

Old Melita Trail

1879—Present

A settlement route turns into a local highway

In 1881 the railway reached Brandon—likely bringing cries of “Hallelujah!” to homesteaders who had intentions of heading west. However, after arriving in Brandon, there was still a lengthy distance to travel in order to reach the land available for settlement. The trail leading southwest from Brandon was known as the Yellow-Quill Trail. This article, however, deals with the lesser-known Old Melita Trail which branched off of the Yellow Quill trail at Melita and struck out west.

It is likely that the trail was first created by the surveyors who travelled the area between 1879 and 1880, marking out the land into townships (blocks of 36 square miles). The wagon trail they left was deepened by the passage of dominion surveyors McArthur and Wilkins between 1880 and 1881 as they surveyed the townships into sections and quarter sections.

The trail kept loosely to the road allowance between Townships 3 and 4, through Ranges 27-29 to the present-day Saskatchewan border. It ended close to the crossing of Gainsborough Creek, after which another trail led toward the Moose Mountains. The “Old Melita Trail,” as it came to be called, meandered gently; crossing streams and creeks, avoiding sloughs and ravines.

Soon settlement-era transportation

methods were seen using the trail: ox-carts, covered wagons and Red River carts. The heavy and constant use served to more clearly define the prairie track. As the land alongside the trail was settled, homesteads and sod houses were built farther from the transportation route, and smaller tributary trails appeared to connect to the main trail. For the established settler, the trail grew from being a settlement route into a regular transportation highway for picking up the mail or shopping in Melita.

Most of the homes originally built alongside the trail were made of sod. The construction of these buildings was quite simple, though it was a heavy and messy job. The houses were small, often no larger than a shack, with one door and perhaps two windows. By the late 1890s sod houses were beginning to be replaced by large frame homes. The design most of these buildings followed was from a style popular in Eastern Canada.

During the late 1880s and 1890s a great influx of settlement came to the region. In 1889 alone over two dozen homesteads were established along the trail. Increased settlement came as a relief to early settlers who had suffered from isolation and loneliness. With more people, farmsteads were closer together and, as transportation improved, parties and get-togethers among neighbours grew increasingly

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common. Schoolhouses became the social centres of the districts established along the trail.

When Mrs William McPherson’s family came across the trail to settle, the wagon ruts in the prairie were 12 inches deep. She had a 20 mile journey from her homestead to Melita—a distance that took 3 hours to travel. She didn’t mind: “We saw a lot more then, than we do now in a car. We saw the wild ducks swimming in the sloughs. We saw the prairie chickens courting. We saw the first crocus, the first buttercups, the first violets and many other wonders of nature...and at night, the moon, and the stars-spangled heavens. Those were the good old days!”

The Eunola Schoolhouse #2 was located right beside the Old Melita Trail for 18 years. It moved beside the trail in 1900 in order to be more centrally located in the district. Settlers heading to Saskatchewan sometimes camped at the school overnight, or paused there during the noon hour much to the amusement of the children attending Eunola. The first organised community dance was held there during the winter of 1909-10, put together by Mr. Melvin, the young teacher. The school was later moved a few miles north of the trail in 1918. Belfry school, further east, was also located along the trail after 1899.

Through the trials and tribulations of settler life, the Old Melita Trail was there. It was present in times of prairie fires, numbing cold, planting and harvesting. The joys of life, such as babies being born, visiting the neighbours and Christmases were celebrated along its length. Today the trail is highway number 445, straightened and paved to serve an age of automobiles.

Sources:
Reekie, Isobel M. “Along the Old Melita Trail.” Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1965.
RM of Edward History Book Committee. *Harvests of Time*. Altona: Friesen Printers, 1983. Pg 24.
Photo: RM of Edward History Book Committee. Pg 18.

▼ Sod was the first building material available to settlers in this region of southwest Manitoba. Pictured here is an example of a sod house (right) and barn (left) built before 1890.

