

Sourisford Crossing

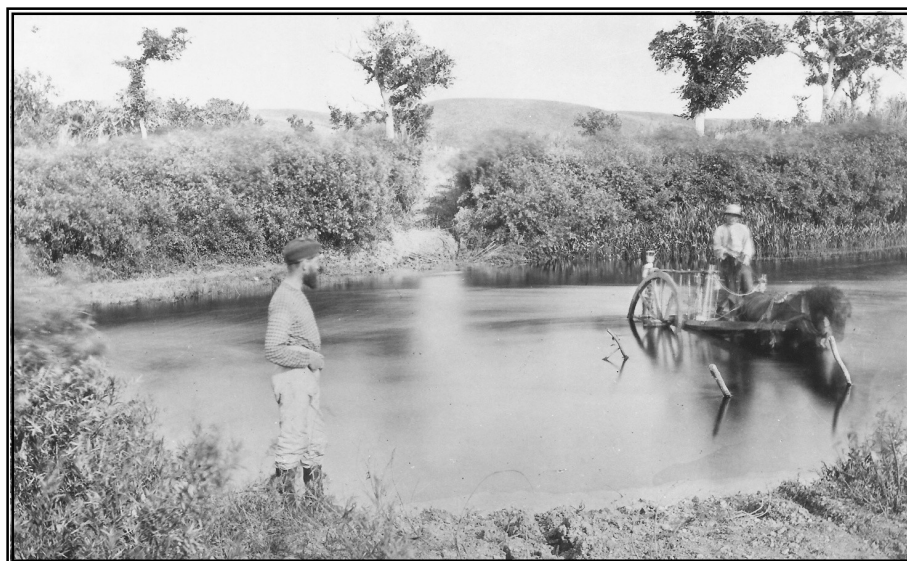
Centuries of activity mark this crossing of the Souris River . . .

Sourisford, as the name suggests, was well known as a convenient place to ford the Souris River. At this place especially, a gravel bottom spans the width of the river and the soft banks on either side were worn down by herds of bison over decades of migrations. The banks of this part of the river were popular as a camping place for First Nations and the location of several villages. In later years, this crossing was also a camping place for early explorers, the Boundary Commission surveyors and the North West Mounted Police.

Among the first settlers to make their way to the Souris River and establish homesteads were Alfred Gould and David Elliot in 1882. When they arrived, they discovered a man named Charlie West had made the bank of the Souris River his home. Supposedly he had been working for the Hudson's Bay Company and had fallen out of favour. Nevertheless, he disappeared the spring after Gould and Elliot arrived.

Coming from the west on the Boundary Commission Trail, Gould and Elliot built a house and barn at the crossing of the trail and the river. With the increase of settlement travel westward, their home became established as a regular "stopping place." Many settlers were relieved to arrive at Gould and Elliot's where they found warm and comfortable stables and a hot meal served in the house for a very moderate price.

In 1882 settlement picked up, a result of the railway reaching Brandon earlier that year. That spring the Souris River also flooded its banks and settlers heading west along the Boundary Commission Trail found what had been a navigable fording place was now a raging torrent. Gould and fellow



pioneer W.F. Thomas both operated a ferry service across the river during this time, charging \$5 a load.

The stopping place slowly grew into a small community. During the summer of 1882 a store was operated out of a tent by a pair of early settlers. A regular post office called Sourisford was opened the next year.

A blacksmith shop opened and a store operated for two or three years.

In 1882 two enterprising early settlers planned a subdivision for "Souris City" on the east side of the Souris River. The town was extensively advertised, with large maps showing a town of 2,088 lots. It was touted as a major up-and-coming manufacturing centre in splendid farm country, conveniently located on the banks of a river that could connect to larger centres. In July of 1883, the registrar's office for the Souris River area moved from Deloraine to the site of Souris City. The registrar, Mr. J. P. Alexander, built his home on the site—the only building that was ever built in Souris City. Though lots were sold to people as far away as the Maritimes, Souris City never took off because of the already established community at Sourisford. The town plan for Souris City (also known as Sourisapolis) was officially cancelled in 1916.

Today, a park near Sourisford is the location of one of the earliest regularly

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▲ *The crossing of the Souris River at Sourisford in 1872. This picture was taken by a photographer who accompanied the Boundary Commission Survey.*

used recreation sites in rural Manitoba. As far back as August 1882 a crowd bigger than any other in southwest Manitoba at that time gathered for a

picnic. Since then, picnics have been held in the beautiful grove every summer. These gatherings used to attract thousands of locals and visitors alike, many from the United States.

Bannock with syrup would be served up, along with a dinner laid out on blankets in true picnic style. Short addresses were sometimes given before a band played to liven things up. In 1903 the event became a combination between track and field activities and a bush picnic. The town of Melita declared the day a holiday so that everyone could attend.

In 1939, Francis Coulter donated the land where the picnic was held and it was then designated as Coulter Park. Alfred Gould's stone house—built to house his family in 1902—also remains preserved on the site.

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