



DELTA

A Prairie Marsh and its People

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Visit **deltahistory.org** to purchase copies of this book and to see more historical photos.

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Acknowledgements

This book began with a small gathering of people in Mallard Lodge at the Delta Marsh Field Station (University of Manitoba) on May 27, 2001, organized by its director, Dr. Gordon Goldsborough. He was researching the life of Winnipeg businessman Donald H. Bain, who had built Mallard Lodge in the early 1930s and thought that a book about Delta Marsh's history would be a great project to take on. A core group was formed including Glen Suggett, the Wildlife Lands Manager with the Wildlife Branch of Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship, Bob Jones, retired Delta Marsh Manager, Heidi Den Haan, assistant Director of the Field Station (now Assistant Director of the Churchill Northern Studies Centre), Shirley Christianson, Portage la Prairie resident, Maurice Blanchard, commercial fisherman, guide and businessman, Barry Bills and Denzel Gamble, retired teachers, Winnie Pauch, Head of the Regional Health Authority (now retired), Cynthia Jordan, cottager and long-time resident of the Oakland area, and Myrna Mackey who grew up on a farm near Delta. What began as a project anticipated taking a year or two to complete in the end took more than a decade. Very little information was readily accessible in published sources, so a call went out to the local community for photographs and reminiscences. For several years Maurice Blanchard organized a Canada Day Fish Fry at Delta Beach to promote the project and raise funds. Open houses were held to find people who had stories to tell. There were countless individuals to interview, each with a fascinating perspective on the marsh, beach, lake and surrounding farmlands. Shirley Christianson hosted regular meetings of the

history group in her home and for the first few years a newsletter was published and distributed to encourage more people to come forward with photos and stories. Sian Bumsted, Sherry Dangerfield, Heidi Den Haan, Bob Jones, Winnie Pauch and Kerry Guenter provided research assistance and prepared background information on various topics. Leo Pettipas, retired provincial archaeologist, provided material on the early Aboriginal inhabitants and on the bombing and gunnery school at Macdonald. Dale Wrubleski provided information on his research and monitoring work at Delta. James Burns edited the manuscript and Jake MacDonald wrote the foreword for the book.

Over the years a mountain of material began to amass – amazing photos from private collections that had never been published before, rich oral histories, and a wealth of letters and documents housed in various archives around the country and overseas. The Royal Family Archives and others provided the diaries of those who visited Delta in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The project could have gone on for another decade as the reservoir of information was rich and still largely untapped. This was a part-time venture for all involved in this work and having time to dedicate to the project proved a major challenge. The material that follows is only the highlights of what was learned in our journey of discovery. It was not feasible to include all of the stories that were told or all the photos that were donated due to space limitations. These will remain in an archive for others to use in future. In the meantime, this is some of what the Delta Marsh History Group has learned about this great landscape and the people who have interacted with it over the years. We hope you will find it as interesting as we have.

Table of Contents

Foreword by Jake MacDonald

Introduction

1 • The First People

2 • People of the Plough

3 • Life's a Beach

4 • Hunting the Wily Duck

5 • Hunting for Knowledge

6 • Droughts and Floods

7 • Marsh Management

Conclusion

End Notes

List of Photographs

Appendix 1 – The Delta Marsh History Group

Appendix 2 – Maps



Foreword

By Jake MacDonald

The Delta Marsh is one of the richest wetlands in North America. Every square centimeter of the marsh trembles and thrums with activity. Ducks, fish, herons, foxes, insects, hawks, muskrats, spiders – you’ll see hundreds and hundreds of species busily working around the clock at their intricate trades. The Delta Marsh is a wetland Serengeti, a mini-Everglades of the north. And it’s close to the very centre of the continent, so it’s an easy place to visit. But only a very few of the 530 million citizens of North America have even heard of Delta, let alone visited it. So for many readers this book will be a handshake of welcome – an introduction to a wonderful place and the people who are trying to save it.

As the American poet Wallace Stevens once wrote, there are many ways of looking at a blackbird. And there are many ways of looking at Delta Marsh, depending on one’s experience and perspective. The Métis fur trapper who tends his muskrat sets on a sun-bright April morning knows a different marsh than the university student researching a thesis about the interaction between those same muskrats and nesting geese. The American waterfowl hunter who spends thousands of dollars to come to Delta and shoot a few ducks knows a different marsh than the local lady from St. Ambroise or St. Laurent who makes some extra income every autumn, cooking his breakfast and chuckling at his jokes.

And her husband sees a different marsh too, when he rises in the -30°C darkness of a January morning to go out on the ice in his tracked vehicle to pull his nets. There are thousands of people who love Delta, in some way or another, and each will have his or her own story.

I owe my own connection to the marsh to my father, who took me there when I was a small boy to hunt ducks. My father was a steadfast, intellectual, fair-minded sort of man who did volunteer work for nature education and built birdhouses in his spare time, and the fact that he also hunted birds puzzled some of his family. (When my sister and I were co-writing his obituary, she kept deleting “waterfowl hunter” from his resume and I kept putting it back.) In general, though, most waterfowl hunters are gentle characters, bird lovers and nature buffs, and my father must have thought that an introduction to Delta Marsh would teach me something.

I remember vividly those boyhood hunts – the saggy beds in the old hunting shack, the rattle of the alarm clock at five a.m., the clanking and smoky aroma of the old cook stove as my dad and his friends made bacon and eggs, the piles of gear, the guns in their sheepskin cases, the crunch of frozen weeds underfoot as we walked to the marsh, the growing excitement as we loaded the rowboats and pushed away from shore, the oars creaking as

my dad rowed, the unseen wings whistling past in the darkness, and the constellations sprayed across the firmament overhead.

When we reached our hunting spot my father would set out the decoys and haul the boat into the tall marsh grass, where we'd sit watching the eastern sky turning pink, listening to coyotes celebrating the end of night, their high-pitched howls and yips erupting from every quadrant of the marsh. Soon it was light enough to see the decoys bobbing in the water just a few yards downwind. My father still hadn't moved or loaded his gun, even though strings of ducks were flitting past in the gloom. Finally, without comment, he would feed two shells into his Remington, noisily rack the pump, and the game was on. Soon enough, ducks would rip past, bank hard and swoop towards the decoys. The gun would go boom and a duck would hit the water. Or he'd miss. After all these years it doesn't matter. That was not the part that mattered. What mattered was being there at daybreak, having a seat at the Dawn of Creation.

I eventually inherited his old pump gun and have since spent hundreds of sunrises in the marsh. Each outing was a chance to experience nature in all her primitive beauty, to reflect on family and friends, to remember loves lost and loves found, and to marvel at the primeval power of the earth to generate life. And although my dad never would have put it

that way, I suspect that's why he wanted to take me hunting all those years ago. He thought I would learn something that I wouldn't learn by staying in bed and going to school. And like many of the people in this book, I believe all those "shooting trips" to the marsh made me a different and perhaps even a better person.

Thus the many photographs of proud hunters and dead ducks in this book. Until quite recently, no one except hunters really cared about marshes. Most people regarded wetlands as "swamps" and worthless. (There's that old quip, "I've got some nice swampland to sell you.") By the 1930s, it was apparent that North America's wetlands were rapidly disappearing, along with the life they supported. And organizations like Delta Waterfowl and Ducks Unlimited solicited hunters to stop the destruction. Thanks to billions of dollars in private donations, wetlands like the Delta Marsh are still supporting life in myriad forms. And environmentalists, bird watchers, farmers and other nature lovers have joined the campaign to save North America's shallow-water wetlands, which, as we now understand, are the most generative environments on the planet.

The primary authors of this excellent book, Dr. Gordon Goldsborough and Glen Suggett, are fine examples of the countless dedicated people who have volunteered their time and personal resources to rehabilitate Delta Marsh. Like almost

anyone who loves the Delta, they can trace their devotion to personal outings on the marsh. Gordon Goldsborough first encountered the marsh when he was a young university student, and as part of his course load was ordered to take a field course at the Delta Marsh Field Station. Like many a young student, he regarded field trips as annoying extra work, but when he got to the marsh and experienced its rough splendor he was converted. He eventually secured a teaching position at Brandon University, but the marsh still tugged at his heart. And in 1996, despite the counsel of his colleagues, ("They thought I was crazy.") he quit his tenured university job and went back to the marsh to become the Director of the Field Station.

Due to budget cuts the University of Manitoba closed the Field Station in 2010. Dr. Goldsborough returned to the campus to teach botany, but says the marsh changed him forever. "There is something magical about Delta that is difficult to put into words. I still dream about it at night. I remember quiet canoe paddles through the marsh, days of toiling in the rain and the mid-summer buggy heat to collect scientific data, winter days and snowmobile rides out into the frozen marsh to collect water samples under the ice, the many fine people I met there – I suspect it will be in my daily thoughts for the rest of my life."

Glen Suggett says that his life too changed forever when his father introduced him to the marsh. "I first learned of Delta Marsh in the fall when I was about 13 and my father informed me that we had a shooting lodge at Delta. This was like finding out that we had a family treasure, because I had read about the marsh in outdoor magazines. I visualized a "lodge" from an old calendar, but was mightily disappointed upon our arrival to find that it was a single car plywood garage on Portage Creek. I nearly froze that night after the fire went out in the old Quebec heater, but the next morning in the marsh was life changing – a gorgeous sunrise, with hundreds of ducks in the air, it was magnificent."

Suggett eventually joined the Department of Natural Resources in 1982 and has worked at the Wildlife Branch ever since. In 2000, he and his wife and newborn son moved to the Delta Marsh, and lived at the south end of Simpson Bay.

As Glen Suggett, Gordon Goldsborough, my own father, and many others would attest, the magic of the Delta Marsh is difficult to convey in words. So read this book, enjoy the book, then do yourself a favor. Get some binoculars, a bird book and a canoe, and go experience it for yourself.

Left: Edward Gilroy at the Oakland Country Club in the early 1900s.



Lake Manitoba lies to the left in the photograph, with Clandeboye Bay to the right. The marsh is protected from the lake by the treed beach ridge, but waters interchange through the channel connecting Clandeboye Bay with Lake Manitoba.

Introduction

Delta Marsh is one of the world's largest freshwater wetlands. Situated in the heart of the Great Plains of North America, it is one of the wonders of the natural world. The marsh is so vast you cannot see it in its entirety from any single place on the ground. It stretches beyond the edge of the horizon and there are few who know all of its bays, channels and ponds.

This is a land of big water and big sky; a land where you can see the weather coming. In spring, when the marsh comes to life, it is a landscape dominated by brown vegetation, blue skies, brisk winds and clear waters. In summer, green completely overtakes brown and the wind is seldom more than a gentle breeze. Fluffy white clouds traverse a deep blue sky at a leisurely pace. In fall, the vegetation slowly turns brown and the skies turn grey. The water is lashed by strong northwest winds in October and the marsh begins to freeze. For the late season wildfowler, the gentle caress of a summer breeze is a distant memory. Bluebills, mallards and a few hardy Canada geese linger until the marsh becomes locked in ice. In winter, the landscape is almost universally white, with only a few brown highlights. The marsh's slumber is regularly interrupted by the north wind's roar as temperatures plunge below -30°C and snow drifts slowly bury the cottages along the lakeshore. In March, the seemingly endless winter finally begins to

retreat and once again the marsh awakens and comes alive. Spring migrants return and the cycle of life begins anew.

Waterfowl, shorebirds, warblers and other birds are attracted to the marsh in unbelievable numbers once winter releases its grip. The cottages along the lakeshore begin to re-emerge from their snowy tombs and people return to the beach, joining the few hardy souls who endured the winter without respite.

Great places tend to attract great people and Delta Marsh was no exception. Local people were attracted to the beach, but it was the marsh that attracted others from around the world. Royalty, politicians, movie stars, artists, writers, astronauts, legendary sports figures, captains of industry and just plain folks learned of its waterfowl and hunting opportunities. The pioneers of wildlife management were also attracted by Delta Marsh's potential for studying waterfowl and understanding how to conserve its habitat. However, long before the rich and famous visited Delta, Aboriginal people took advantage of its abundance of wild foods. Evidence of their use of the marsh still comes to light along the lakeshore where arrow heads, spear points and primitive tools are briefly exposed in the sand before being reburied by wave action.

Delta Marsh is a series of interconnected bays separated from Lake Manitoba by a sandy beach ridge. There are several creeks and channels that connect the marsh with the lake, allowing the



waters of the marsh to ebb and flow with those of the lake. Though not tidal in the normal sense of the word, wind set-up on Lake Manitoba can cause water levels to rise in response to north winds and drop when the wind blows from the south.

The origins of the marsh can be traced back some 4,500 years when the ancient

Assiniboine River flowed northward into what is now Lake Manitoba. The river split into several channels upon reaching the lake, where it deposited sand, silt and sediment.

It is believed that by some 2,500 years ago the sediments deposited in the lake were gradually reshaped by wind-driven

currents to form the beach ridge, separating what is now Delta Marsh from Lake Manitoba.

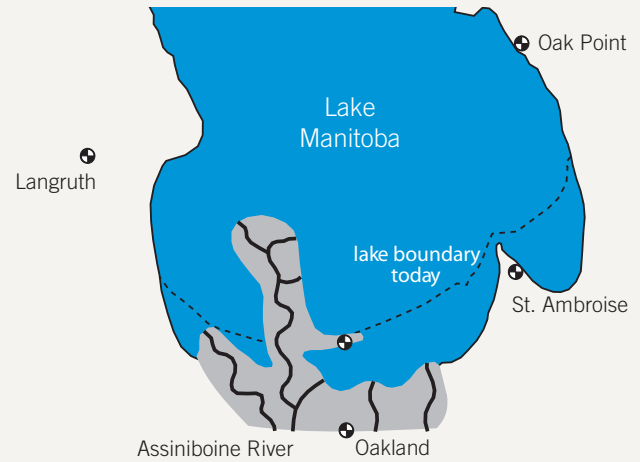
About 2,000 years ago, the ancient Assiniboine River changed course, abandoning the route to Lake Manitoba and striking a new path eastward to join the Red River where the City of Winnipeg

continued on page 4

4,500 years ago



3,500 years ago



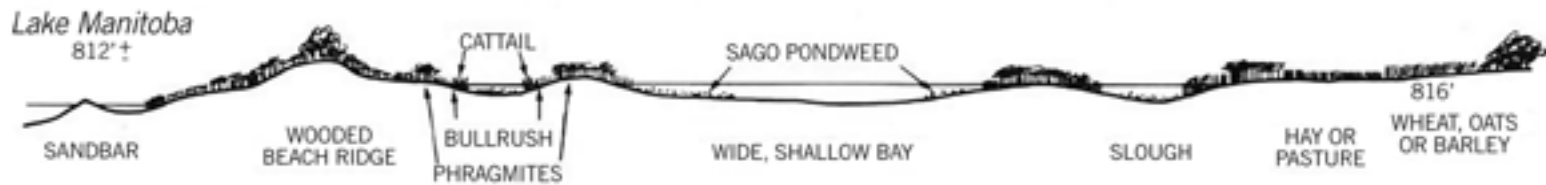
2,500 years ago



Now



Cross Section of Delta Marsh



later developed. After the Assiniboine changed course, the marsh lived on as a freshwater coastal wetland, fed by the waters of the lake and localized run-off from the surrounding lands. The abandoned channels of the ancient Assiniboine still convey some water to the marsh, but their headwaters are now only a few kilometres from the lake. They convey a mere trickle compared with the former flow that once carved them into the landscape.

The vast wetlands around the south end of Lake Manitoba became known as Delta Marsh when the Northern Pacific Railway completed its spur line to the lake. Four stations were planned for the railway between Portage la Prairie and Lake Manitoba, named Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta, following the sequence of the Greek alphabet. As events unfolded, there seems to have been considerable deviation from the plan. There were five stops instead of four and they were named Alpha, Townline, Oakland,

Huddlestone, (the surname of a nearby homesteader) and finally Delta, where the railway reached Lake Manitoba.

From the late 1800s until the early 1960s, Delta Marsh was internationally renowned for waterfowl hunting. However, hunters and wildlife biologists began to notice a serious decline in the numbers of ducks using the marsh. Various efforts were made to improve the situation, but these floundered in the early 1980s. The termination of the federal-provincial Delta Marsh Project in 1982 ushered in an era of precipitous decline. Emergent vegetation and submerged aquatic plants disappeared. Islands eroded away and the once clear waters of the marsh became murky and filled with harmful algae. The reasons for these adverse changes weren't known. Some blamed it on the diversion of Assiniboine River waters into Lake Manitoba. Others thought that the marsh had become stagnant and needed flushing. No one really knew for sure.

As the marsh entered a period of decline recreational preferences began to change as well. The corporate elite were more likely to pick up golf clubs than shotguns. By the 1990s, several commercial hunting establishments closed their doors for good and many private hunting lodges fell into disuse. Those who came in search of the legendary duck-hunting opportunities at Delta went home disappointed.

The bays of the marsh that were once so full of ducks that it would take a shoe horn to get another one in, lay empty and silent. The beds of sago pondweed that once attracted sky-filling flocks of canvasbacks disappeared. The turbid waters of the marsh, when they did drop their sediment load on a calm summer day, revealed a lifeless bottom devoid of any vegetation. This was not the result of some toxic spill, but the relentless effects of millions of common carp, an alien invasive fish species, combined with stabilized water levels in the marsh. Without drying out period-

ically, as prairie wetlands normally do, and under attack by legions of common carp, Delta Marsh slowly began to die.

Common carp, an alien invasive fish, first appeared in the 1940s and soon became the dominant fish species in Delta Marsh. Research initiated in the 1990s by Ducks Unlimited Canada's Institute for Waterfowl and Wetlands Research, in co-operation with the Delta Marsh Field Station (University of Manitoba), found that the spread of common carp into the watershed was disastrous. Imported to North America from China in the late 1800s to put food on the poor man's table, common carp have greatly increased since their first appearance in the marsh in the mid 1940s. The poor man, it seems, proved unwilling to eat muddy-tasting fish, and a steady market has never been found to encourage its use. For decades millions of common carp were free to churn up the marsh bottom, uprooting pondweeds and bulrushes with reckless abandon.

Increased nutrient loading, the result of agricultural activities and residential development, may also have had an adverse effect on the marsh. Blooms of toxic algae became commonplace during summer, and the increase in nitrogen and phosphorus entering the marsh has encouraged a lush growth of hybrid cattail. This vigorous plant can grow in greater water depths than native cattail and also thrives in drier





(Left) Delta railway station, built in 1916, as it looked while still in use in the 1930s. (Below) Clark Gable paddles a canoe the Portage Country Club's marsh with Freeman Dalzell (1938).



sites once dominated by giant reed grass (*Phragmites*). It can replace hardstem bulrush, the preferred nesting cover for many over-water nesting birds, and close in areas that were formerly open water making the marsh less attractive to waterfowl.

Though the challenges facing the marsh are daunting, they are not insurmountable. More by accident than by design, Lake Manitoba water levels have varied to a greater extent in recent years than they have for decades. Following earlier measures at marsh management that met with mixed results, the construction of structures in the winter of 2013 to prevent adult common carp from entering the marsh have shown that the negative trend in habitat conditions can be reversed. Delta Marsh can be saved. Whether or not it is restored will depend on people – people like you.

This is the story, really a collection of many stories, of where Delta Marsh came from, how it has changed, and how it can be restored. It is a celebration of the people who enjoyed the good times and a call to action so the beach, the marsh and its wildlife can thrive again. Perhaps better awareness and understanding will once again make it one of the world's greatest wetlands.



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