

Al Wilkins Helped Conquer West; In Montana More Than 62 Years

By AL H. WILKINS
As Told to
Grace Stone Coates

BOYS who grew up in Minnesota when I did felt the strain of two conflicts; the greater one with the south, and the lesser one with the Sioux Indians, who had gone on the war path in the spring of 1862 and were killing white settlers and burning their homes.

I was born at Faribault, Rice county, Minnesota. My father, G. D. Wilkins, was a prosperous merchant and land owner before the war of the rebellion started. He furnished supplies for the families of enlisted men as long as he had a sack of flour in his store, for my two brothers had enlisted in the Union army; and when the war ended my father found himself financially ruined. He was making a living hauling supplies for the northern forces, but no worse off than many other one-time wealthy men whom the war had reduced to poverty.

After the great conflict between the states was ended, the troops were sent north to settle the Indian troubles. The main stronghold of the Sioux Indians was at Camp Reuss, now a government reserve. Here they met a decisive defeat from General Sibley's forces, and 37 white captives, women and children, were recovered from them. Their warriors, what were left of them, were taken prisoners and tried for murder, and 39 of them, found guilty, were hung on one scaffold at Mankato, Minn. My brother and half-brother, William Wilkins and Robert Starbeck, and my father witnessed this execution. Some of the Indians sang their war chant as they mounted the scaffold; others made derisive pantomimes of the way they had handled their white women captives; and some were dancing their war dances as the great trap was sprung. These Indians were of the tribe known as the "Cutthroat" Sioux. The remnant of them were driven into Canadian territory, and I shall have more to tell of these later on.

In the spring of 1868 my father moved to what is now known as Montevideo, Minn., and started to lay out a townsite which he called Chippeway City. The name was afterward changed. Here white settlers were often surprised by war parties of the Cutthroat or Santee Sioux.

We had one of the largest houses in the old town of Chippeway City, built of hewn oak logs so thick they were bullet proof. The house served as a fort many times during the Indian troubles. My first memories of my brothers are of seeing them in this house, with one Albert Green, who was reared by my parents, and served through the war in the Union army with my brothers. Robert Starbeck came home without a scratch, but the other two boys received slight wounds that remained noticeable through life.

Proves in Homestead

My father proved up on a homestead adjoining Chippeway City, where we lived until 1870. In that year my father and mother separated. My mother remained on the homestead with my baby sister and next older brother and my half-brother, Robert Starbeck. My father and I, three half-sisters and a half-brother moved west to the Otter Tail river, seven miles west of Fergus Falls. We soon went farther west, settling at last on Red Lake river where the city of Crookston now stands. The Pembina branch of the Northern Pacific railroad was then under construction and Crookston, at the crossing of the Red Lake river, gave promise of becoming a thriving young town. A year later the federal government brought suit against the railroad company, and all the rolling stock was taken off the Pembina branch. All contract work was brought to a standstill. Father had been working teams on the road grading contract, and supplying cord wood on contract for the wood burning engines. With the shutting off of this work he was again left without resources. He had also run a ferryboat that did a flourishing business as long as the construction work was going on; but with everything shut down, and only part-pay

for the work already done, conditions looked bad.

Freight and supplies had to be hauled 70 miles. We had teams on the road hauling supplies for the village in the spring of 1872, when a deputy United States marshal charged us with freighting in whisky contrary to law, claiming that Crookston was on the Indian reservation. For this violation he was going to arrest father and confiscate his teams. A little trouble took place right there, and the officer went away with a sore head. While he was deputizing 20 men to storm our home and make the arrest, father was just as diligently getting himself and teams across the Canadian line, down the Red river to old Fort Gary, now the beautiful city of Winnipeg.

He found employment for himself and teams that summer, and in the fall sold all but one team. In the meantime he had communicated with the secretary of the interior at Washington, D. C., and received official assurance that he had violated no law, that his case had been looked into and he exonerated, and the marshal dismissed. He came back to Crookston in the fall of 1872, loaded all our belongings in our old ferry boat, and we floated down Red Lake river to Grand Forks, N. D., and down the Red River of the North to old Fort Gary.

Six Days on River

We had built a little cabin on the boat and arranged sweep oars at bow and stern, so that we could keep the boat in midstream or hold it against the shore for landing. I don't remember the exact distance from Crookston to Winnipeg, but I remember well that it took us six days to make the voyage. We made the journey without accident, pulling ashore at Grand Forks to get supplies. I remember counting the buildings at Grand Forks—seven of them: one small store, a saloon, a hotel and four dwelling houses made up the city, in 1872.

Many of the inhabitants of the lower Red river valley were Scotch half bloods. It was a usual sight to see these half bloods, morning, noon or night, out with their dipnets dipping away to catch fish for the immediate meal. There seemed no thought for the morrow to disturb them; and as we floated past them they would often shout: "Have you got any flour?" Some of them did not see flour once a year. They lived on fish and wild meats.

The Red river was navigable as far as Crookston in those days. Small steamboats plying the river did quite a business until the advent of the railroad. It seemed strange when I was back there for a visit in 1923 to see the bottom of that once great river plainly visible, with hardly enough water in the stream to supply the towns along its banks.

At Winnipeg we sold our flatboat, rented a house in a little settlement on the south bank of the river, called St. Boniface, and lived there until spring of 1874. Once settled, father loaded his wagon with Indian trinkets and supplies, headed into the British northwest territories and established a trading post in what were then known as the Riding mountains, 150 miles northwest of Winnipeg. Here he traded with the Sioux tribe that had been driven out of Minnesota in 1862. These Indians were good hunters and trappers, and father came home twice a year with loads of furs.

One by one my three half-sisters had married during the two years father had been making trips to his trading post, and when he returned in the spring of 1874 I was the only one left at home. Father had faced the danger of these journeys alone; but this year he heard that a strong force of British police were to be sent up into the northwest territories. In view of this additional protection he decided to take me with him rather than leave me at Winnipeg alone. He intended to go back to the post, transfer the remnants of his winter stock of goods to his wagon—drawn by a team of big mules—and under the protection of the British police force go as far west as they went, trading with the Indians on the way.

On this return trip father had hired half-breeds to bring in him and his furs with a string of Red river carts. These vehicles would be a novel sight to the present generation. There was not a scrap of iron on them, nor on the harness used with them. Spokes, felloes and hubs of the six-foot wheels were made of hardwood. Rawhide was stretched over the felloes for tires. Hardwood pins through the outer ends of the axles held the wheels on. The shafts were 2 by 4 inch hardwood sticks, which formed part of the bed timbers. The cart beds were perhaps 4 by 6 feet. To these enormous looking vehicles the Indians drove dwarf horses or cattle, with a load of 800 to 1,000 pounds to each cart. One man usually drove three carts. With this caravan of Red river carts we left Winnipeg.

Picture a father and son breaking home ties! My three half-sisters and half-brother bade us goodbye, knowing well that our intended trip through the wilds was a dangerous one. All of them—Hulda, Virginia, Georgia and my brother William—stood waving to us until we were lost in the distance.

We were on the road eight days with the half breeds and their carts, making about 20 miles a day. It rained on us half the time, and we had no protection but the clothes we wore. The cargo on each cart was shielded by a rawhide cover stretched down tight, but there was no room

under the rawhide for a person. At camp and on the road we were as wholly exposed to the storm as the dumb brutes were.

Stricken With Measles

On the third day out I came down with the measles. I had been in the rain all day, and the chill of the storm made the measles strike in, and I was a very sick boy. We were 150 miles from a doctor. Fortunately for me, we reached our trading post on the eighth day; and I lay in a comfortable bed, unconscious, for five days. Our only medicine was a quart of brandy. Father mixed this into hot drinks, and gave it to me with a spoon. The brandy and the warm blankets did the business, and on the fifth day the measles broke out on me, and consciousness returned.

I remember my father as the happiest man on the plains that day. It didn't take me long to get well after that, and by the time the mounted police arrived at our post we were ready for the long trip into the wilderness. We were to cross great plains where there were only buffalo and other wild animals, Indians, and a few white traders like ourselves.

The detachment of mounted police reached our post May 10, 1874, and camped there over night. They were nearly all men under 30. As I remember them they remind me now of any college group on dress parade. Their uniform was khaki colored pants and shirt and a bright red coat, topped off with a red and white cap. We learned later that many of the boys were sons of aristocrats, boys who had been a little wild, whose titled fathers had crowded them overseas and into the police force to quiet them down. They were a jolly bunch; well met, and the evening of their arrival we called on the officer in command, Colonel Walsh. When we told him of our intention to go into the northwest territories he advised us to stay close to his command, and not take the risk of being in that savage country by ourselves. The colonel was a real man, a born officer, who held the esteem of his little army.

First Real Adventure

When the command broke camp and started off on a rutted half breed cart trail we pulled in behind them with our mule team pulling our covered wagon, loaded with trading goods. Here was my first real adventure as a frontiersman. We had two guns and a six-shooter. I had been taught in early boyhood how to use them. We had a supply of ammunition, and considered ourselves well armed. We felt secure, too, with such a large body of men going in advance. We stayed with the police command until we got to Shoal lake on the west slope of Riding mountain. This was a beautiful place. The lake covered 15 acres, and was sur-



A free trader of the early days in the northwest bringing his furs to the trading post in midwinter. Dogs drew sledges of the toboggan type. The dogs were of the Eskimo breed, many of them half wolf, and were capable of enduring great hardship of extreme cold and perilous trail. Outfits of this kind were much in use when Al Wilkins, as a boy, traveled the prairies of northwest Canada.