

Napinka at the Crossroads

A CPR decision created a boom in Napinka

The CPR made it to Deloraine in 1887, and stopped there for a time, as if unsure as to where to go next. The logical next step was to continue west towards the already well-established village of Melita, but as usual, the CPR was in no hurry.

In 1889, railway surveyors had secured the right-of-way and had done some surveying of the line west towards Melita. But in July of 1891, there were rumours that the line might go to Napinka and link up with the Kemnay-Estevan branch of the CPR. This did not sit well with the merchants at Melita who sent a delegation to Winnipeg to plead their case to the CPR brass, but to no avail. As Pierre Berton once wrote; "With a scratch of the pen the company could and did decide which communities would grow and which would stagnate".

Although Melita certainly didn't stagnate, Napinka got a real boost. It was now at a crossroads of the two busiest railway lines in the southwest. In the early part of the 20th century it had most of the flourishing businesses that were

available in towns like rivals Deloraine and Melita.

Trains came in every day from Brandon, Winnipeg, Estevan and the many small towns along the line. To service the trains, the CPR built a water tower and a dam on the Souris River. A coal dock, tool shop, roundhouse and bunkhouse also appeared. The passengers and crew on the trips that stopped overnight in Napinka used the hotels and stores built along Railway Avenue. In 1892, an article in the *Brandon Sun* mentioned Napinka having "...two general stores, three hardware stores, two butcher shops, one flour and feed store, one watchmaker, two dressmakers, builders, coal and wood dealers, one elevator, two lumber yards, a drug store and a barber shop..."

Soon there were two hotels, two banks, a blacksmith, doctors, a laundry, a Massey-Harris tractor dealership, and eventually, two garages.

Sports teams, social clubs, and women's organizations were organ-

ized. An open air skating and curling rink was built in 1896, while a more modern curling facility was built in 1906, and curlers from Napinka achieved great success in bonspiels across Manitoba. Three churches were filled each Sunday at the turn of the century and the Napinka Women's Institute and a Red Cross branch soon followed. Lodges and 4-H clubs, along with the Explorers and Canadian Girls in Training (C.G.I.T.) were active.

The story of Napinka is both unique and typical. It thrived as a commercial centre as a result of a seemingly arbitrary CPR decision. But its decline followed the oft-repeated prairie pattern. Times changed. Transportation evolved. Rails gave way to cars.

Memories of the glory days of the early twentieth century are still strong in the residents of the town. They remember the magic of a steam train sliding in gracefully next to the station on a puff of white smoke and dozens of people disembarking to take in the charm and vitality of a small town with so much promise.

Sources:

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Waskada Memoirs. Morden. Morden Commercial Printers, 1967.
Additional Research by Tyler Bugg

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▼ In 1890's there was no north-south line in the district. By connecting at Napinka the CPR made the route to Brandon a little shorter. Napinka is pictured here around 1910.

