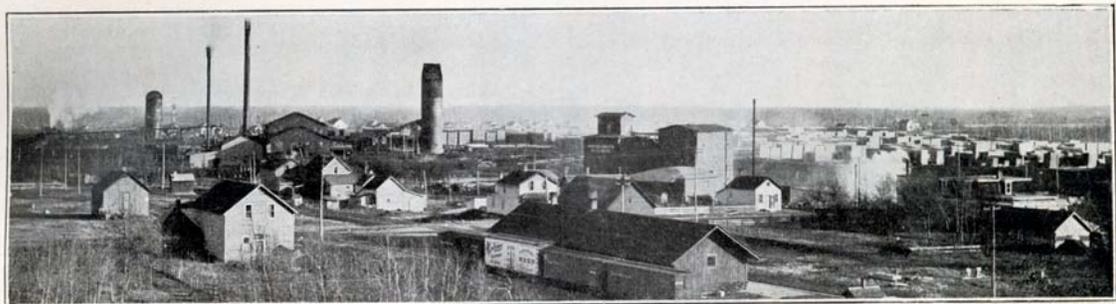


THE HISTORY OF NAMING THIEF RIVER FALLS,
MINNESOTA

Estimated date of Publication: 1908





GENERAL VIEW OF THIEF RIVER FALLS

Photo by Borry.

Why Named Thief River Falls

BY W. C. SMILEY

LET no one point the finger of scorn at Thief River. It is an ancient name, hoary with the traditions of centuries, and was, without doubt, the proper title of this stream before Columbus discovered the new world. The first white men who set foot in this region found the lake and river so called and learned the Indian tradition of the origin of the name, learned how a grim Sioux murderer, long before his tribe had been driven out by the Chippewas, had concealed himself in the vicinity of this river,

and, for years, lived an outlaw's life of pillage and robbery, defying capture though surrounded by enemies. About the year 1750 the Chippewas (Ojibways) drove the Sioux (Dakotas) out of Northern Minnesota, although for years thereafter, bands of Sioux warriors continued to roam this country as far east as Red Lake and to give battle to their hereditary enemies. The Chippewas translated the name into their own language but retained the meaning. During this time the agents of the Hudson Bay company

3

penetrated into this region and in 1800, Alexander Henry, a fur trader, writes of "Lac aux Voleurs" and "River aux Voleurs;" that is, in French, "Lake and River of Thieves."

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Beltrami, in his book "Pilgrimages in Europe and America", tells of this trip and mentions "Robber river (called Wamans Watpa, by the Sioux and Powisei sibi by the Cypowais), so denominated because one of the Sioux, in his flight from the vengeance which had been denounced against him for murder, kept himself concealed, and robbed on this spot for many years, escaping the observation of his persecutors and enemies, by whom he was completely surrounded." The modern Chippewa name is Kemotake o cepe. Kemota meaning "steal", Kemotake, "thief" and cepe "river."

From time to time persons have arisen among us who have clamored for a change of this name. To some it seems entirely too suggestive of the wild and woolly west to be a proper title for an honest, lawabiding community. However, so long as Chicago prospers and grows apace in spite of its name, which is just plain Chippewa for "skunk," we feel that old Thief River Falls can worry along for a few hundred years more under its ancient title.



Published: October 14, 1915 - "Thief River Falls News-Press" - Page 3

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THIEF RIVER FALLS NEWS-PRESS.

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Chapter One

THE FIRST SETTLERS

This pleasant land, located where the headwaters of the Thief River flow into the Red Lake River, was permanently settled and developed in the 1880's by pioneers seeking new frontiers. The early arrivals, whether from the East, from neighboring Red River Valley communities, or from Norway, Germany, and other countries, were searching for undeveloped soil and commercial opportunities. But the new migrants were not the original settlers. They were part of the second Westward expansion movement, not the first.

The Chippewa, or Ojibwa, had moved west away from the fierce Iroquois. While they slowly worked their way across the country they adapted the white man's tools, utensils, and customs for their own use and, although a peaceful people, became proficient in the use of firearms. By 1660 a few hunting parties had entered Minnesota, but they did not remain for it was the land of the Nadowa, or Dakota Sioux.

By the 1730's bands of Chippewa travelled through Northwestern Minnesota, but the Sioux were well established and dominant. Compared to the Chippewa, the Sioux were primitive and warlike. In the mid-1730's, they turned against the French traders with whom they were living in peace and began a series of raids. One of their war parties killed a Chippewa family near Lake Superior. This dates the Chippewa march into Minnesota against the Sioux. By 1770 the Chippewa became the dominant tribe in a wide area of Northern and Central Minnesota, including Red Lake.

The rich hunting grounds at the headwaters of the Thief River were attractive as a hiding place from other hostile Indians at two historic times. The naming of Thief River is credited to the Sioux, who called it "Wamans Watpa". According to J. Constantino Beltrami, an arrogant Italian lawyer who was expelled from Italy as a disruptive influence by the King and who left Major Long's exploring

party in 1828 at Pembina to scout on his own, the "Robber" River was:

"...so denominated because one of the Sioux, in his flight from vengeance which had been denounced against him for murder, kept himself concealed and robbed on this spot for many years, escaping the observations of his persecutors and enemies by whom he was completely surrounded."

At a later date a group of Sioux selected the same site as their hunting grounds. They lived in fear of Chippewa war parties and carefully disguised their lodges with embankments of earth. They used bows and arrows rather than guns to hunt their game and managed to escape observation for a number of years. Finally some Cree Indians, who were always friendly with the Chippewa, discovered and reported them. The Chippewas immediately dispatched a war party and annihilated the Dakotas at the Battle of Thief River.

In 1863 the Red Lake and Pembina Chippewa and the federal government concluded a Treaty that opened up a large tract of land to homesteaders. This treaty was amended in 1864 when Chief Moose Dung, the elder (Mis-co-co-noy) and Chief Red Bear (Mis-co-muk-wa) of the Pembina Chippewa sent a delegation to Washington. After the government followed their usual practice of feting the Indians at Washington parties, both sides agreed to the Indians ceding approximately eight million acres of land that extended throughout Northwestern Minnesota and North Dakota. As a reward from the government for his work in arranging the treaty Chief Moose Dung, at his request, was given the site at the headwaters of the Thief River for his Indians.

The white man, encouraged either directly or indirectly by the government, continued his relentless westward march. The United States needed manpower for the Civil War and the development of the land after the War. Shipping agents went to Germany and Ireland and offered large army enlistment bounties and automatic citizenship after discharge to volunteers. Other transportation agents representing the young Western railroad companies wanted to promote migration along their lines to acquire more business. The railroads sold the land they received from the government as construction subsidies at low prices to new settlers. A further encouragement for both internal migration and immigration was the Homestead Act of 1862. This gave a quarter section (160 acres) of unoccupied public land to a homesteader for a nominal fee payable after five years of residence and development.

The early settlers who came to the ceded lands near Thief River Falls lived peacefully with the Indians from the Chief's Section (located in the area from the Soo depot to Squaw Point) although there were transgressions on both sides. Some Indians took the white man's food and livestock; some settlers took the fish caught in the Indian trap



near Squaw Point. The cutting of timber on the Indian's land was a more serious offense and resulted in the 'Indian Scare' of January 1891. The *Crookston Times* of January 31, 1891, reported:

"There is some excitement and much anxiety among the settlers along the Red Lake Reservation near St. Hilaire and Thief River Falls, over the way Moose Dung's band of Indians have been acting during the past few days. For some time past, the Indians have acted in a very sullen and insolent manner towards the settlers with whom they have heretofore been friendly, but no particular attention was paid to their actions until settlers commenced to come in and reported that for three or four nights the Indians had been dancing and they had heard the drums and yells of the savages during the greater portion of the night."

One St. Hilaire resident sent the following telegram:

Gov. Merriam:
Indians having wild dances night and day.
Examine matters at once.

The Governor did send an investigator—Adjutant General Mullen—who found, according to the *Crookston Times*:

"...the trouble with the Indians had been grossly exaggerated. He had made a careful investigation and found that the trouble arose from the settlers going upon the reservations and stealing timber. Many of the Indians, he

said, had . . . only united to protect their timber lands from devastation. . . While upon the reservation he witnessed one of their dances, and said it was not the ghost dance at all, but that they were merely dancing for amusement."

The October 14, 1915, Thief River Falls News Press recalled the Indian Scare from their perspective:

" . . . the reports evidently started by jealous neighboring villages for the purposes of influencing prospective residents against emigrating to the new "village of promise" where the Red Lake and Thief Rivers meet."

The question of timber rights was a prominent feature in the 1889 Red Lake treaty negotiations with the U.S. Chippewa Commission. A number of open councils recorded by a government secretary relate directly to Thief River Falls. The federal representatives first explained that the Great Father (the United States President) was concerned for their welfare and that their pine was being lost and destroyed by fire. It was for their own good, and that of their children, that they sell the land to the government before it was wasted. The Indians replied that the settlers who surrounded the land were responsible for the fires and not the Indians who were "a peaceful tribe and take things patiently."

At the fifth council, Threading the Southern Earth (Shaw-wun-ah-cunig-ish) "brought up the matter of the boundary running South of Thief River as established by Moose Dung and about the cuttings that they believed were being made on their reservation by a man called T. B. Walker." (The T. B. Walker of whom the Indians complained was a lumberman who moved to Minnesota from Ohio. He later gained fame as an art collector and founded the Walker Foundation and Art Center.)

The sixth council opened with a moving speech by the Head Hereditary Chief of the Red Lake Indians,

He that is Spoken to (May-dway-gwa-no-nind). He pleaded for understanding between the Indians and the Commission and hoped that the whole of the Lake would be reserved. He said, in part:

"I shall be called upon by the Master of Life to deliver an account of my feelings. At my age I must do as my fathers have done; I must look to my grand children and their children's grand children; I must look after the benefit of all. I shall be dead when you receive the benefits of this work. If it pleases the Master of Life that this should be a blessing to us, it will be because we follow the advice of those who are sent to us, and who say they are our special friends."

At the seventh council, the Indians who lived the greatest distance from Red Lake were asked to speak first and claim the parts of the existing reservation they wished to retain. The first claim was that of Chief Moose Dung and his forty-two families who wanted land near Thief River. Moose Dung was quoted as saying: ". . . the young men had submitted the outline of the reservation they wished to retain and that it contained swamp land valueless to the whites but of some value to the Indians as there was much wild game on it which could be used for subsistence. Therefore, they wished to keep it for their children and their children's children."

They did not keep it. The final government land sale was held on June 20, 1904 from a temporary platform erected on the north side of the Washington School in the eight year old city of Thief River Falls. The sale closed on July 14 after 93,000 acres were sold. The last of the original Thief River Falls Chippewa returned to Red Lake on a barge, towed by the gasoline boat Dan Patch, skippered by Joseph DuChamp. He had been awarded the government contract to move the 113 Indians in the Squaw Point burial grounds for \$14.50 per body.



Visiting on Squaw Point

Published: 1976 – “Pioneer Tales – A History of Pennington County”

THIEF RIVER FALLS (HISTORY OF)

WHY NAMED THIEF RIVER FALLS

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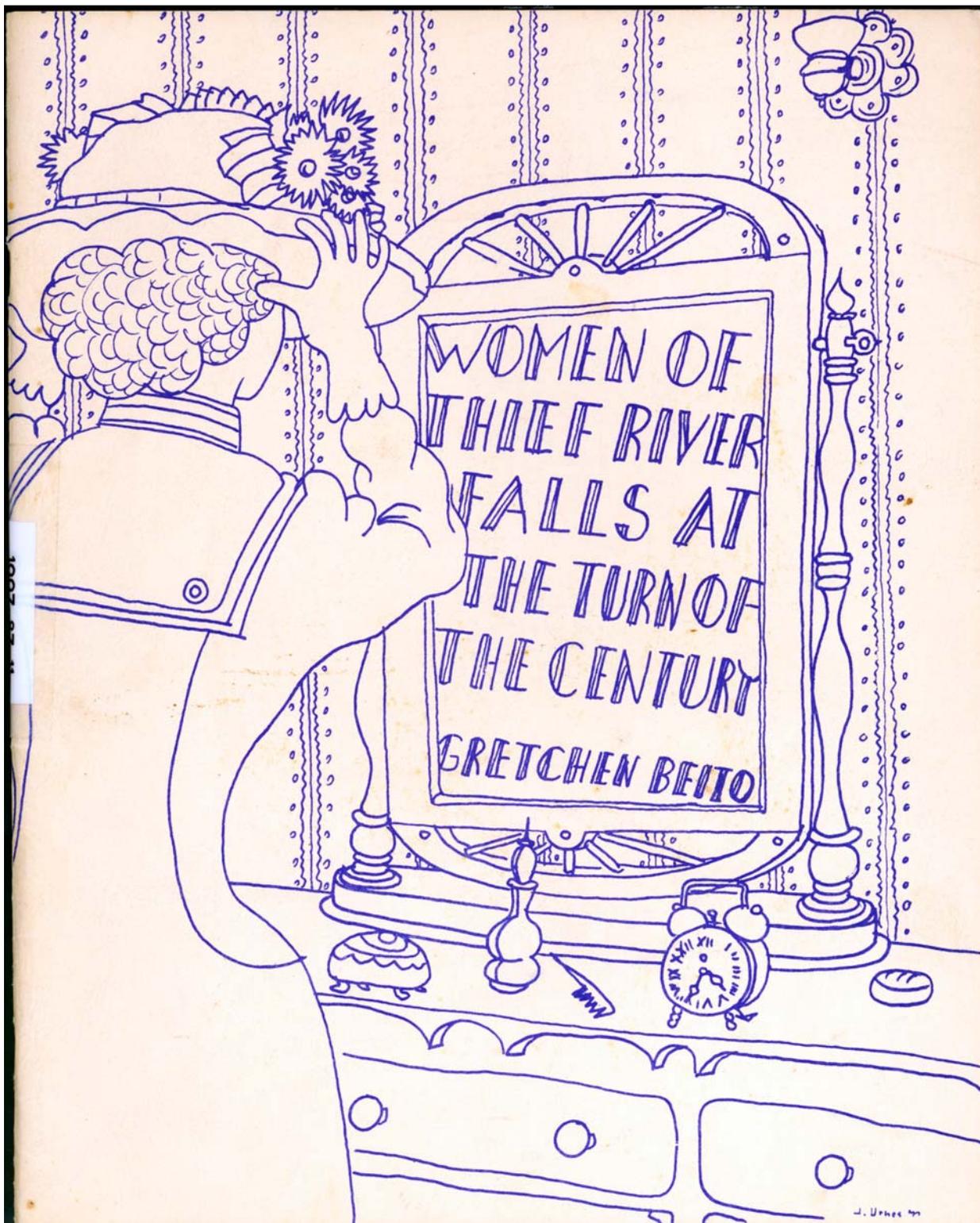
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Published: 1977 – “Women of Thief River Falls at the Turn of the Century”
– a study of life in a boom town – 1895 - 1905



In 1858, the Indian historian William Warren interviewed Wa-won-je-quon, a chief at Red Lake, who told of a camp of ten Dakota lodges at the headwaters of the Thief River who succeeded in escaping notice of the Ojibway for a number of years. About 1750, the Ojibway, having been driven out of their ancestral home by the Iroquois, had successfully fought the Dakota and drove them out of the northern half of Minnesota. This was possible because the Dakota were still using bow and arrows, while the Ojibway had guns supplied by the white men.

But because the Thief River area was their ancient home and was a very rich hunting ground, for more than seventy years some Dakota bands stayed in the area to the west of the Ojibway-controlled Red Lake. A hundred years ago, William Warren wrote, "They lived from year to year in continual dread of an attack from their conquering foes. They built a high embankment of earth, for defense, around their lodges and took every means in their power to escape the notice of Ojibways - even discarding the use of the gun on account of its loud report, and using bows and arrows, in killing such game as they needed. They were, however, at last discovered by their enemies. The Crees and Assineboines, during a short peace which they had made with the Dakotas, learned of the existence and locality, and informing the Ojibway, a war party was raised. They were discovered encamped within their earthen enclosure; and after a brave but unavailing defense with their bows and arrows, the ten lodges with their inmates were entirely destroyed. The embankment of earth is said, by Wa-won-je-quon (in 1858) to be still plainly visible. From this circumstance, the Ojibways named the stream Ke-moj-ake-se-be, literally meaning, "Secret Earth River", which the French, pronounce Ke-mod-ske, meaning Stealing Earth, has been interpreted into Thief River, by which name it is laid down on Nicollet's map."²

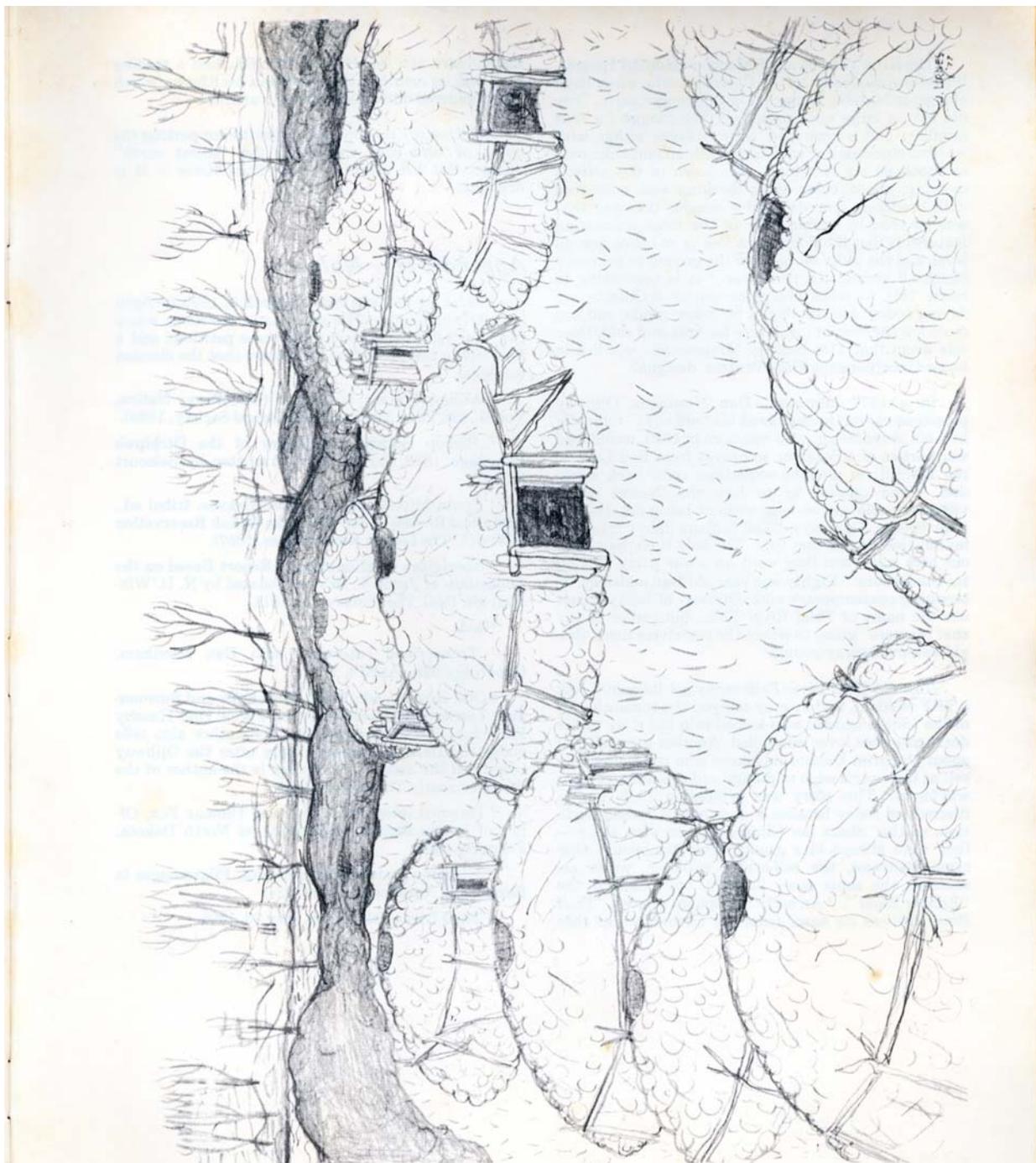
Was there an error in translation, then, from the Ojibway language by the French or English fur traders? In *Dictionary of the Otchipwe* by Bishop Baraga, 1878, Ojibway words for "secret" and "stealing" are identical, except that "secret" has one more syllable, which might not have been heard by a translator: "secret" is "gimodisiwin", "stealing" is "gimodwin".³ A compelling reason for the credibility of secret being the original name, is the presence of "ake", or earth, in the river's name in early writing. "Ke-moj-ake-se-be" - "secret earth river", is based on historical fact. "Stealing Earth River" does not really make any sense.

Information about the original inhabitants of the Thief River area is sketchy, because by the time their history was written, the Indian nations had shifted and re-shifted as waves of white men drove whole Indian nations west, dislocating each other. However, Wa-won-je-quon (Feathers from Different Directions) said, "The Gros Ventres once lived in earthen houses at the mouth of the East Savannah River."⁴ Also, in 1806, Alexander Henry the younger from Red River reported that the Gros Ventres lived in earthen wigwams.⁵

Appendix II

"What was that again" Did you say Thief River Falls? How ever did your town get a name like that?" Sometimes, these are the incredulous queries following my answer to, "And where are you from?"

It is not easy to sort fact from fiction in the large number of stories that attempt to explain just how the town was named. Two facts are indisputable. One is that back in 1896, city voters (male only, of course), selected Thief River Falls as their new town's name over the other suggested names of Twin Falls and Beau Falls. The other is that the name was derived from the Thief River, which empties its waters into the Red Lake river at the city site. Just as they had christened other northern Minnesota lakes and rivers, the Indians had earlier designated the name of this river, but why? Researching this has unearthed a good deal of colorful local pre-history.



How secret earth village might have looked in the late 18th century. Notice the smoke hole for the wood fire: ventilation was achieved by the constant current of air moving from the vestibule to the fire. The roof was supported by four central posts, and a windbreak screen extended from the side wall between the doorway and fire.

The Gros Ventres are Hidatsa or Mandari Indians, linked linguistically to the Cherokee, who often lived alongside Mandan Indians. They no longer exist. They did live in large earthen houses, big enough for four families, and surrounded their villages either with wooden stockades or with large earthen embankments as much as six feet high. As shown in the artist's drawing, the circular earth dwelling was reinforced with branches, and also had a wooden doorway that was covered by a skin. One of the most interesting features is that the floor was a foot or so below ground level, and the walls set back on the ground to achieve a bench all around the perimeter.⁶ It is interesting to relate this to what energy-conscious architects are saying today: houses should be below grade, and sod roofs are the best of insulators for heat and cold. Does this mean that 21st century Minnesotans will live in houses incorporating Gros Ventres' designs?

In a 1977 interview, Dan Needham, Ojibway pipestone carver, remembered his "old aunt" telling of how his grandfather, who was born in 1820, would lead war parties of a dozen or so braves from Red Lake to the Thief River area: he sometimes came back wounded. When queried as to how the "secret earth" villagers could live so long without being detected by their enemy, Dan says, "The Indians didn't travel so far out this way at that time. The only time they came out here was when they went on a war party looking for the Dakota." Eighty-one year old Dan added an interesting contemporary note: Ojibway of today do not use the name of Thief River Falls, but prefer to say that they are "going to where the two rivers meet. (Negid-dah-mi-ti-gway-young)"⁷

How did Thief River Falls really get its name? Ask a TRF resident, and he may tell you the romantic tale of the Indian maiden who leaped into the river to her death after her lover was killed. Another may tell you about the grim Dakota murderer who concealed himself at the river's edge to pillage and rob unsuspecting wayfarers.⁸ This story was printed in 1908, and is discredited today because it does not fit Indian tradition: neither Sioux nor Chippewa ever were alone — they were always in a group.⁹ The flamboyant Giacomo Beltrami, the self-styled explorer, wrote essentially the same story in 1824, and called it the "Robber River".¹⁰ An early newspaper relates, "Thief River derived its name from the circumstances that

many years ago the Hudson Fur Co., had a trading post near its mouth in charge of Geo. McKinstry which was plundered during McKinstry's absence."¹¹

Which story do you buy? I'll settle for parting the mists of time and visualizing the "secret earth" village. But I'll keep the name Thief River — it is dramatic.

Appendix II — Notes

¹ Thief River Falls News, March 7, 1895 to April 15, 1897. (microfilm) The selection of the name was a two year long battle involving three petitions and a final ruling from the state legislature that the election was legal.

² William Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, Vol. V., (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1885).

³ Bishop Baraga, *Dictionary of the Otchipwe Language*, 1878. Parts were first written by Belcourt in 1840.

⁴ Erwin Mittelholtz, ed., Rose Graves, tribal ed., *Historical Review of the Red Lake Indian Reservation* (Gonvick: The Leader Record Press, 1957).

⁵ *Aborigines of Minnesota: a Report Based on the Collections of Jacob V. Brower*, collated by N. H. Winchell (St. Paul: The Pioneer Co., 1911)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Transcribed Interview with Dan Needham, Goodridge, Mn., April 4, 1977.

⁸ Olaf Huseby, ed., *Thief River Falls and Surrounding Territory, illustrated* (Grand Forks: Olaf Huseby Publisher, 1908). Interestingly, the author also tells about the Dakota remaining long after the Ojibway controlled the area. W. C. Smiley is the author of the section on early Thief River Falls.

⁹ Personal interview with Irene Thomas Fox, Office of Indian Studies, University of North Dakota, February, 1977.

¹⁰ Giacomo Constantine Beltrami, *Pilgrimages in Europe and America* (France: 1824)

¹¹ Thief River Falls News, May 23, 1895.

LEGENDS OF THE THIEF RIVER FALLS NAME

The name “Thief River Falls” is a unique one, causing one to question its origins. Former mayor W.C. Smiley was once quoted as saying, “Let no one point the finger of scorn at Thief River. It is an ancient name, hoary with the traditions of centuries, and was, without doubt, the proper title of this river before Columbus discovered the new world.” Yet as noted in Gretchen Beito’s research, “Thief River Falls” was simply a mistranslation of the Indian name. Legends, however, capture more hearts and so, two legends behind the name have been perpetuated. One centers on a vicious Sioux warrior turned murderer who, according to Beltrami in *Pilgrimages in Europe and America*, used the river as a hide-out and who committed robbery in the area for many years. But the most poignant of the legends remains the legend of the Indian maid and the Thief river.

LEGEND OF THE INDIAN MAID & THE THIEF RIVER

“Hush, little one,” cooed the Indian maiden to her babe as they huddled in the brush near the river. The river lapped at the weeds about their feet as they crouched out of the view of the trappers.

“They were right here,” shouted one trapper.

“Keep looking ‘til you find them,” roared another.

What was the maiden to do? Her mind raced. They would not stop until they found her. The baby was of no consequence to them. She was.

Tenderly she gazed upon her first-born, a son, a future chief. She stroked his cheek, then laid him beside the water. “Hush,” she whispered. “Let the river tend you. I will come back for you. Do not worry.” Then she bolted out of the brush into plain view of the trappers.

“There she is, boys,” bellowed one from atop the ridge. The maiden lept away with the trappers close behind.

Still lay the babe, listening to the water lap against him gently, softly, tenderly as if to caress him. Night fell and so came on the sounds of the night: the choir of frogs croaking and crickets chirping and always, always the gentle rhythm of the waves against him . . . the waves loving him. His eyes grew weary and he leaned to nuzzle the one left him for comfort, for love . . . and fell into the arms of the waiting river. Swiftly the current carried him on and on down the river and over the falls to the rocks below.

There the Indian maiden found his lifeless body. She clutched her son close to her bosom. She wept for her tribe’s future chief and in a cry of anguish, she branded the river a thief. The blood of her son was upon the river and so also, the blood of her tribe. She vowed that someday her tribe would rid themselves of this river and the land about it. Then only would her tears cease.

Yet even today on still nights when the waves of the river make gentle rhythmic music in the night, you can hear the Indian maiden . . . weeping. *by Key Teeters Asp*

Published: 1996

Where Two Rivers Meet





Chapter One

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The Chippewa, or Ojibwa, had moved west away from the fierce Iroquois. While they slowly worked their way across the country they adapted the white man's tools, utensils, and customs for their own use and, although a peaceful people, became proficient in the use of firearms. By 1660 a few hunting parties had entered Minnesota, but they did not remain for it was the land of the Nadowa, or Dakota Sioux.

By the 1730's bands of Chippewa travelled through Northwestern Minnesota, but the Sioux were well established and dominant. Compared to the Chippewa, the Sioux were primitive and warlike. In the mid-1730's, they turned against the French traders with whom they were living in peace and began a series of raids. One of their war parties killed a Chippewa family near Lake Superior. This dates the Chippewa march into Minnesota against the Sioux. By 1770 the Chippewa became the dominant tribe in a wide area of Northern and Central Minnesota, including Red Lake.

The rich hunting grounds at the headwaters of the Thief River were attractive as a hiding place from other hostile Indians at two historic times. The naming of Thief River is credited to the Sioux, who called it "Wamans Watpa". According to J. Constantino Beltrami, an arrogant Italian lawyer who was expelled from Italy as a disruptive influence by the King and who left Major Long's exploring

along the rivers in northern Minnesota, the Sioux would have to live concealed in embankments along these rivers, hiding from the Chippewa. Eventually even these Sioux were either driven out or killed by the Chippewa. The name "Robber River" remained, and subsequent settlers in the area changed the name to Thief River.

Another legend tells of a Sioux Indian probably in the late 1700s needing to hide out along the river for fear of being caught by the Chippewa. He was to have spent years stealing from Indians and possibly early fur traders to stay alive.

There is yet another story of "How Thief River Got Its Name". In the book entitled, "Women of Thief River Falls at the Turn of the Century", by Gretchen Beito, a few paragraphs included here tell of possibly the real story about the name Thief River.

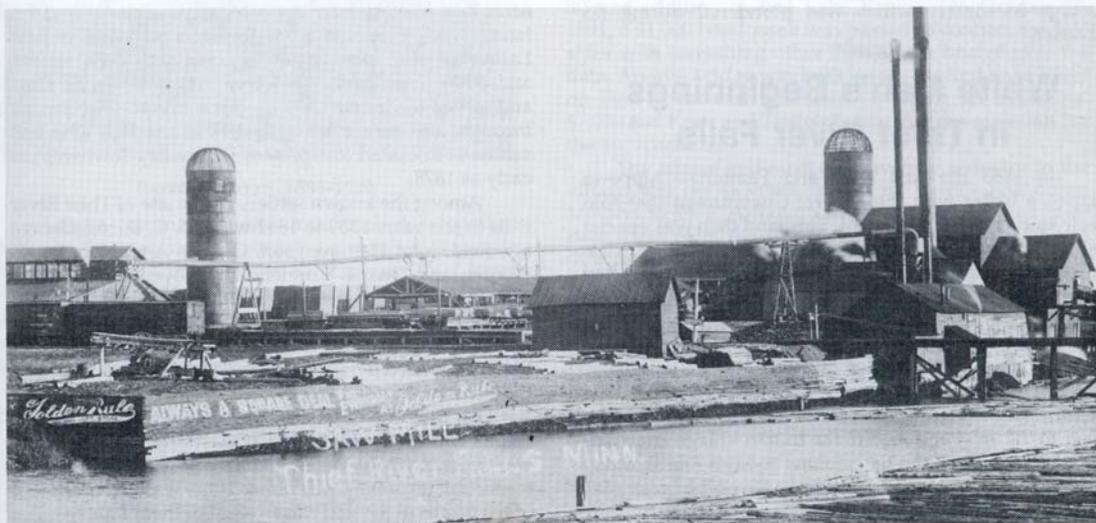
"It is not easy to sort fact from fiction in the large number of stories that attempt to explain just how the town was named. Two facts are indisputable. One is that back in 1896, city voters, selected Thief River Falls as their new town's name over the other suggested names of Twin Falls and Beau Falls. The other is that the name was derived from the Thief River, which empties its waters into the Red Lake River at the city site. Just as they had christened other northern Minnesota lakes and rivers, the Indians had earlier designated the name of this river, but why? Researching this has unearthed a good deal of colorful local pre-history.

"In 1858, the Indian historian William Warren interviewed Wa-won-je-quon, a Chief at Red Lake, who told of a camp of ten Dakota lodges at the headwaters of the Thief River who succeeded in escaping notice of the Ojibway for a number of years. About 1750, the Ojibway, having been driven out of their ancestral home by the Iroquois, had successfully fought the Dakota and drove

them out of the northern half of Minnesota. This was possible because the Dakota were still using bow and arrows, while the Ojibway had guns supplied by the white men."

"But because the Thief River area was their ancient home and was a very rich hunting ground, for more than seventy years some Dakota bands stayed in the area to the west of the Ojibway-controlled Red Lake. A hundred years ago, William Warren wrote, "They lived from year to year in continual dread of an attack from their conquering foes. They built a high embankment of earth, for defense, around their lodges and took every means in their power to escape the notice of Ojibway - even discarding the use of the gun on account of its loud report, and using bows and arrows, in killing such game as they needed. They were, however, at last discovered by their enemies. The Cree and Assiniboine, during a short peace which they had made with the Dakota, learned of the existence and locality, and informing the Ojibway, a war party was raised. They were discovered encamped within their earthen enclosure; and after a brave but unavailing defense with their bows and arrows, the ten lodges with their inmates were entirely destroyed. The embankment of earth is said, by Wa-won-je-quon (in 1858), to be still plainly visible. From this circumstance, the Ojibway named the stream Ke-moj-ake-se-be, literally meaning, "Secret Earth River", which the French pronounce Ke-mo-d-ske, meaning Stealing Earth, has been interpreted into Thief River, by which name is laid down on Nicollet's map."

"Was there an error in translation, then, from the Ojibway language by the French or English fur traders? In the "Dictionary of the Otchipwe" by Bishop Baraga, 1878, Ojibway words for "secret" and "stealing" are identical, except that "secret" has one more syllable, which



Meehan Sawmill, 1904, located where the Northwest Medical Center is today. Note the ad for the Golden Rule Department Store.

might not have been heard by a translator: "secret" is "gimodisiwin", "stealing" is "gimodiwin". A compelling reason for the credibility of secret being the original name, is the presence of "ake", or earth, in the river's name in early writing. "Ke-moj-ake-se-be" - "secret earth river", is based on historical fact. "Stealing Earth River" does not really make any sense."

"... In a 1977 interview, Dan Needham, Ojibway pipestone carver, remembered his "old aunt" telling of how his grandfather, who was born in 1820, would lead war parties of a dozen or so braves from Red Lake to the Thief River area: he sometimes came back wounded. When queried as to how the "secret earth villagers could live so long without being detected by their enemy," Dan says, "The Indians didn't travel so far out this way at that time. The only time they came out here was when they went on a war party looking for the Dakota." Eighty-one year old Dan added an interesting contemporary note: Ojibway of today do not use the name of Thief River Falls, but prefer to say that they are "going to where the two rivers meet." (Ne-gid-dah-mi-ti-gway-young)"

"How did Thief River Falls really get its name? Ask a Thief River Falls resident, and he may tell you the romantic tale of the Indian maiden who leaped into the river to her death after her lover was killed. Another may tell you about the grim Dakota murderer who concealed himself at the river's edge to pillage and rob unsuspecting wayfarers. This story was printed in 1908, and is discredited today because it does not fit Indian tradition: neither Sioux nor Chippewa ever were alone - they were always in a group. The flamboyant Giacomo Beltrami, the self-styled explorer, wrote essentially the same story in 1824, and called it the "Robber River". An early newspaper relates, "Thief River derived its name from the circumstances that many years ago the Hudson Fur Company had a trading post near its mouth run by George McKinstry which was plundered during his absence."

White Man's Beginnings in Thief River Falls

In 1863 the Red Lake and Pembina Chippewa signed a treaty with the Federal Government that sold their land to the government. This land then was opened up for settlement by the whites. Chief Miscoconoy (Mes-co-co-neh) was given the land around the Thief and Red Lake Rivers as a reward for selling the eight million acres of land.

Some first settlers to this area lived along side the Indians, some were pushed off the land by the Indians, but eventually a few fur traders and farmers stayed to begin establishment of a white settlement along side the river to the west and next to the Indian Village known as "Squaw Point" on the East, (along today's Eighth Street Bridge near the Thief and Red Lake Rivers" edges).

Few disputes occurred among the Indians and the white settlers, but occasionally the Indians took the white man's food and livestock and the white settlers took the fish the Indians were catching in their fish traps along the

river near Squaw Point.

In 1864 the land owned by the Chippewa along the head waters of the Thief River was sold to the Federal Government. The Indian Village located at Squaw Point was moved further east to what is known now as the Red Lake Indian Reservation. The Indians and their burial grounds of about 113 dead were moved on a barge towed by a gasoline-powered boat called the Dan Patch and skippered by Joseph DuChamp. His Indian Interpreter being Rudolph Berg, the son of an early white settler in the area. (See Rudolph Berg's photos in Chapter 1. The Berg House is located now at Pioneer Village in Thief River Falls.) DuChamp received \$14.50 per body to move the Indian Burial Grounds.

A City is Born

In 1879 the site of Thief River Falls was intersected with Indian trails. In that year Frank Russell, who was living in North Dakota with a Cree wife, heard from traveling Chippewa of a bountiful fishing, hunting, and camping grounds at a place where two rivers meet. In the following year he moved to Thief River Falls, established squatters rights on the west side of the river near Squaw Point, and built a wooden lodge. He was soon driven off by the Indians and returned to North Dakota.

Another white man, Joe Gudo, also came and left in 1880. He opened a small trading store that burned to the ground a few months afterward.

The first permanent settler of Thief River Falls was the former (and first) marshal of Crookston, John Baptize LaBree. In January of 1881 he bought the squatters rights from Russell for \$60.00, a cow, a light platform wagon, and a promise of two lots of ground when the land was platted. The first legal evidence of property in Thief River Falls occurred when LaBree filed for his 160 acres as a homesteader. As soon as possible he had his land, which extended from the river to what is now LaBree Avenue, plowed and seeded with corn, wheat, and other crops. In the spring of 1881 he started a store and served the Indians, a few wagon drivers who passed through, and earlier homesteaders in the area who had settled in Rockstad (the present Rocksbury Township) as early as 1878.

Among the known settlers on the site of Thief River Falls in the years 1880 to 1882 were M. C. Burns, George Maxfield, John Hemmingson, Charles Anderson, James Warner, and Dennis Connely. On November 17, 1882, LaBree deeded his land to a resident of Red Lake Falls, Carl Kretzschmar. Kretzschmar platted the tract and it was officially recorded on August 21, 1883. Shortly after filing he deeded it back to Sarah LaBree, John's wife, and the family continued to live on it.

By 1883 the town had attracted a variety of merchants and new settlers and at least one term of school was necessary. Miss Helen Wallin, whose father was a fur trader and merchant, was hired. There was an enrollment of ten pupils in the first class - eight of them LaBrees. The other two were the children of Lyman Clark.

The new town was not always peaceful. William Porter successfully contested the land filed for by George

Maxwell but not without a bitter fight that culminated with gunpowder being poured down Porter's stovepipe. The stove blew up and the flames badly scarred Porter's brother.

Steady growth characterized the early years. The site was strategically located as a trading post for furs and supplies since it was adjacent to the Red Lake Reservation. The abundant water power in the two rivers, one of which was directly connected to Red Lake and its vast timber resources, attracted industrial development. Further, the nearest supply center for the homesteaders was Crookston, by then a fairly sizable city and the county seat. The settlers had to travel there either by ox cart or, more frequently, by walking. Although the homesteaders were pioneers, they and other outside merchants knew the advantages of an adjacent townsite where supplies and labor would be readily available.

The growth warranted a formal governmental structure and in 1882 the township of North was organized. In 1884 the first elections were held with John LaBree and R. S. Hoyt as judges, and Ed LaBree as clerk. R. C. Hoyt, Ole C. Larson, and John LaBree were elected as supervisors. Other offices were held by C. Knutson as treasurer; Peter Newman, clerk; Sam Krueger, justice of the peace; C. A. Swensen, constable; and Jim Krueger and Dennis Connelly, road overseers.



Barzen Saloon, 1885-1900

Larger commercial and industrial development began in the eighties and attracted a number of people who would be instrumental in establishing Thief River Falls as a city in 1896. Frank Kratka, a Wisconsin native, Indian interpreter, early merchant, and builder, arrived in 1884. Hans Langseth and C. A. Robbecke both moved from St. Hilaire. Langseth arrived in 1887 as a general merchandise dealer and soon had a two-story frame building with basement on the corner of Third Street and LaBree Avenue. Robbecke came in the winter of 1888 accompanied by his building. He was born in Saxony, Germany in 1852, arrived in America in 1870 and served in the Army. After discharge he moved to Crookston and later to St. Hilaire where he built the Hotel Ogahmah. In search of better business, he loaded his hotel on runners and moved to Thief River Falls with a capital of \$1.50.

The hotel was located on the site of the present Post Office parking lot. By 1892, he was financially able to build a large addition to his hotel and by 1901 had 32 rooms.

Carl Kretzschmar, who platted Thief River Falls while a resident of Red Lake Falls, came to America from Germany in 1871 and moved to Crookston in 1876. While living in Crookston, he acquired land adjoining the townsite of Red Lake Falls and moved there in 1882. He platted an addition to that village, developed water power, and erected a large flour mill. In 1888 he had financial losses in his various enterprises and decided to move to Thief River Falls and begin again. This time his success was durable. He built the first dam, erected a flourmill he called the "O. K.", purchased real estate, developed an extensive hide and fur business, and owned a large general store at the Red Lake Reservation.

The North Spring Flour Mill, run by steam and operated by J. W. Howes, also began operation in 1888.

Both Dennis Connelly and James Warner had land on the east side of the river. In 1889, Wiley Tindolph purchased Warner's land, platted it, and named it Red Lake Rapids. There were now two settlements; one on each side of the river. In the first year of the new decade, 1890, the property owners on the west side of the river met and organized a village. The first village council consisted of Carl Kretzschmar, president; M. V. Evenson, Philip Zeh, and Charles Robbecke, trustees; and William Porter, recorder. At their first official meeting they appointed J. W. Wallin, treasurer; Charles Myers, pound master; Henry Williams, constable; and Adam Zeh, justice of the peace.

In the six years between the formation of the village and the establishment of the city of Thief River Falls there was growth on both sides of the river, trade wars, and political agitation. On the east side, C. J. Knox added an 80-acre addition to Red Lake Rapids. On October 17, 1891, a \$1,000 bond issue was passed to connect the two sides with something other than a pole bridge over the dam. An iron bridge was built across the Red Lake River on First Street with the State providing an additional \$7,000 and Knox and Tindolph donating the materials for the approaches.

The largest and most controversial industry in the village was the sawmill opened by Patrick and James Meehan in 1892. Although the mill was over one hundred miles from the stands and cutting of pine, it was directly connected to them by the Red Lake River. During the winter months, logs were piled on the ice at Red Lake to await the spring. Thousands of logs, stamped at each end with the Mill's mark, were sent downstream in a torrent of water during the breakup. The river drivers, following the logs in their wannigan, put in long and hard hours frequently working up to the waist in icy water to dig stranded logs out of debris or work them into the current.

After the drive it was a time of celebration in the numerous saloons that catered to them. In an unequal contest between newly wealthy and thirsty log drivers and saloon keepers, the saloon keepers invariably came out on top.

The Meehans had many interests other than the



Livery Barn at the Sawmill

mill and were heavy investors in real estate. They usually were on the opposite side in political battles from the majority of the village's businessmen and office holders. The Business Men's Union was formed in 1893 because of trade wars and aligned themselves against the Meehans. Rival slates, backed by the two factions, were common in village elections. The most serious and long-lasting controversy started in August, 1894, when the Red Lake Booming Company, organized by Ray W. Jones, began looking for a site for a new sawmill. A new mill did not open.

By this time, the Meehans also had a newspaper of their own that promoted their viewpoint. In the spring of 1893 they purchased and moved their newspaper "The News" from Red Lake Falls. H. W. Lee, their attorney, was the editor.

Incorporation of Thief River Falls

Another serious conflict started in 1894 when Ira C. Richardson, acting for the village as its attorney, initiated proceedings to incorporate as a city. H. W. Lee was the attorney representing the opposition who claimed the population wasn't large enough to justify the status of a city and the resultant tax increases would be prohibitive. A long series of courtroom battles began. Finally, the process of incorporation started on June 8, 1896. Lars Backe and C. J. Knox made affidavits to the board of commissioners of Polk County (the county in which Thief River Falls was then located) for the incorporation of Thief River Falls but that the name be changed to Twin Falls. Another petition, signed by M. C. Burns and many others asked that the name remain Thief River Falls.

The election for incorporation was held on September 1, 1896. 177 votes were cast: 30 favored incorporation; 78 voted for the name of Thief River Falls; 52

avored Twin Falls. On September 15, the County Commissioners decreed the territory as the city of Thief River Falls.

This action brought Red Lake Rapids on the east side together with the west side into one community. The first city election was on October 17, 1896, and the successful candidates were F. H. Kratka, mayor; J. W. Wallin, treasurer; Charles J. Knox, John E. Burkee, P. O. Bergh, Charles A. Robbecke, and O. T. Tandberg, aldermen. The new city council organized on November 14 and elected C. J. Knox as president; P. O. Bergh, vice-president; and Lars Backe as city clerk. H. W. Lee, acting for the Meehans, requested the Attorney General to test the validity of the new city organization. The case worked its way through legal channels up to the State Supreme Court which ruled in favor of the city.

Soon after the final courtroom test, the Meehans sold most of their interests in the city and the mill was purchased by a corporation from Wisconsin in 1899. The purchasers were John O'Day, John Daley, C. J. Winton and D. N. Winton. The new owners made many improvements among them the establishment of regular semi-monthly paydays with the employees receiving cash rather than due bills. By 1901 the Thief River Falls Lumber Company mill had an annual capacity of 25 to 30-million feet of lumber, employed 250 men during the sawing season, and had a monthly payroll of approximately \$4,000.

Facts and Statistics about Thief River Falls - 1995

The population of Thief River Falls, as of 1990, was 8,010.

Major employers included: Arctco, Inc. - manufacturer of snowmobiles and wet bikes - 850 employees; Northwest Medical Center - 409 employees; School

District 564 - 409 employees; Digi-Key Corp., an electronics component supplier - 315 employees; Northern Pride, Inc. - 200 employees; Pennington County - 204 employees; City of Thief River Falls - 140 employees; Country Lake Foods, milk processing plant - 97 employees; Best Western Inn - 95 employees; Hartz Foods, Inc. - wholesale groceries - 91 employees; Falls Clinic - 90 employees; Kmart - 85 employees; and Soo Line Railroad - 50 employees.

CLIMATE

- Number of days between killing frosts - 120
- Number of days above 90 degrees - 10
- Average annual snowfall - 25 inches
- Average annual precipitation - 20 inches

The coldest month is January with a mean daily high of 15 degrees Fahrenheit and a mean daily low of -5 degrees Fahrenheit. The hottest month of the year is July with the mean daily high of 83 degrees Fahrenheit, and the mean daily low of 58 degrees Fahrenheit.



Ice Chunks at the Thief River Falls Dam, 1995



LaBree Avenue South, Thief River Falls, 1915



Spring Breakup

POSTCARD HISTORY SERIES

*Thief River Falls
and Pennington County*

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INTRODUCTION

The Thief River Falls of today is located where Thief River and Red Lake River converge. The earliest settlers, the Ojibwe, named their village Negiddahmitigwayyung—"Where the Two Rivers Meet." During early European settlement, the site was divided into three villages, including that of the Ojibwe. In 1889, the settlers on the southeast side of the rivers formed a village called Red Lake Rapids in honor of the river that supported their sawmill. In 1890, settlers on the west side of the rivers named their village Thief River Falls, although the Thief River ended north of where the village was platted.

Economics and practicality led the two European villages to merge in 1896, and there was controversy over the name. The citizens of each village preferred to retain their name, but agreed to compromise on a name. Strong contenders were Beau Falls and Twin Falls. However, when the question was taken to the polls, Thief River Falls was elected, receiving 78 votes (versus 52 for Twin Falls). The Red Lake Rapids newspaper was already called *The Thief River Falls News*, and most of the businesses and population in town were in the original Thief River Falls area.

Why was Thief River so named in the first place? An early English translation of the Dakota name occurred in 1823, when army Major H. S. Long labeled the river "Thief R." on a map made during an excursion up the Red River to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Although he never saw the river, he took his information from Giacomo Constantino Beltrami, a 44-year-old Italian army officer, adventurer, linguist, and political exile. Beltrami, a member of Long's party, had become disgruntled due to the meager supplies and strict regimen. He set off with three guides to find the source of the Mississippi. He did not succeed, but he did find the Thief River and traveled down it to the present site of Thief River Falls.

According to Native American legend, the name thief or robber was applied to the river because of conflict between the Dakota and the Ojibwe. The Dakota occupied the territory first but were driven out by the Ojibwe. However, not all the Dakota left their homes. Those who stayed built a high embankment around their village. When the Cree and Assiniboine informed the Ojibwe of the Dakota village's existence, the Ojibwe destroyed the village and its denizens. The Ojibwe then named the nearby lake and its river Ke-moj-ake-se-be, or Secret Earth River. The French mispronounced it Ke-mod-ske, or Stealing Earth; and it was finally translated into Thief River on explorer Joseph Nicollet's map in 1839. Other legends refer to a maiden who leaped into the river after her lover was killed and a Dakota warrior who lived alone, robbing and pillaging for several years.

Pennington County has a similarly colorful history. When Thief River Falls and Red Lake Rapids were discussing their union, both towns were located in Polk County. Polk County was

established in 1858, when Minnesota entered the union, and comprised much of northwestern Minnesota—people had to travel over 100 miles just to get to the county seat. In 1896, voters created three new counties: Mills, Columbia, and Red Lake County. Columbia County never officially organized, but the other two succeeded in establishing themselves. However, Red Lake County and Mills County overlapped. Red Lake Falls became the county seat for Red Lake County; Thief River Falls became the county seat for Mills County. Eventually, Gov. David M. Clough declared Red Lake County the legal entity because its petition had been received prior to the Mills County petition.

Red Lake Falls was a smaller town located 18 miles south of Thief River Falls. Thief River Falls, due to its advantageous position on the two rivers, grew more rapidly. As a result, in 1905, Thief River Falls gathered 2,006 of the 2,365 voters in the county to sign a petition to claim the county seat. However, Red Lake Falls managed to gain a court order to block the county commission vote, so the petition was denied. More court and commission activity occurred over the next year. At one point, a petition disappeared under suspicious circumstances from the county auditor's safe. A new petition with even more names in favor of the move was presented to the county commissioners. The State Supreme Court ruled that a new petition could not be considered until the old petition's fate had been determined. The courthouse building purchased by Red Lake Falls in 1905 mysteriously burned to the ground a few months after the Supreme Court ruling.

In 1909, tiring of controversy, 899 voters drew up a new petition asking for a county wide vote on a decision to split the county. The vote was taken in November 1910, with 1,942 voting for division and 1,801 against. On November 23, 1910, Gov. Adolph O. Eberhart declared the establishment of Pennington County, with the county seat in Thief River Falls. The county was named after Edmund Pennington, the president of the Soo Railroad Line, which had been instrumental in the formation and growth of Thief River Falls. Pennington, once a mere section boss on the line, had worked his way up to lead the company. Pennington's rise from obscurity into prominence seemed to mirror Thief River Falls's rise into importance as a county seat, and so the citizens of the new county found him an appropriate person for whom to name their new county.

—Dr. Diane Drake

Diane Drake
6-29-06