railroad Land Department, *Map of Becker and Otter Tail Counties, Minnesota* [map] (St. Paul: Land Department, Northern Pacific Railroad, 1887).

The extension of the Northern Pacific’s land grant into the reservation encouraged the surveying of reservation lands, which made the White Earth Ojibwe legible twice over: once on their ancestral lands and once again on their reservation. The surveyors first arrived at White Earth in the early 1870s—coinciding with Northern Pacific Railroad developments—and by 1877, Indian agent Lewis Stowe wrote to the Surveyor General of Minnesota requesting the “latest map of Minnesota,” as he was “very anxious to procure one with the reservation surveyed thereon.”<sup>30</sup> By “procur[ing]” a surveyed map of the reservation, Indian agent Stowe (and his successors) could monitor the whereabouts and activities of the Ojibwe (see Figure 14). The process of surveying reservation lands gifted the federal government knowledge of what land existed and how it was/could be used, which explains their ability to coerce the Ojibwe into taking individual land allotments in the Nelson Act of 1889.

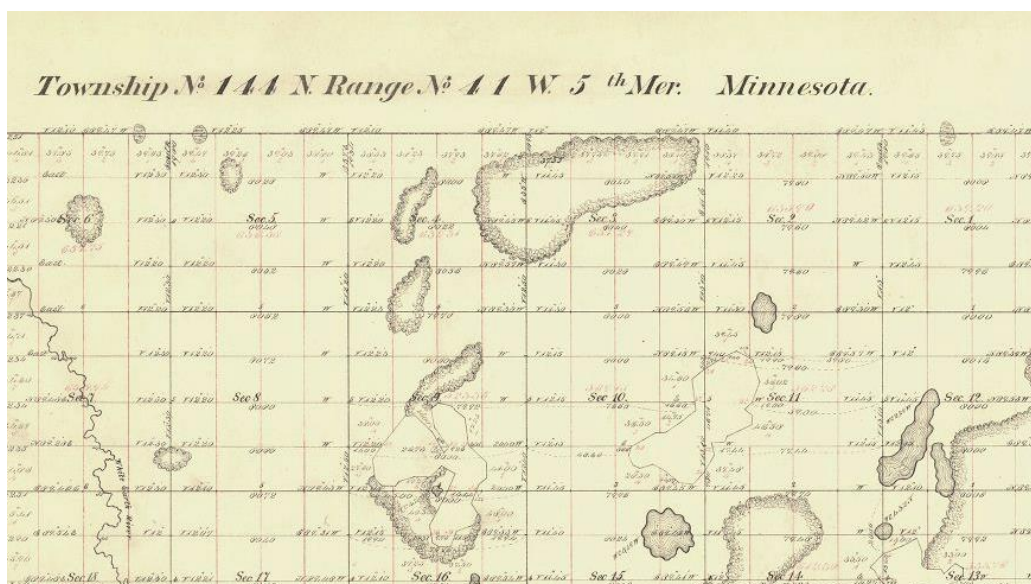


Figure 14: This excerpted view of a township plat at White Earth (from 1871) showcases the extent of knowledge the federal government accumulated about the land. The survey documents the precise locations of tree-covered regions, and the grid facilitated the quantification of land that made allotment possible and easy to monitor. Image citation: “Survey Details – BLM GLO Records,” Township 144 N – 41 W, Original Survey (1871), Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, U.S. Department of the Interior, Accessed November 8, 2019, [https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm\\_id=234111&sid=ryx0vnfb.gal#surveyDetailsTabIndex=0](https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm_id=234111&sid=ryx0vnfb.gal#surveyDetailsTabIndex=0).

<sup>30</sup> Lewis Stowe, Letter Book, 1876-1877, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 96.

According to the council minutes during the Nelson Act negotiations, though, the White Earth Ojibwe not only complied with the act but also endorsed it. Chief Wah-on-ah-quod's response, that he would "overflow with joy" at the terms, appears too positive considering their history of dispossession.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, reevaluating mid-nineteenth-century GLO and county atlas maps, and situating these maps in the long history of Ojibwe participation in federal survey processes, gestures to an explanation. As explorers like Schoolcraft appropriated Mississippi Band Ojibwe geographic knowledge for federal purposes, Ojibwe sovereignty gradually slipped away until gridded surveys displaced Ojibwe presence on the land. For the White Earth Ojibwe, receiving allotments became an opportunity to reinsert themselves into the cartographic narrative after relocation, albeit under the terms and using the standards of land commodification. County atlases from the early twentieth century feature White Earth Ojibwe as owning parcels of land, highlighting the visibility that results from reclaiming land in the form of allotments (see Figure 15). Nevertheless, although surveying empowered White Earth Ojibwe to receive individual land allotments, the legibility surveying afforded also paved the way for expropriation—something that White Earth Ojibwe faced in the years following the Nelson Act.



Figure 15: Although difficult to discern, Ojibwe names label some of the allotments surrounding this lake at White Earth in a 1911 county atlas. This reveals that allotment (somewhat) empowered the White Earth Ojibwe to reclaim land, albeit under federal terms. Image citation: *Standard Atlas of Becker County, Minnesota* (Chicago, IL: Ogle & Co., 1911), 97.

<sup>31</sup> "Minutes of Councils Called to Accept the Act of 1889," White Earth Councils, 80.

While agricultural and railroad interests defined the White Earth Ojibwe's experiences leading up to the Nelson Act, environmental circumstances dictated the Red Lakers' interactions with Euroamerican influences. Red Lakers, following the fur trade legacy, remained largely removed from Euroamerican entanglements. As most of Red Lake land lay in pine forests, the land did not attract the interests of those traversing the oxcart trails west of the reservation. Returning to the GLO and county atlas maps of the mid nineteenth century reinforces that the federal government remained largely ignorant of Red Lake lands (see Figures 1-4).

One particular moment in Red Lake history reveals the degree to which their environmental situation determined their path leading up to the Nelson Act. Red Lakers, unlike the White Earth Ojibwe, always remained on their ancestral lands, but they nevertheless ceded some of their lands through treaties. In 1863, the federal government approached the Red Lake Band and encouraged them to cede their lands stretching west of Red Lake to the Red River Valley.<sup>32</sup> When reading this treaty alongside Marschner's vegetation map and the map of the oxcart trails, the agricultural promise of the Red River Valley appears to have determined the federal government's desire for the lands (see Figures 6 and 11). The Red Lakers ceded the lands and in so doing agreed to occupy their remaining homelands in what officially became their reservation.<sup>33</sup> Red Lakers experienced dispossession as did the White Earth Ojibwe, but by inhabiting non-coveted lands, they remained out of federal consciousness for a longer duration.

Revisiting Figures 1-4 undermines the assumption that Red Lake remained unsurveyed because it was geographically isolated. After Red Lakers ceded lands in the Red River Valley, GLO and atlas maps reveal how quickly the grid extended into the ceded lands. The railroads soon followed suit, and their focus on tapping into agricultural resources and extending to the Pacific coast made traversing Red Lake lands irrelevant for their purposes (see Figures 16 and 17). The Red River Valley resides equally as far away as Red Lake, challenging the use of geographic isolation to explain Red Lake's eluding the grid. If anything, the argument presented in the 1824 travel narrative—that the forested and swampy

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<sup>32</sup> "Treaty between the United States of America and the Red Lake and Pembina bands of Chippewas: concluded March 2, 1863: ratification advised by Senate with amendments March 1, 1864: amendments accepted April 12, 1864: proclaimed May 5, 1864," Washington, D.C., s.n., 1864.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



environment at Red Lake “rendered [the land] impenetrable”—appears a more suitable explanation for why Red Lake evaded surveys until the 1890s.<sup>34</sup>

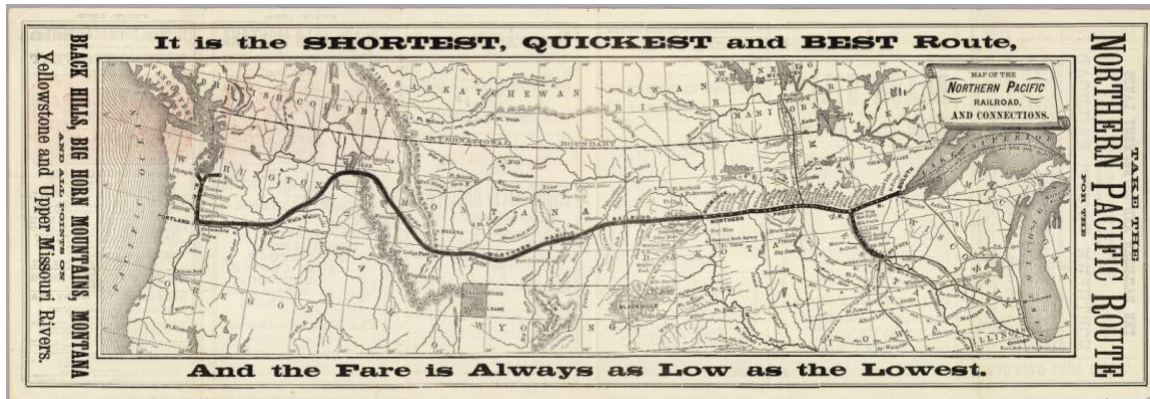


Figure 16: This 1879 map of the Northern Pacific’s railway line underscores the railroad’s interest in reaching the western seaboard. In this process, the lands west of the Twin Cities also became subsumed into the national market by providing agricultural produce for metropolitan areas. Image citation: Northern Pacific Railroad Company, *Map of the Northern Pacific Railroads and Connections* [map], 1:7,500,000 (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1879).

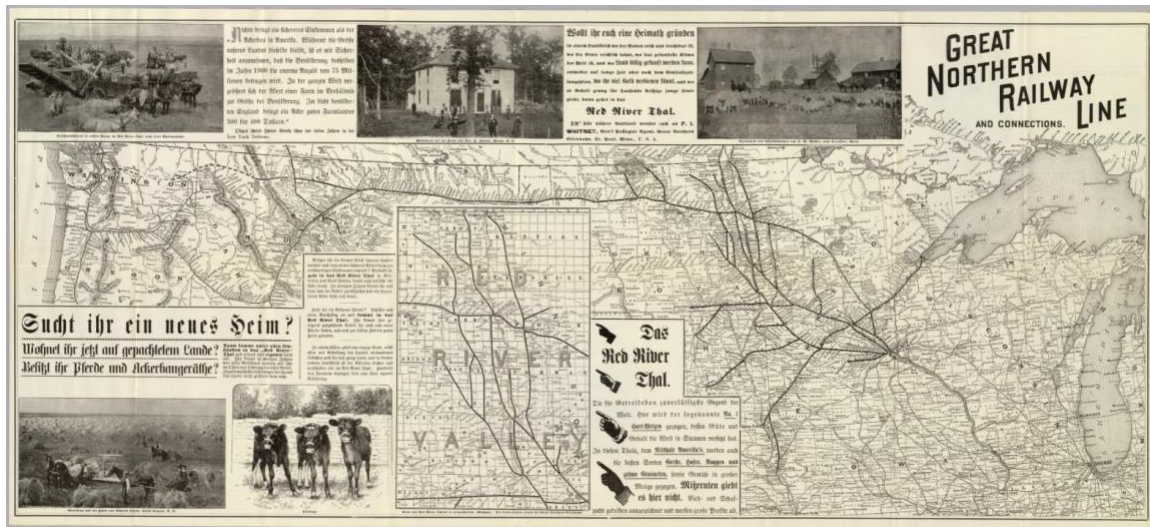


Figure 17: Another transcontinental railroad line, the Great Northern, prepared a map in German in 1892 to attract prospective settlers west. While the line stretches to the West, the abundance of regional lines in the Red River Valley (and the inset featuring the valley) reveals that the regions just south and west of Red Lake were highly coveted by settlers. Notice how Red Lake itself lies just beyond the area of interest, whereas White Earth is subsumed by it. Image citation: Great Northern Railway Company, *Great Northern Railway line and connections* [map], 1:2,730,000 (St. Paul, MN: Great Northern Eisenbahn, 1892).

<sup>34</sup> Keating, *Narrative of an expedition*, 58.

The lack of decent infrastructure—even roads—to Red Lake illuminates the challenges facing the federal government in gaining knowledge of the land. While the government’s disinterest in the land fostered ignorance, the absence of navigable roads reinforced this ignorance. In 1870s surveys conducted at White Earth, a “Red Lake Wagon Road” runs through some of the township plats (see Figure 18). Red Lake remained so removed from the railroad that the White Earth Agency delivered Red Lake’s mail on a weekly basis. In White Earth’s council minutes in 1889, Chief Kesh-ke-we-gah-bowe complains that the road to Red Lake is “a very bad one,” leading him to repair his wagon weekly to “carry...the mail.”<sup>35</sup> That White Earth Ojibwe struggled to reach Red Lake via their road underscores the multiplicity of factors leading to Red Lake’s cartographic invisibility.

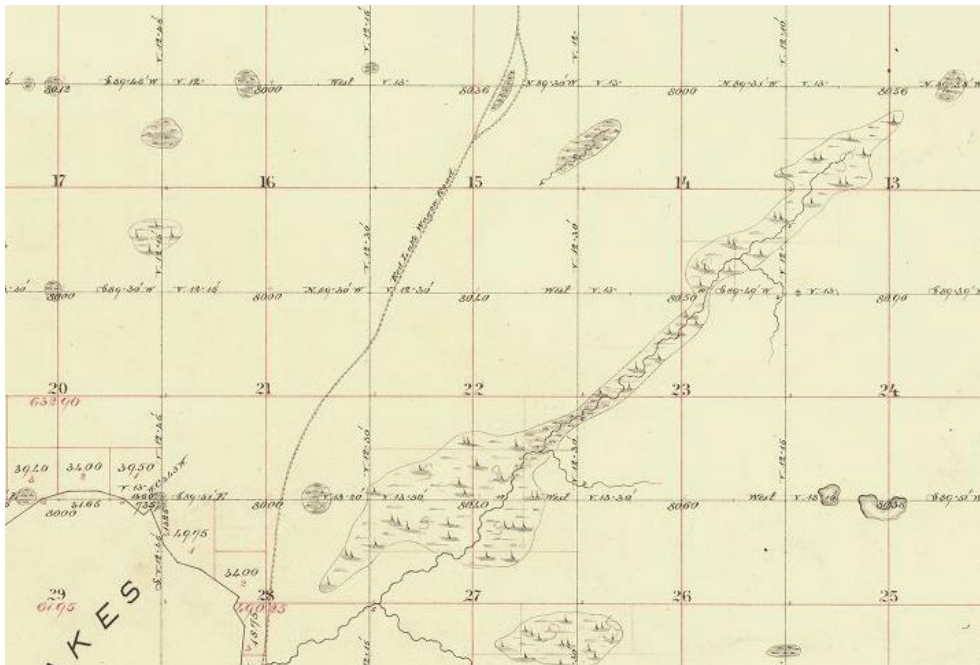


Figure 18: This close-up image of a township surveyed at White Earth in 1874 shows the “Red Lake Wagon Road” that served as the main avenue to Red Lake. In contrast to the railroad lines cropping up along the borders of White Earth, Red Lake remained spared of this encroachment. The most accessible route to Red Lake was along this “very bad” wagon road. Image citation: “Survey Details – BLM GLO Records,” Township 144 N – 39 W, Original Survey (1874), Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, U.S. Department of the Interior, Accessed November 8, 2019, [https://gloreports.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm\\_id=115193&sid=zcvrcb5d.ep5#surveyDetailsTabIndex=1](https://gloreports.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm_id=115193&sid=zcvrcb5d.ep5#surveyDetailsTabIndex=1).

<sup>35</sup> “Minutes of Councils Called to Accept the Act of 1889,” White Earth Councils, 88.

Red Lakers' occupation of ancestral lands and limited contact with Euroamerican influences impassioned their leaders during the Nelson Act negotiations. Whereas the White Earth Ojibwe greeted the act with (mostly) enthusiasm, the Red Lakers resisted allotment because their connection to their ancestral lands had never been shattered. Comments such as "I love my reservation very much" and "we own the land in common whenever we are a community" divulge the chiefs' gratitude and appreciation for their land in its contemporary condition.<sup>36</sup> And without survey knowledge of the reservation, the federal commission could only agree that allotting the reservation in the same manner as White Earth would indeed be "impossible."<sup>37</sup> More than anything else, perhaps the ancestral and emotional connections to land defined the White Earth and Red Lake Ojibwe's differences in accepting the Nelson Act.

### **Escaping Notice: The Land as Producing Ignorance**

Comparing the White Earth and Red Lake Ojibwe's ancestral and reservation lands suggests that the land itself possesses agency over the process of becoming visible. While the upper reaches of the Mississippi River invited early explorers into the White Earth Ojibwe's homelands, Red Lake remained largely "impenetrable" except to those adept at navigating "the principal streams in bark canoes."<sup>38</sup>

If federal maps reveal Euroamerican ignorance of Red Lake lands, then Red Lakers' experiences highlight the degree to which the land cloaked itself in an aura of mystery—so that even its inhabitants remained ignorant of the goings-on upon the land. When the Ojibwe first settled at Red Lake around 1760, they ousted its contemporary inhabitants, the Dakota, through violent conflict. Yet, unknown to the Ojibwe, a secret village of Dakota continued to live at Red Lake for the following 60 years.<sup>39</sup> As Ojibwe historian William Warren recounts, the Dakota "built a high embankment of earth" and "took every means in their power to escape the notice of the Ojibways."<sup>40</sup> The land facilitated the protection of the Dakota and the ignorance of the Red Lake Ojibwe until 1820, at which time the Ojibwe

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<sup>36</sup> "Minutes of Councils Called to Accept the Act of 1889," Red Lake Councils, 39, 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Keating, *Narrative of an expedition*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Treuer, *Warrior Nation*, 9, 39-41.

<sup>40</sup> William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway People* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1885), 356.

routed the village.<sup>41</sup> While environmental factors, Euroamerican designs for the land, and Red Lake Ojibwe solidarity all contributed to the production of cartographic ignorance at Red Lake, the survival of the undetected Dakota village for six decades stresses that the land itself staked a claim in its persistent evasion of the map.

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<sup>41</sup> Treuer, *Warrior Nation*, 39-41.