

# A Railway Builder's Challenge—Crossing the River

The Great Northern Railway faced a few building challenges along the Souris Valley

Railway builders avoid hills and valleys – it is much cheaper to build on level prairie. That's why a look at this map shows the Brandon, Saskatchewan and Hudson's Bay Railway line (better known as the Great Northern) angling southeast from Boissevain, instead of going straight south – the way Highway 10 does today. They avoided crossing Turtle Mountain.

But to connect to Brandon there was an obstacle they couldn't avoid. The landscape of Southwestern Manitoba is dominated, perhaps defined, by the Souris Plains, a wide expanse of relatively flat country stretching from the base of Turtle Mountain, west and northwards, towards the Souris River Valley.

A traveler new to the area, and on a trek from Boissevain northwards to Brandon, whether on the rutted ox-cart path known as the Heaslip Trail, or on the smoothly paved Highway 10, might be surprised when, out of nowhere, there appears the valley of the Souris; a deep, kilometer wide channel cut over ten thousand years ago as the last of the glacial lakes drained.

Scenic it may well be, but to the railroad builder it holds no romantic charm. It is an obstacle to be crossed. A challenge perhaps, a nuisance, definitely.

Trains don't do well on hills, and keeping the grade or slope of the track

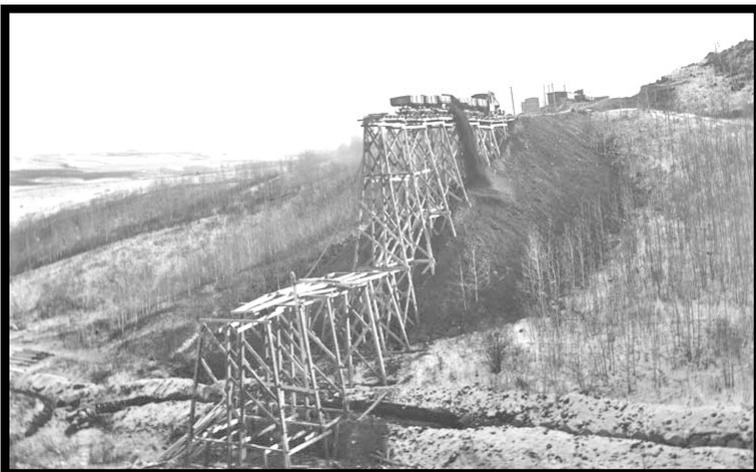
as gentle as possible is a priority. The surveyors for the Great Northern had rejected a crossing straight north of Minto where the valley is both deep and wide. Instead they selected a site near the hamlet of Bunclody where the southern lip of the valley brushed right up against the stream, where the gentle slope on the north side could be crossed with a modest embankment. To get there, the line bends westward at Heaslip, following the curve of the river.

Unfortunately for the railway builders, between Heaslip and Bunclody there are two small streams running into the Souris from the west. Small streams now, but back in the days when Lake Souris was rapidly draining, the waters had cut deep ravines as they approached the river.

The railway engineers crossed these steep narrow gorges by building temporary trestle bridges and then dumping fill to create a road-level earthen dam, complete with huge pipes designed to let the runoff through. The pipes soon broke and had to be replaced with concrete tunnels two meters square—still quite visible today, although somewhat clogged with rubble. Area residents have told me about boyhood adventures that included a dare to go through the tunnel.

Today a marked trail, beginning at a dead end road north of Heaslip, follows the abandoned railway bed and a short walk takes you right there.

## Trains don't do well on hills...



### Sources:

Storie, Ken. Virtual Manitoba. <http://www.virtualmanitoba.com/FalseStarts/>.  
 Todd, John. "Jim Hill's Canadian Railway, Canadian Rail". Canadian Railroad Historical Association, Montreal. No. 283, August 1975.

Images: TM-SPHA Collection



▲ The route of the GNR as it crossed the border and travelled north to Brandon. The railway line was built in 1905 and in use until 1936.

◀ Crossing a ravine north of Heaslip.