



Red Jacket Valley lives on New book written by historian, genealogist Julie Schrader explores area's bustling history

*By Rachael Hanel
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Mankato author Julie Schrader details the history of the Red Jacket Valley in her new book. Photo by John Cross

An area now mostly associated with a meandering trail once had a life of its own - a life filled with gold, buffalo, schools and railroads.

The suspicion of copper and gold hiding in the green-blue earth in the river bluffs drew explorers and settlers to the Red Jacket Valley just south of Mankato. The first white people in the area were greeted by herds of buffalo and a valley of rolling hills that seemingly stretched for miles.

Soon the settlers had a mill, schools and a railroad to make their lives easier. The structures no longer are there, but history isn't lost thanks to a new book written by local historian and genealogist Julie Schrader.

"It's important for me to have the stories told of what happened before they're forgotten. The buildings are gone, and all we have left are words and some pictures," said Schrader, author of *History of the Red Jacket Valley*.

She first took an interest in the Red Jacket Valley because of her fond memories of the scenic drive to her grandparents' house in Good Thunder. And while compiling the 976-page book *Heritage of Blue Earth County, Minnesota* a decade ago, her interest in the valley was renewed.

Her latest book is the result of about a year of research and writing. She spent time at the Blue Earth County Historical Society looking through old newspapers and photos. She tried to find people who attended school or lived in the valley to round out the portrait.

The valley was an idyllic one for the first settlers: "As pretty and quiet a spot as there is anywhere in Blue Earth County is that near the Red Jacket bridge ... Some of the most beautiful maple trees, interspersed by butternut and other varieties, furnish delightful shade, while the carpet of green grass and the gently sloping ground add to the beauty of the situation," reports the Good Thunder Herald of Sept. 7, 1911.

The valley gets its name from a flour mill that was built in 1866 and painted red. The owner, Park Worden, gave it the name "Red Jacket Mill." The name Red Jacket originally comes from a Seneca Indian chief. The name of the mill eventually stuck with the entire valley.

Schrader said she was surprised at some of the information she uncovered. For example, one man reportedly washed up \$62.50 of gold in 1891 from gravel 12 to 15 feet deep in a gully near the Red Jacket bridge.

And the image of 100 covered wagons a day passing through Mankato at the height of the pioneer movement sparked her imagination.

"That's what gets me going. I try to imagine what it was like coming here 150 years ago, coming as a young settler. It must have been just awesome and an adventure for them," she said.

The railroad played an important part of Red Jacket Valley's history and the abandoned track is now the popular Red Jacket Trail.

"It was interesting to learn about the railroad and how much they had to do to get it through, and the work to build the trestle," she said.

Schrader thinks the popularity of the trail leads more people to want to know the history behind the valley.

"I think people are getting more aware and care more now than they did even when [my] first book came out," she said.

She also thinks Mankato's sesquicentennial celebration this year will spark even more interest in the area's history. Schrader now is working on a guidebook to be available this summer about various landmarks in Mankato that are referred to in the Maud Hart Lovelace Betsy-Tacy book series. She doesn't rule out more local history books and cites interest in Rapidan Dam and smaller communities in the county.

She started her own company, Minnesota Heritage Publishing, to publish the Red Jacket book. She may take upon other authors if they write about local history.

Schrader has done a couple of local book signings, and the book has made the best-seller list at the Mankato Barnes and Noble.

"Everyone's been very nice, very complimentary. People really love it. It's hard when you're doing it to think of what people will like or want, so I just have to think of what I like," she said.

Schrader's book is available at Barnes and Noble, B. Dalton and various gift shops in the area, or by calling Schrader at 625-8056.

Some symbols of valley's past are still evident

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Although many buildings that once graced the Red Jacket Valley are now gone, some vestiges of days gone by remain.

Skihaven/Mount Kato

Mankatoan Harvey Anderson met nationally known ski jumper Anders Haugen at a ski tournament in Chippewa Falls, Wis., and asked Haugen to design a ski jump for Mankato.

The first hill was at the end of Belgrade Avenue in North Mankato in 1931. That ski hill, along with another hill on James Avenue in Mankato, was abandoned because of increasing traffic and housing development.

In 1937, Anderson opened what is now Mt. Kato because he liked the natural amphitheater and the northeast-facing hill that would be affected little by the sun. There was no ski lift and no charge, with the thought that if a person could clamber up the hill he or she was more than welcome to ski down. Skihaven was used for tobogganing, bobsledding and ski jumping in addition to skiing.

In 1945 Anderson used a Buick engine hooked to a bullwheel to use as a tow rope. The rope was heavy, slippery and fast. Only three people could be pulled at a time otherwise the weight of the group would cause the engine to stall. A fee was added after the lift was put in, and Anderson himself rigged up lights for evening skiing.

In 1951 Anderson hired two men from northern Minnesota to building a log cabin chalet. Anderson's wife, Dolly, operated a lunch counter and served her famous barbecues. She would work until 3 a.m. to prepare the barbecues for the next day's skiers. She later turned her recipe over to Randall's Valu Center.

Skihaven got electric lifts and more lighting in 1966. The 42-acre back hill was acquired and a snowcat groomed the hills daily. The owners of Afton Alps bought Skihaven in 1977 and changed the name to Mt. Kato.

Red Jacket rail

The Southern Minnesota Rail line (later the Central Railroad and then the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul) had reached Wells by the summer of 1869 and by the summer of 1870 surveyors worked on the next segment, from the Maple River to the Red Jacket mill. Because of financial and legal disputes with the railroad, the Red Jacket trestle wasn't completed until September 1874. The trestle connecting the bridge with the bluff was 618 feet long and its highest point was 59 feet above ground.

A passenger train ran between Mankato and Good Thunder and cost 70 cents. The rail suffered many disruptions because of snow and landslides, especially in the Red Jacket ravine. By 1978 the Milwaukee Road had abandoned 30 miles of track between Mankato and Minnesota Lake. The former rail line is now the Red Jacket Trail.

Kerns-Yaeger Bridge

A bridge was built about a mile from the Red Jacket Mill in 1873 to help farmers haul their goods. The Wrought Iron Bridge Co. of Canton, Ohio, built the bridge for \$6,000 in Section 35 of Mankato Township. The bridge provided an all-season crossing for two roads into West Mankato - the Cobb River Road and Indian Lake Road. The bridge was found to be too dangerous for traffic and closed in December 1990.

It is now on the National Register of Historic Places and is the only example of a bowstring arch-through truss bridge in Minnesota today.