

Preparing the Way



In 1876 the territory west of Boissevain wasn't surveyed.

In 1870 Canada made a deal with the Hudson's Bay Company, and gained control of territory that included most of what today is Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. The era of the Fur Trade was over. The plan was to open up this huge new territory for farming.

Before that could happen there were several questions to answer.

First: Who really owned this land? Canada purchased it from the Hudson's Bay Company – but what about the First Nations people, the Ojibway, the Cree, and the Nakota and Dakota who had been living on this land for centuries? Wasn't it really their land?

Second: Were these dry open lands in the west even suitable for agriculture? Some thought it was too dry and that the growing season was too short. Others felt that it

would be perfect for growing wheat – the most important crop of the time. No one was really sure how farming would work here.

Third: How were these thousands of new farmers going to get there – across the thousands of kilometres of the rocky terrain of the Canadian Shield? In 1870 it was a difficult journey of several weeks. And even if they got here and grew crops, how would they get those crops back east where they could be sold?

Fourth: Would Ontario and British settlers really want to come to this cold and unknown land? It would mean leaving family and friends behind. It would mean taking a big chance.

Treaties

Who owned the Prairies? The Government of Canada bought this huge parcel of land from the Hudson's Bay Company. The HBC had been granted the use of the land by the British Government in 1670 for the purpose of trading in furs.

But what about the Aboriginal people who had been living here for centuries?

The solution was to make deals called Treaties.

The First Nations communities knew that their old way of life was gone. The buffalo herds were gone. They were interested in securing a more certain future for themselves and generations to come.

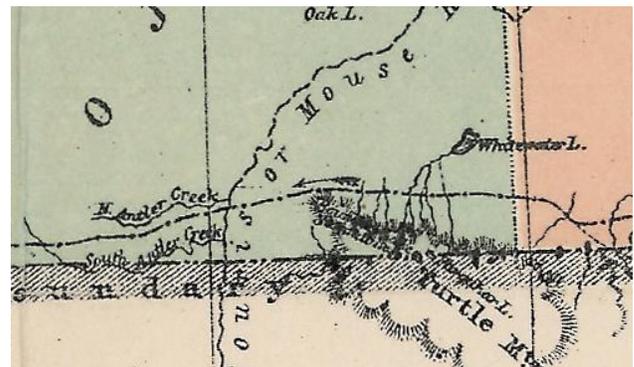
Treaty 1 which covered the central and eastern parts of Manitoba, was signed on August 3rd 1871.

In exchange for certain payments and guarantees of services, the First Nations agreed to give up the use of all of their land except for reserves. They pledged that they and their people would “maintain peace between themselves and Her Majesty’s white subjects, and not interfere with the property or in any way molest the persons of Her Majesty’s subjects.”

Treaty 2, which included almost all of the Turtle Mountain – Souris Plains Region was signed on the 21st of August 1871.

Two other separate arrangements were made with the Dakota in the region. A small reserve (IR #60) was set aside on Turtle Mountain for a group of Dakota families.

Today most people would agree that the deals made with both the First Nations and Metis communities were not fair, and that the First Nations didn't have a lot of choice in the matter.



The boundary between Treaty 1 and Treaty 2 land is close to where Boissevain is today.

The Numbered Treaties, in addition to the passage of the Indian Act in 1876, marked the beginning of a new relationship between western First Nations and the Canadian government.

Questions about whether the deals were fair and whether the Government of Canada kept its promises are still important topics today.

The Metis Claim

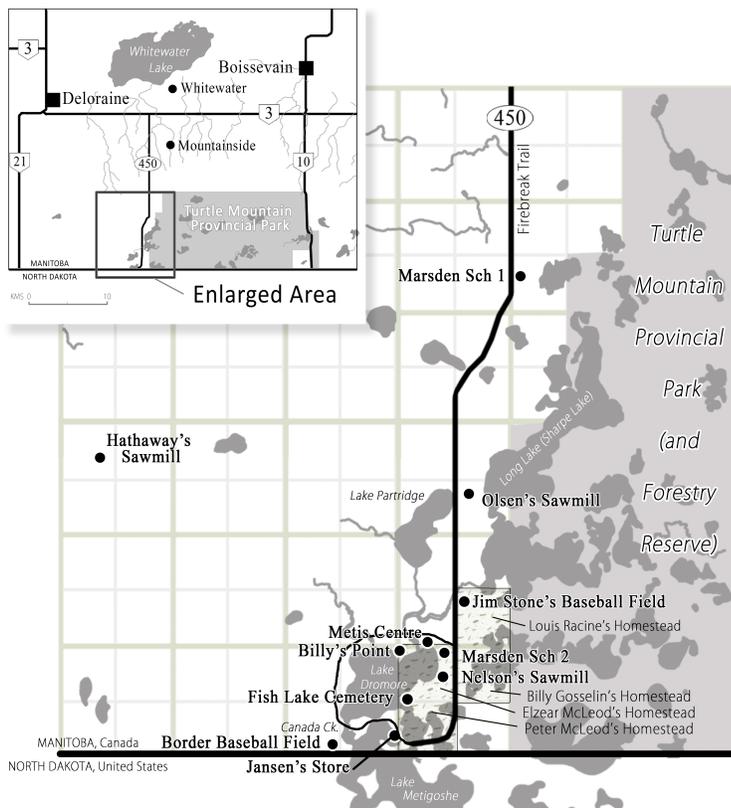
In 1869, the area we now call Manitoba would likely have become part of the District of Assiniboia – a large district that would include present day Saskatchewan and Alberta as well. It would have been administered by a Governor and Council, it might well been some time before it became a province. Alberta and Saskatchewan had to wait until 1905.

What the government overlooked was that there were already people here. The Metis people who had lived here for decades in well-established communities, quite naturally objected when surveyors arrived who seemed determined to re-draw the maps as if they weren't even there.

For several generations the Metis made up the majority of the population in Red River. The Resistance in 1869 and the North West Resistance of 1885 uprooted Métis families from their homesteads and scattered them in all directions.

The Government promised that each Metis family would get a farm, but the way it was done has caused disagreements to this day, and many people feel that promises were not kept.

The Turtle Mountain Connection



During the summer and fall hunting seasons the Métis grew familiar with the plains surrounding Turtle Mountain.

Turtle Mountain provided resources from which temporary winter camps could be built: construction materials for simple cabins, firewood, and shelter from the stiff winter winds.

The first permanent Métis settlers moved to Turtle Mountain in 1908. The first group were descendants of the Red River Métis and came north from Belcourt, North Dakota. The following decades saw more families move into the bush land surrounding Lake Metigoshe, Lake Dromore and Sharpe Lake (at the time known as Long Lake). Some European settlers married into Métis families and the community grew.

The Métis have a long history of interaction with the landform known as Turtle Mountain. Turtle Mountain and Whitewater Lake to the north were prime hunting grounds.

Farming on The Prairies



It is a common perception that most plains Aboriginal peoples were all nomadic wanderers who existed without the use of agriculture.

Though this was true of some First Nations, we know that agricultural activities in Southwestern Manitoba did not begin with European settlers. However the constant movement of the buffalo hunting societies made agriculture difficult, and the abundance provided by those animals made it unnecessary.

The first European “settlements” or communities in western Manitoba were fur trade posts. We also know that they tried to supplement their provisions with some form of agriculture – and reported some success.

But could people make a living on these plains through farming alone?

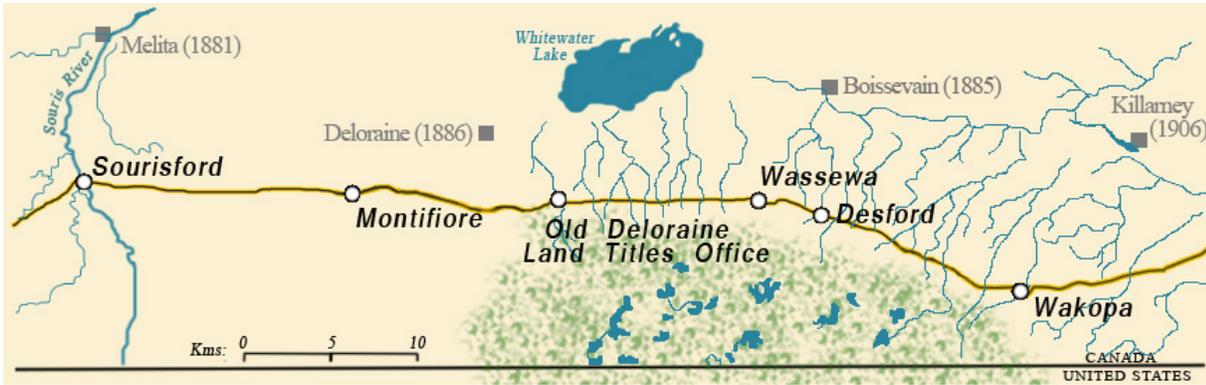
The Canadian government sent Professor Henry Youle Hind, a Toronto geologist, to

explore the region and answer that question. During the summer of 1859 he and his party of 13 men explored southwestern Manitoba. They noted the lack of timber, but found what they were looking for - fertile land.

In 1859 a British expedition by Capt. Palliser also explored the Northwest Territories to examine the suitability of the region for agricultural settlement. He was impressed with the parkland along the Saskatchewan River but defined the large area south of that, including much of southwestern Manitoba as near-desert, unsuited for settlement.

His opinion was contradicted by a later report by John Macoun that essentially predicted that the prairie grassland would be the breadbasket to the world.

Transportation



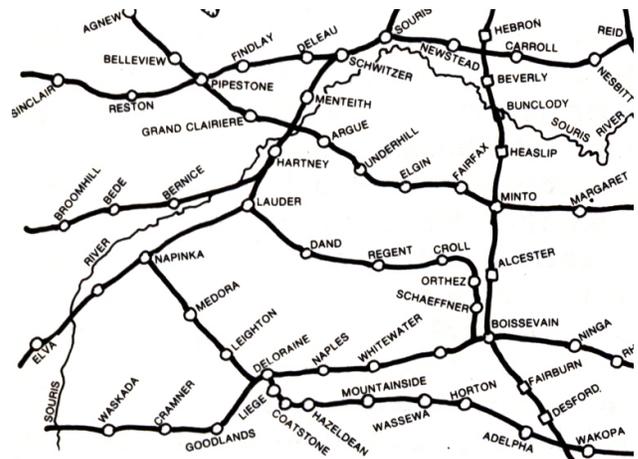
The first highway to Southwestern Manitoba.

The Boundary Commission Trail



Crossing the Souris River at Sourisford, 1874

In 1873, the British and United States Boundary Commissioners followed a route along the 49th Parallel as they marked the boundary between the U.S. and Canada.



By 1920 rail lines crossed southern Manitoba.

The National Dream

The Conservative government led by John A. MacDonald had a long-time dream of building a railway that would span the country from coast to coast.

The settling of the west and the establishment of farms would depend on having this modern fast method of travel.

Why They Came



For the first settlers, it was a long slow journey.

The Government of Canada negotiated Treaties with the First Nations. They had reason to believe that this land was suitable for farming, and had arranged a transportation system that would get people here and get farm produce to market.

One issue remained. Would the settlers come? Would large numbers of people leave their home and travel to an unknown land?

There were reasons to believe that many would take the step,

There were circumstances in Europe and Upper Canada that might cause people to want to leave their communities and consider Manitoba as an option.

Poor employment opportunities and shortage of good farm land might cause some settlers to leave established communities like those in Ontario.

In other parts of the world these reasons might also apply, while famine, war, disease, and a desire for political change might also be good reason to leave a place.

Some might just have had an “adventurous spirit” or ambition.

I’m Hearing Good Reports.....

There were also some good reports from people who had visited and thought the place was great.

The most famous of those was “The Great Lone Land”

How could one resist the land described as follows?

“The great ocean itself does not present more infinite variety than does the prairie ocean of which we speak. In winter, a dazzling surface of purest snow; in early summer, a vast expanse of grass and pale pink roses; in autumn, too often a wild sea of raging fire. No ocean of water in the world can vie with its gorgeous sunsets; no solitude can equal the loneliness of a night-shadowed prairie: one feels the stillness and hears the silence, the wail of the prowling wolf makes the voice of solitude audible, the stars look down through infinite silence upon a silence almost as intense...”

William Francis Butler had visited in 1870 and he was impressed. Many people in Ontario and in Britain read his book.

Others writing in newspapers gave first hand accounts of the great opportunities available in the new west.