PIONEERING IN MANITOBA IN 1882 by Mervyn Bryan (1851-1928)

Preliminary Remarks.

Passage Out in S.S. “Dominion” - Wreck - Loss of Captain.

Intemperance of Marine.

Winnipeg in 1882 - Land Boom.

Brandon Railhead of C.P.R. O.S. 35.

Souris - Taking up land - Pencil Entries - Jumping

Surveying_- Gardening - Farm - Church.

Going on Farm - Soil - Wild Life – Breaking and Backsetting

Planting Potatoes - 400 bushels to the Acre.

Horse - Barn - Stables - Fencing – Tree-planting - Draining - Well-sinking.

Hay Harvest - Gophers - Mosquitoes - Flies - Prairie Fires.

Wheat harvest - Binding - Stooking - Stacking - Threshing

Hotel fire - Insurance frauds.

Winter - Climate - Wood-cutting - Care of Stock – Snow Drifts.

Marketing Crop to Brandon.

Sports.

Temperance - W.W.C.T.W.

Closing of Hotels and consequences.

PIONEERING IN MANITOBA IN 1882 by Mervyn Bryan (1851-1928)

Mervyn Bryan (1851-1928). In Canada 1882-1899.

Mr. Chairman and Members, you will probably ask me in the first place, what induced me to emigrate?

It was Christmas 1881. I had just been invalided out of the Navy for heart disease, and found myself stranded without any sort of qualification for beginning life afresh at 29, and with a pension of 5/- a day. I felt the Medical Board at Haslar, Portsmouth, had made a mistake, but there was no appeal from its decision.

I was not at all merry as the season required, but angry, when I met one Richie Kirchoffer, who had been sent home to round up young men, with capital if possible, to go to Manitoba and take up the homesteads of the syndicate he represented. The idea appealed to me. I had saved £200, so I decided to burn my boats and emigrate. Richie had already secured 11 others. There was a Doctor, two Bank Clerks, two Ship Captain's Sons, three Parson's Sons, and three Farmer's Sons. All Irish, except myself and one other.

We were to have a free grant of 320 acres homestead, with the right to pre-empt or purchase the adjoining 320 acres for $4.00 an acre, payable in three annual instalments with interest at 6% per annum from the Government, and having fulfilled the settlement conditions, would receive a Freehold Deed or Patent at the expiration of 3 years. The conditions were:-

1. The settler must reside on the land for six months in each year, and break at least ten acres in every year.

2. He must erect a dwelling house (Richie said a log shack would do) in the first year.

3. If he lives one full year on his land, he may sell it and homestead again elsewhere.

4. He must reside on his homestead within six months of date of entry.

I said “I don’t know anything about farming”.

“You don’t have to. All you have to do is to scratch the prairie, chuck in your seed, reap your harvest, and get a dollar a bushel for your wheat. You should have a yield of 30 to 40 bushels of wheat, and 50 to 60 of oats. The cost of production is merely a trifle.”

“I suppose one will require to take out lots of things?”

“Take everything you have got, especially woollen underclothing and socks.”

“Any game?”

“Every possible sort.”

“Indians?”

“Lots.”

“Savage?”

“Rather.”

“Anything else to tell me?”

“No, I think that’s all.”

I felt satisfied and signed on, and arranged to meet the party at Liverpool on the 20 March following. I mention these preliminaries because this is just the sort of information the Emigration Agents afford intending emigrants, and it is all wrong. It shows the best side and none of the drawbacks. Families going out should take all their cherished belongings, but single men require money only. Every necessary could be purchased on the spot even in those early days. However, I made elaborate preparations in accordance with Ritchie’s advice, and as I said, I had burnt my boats, I decided to take everything I possessed. I bought a tent 12ft in diameter, lined with blue serge, a tarpaulin floor, and a duck fly to keep off the sun. A jointed steel stove pipe for a pole, and a neat little cook-stove with complete set of utensils. I packed my trunks with uniforms, dress clothes, white shirts, patent leather pumps and two large boxes of books and instruments, two guns, a rifle, revolver and bowie knife for the Indians, and last, but not least, two fiddles in a case. (Everything was burnt in hotel fire of 30 September, 1882).

When I arrived alongside the good ship “Dominion” at the Liverpool Docks, I met Richie, who inquired if I had engaged a staff of carriers to go out with me.

"There are no porters in the West," he said "it's every man for himself." Here he spoke the truth, as I found to my sorrow later on. However all my things were got on board and stowed away, and I didn't see them again until we arrived at Brandon, Manitoba. All settlers' baggage was chequed through and overhauled by the Customs at the end of the journey. Of course there were hand bags, rugs, and the fiddles; also a case of selected seeds of every description kindly presented to me by Messrs. Sutton of Reading for testing in the North Vest. This case was stolen at Winnipeg. The rest of the small trifles had to be carried by oneself.

We sailed on the 20 March 1882, a very jolly crew. There were besides our party in the saloon, about 150 emigrants in the steerage, mostly Irish bound for the United States, Canada had not yet come to be known, i.e. the new North West. There was a young north countryman taking out a string of six shire mares and a stud horse. The weather was very bad all the way from the start, and the horses suffered a good deal, especially the stud. Horses suffer more than any other animals from sea-sickness, because they are unable to vomit. It was blowing a full westerly gale with a heavy sea, and on the forth day out the stud was down. The captain, a German, bet the horseman £5 his horse would not live through the night. The engines had been slowed down for two days, speed was increased, and the vessel forced into the seas at great risk to the vessel and great risk and discomfort to the passengers. The Captain won his bet, and the horse was dropped overboard in the morning.

PORTLAND, MAINE

Arrived at Portland in the State of Maine on 4 April [1882] after one of the worst of my many Atlantic crossings. (Twelve). The "Dominion" was totally lost on her next outward passage on the rocks in the Straits of Belle Isle. Her captain was transferred to the "Parisian", and was washed overboard and drowned on his first outward trip in that ship.

MAINE

In passing I may mention the State of Maine is noted for the stringency of its Liquor Prohibition Law. No alcoholic liquor is permitted to be <u>sold</u> in the State except by druggists for medicinal purposes. The result of this weak and foolish law is, that those who use liquor, have to keep a supply at home, whereas in the ordinary way they would go to the saloon and have a drink! Increased drunkenness, family discord, and crime naturally follow.

We visited a druggist's shop, and had all we wanted in his inner surgery. He told us the votes were nearly equal for and against Prohibition, a majority only being necessary. At the last referendum taken a few months ago (1911) the "nays" won, but on a recount the act was maintained by only four votes. The chemist said that it was a notorious fact that there was more drunkenness in Portland than in any other city of the Union.

Having rechequed our baggage, we boarded the train for Chicago and Winnipeg. Stopped a few hours at Montreal, Toronto, and Chicago, and arrived at Winnipeg on the 9 April, country still covered with snow. The ice had not begun to melt.

WINNIPEG

Winnipeg was quite a small place in the 80's. The town, centred around old Fort Garry, the Hudson Bay Company's port close to the old Red River, had some good stores, hotels, and dwelling houses. The main street, over half a mile long, runs north to the railway station, and another half mile north to St. Johns, where are the Cathedral and University. The whole of this street was ungraded, and a mere cart track, a foot deep in black tenacious mud. The crossings consisted of a single plank floating on the mud, and woe betide the tenderfoot with his load of hand bags, who fell off one. Most of us did, and never forgot it, for the mud could never be removed from our clothes. I heard afterwards that there was a company started to make cement out of Winnipeg mud.

The great boom in Town Lots of '81 was still booming, but it was not only confined to Winnipeg; it embraced other western towns such as Regina, Calgary, and Edmonton, already surveyed and planned out, and many other towns with high sounding names, plans of which hung in the auction rooms and on the street, though some of them had no real existence. The population was simply crazy, to use a Canadian expression. Auctions were held in the streets as well as in buildings from noon till night. Town lots were bought and sold at prices ranging from $5.00 to $1000.00 and exchanged hands a dozen times during the day at double, treble, and ten times the original cost. Huge sums of money were made and lost, but the boom fizzled out when the spring came and men started west to locate their properties.

Some found them all right, but others found theirs in the middle of lakes and rivers, and a good many never found theirs at all, being non-existent, so after months of travel by ox carts, and suffering great privations, they mostly settled down in the nearest surveyed township. A great many of the Auctioneers were bogus and had cleared out.

Note: The population of Winnipeg in 1900 was 42,340, in 1910 it was 135,000. Its output of manufactures in 1900 was roughly nine millions and today (1911) it is 36 millions. Winnipeg is the gate of the West. It is rapidly cutting out Minneapolis and Chicago, and will shortly be the Central Wheat Market of the World.

12 APRIL [1882]

Left for Brandon, the capital of that county, and the rail head of the C.P.R. at that time. This section of the railway (150 miles) was very rough, sleepers being laid on the prairie with a minimum of grading, so we had to proceed at traction speed and arrived there next day. (Construction at the rate of 3 miles a day).

Brandon is on the Assiniboine River, a tributary of the Red River, and will probably be a very large city in the immediate future. It is the heart of the Great Fertile Belt, and has already donned the title of the "Banner Wheat City".

Note: The Great Fertile Belt is a geographical depression in the centre of the continent bounded on the South by the International Boundary line, on the West by the Rocky Mountains, on the

North by the Northern branch of the Saskatchewan River and on the East by Lake Winnipeg and the Lake of the Woods. This Fertile Belt contains a total area of 140,000 acres of which Manitoba claims 47 million. The Hudson Bay Company, chartered by Charles II, which charter was never signed by that Monarch, sold its rights to the Imperial Government in 1870 for £300,000 in cash and the right to select a block of land adjoining each of its stations, also grants of land in the Fertile Belt namely two sections in every township. The Company has received 6,172,025 acres and there are 1,100,000 acres to come. The Company has already sold 2,149,039 acres.

About a century ago the H.B.C. granted to Lord Selkirk an area of 16,000 square miles of territory on condition that he established a settlement and supplied the Company with men. He set up his Head Quarters in the Selkirk or Red River Valley near what is now Winnipeg and wheat has been raised there ever since. In 1871 the population of the whole of the NW was 43,000. It is now (1911) 1,200,000.

On the 14th, having loaded up our goods, we started in bob sleighs on the last stage of our journey, 26 miles across the open prairie in a S.W. direction to Souris, the new settlement at the confluence of the river of that name and Plum Creek. At that time it was known as the Plum Creek Settlement. Snow covered the prairie in all directions to the skyline. It was like being at sea, the smooth undulating motion of the bob sleighs making it very realistic. The radiation of the sun's rays off the snow literally burnt our faces. We arrived at Souris in the evening looking like boiled lobsters, and in three days the skin peeled off in large flakes. This is the time of snow blindness and when men and cattle must have their eyes protected with coloured gauze or glasses.

Plum Creek consisting of two shanties, a log house, and two or three tents, turned out to meet us and gave us a right good welcome. The snow began to go fast now, and the ice broke up in the Souris River with a terrific report and started to move down stream. It was a grand sight to see the huge blocks of ice four or five feet thick, pile up one on top of another twenty feet high, and then topple over. Great masses of earth and stones were torn away from the banks, and bushes and trees were soon mixed up in the general movement, which was slow and stately. A jam occurred a mile below the turn. The water rose thirty feet and flooded all the low lying country including the park in the middle of the town site. The Mill Company, which had been constructing a mill all the winter, were caught with their dam on Plum Creek, and nearly finished, and the whole of it, the foundation of the mill and all was swept away. The ground remains frozen long after the snow has melted off, but as the frost goes down 8 or 9 feet, all depressions remain filled with water until evaporated by the summer sun. So great was the pressure of the ice, and so rapid is the thaw, that the jam gave way in a few days, and the river soon lowered sufficiently to enable a scow to work between the banks on a wire hawser stretched across. Settlers from the south arrived in great numbers from Brandon, and the "scow" made good money transporting them and their outfits across.

Photograph by Major Fairclough. R.A. President of the Royal Military College, Kingston, Ontario.

First House in Souris 1881. Showing Lieutenant Bryan's tent marked with a cross.

The Government Surveyor arrived to plan out the town site, and I got my first job to haul the chain at a dollar a day. It was not cheerful work. The weather was still cold 15 or 20 degrees of frost at night and rain and sleet by day. Paths had to be cut through the scrub where snow still lay deep. In a fortnight enough "site" was laid to allow for 20 years growth and development. Homesteads were now allotted to the settlers under the Government Agreement. Mine was about seven miles from the town, and not liking this I bought out a man 1½ miles from the place for £200, and, as I thought, with the right to pre-empt or purchase the adjoining half section.

The syndicate, under whose auspices I had come out, had been granted nine townships free, on condition that they placed 300 bona fide settlers on the land. (There were five members of the Syndicate). They grabbed all the sections adjacent to the town, and entered themselves, their fathers, grandfathers, brothers, cousins, uncles and nephews in pencil in the Land Office Register at Brandon. The land agent, Mr. Clementi Smith being in the swim. Then they sold these lands, as in my case, the pencil entry being covered by the new bona fide settler's name in ink. We did not understand this business until long afterwards. When I claimed my pre-emption, the Syndicate coolly remarked "We don't remember any mention of pre-emption when you bought out Fred Howard. You bought his homestead only, the pre-emption was already sold to somebody else."

Jumping was a fashionable pastime just now. When a land-hunter found out a pencil settler, he went to the land office and compelled the land agent to rub the name out and enter him for the

homestead. A settler must get on to his land within six months of the date of entry. Many failed to do this, and were promptly jumped. This caused much bad blood.

I now proceeded to take a survey of my farm. It was mostly covered with water, the section posts just showing above, and I had to wade up to my shoulders in some places.

A section is a square mile and contains 640 acres with a road allowance of 90 feet taken off the north and west sides of each, thus leaving a road round every section. Blocks of 36 sections adjoining one another, and running in a line east-and west, are called a Township beginning at the international boundary with the United States, and numbered 1, 2, 3, etc., North. This corresponds to Latitude. A row of townships north and south is called a Range, and are numbered 1, 2, 3, etc., East or West of a Principle Meridian, thus answering to Longitude. There are eight Principle Meridians. At the intersection of every two land allowances, a stake is set up by the Surveyor, having four faces with the numbers of the four sections adjoining also their township and range to which they belong, carved on them. Mine was XXII. 7. 21. W., so I read no difficulty in locating it. But I must confess the prospect was not alluring. Most of the adjoining land as far as I could see was dry, but with the exception of a small island of three or four acres near the centre of the farm, mine was a vast lake. When I got back to town, cold, wet through, but not discouraged, the boys had a good deal of chaff about my wet, cold, sour, low-lying investment. I had different ideas, and I believe in my wrath I begged them to wait and see. There was nothing to be done until the ground thawed and soaked the water up, so I hired a man and a team and ran furrows all over the farm wherever there was a fall. These I deepened later on, and the following Spring started breaking with the rest. I may say here St. Helens to-day, is considered one of the very best farms in the Souris valley. I sold it fourteen years ago for £7 an acre. This is still the average price for improved lands, with good dwelling house and farm buildings.

Some of the Pioneers of Souris 1882.

Left to Right. M Bryan, N Kirchoffer, H Leaky, Ed Starr, J Jameson.

The sale of town lots of Souris took place daily by an Auctioneer in a farm wagon on the street. Prices ranged from $ 10.00 to $ 150.00 for the best lots, and $ 500.00 for corners. The Company offered the choice of two lots free to any settler who would put up a hotel at once. I accepted the offer and chose the two central lots each 50 ft. by 150 ft in the centre of the crescent overlooking the Park, and purchased the two lots immediately in the rear for a livery stable. A contract was soon made and a hotel 50 ft by 60 ft started containing Bar-room, Dining room, nine double-bedded rooms, and a lean-to kitchen; I also started a stable for eight teams of horses.

Leaving the building in the hands of an architect, I gathered up my belongings and went on to the farm. Having pitched my tent, I dug a well 4 ft in diameter and 12 ft deep, where striking blue clay I found a good run of water. I had learnt that water always runs on blue clay. It was only surface water, but good. Most of the farmers went down about a hundred feet or more and struck alkaline springs. I then hired a carpenter to put up a frame house 18ft x 30ft containing five rooms, entrance hall, and a lean-to kitchen at one end; also a frame stable (at the same end) for four teams. Any handy man can put up a frame building; lumber already dressed, tongued, and grooved, and sills, rafters, etc, in suitable lengths, were easily procurable on the streets of Souris. Enterprising settlers were making money, drawing lumber from

Brandon. I next bought a yoke of oxen for £40, a breaking plough for £5, and a logging chain to draw it with for 12/-.

The yoke and the bows go with the oxen, and I started out to try my hand at ploughing. The oxen are guided by a line attached to the tips of the outside horns. A good ox never leaves the furrow, when a good man is behind him, but they soon note a “tenderfoot” (“greenhorn”) and play all sorts of tricks with him. The most exasperating was to suddenly bolt into the nearest pond, and there was nothing for it but to go in and fetch them out, one or two good thrashings with a doubled up line soon let them know who was master. Some art is required to thrash an ox. You take off his yoke, pass the logging chain three or four times round his neck and near fore leg, drawing his foot up to his chin, the first stroke of the lines tumbles him over, when you proceed to lay it on until he howls for mercy. One soon realises that the ox is no gentleman, and has to be treated accordingly. I got along all right and deepened all the water carriages and thus got rid of all the surface water, with the exception of two good ponds which I proposed to keep and deepen later on.

Plumb Creek in Flood 1882.

In the days of the Pioneers of the Souris, there was not much mirth or humour beyond that to be found in the hotel bars, and this was sometimes rather rough. Society had not begun to be formed. All was hard, strenuous work and in the first few winters of unpreparedness uncongenial work. There was also much sickness among the settlers, especially of a lymphoid and diphtheritic nature, possibly owing to the liberation of poison gasses by the breaking of the sod.

Then the housing conditions were quite inadequate. Rough board shacks with joints broken by common trellis tacked over them and roofs covered with tarred paper kept on by bolts. An ill-fitting door and ditto window and great cracks in the floor let in more ventilation than the cooking stove could keep warm. Everything froze solid. Off the stove, the milk froze to the pail before you could get it to the house from the stable. The pail had to be set on to the stove to thaw and then the milk was dumped onto the clean snow outside which served for a dairy. I took milk to market in sacks and sold it by the lb.

The first winter all the fowls froze on their roosts through ignorance of the climate and lack of proper arrangements. A turkey cock got on the wheel of a waggon and froze to the tyre. People were lost in the blizzards. One whole family, father, mother and two little girls were all lost within a few yards of each other. Pigs got round the straw heaps and burrowed into them and stayed there. I was nearly lost myself one night in the snow.

PLOUGHING

A Breaking Plough is 12” broad at the point, and has a knife edge. The coulter is a revolving disc also with a keen edge. These edges must be kept sharp with a file. The two blacksmiths in the settlement were kept busy drawing out points. Lands are usually marked out North and South or parallel to the largest side of the farm, and the furrow is a mile long. The furrow slice is 12” wide and 2½” thick and must be laid over flat. You are considered a good ploughman if you can turn a mile furrow without breaking the slice.

A good yoke of oxen will break 1½ acres a day, or as much as a team of horses because they go steadier. In three months the sod is rotted, and is then back set with the same plough set 2½” deeper, so as to cover the sod with mould. In the following Spring the backsetting is harrowed and pulverised affording the finest wheat seed bed in the world. The soil is generally black sandy loam from 1 to 3 feet thick with a subsoil of gravel and clay.

It is just at this point that the emigrant realises that he has to live for eighteen months before he can get any return from his land. He arrives in March, breaks and backsets say 30 acres, sows his first crop the following March, harvests it in August, and by the time he has threshed and sold his wheat, it is round about Christmas. It is the first year that is so hard on the settler, and eats into his capital, and this above prime point, is the one that is scrupulously ignored by the Agents.

The settler may break and backset a patch of ground for vegetables and potatoes. Both do well on this, but the sod does not rot when covered by backsetting, and will not grow cereals.

Early Rose potatoes yielded 400 bushels to the acre on last years’ breaking and backsetting, and I had some very good samples planted under the breaking alone.

Geese, grey and wavy, and ducks of every variety, began to arrive from the South in vast flocks, and settled down all over the prairie to breed. As they were paired we contented ourselves with, just a taste only. The shooting season is in the Fall, when they are on the return journey.

Fallow deer, timber and prairie wolves, foxes, badgers, mink, and skunks were plentiful, and a few black bears were still to be found in the wooded river banks. The Gopher or ground squirrel literally swarmed everywhere. They cultivate the ground in place of earth worms which are absent on the prairie, but they destroy large tracts of young wheat, and are the farmers greatest pest doing more damage than rust or smut. The buffalo is extinct on the prairie. There is a small herd preserved in the National Park at Banff in the Rockies. Skulls and bones are everywhere and an enterprising Yankee is collecting them for manuring purposes, and has an enormous heap beside the C.P.R. survey a little further West. The settlement already formed is named the "Pile of Bones". The last buffalo hunt in the Souris valley took place in 1865.

29 MAY [1882]

First appearance of mosquitoes, making it necessary to wear gauze and veils over our hats and faces. Killed and skinned my first and last skunk!!! The odour de skunk is about equivalent to that of a hundred old billy goats, and is perceptible several miles off. It is therefore difficult to locate a skunk by his scent.

Bird emigration is in full flight and the night is alive with their calls, and the sound of rushing wings. Beyond sparrows and the swallow tribe, all the birds were strange to me. The most notable were the warblers, of which I noted eight varieties; about the size of our starlings, and with much the same habits, they were blue-black, black with canary heads, black with crimson shoulders, black with white wings and backs, and [some] brown. They are the cow birds of the Ranches, as they feed off the flies and mosquitoes on the backs of the cattle. Of song birds the Bobolink or Rice Bird, and Meadow Lark are the only two representatives. Later on the Blue Robin and Humming Birds come North to nest. Flocks of gulls and other Sea Birds are seen crossing to the lakes where they breed.

The country is now beautifully green, and a mass of colour with strange flowers, but there was no time at present to, study these.

The Hotel being finished and ready for the opening, I returned to town, having hired a man and a team of horses to break four acres at $ 4.50 an acre. The average breaking is 1½ acres a day, which means 27/-. Horses suffered a good deal from exposure and wading through so much snow water. A disease called Pink Eye was very prevalent and carried off a great many good animals.

The opening of the Hotel went off with a great éclat, and all the beds (9 double ones) were occupied the first night. This was the time of my life. I had to do host, cook, housemaid, dining room maid, bartender, ostler, and everything else. The only help I could get was a young Englishman just arrived as "Boots". For the first month we had over an average of 30 to dinner every day. These meals had to be provided at $2.00 a day including bed, or $1.00 for meals alone. Of course everything was pretty rough, but everybody was in the best of tempers and spirits and glad enough to get any comfort at all. On the arrival of an old English lady as cook-housekeeper, and two girls, things immediately improved, and I was able to attend to the bar and stable better. Business went with a snap, as they say. Often late arrivals had to be

accommodated with rooms chalked out on the floors of the dining room and bar-rooms, 2ft x 6ft, and find your own bedding, usually a buffalo robe or coat. For this accommodation $1.00 was the charge including breakfast. When I left Souris in '98, George MacColough, the miller, who was a bounder, showed me some of my breakfast rolls of the '82's, which he had kept as souvenirs, They were called Dingbats in those days, I fancy on account of their hardness. But the best baker will have a bad batch sometimes!

Mervyn Bryan's Crescent Hotel, Souris, opened May 1882, burnt September 1882, and rebuilt 1883.

A billiard room was now added, and I turned over the management of the hotel to a young Scotsman named Duncan, and his brother, and went back to the farm.

The house and stable were fit for occupation though not by any means finished. I left the chimneys and plastering to be done next year, and stuck the stove pipe out through the window.

In the middle of the night a settler from the South drove up with a load of lumber from Brandon, drawn by a team of mares quite played out. He stayed the night, and insisted on trading his mares for Buck and Bright (all oxen are called Buck and Bright, Buck is the nigh and Bright the off ox) harness included. The mares, Maggie and Jane, were three parts bred about 15 hands. Maggie had contracted feet (heels). Jane had a sweeny (muscular atrophy). Maggie

foaled a few weeks after I had her, and I sold Jane for $150.00. She afterwards bred some of the best trotters in the West. The mares not being fit for work, I bought a great team of black oxen for £50, also a mower, rake and waggon. I broke about 20 acres, and the hired man 40, and then had to stop as the ground was then too dry, and the hay was ready to cut. I paid off the hired man, and put the little mares in the mower.

HAY HARVEST

The mares had quite recovered and went splendidly. My neighbour helped me in return for my helping him. The plan was to cut in the morning, rake into windows and cocks as fast as possible, and carry on in the evening. We put up two respectable ricks of about 30 tons each. Fire guards must be ploughed without delay, commencing close to the stack and going round and round until at least two rods is turned. The wider the guard, the greater safety it all counts for breaking.

PRAIRIE FIRES

These were the greatest terrors of the early settlers. Started no one knows how, possibly by the sun's rays, since these fires occur regularly every year, but more probably by fires from the northern settlements in the U.S. In the early days, they always came from the South. As this is usually the season of calms, the fires travelled at the rate of about 10 miles a day and covered a breadth of 40 or 50 miles.

Our warning was given by the dense smoke and livid glare in the Southern horizon. Then men and teams turned out to fight fire and protect their homesteads and crops. I and my man spent one whole night breaking a fire guard round the farm, and only quit at eight o'clock in the morning, when the fire was upon us. We had gone about five rounds of 3 miles each through tough, stout brush and boulders. Men and horses were played out, but I fortunately had a new hired man, who was an old hand (and I had bought another team of heavy horses) nevertheless, I must confess this was the toughest job I ever had in my life. With wet sacks we were able to beat out the fire as it came to the guard, though it jumped it here and there. Fortunately also I had cut my hay on that side of the farm, and there was no long grass to take fire. This fire passed us without doing any damage and burnt itself out at the river. Several Settlers to the South were burnt out. These fires occurred frequently during the first three years, and kept me on the alert day and night. Now the whole country is fellow the danger no longer exists.

Terrific thunder storms occur in June, July and August, quite equal in intensity of lightning and downpour to anything I ever experienced at sea in the tropics. Much damage was reported, and deaths of men and cattle. Jack Chestnut's team was killed on the trail with a load of lumber from Brandon, whilst he was riding on the load and was not hurt.

Mosquitoes, bulldog flies, the common house fly, flying ants by day, and great moths by night, rendered life more or less miserable. Beyond these pests, I am glad to say, there are no poisonous beasts or reptiles in the North West. The common cross snake is the sole representative of the evil one, but unlike him is quite harmless. Flying ants in great swarms are

now met with. The meeting is decidedly unpleasant; they set down your neck and bite poisonously, the only thing is to strip off at once and flee. The worst position in which to encounter these pests is when on top of a load. You are blinded and bitten, and the terrified horses bolt. Many serious accidents have occurred. They swarm on the chimney pots and fill the house, but directly they touch ground their wings drop off and they disappear. The Bot or Gadfly, the Ox Warbler, and Bulldog, or housefly are very troublesome to horses and cattle. One wonders how these insects managed before horses and cattle were introduced into the country.

POLITICS: Every Canadian is a politician. The subject now came into prominence by the necessity of electing a member of the provincial parliament for the new constituency of Brandon County, just formed. There were two parties, Conservative and Reformers or Radicals. The majority of the farmers are Methodists and belong to the latter party. There was much speechifying on both sides, but we English didn't understand what was meant by the N.P. (Nation Policy) and the various planks in the two platforms. One thing we did observe, was that the general principle underlying all politics, namely, to vote under the secrecy of the ballot for the party that you will think will do the most good. Political history tells the same story here as in other countries, namely, that under a Conservative administration, peace and prosperity are secured, whilst under a Reform or Radical government, extravagance and wastefulness invariably occur. All the Church people and old countrymen voted Conservative, and returned our member at the head of the Poll, though with a slender majority.

As soon as the hay is up, backsetting starts or the early breaking, that is turning over the now settled sod, with 2½" of mould on top. This continues until freezing up time about the end of September. The plough could be started about 11 am and continued until 3 pm., or until bought up all standing by the frost. Horses and oxen were unhitched, and the plough left ready to resume work in the Spring. All this is different now. The seasons are quite altered by the cultivation of the land and planting of trees. Immediately stacking is finished, stubble ploughing now takes place. The stubble plough is 14 or 16 inches furrow slice, and set 5 inches deep. There is no coulter. The double mouldboard or gang plough has a driving seat, and requires 4 horses or oxen abreast. The larger farms are now ploughed by gasoline or steam traction engines.

The first frost appears about the middle of August, just when the wheat is in the milk, and is the most anxious time for the farmer. Most of the wheat in those early days was touched by the frost. In the second year and after we drew straw along the windward side of the wheat field, usually the west side, as the cold wave comes from the Rockies; damped and fired it at night staying out night after night; as long as the straw lasted. The smoke saved the crop. No seeding is now done after April. Winter does not begin until November, and there is barely any frozen wheat now.

The binders of those days were quite primitive. Oak frames, and very heavy, requiring 4 horses to draw. The knotter consisted of 32 parts, now reduced to 7. Then the ground was very rough, causing great wear and tear on the gears and chains, not to mention the seat of the driver. The driver's seat was made of cast iron moulded to the human form. About 4 acres a day was considered fair work.

They cut and bind day and night now in relays, and 10 acres is a day's work. In the old days a single man had to set up the stooks after cutting. Now the binder is fitted with a carrier, which dumps five sheaves at once automatically, and one man stooking can keep up with the machine. As there were only two threshing outfits in the district, wheat had to be stacked. Stacks were never thatched, not even the hay, as there is rarely any rain during the winter, and snow does not lie on the tops of things. After threshing the straw was burnt.

Most of the settlers put up granaries the first year, small affairs for feed and seed. In three or four years, great barns arose in all directions. In the early days crops were drawn in sleighs to Brandon, the nearest market, 26 miles, as soon as the snow made a practicable trail. A load was 21 bushel bags, or about 5 quarters. But after the farmer had sold his wheat, and had a good time, he arrived home, with very little change in his pocket.

Note: In 1905 there were 5,900,000 acres under crop in the NW. In 1911 it is over 16,000,000 acres. Occupying about 1/12 of the Great Fertile Belt. Manitoba alone has 47 million acres, of which 5,830,000 were cultivated for cereals in the past season. And the crop, which has been successfully harvested under severe climatic difficulties (Snow fell while stook were still standing, and many of the imported labourers thinking Winter had come, left for home and left the farmers in the lurch) is valued at nearly £50 million sterling. It staggers the imagination to picture the future, and the early future of these wonderful pioneers. One supreme difficulty is the lack of help at harvest time. One man can rush in 2 or 3 hundred acres of wheat, but it requires five men to every one to take off the resulting crop.

30 September, 1882

The Crescent Hotel was burnt to the ground, and I regret to say the younger Duncan lost his life. The hotel was rebuilt in the following Spring, and although it has had several narrow squeaks from fire, it is still running.

The first hotel was insured, but the Company refused payment on the ground that I was selling liquor without a licence. I pointed out that they were aware of this when they accepted the risk, so they compromised, and offered half. As I could not afford to fight the Company, I accepted, and I always believe the Company's agent collared the Balance.

After the first snow flight the ground remains covered until the end of March (average 8" deep out on the prairie). Sleighs are bought out, and parties made up daily to go out to the woods about 5 miles north for firewood. I soon became an expert woodman. A good old dry tree is planted firmly in the ground near the door of the house, and round this the firewood is stacked. These wood piles became features in the landscape.

Breaking and splitting firewood occupied some hours of the short winter day, and the stock had to be attended to. Sometimes the stable was snowed up, or the house door. Digging snow was a very serious thing. You had to shift such a lot, and the more you shift snow the worse it becomes. The slightest bit of solidity immediately forms a drift around it. The houses and

stables are banked up with stable manure beginning in August, six feet wide at the bottom and go on adding to it all through the winter. This is removed to the heap in Spring.

The snowdrifts round the building were six feet high leaving a passage of 4 or 5 feet all round. The average temperature from December to March is -15°, with snaps as low as -60°. These cold snaps are usually accompanied by blizzards from the N.W. The snow is like coarse sand, blown horizontally at 50 miles an hour, and no living thing can face it for a moment.

CONCLUSION: Mr. President, I am afraid I have only been able to give you the barest outlines of my experiences in the North West. Volumes might be written on this subject. I will conclude with a few remarks on that great undertaking to which the whole Dominion of Canada owes its rapid development and phenomenal prosperity, namely the Canadian Pacific Railway. This Company was incorporated on 16 February 1881. The Contract was completed, and the last spike driven at Craigellache on the Pacific shore, by the Governor of Canada Lord Strathcona, in November 1885, or 5 years before the expiring of the Contract time.

In 1882 the Ordinary £1 shares of the Company were worth 7/- and I advised all my friends in England to buy for all they were worth. In ‘85 the shares were 10/6 , and in ‘88 at par. The rise has been steady ever since, and to-day they are round about £250.

The Canadian Pacific Railway follows the-oldest trade route across the American Continent. It follows what was known as the North Shore Line to Montreal, from Fort William at the Western extremity of Lake Superior. It follows the old Fur Traders route to Winnipeg. The old track is continued Westward by the C.P.R. but it is well worth while to keep in mind the Road which the Pioneers travelled on foot in the olden days. The length of the main line from Montreal to Vancouver is 2908.4 miles.

St Helens, Lieutenant M Bryan's Farmhouse and Farm, Souris. 1880s.

From a talk given by Mervyn Bryan in 1912. Transcribed by Bill Lindsay June 2020. With kind permission of Tim Jurdon, Mervyn's great-grandson.