

The Diana Icelandic Cemetery

A small settlement north of Tilston connects our region to the story of the Manitoba Icelanders

A small fenced enclosure in the centre of a field a few kilometres north of Tilston would be easy to miss if you were just passing by. A closer look reveals that it is an old cemetery. There is no access road, not even a rough trail, so you know it hasn't been used in recent times. But like all old cemeteries, it has a story to tell.

The first settlers to arrive in the community that was to become the Diana district were Icelandic. They had originally come to the New Iceland settlement at Gimli beginning in 1876. Some had moved on to the Grund area between Baldur and Glenboro in the early 1880's, and when homesteads were becoming harder to find, a few moved west to the area between Sinclair and Tilston.

The largest group settled in the Diana district in what was then Albert Municipality. Perhaps because of distance, or perhaps because Icelandic settlers had their own distinctive burial traditions, they established their own cemetery rather than use the nearby ones in Tilston and Sinclair.

The cemetery contains seven graves, all unmarked but one. A small white granite headstone bears the word "Baby" and below it, is the name of Gestur, infant son of J. F. and F. Davidson, who died on May 8, 1919, at the age of seven days.

Three unmarked stone slabs can be seen in the east half of the cemetery.

The Icelanders were a very literate people with the old Norse love of poetry and sagas. Wherever they settled, a school was first priority. The Diana School was built in 1905.

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▲ A cairn erected on site pays tribute to the seven people buried at the Diana Icelandic Cemetery.

A teacher was needed who understood both their language and their culture. Josasina Stefansson, a seventeen-year-old girl from Gimli, taught the first year. The second teacher was Thorstina Jackson from North Dakota.

The schoolhouse served as a religious meeting place every other Sunday in summer. Soon an Icelandic Hall was built one and a half miles west of Sinclair, and an ordained minister who travelled from Winnipeg preached for two or three consecutive Sundays. One preached for three straight hours prompting one of the congregation to say: "They are trying this once a year to fill us with all the holy spirit we may need for the rest of the year."

The drought of the thirties caused many from this area to leave the land, and the little cemetery is one of the few links to the story.



Sources:

- R.M. of Albert History Book Committee. *Reflections of Time: A History of the R. M. of Albert*. Tilston, 1984.
- R.M. of Pipestone History Project. *Trails Along the Pipestone*. 1981.

◀ The Diana Cemetery is easily missed as one drives by.