

# A RIVER RUNS NORTH

Managing an International River

Second Edition

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Red River Basin Commission  
May 2013



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Second Printing 1998

Second Edition 2013

*Additional Funding Provided by*

**North Dakota State Water Commission**

**Manitoba Water Stewardship**

## Chapter 4

### A Place to Relax: River-based Recreation<sup>1</sup>

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Earliest documented recreational uses of the Red River began after World War I when people started to use the river to swim, fish for fun, and relax. However, the Red River faded as a place for leisure as the west-central Minnesota lakes country developed, transportation improved, and the belief took hold that the river was dangerous. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the river as a recreational resource. Recreational use continues to grow up and down the valley.

#### Early Recreation

No doubt Native Americans, fur trappers and traders, and early basin settlers used the river occasionally as a recreational resource. Most likely, early residents and visitors to Winnipeg saw the Red River as a place to play, since that area was settled far earlier than the upper basin.

Eric Sevareid (1968) spent time with members of the Winnipeg canoe club in 1930 on his epic journey down the Red River. The brochure for Winnipeg's first "Greater Winnipeg Red River Day" on September 8, 1957, included the following regarding recreation in years past: "Another disappointment is the lack of river drives, swimming facilities, and winter activities, such as tobogganing, skiing, ice skating, sleigh rides, and horse racing on the river. Years ago we had all those winter activities, and they are pleasant memories to those who remember" (Red River Day Committee 1957, p. 7).

Winnipeg not only had a canoe club before World War II, they also had a swimming club with 2,500 members. They did not swim in indoor pools, they swam in the rivers!

Swimming was popular as well in Fargo-Moorhead in the 1930s. Dommer's Boat House was a popular spot for swimming, boating, and "hanging out" by the river. "They are so anxious to bath in the Red River dam they sneak in between racks of canoes and change their clothing," Frank Dommer complained in 1932 (Clay County Historical Society, 2000, p. 76).



*Dommer's boathouse.*

Dommer's boathouse was a favorite place to hang around to watch people on the river in the rented rowboats and canoes, or those diving from the three-level diving platform midstream, which was removed after a local boy broke his back in a dive (Sprague 2000 p.3).

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is new in the Second Edition due to the ever-increasing interest in using the Red River as a valuable community asset.

Winter recreation was popular, with toboggan slides, ice races, and ski hills. From 1935 to 1942, Fargo had a 140-foot-high ski jump with a landing zone on the river, using the river bank on the Moorhead side for reducing speed. It was the largest ski jump scaffold in the country and it hosted regional competitions. The Civil Aeronautics Board asked that it be removed in 1942 as it posed a hazard to air traffic (Cass County Historical Society 2000).

Using the Red River as a recreational resource was about to change, again.

## Taboo Period

Interest in the upper Red River as a recreational resource began to fade during and after World War II. From about the 1950s to the 1980s, parents and community leaders depicted the Red River as dangerous, dirty, and generally a place to be avoided. Use of the river as a place for outdoor leisure activities took a 180 degree turn for the next few decades.

*"Taking chances doesn't pay. The river is dangerous night and day." So said 250 signs installed by the river in 1945 throughout Fargo and Moorhead.*

The river has claimed about one life a year, largely due to low head dams and lack of water safety education. The low head dams, also known as "killing machines," would trap unsuspecting swimmers or overturned boaters, holding them in an undertow near the dam, often until drowning. All of these dams in the US have been or are scheduled to be retrofitted (Table 4.1) by replacing the concrete structure with strategically placed boulders. The new "dams" are safer for human users and allow passage of migrating fish (Aadland 2010). This leaves only the St. Andrews Lock and Dam, near the river's mouth, as originally built.

To the casual observer, the Red River appears to be dirty, which many people equate with unhealthy and, thus, discouraging recreational

uses. These negative views of the river were fostered by real or perceived water quality issues prior to modern municipal wastewater treatment and sanitary sewer systems. However, today's municipal wastewater treatment plants return water to the Red River that is cleaner than the water that was withdrawn. In

**Table 4-1. Red River Dams**

| <u>Dam</u>               | <u>Closest City</u> | <u>River Mile</u> | <u>Status/year</u>        |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Kidder                   | Breckenridge, MN    | 546               | Retrofit w/boulders, 2000 |
| Christine                | Christine, ND       | 495               | Retrofit w/boulders, 2011 |
| Hickson                  | Hickson, ND         | 482               | Retrofit w/boulders, 2011 |
| Fargo South              | Fargo-Moorhead      | 458               | Retrofit w/boulders, 2003 |
| Midtown                  | Fargo-Moorhead      | 452               | Retrofit w/boulders, 1999 |
| Fargo North              | Fargo-Moorhead      | 448               | Retrofit w/boulders, 2002 |
| Riverside                | Grand Forks, ND     | 296               | Retrofit w/boulders, 2001 |
| Drayton                  | Drayton, ND         | 203               | Retrofit planned          |
| St. Andrews Lock and Dam | Lockport, MB        | 23                | Lock, dam, and bridge     |



*Hickson Dam before retrofit.*

Brent Wach, City of Fargo



*Hickson rapids, after dam retrofit.*

Nathan Boerboom, City of Fargo

addition, farmers were thought to be responsible for excessive chemical application, resulting in herbicides and pesticides finding their way to rivers and streams. Today's farm operators have more information and better tools available to apply precise amounts of chemicals, leaving minimal water quality issues resulting from agriculture.

The river still looks "dirty" today. However, that is just what it is, dirt (i.e., soil) suspended in the water. The valley's fine clay soils are picked up and transported to the river and remain in suspension, causing the dirty look of the river.

Water quality issues may still exist, but they are usually isolated and are frequently remedied promptly. A recent study of the urban impact on Red River water quality confirmed impacts are infrequent and isolated (Ivashchenko 2009). In short, people stayed away from the river, when, in fact, it is neither dirty nor dangerous. Once community leaders became more aware of what the river had to offer, the taboo period came to a close.

## Modern Times

Today there are recreational facilities from one end of the river to the other. Attitudes about the river have come a full 360 degrees, back to where people think of the river as a valuable resource. Many communities on the river have one or more river-related festivals each year (Table 4.2). Some communities have summer and winter festivals, and most include some type of fishing derby.

The Red was recently designated a Canadian Heritage River as a way to encourage public appreciation and use.

The City of Winnipeg was the first to formally recognize the recreational potential of the Red River. A Heritage Advisory Committee was formed in 1988 in part to promote The Forks, at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, as a valuable resource. The centerpiece of downtown today, The Forks is Winnipeg's top tourist attraction and is the site for more than 100 community festivals throughout the year.

**Table 4-2. A Sampling of Red River Activities**

### Summer:

Rod and Reel Rally, Drayton, July  
 River Arts, Moorhead, select Tuesdays in summer  
 Headwaters Day, Welles Memorial Park, Breckenridge, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sept. Sat.  
 Vince Herding Youth Fishing Derby, Wahpeton, 1<sup>st</sup> May Sat.  
 Dick Bell Catfish Tournament, Wahpeton, 1<sup>st</sup> June Sat.  
 Red River Festival for 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Students, Wahpeton, 2<sup>nd</sup> May Wed.  
 Blue Goose Day, Wahpeton, 1<sup>st</sup> June Sat.  
 Carp & Sucker Fishing Derby, Wahpeton, 2<sup>nd</sup> August Wed.  
 Race the Red Canoe/Kayak Race, Fargo, June  
 Tour de Forks, walk, run, bike, Grand Forks, September  
 SS Ruby tours, Moorhead, summer  
 Youth fishing clinics and derbies, Fargo and Moorhead, summer  
 Canada Day at the Forks, Winnipeg, July 1  
 International Trails Day, Manitoba, 1<sup>st</sup> Saturday in June  
 Canadian Rivers Day, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in June  
 Dragon Boat Festivals, Winnipeg, June and September  
 Canada Day at The Forks & St. Boniface, Winnipeg, July 1  
 Catfish Derbies, Selkirk  
 Womens Weekend, canoe, Breckenridge to Ft. Abercrombie, June

### Winter:

B-B-BRRR Winter Classic, bike race, Fargo, January  
 Ironman Outdoor Curling Bonspeil, Winnipeg, February  
 Ice Fishing Derby, Wahpeton, 1<sup>st</sup> March Saturday  
 Iceman Triathlon, Grand Forks, February  
 Assiniboine Credit Union River Trail, ice skating, Winnipeg, all winter  
 Horse-Drawn Wagon Rides, Winnipeg, all winter  
 Red River Sled Dog Derby, Halstad to East Grand Forks and back  
 MCA Curling Bonspiel, Winnipeg - January  
 Actif Epica Bike Race, St. Malo to St. Boniface, February  
 Festival du Voyageur, St. Boniface, February  
 Ice Fishing Derbies, Selkirk & Netley Creek  
 Fireworks at the Forks, New Year's Eve, Winnipeg



Winnipeg was far from alone in recognizing the role the river could play in enhancing the quality of life for residents. In 1989, believing it was time to promote a new attitude about the river and explore ways to develop the Red River as a recreational resource, a team of architects from the American Institute of Architects called the Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) produced an intensive review and analysis of resources along the Red River in Fargo and Moorhead (R/UDAT 1989).

R/UDAT proposed the creation of an organization to act as “River Keeper.” They also proposed plans to educate people about maintaining the ecological health of the river, ideas for expanding the river’s recreational use, and plans to build a “rediscovered” riverfront area in the downtown Fargo-Moorhead area. These visions could be accomplished through the combined actions of a River Keepers organization ([www.riverkeepers.org](http://www.riverkeepers.org)), Fargo and Moorhead government offices, and by educating the public to appreciate and to be stewards of the river.

Today, the Red River hosts parks, picnic areas, trails, golf courses, and fishing accommodations. Cities proudly list the river as one of their community’s amenities. From Headwaters Park in Breckenridge to catfish fishing at Lockport, the river is now a key element in community life.

## Types of River Recreation

River recreation is of two types: those activities that are river dependent and those that are river associated. River-dependent activities include fishing, swimming, and boating. River-associated activities include walking trails, parks, golf courses, and some winter uses.

### *River-Dependent Recreation*

River-dependent recreational activity depends on the river as a part of the experience. For example, without the river there could be no fishing or boating. These are also called water-based recreational activities.

**Fishing:** The City of Selkirk calls itself “the Catfish Capital of North America,” adding that the Red River is known for producing some catfish weighing more than 50 pounds. The Red River has become known as a trophy channel catfish fishery (Breining 1999). The former (now second



*The Forks in Winnipeg, MB.*

City of Winnipeg



*Taking care of the Red River.*

Red River Basin Commission

place) state record channel catfish, a 33-pound giant, was caught in the Red River. There are several Red River catfishing guides, catfishing derbies, a Red River fishing blog, and a Minnesota DNR Red River fishing booklet (MN DNR 2002).

The City of Winnipeg extensively promotes the fishing resources of the Red. European anglers have visited the Red in recent years to seek large carp.

In addition to channel catfish, another 57 species of fish are found in the Red River (Franzin et al. 2003). Red River anglers go after walleyes, goldeye, crappie, smallmouth bass, and several other popular sport fish.

Through the efforts of Native tribes, Minnesota DNR, North Dakota Game and Fish, and Manitoba Ministry of Natural Resources, lake sturgeon are being re-introduced into the Red River and its tributaries (Abraham 2008). The White Earth Band has been stocking about 20,000 fingerlings each year and DNR has been stocking over 150,000 fry each year in the Red River watershed's lakes and rivers. The sturgeon is the only fish species in the Red River for which there is no open fishing season.

There are now at least a dozen well-used public boat launches up and down the river from the headwaters to Lake Winnipeg. Parking lots at these launches are often full to capacity on summer weekends, and busy during the week as well. Some communities have fishing piers and platforms or have made other accommodations for shore anglers.



Jay Leitch

Red River catfisherman.



Red River Basin Commission

Red River recreation.

Fishing on the Red River isn't limited to the open water season. Anglers can be seen fishing through the ice in many places along the river. Their small communities of ice shacks also dot the frozen surface in popular fishing holes.

Fishing is not limited to hook-and-line, as the Red River is a popular spot for bowfishers to pursue the plentiful carp using archery equipment.

Progress of an ongoing program called "Reconnecting the Red," which has been a real boon to fisheries and fishing, includes "to date, 33 barriers to fish migration have been eliminated in the Red River of the North watershed.... Four mainstem barriers (three in the US) remain on the Red River" (Aadland 2010, p. 89).

**Canoeing and Boating:** Perhaps the most famous canoe trip on the Red River was Eric Sevareid's trip in 1930. He, age 17, and Walter Port, age 19, canoed from St. Paul to Hudson Bay, a trip of 2,250 river miles. Their trip has been replicated only a few times since then. In 2011, Ann Raiho and Natalie Warren became the first women to successfully canoe this route (Upnorthica.com 2011).

The Minnesota DNR developed a master plan for canoeing and boating on the Red River in 2002 (Leitch et al. 2002). They also developed a 3-map set, *Red River of the North: A Water Trail Guide* (MNDNR 2009), to



promote and facilitate travel on the US portion of the river. The maps annotate the scores of recreational facilities and hazards on the river.

River Keepers of Fargo-Moorhead organized a Millennium Canoe Tour in 2000. The group started in Breckenridge, stopping in nearly every community along the way, and ended 34 days later with a celebration in Selkirk. In late 2000, the White House declared the Red a Millennium Trail. Since 2001, River Keepers has operated a 34-foot pontoon, the *S.S. Ruby*, on the river, providing 45-minute tours or charters for up to 17 adult passengers.



River Keepers

*S.S. Ruby tour.*

On all but the weekends with the worst summertime weather, you can see paddlers and boaters leisurely making their way along the river. Several vendors rent canoes and kayaks for use on the river. The Red River is also included in several canoeing guidebooks (Breining 1999).

#### *River-Associated Recreation*

Many types of outdoor recreation in close proximity to the river do not depend on the river, but are often there because of the river. The river and its wooded banks provide pleasant and protected surroundings for spending leisure time. Additionally, maintaining open space next to the river helps keep the **flood plain** free from structures susceptible to flood damage. The river is no longer something to be feared, but rather, something to enjoy.

**Parks, Paths, and Trails:** Most communities along the river have pedestrian or bicycle trails. A recent study of river recreation in Fargo-Moorhead found that one-third of the people surveyed near the river were bicycling (Karlsson, 2006). Paths are also used by walkers and joggers in summer and skiers and snowshoers in winter.



River Keepers

*2011 Fun Race.*

Some skiers and snowmobilers also make their way onto the sinuous path of the river when its waters are frozen in the winter. More than one community has recently hosted “bikeicicle” races on the ice. Caution must be taken whenever venturing out on to the frozen surface of the river, especially in urban areas. Thin ice or open water can be a hazard in sharp river bends, near bridge supports, or around storm sewer outlets.

Red River State Recreation Area and Sherlock Park Campground at River Mile<sup>1</sup> 297.2 in

<sup>1</sup> River Mile refers to the distance from the headwaters to the mouth of the river. For example RM 297.2 is 297.2 miles upstream from the mouth of the river at Lake Winnipeg.



Grand Forks are perfect examples of changing land uses next to the river and recognizing the recreational values of the river. The location is the site of a neighborhood destroyed by the flood of 1997 (see Chapter 6). There are 72 campsites, restrooms with showers, a playground, picnic tables, and access to hiking and biking trails at the site.

The recreation area and campground are part of the Greenway, a 2,200-acre natural open space in the heart of Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota. The Greenway features several parks, campgrounds, two golf courses, three disc golf courses, over 20 miles of multi-purpose trails, bank fishing sites, and much more. The Greenway provides a unique opportunity for year-round outdoor recreation activities in an urban setting.

Fort Daer Campground at River Mile 158.4 in Pembina is another example of riverside development in support of recreation. There is a concrete boat ramp, a dock, 12 campsites, restrooms with showers, picnic tables, shelters, fire rings, a fish cleaning station, and a playground.

**Birding:** Birding is one of the most popular outdoor leisure pastimes in the United States and Canada. Birders can find approximately 300 species of birds in the *riparian* areas of the river (O'Connor 2000). Birding tours are available in some communities.

The past few years have witnessed the return of bald eagles along the banks of the river. Eagles are frequently seen flying over the river in search of fish or waterfowl or resting in the riparian forest.

Wood ducks are another example of a species making a comeback along the river. Several organizations have placed hundreds of wood duck nest boxes in trees near the river. River Keepers has placed over 300 in the upper watershed of the Red River.

**Golfing, Frisbee Golf, Ball Diamonds:** Areas adjacent to the river are popular spots for developing sporting facilities that are flood resistant and/or resilient. Golf courses are common along the river. Some communities have Frisbee golf facilities in their riverside parks. Ball diamonds, volleyball courts, and horseshoe pits are common in the transitional area between the river and the community's built-up area.

**Hunting:** The Red River Valley was once known as a biological desert, due to lack of suitable habitat for most native species. However, at least two species have reached such numbers that they are now considered nuisances in urban areas. Whitetail deer numbers have become so high in urban areas that communities have organized controlled hunts to thin the herds. Wild turkeys have invaded the river bank habitat and can be seen in groups of 50 or more in towns as well as in the countryside. These species provide excellent hunting opportunities for sportsmen and women on both sides of the Red River. Bowhunting for deer is especially popular in the riparian forest.

Today, many communities along the banks of the Red River have well-groomed and developed parks, golf courses, walking/biking trails, picnic areas, boat ramps, ball diamonds, and volleyball courts that allow and encourage residents to enjoy the river in their leisure time. The Greenway in Grand Forks and The Forks in Winnipeg are excellent examples of how the Red River is being used to provide recreational opportunities to basin residents and visitors. These facilities are well suited for lands adjacent to the river which are subject to frequent flooding. More and more land adjacent to the river is becoming available for public recreation as communities buy out riverside homes and move them away from flood danger. Most of the recreational features built today are designed to be flood resistant as well as resilient due to the potential for frequent flooding.



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*Sailing on Lake Winnipeg.*

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