

Land, Water, and Memory:
Mennonite Settlement and Indigenous Presence in Southern Manitoba

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the history of a small colonization reserve to ask how prairie land becomes known and accepted primarily as settler agricultural space even if vaguely understood, at some level, as Indigenous land. The land in question – designated for Mennonite migrants to Manitoba from Imperial Russia in 1875 and often referred to as the ‘West Reserve’ – was one of two block settlements provided to Mennonites in the 1870s. In this micro-historical context, I focus on the interactions between settler history-making, land, and geography, to explore the relationships between material and discursive forms of Indigenous land dispossession, and to consider the roles of water and landscape in the formation of settler identity.

As West Reserve settlers became more established, they began to historicize and commemorate their presence there, establishing a corpus of historical understandings of this place that grew stronger and more solidified into the late twentieth century. In many ways this body of knowledge established parameters that defined the region as Mennonite, agricultural, settler space. Yet an analysis of state, settler, archival, and oral history sources reveals that this discursive unmaking of Indigenous space was never totalizing, nor were narratives of agricultural ascendancy the only stories of the region’s environment and geography. Indigenous Peoples continued to utilize, live in, and travel through the region throughout the timeframe of this study (roughly from the time of Mennonite arrival well into the twentieth century). Though the reserve was noted for not having any major water bodies within it, its many small creeks and low areas remained intrinsic, if less-emphasized, features of both the environment and people’s experiences of it.

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INTRODUCTION

In the late fall of 1959 Jacob Toews, a resident of the small town of Gretna, Manitoba, was doing excavation work for a municipal drainage ditch when he “found a buffalo skull with two horns still attached.” The skull was “about six feet below the surface of the ground” near the Marais River, a small and seasonally fluctuating river that flows east into the larger Red River. In this rural and agricultural part of the province, the instance was enough of a local curiosity to warrant a short story in the local newspaper, in which the discovery was described as having “verified” that “buffalo once roamed this part of Manitoba.”¹ On one hand, Toews’ discovery was a minor story of some passing interest; such findings were surely not uncommon across the Canadian prairies. On the other hand, it contains several elements that, when considered more closely, speak to complex and multiple histories of a single place, of historical environmental changes over time in that place, and of how these histories have been told and remembered.

First, as the newspaper noted, the unearthing of these bison remains shed some light on longer and older histories of land that had been home largely to Mennonite people for the previous 84 years or so. The Mennonite ancestors of people like Toews (and myself) had come to Manitoba in the 1870s through negotiations with the Canadian government, and were granted two settlement reserves, one to the east of the Red River, and one to the west. These types of land reserves, earmarked for European migrant settlers, were “an important part of Canada’s immigration and land settlement policies” in the late nineteenth century.² Toews’ discovery occurred in the West Reserve area, which is the geographic focus on this study. By Toews’ time, Mennonites were the predominant cultural presence in the region, which, together with the East

¹ *Red River Valley Echo*, “Buffalo Remains Found at Marais,” November 25, 1959.

² Ryan Eyford, *White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 5.

Reserve, is sometimes colloquially or jokingly referred to today as Manitoba's "Mennoland."³

Also by that time, Mennonites had already begun commemorating their presence and initial arrival in the province, further establishing the Mennonite character and history of West Reserve land.

Yet, here was the bison skull staring Toews in the face. Though not alluded to in the newspaper report, it – along with the innumerable examples of Indigenous material culture found by Mennonites in this region over the decades – demonstrated that Mennonites' time there had been relatively short. Further, as this dissertation's ensuing chapters will show, Indigenous histories of the West Reserve region stretch into the present and were not consigned to a bygone and distant past. Indeed, Indigenous presence continued there, even in small and muted ways, well into the twentieth century, a fact that stands in contrast to many settler historical narratives of the area.

Further, the fact that the bones were found during the digging of a drainage ditch is telling. In Mennonites' eight decades in southern Manitoba up to that point, they – similarly to other Euro-Canadian settlers and various levels of governments across the prairies – had implemented innumerable changes to the landscape. In the West Reserve, these ranged from the particular patterns of agricultural villages, the planting of trees, the tilling of the tallgrass prairie for agriculture, and the establishment of growing towns, among other things. Particularly notable in the West Reserve's patch of "wet prairie"⁴ were the array of drainage works – such as the ditch being dug by Toews' group – that altered the area's waterscapes. Such drainage initiatives

³ James Urry, "Of Borders and Boundaries: Reflections on Mennonite Unity and Separation in the Modern World," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73, no. 3 (1999): 503-24; Alvin J. Esau, "The Establishment, Preservation and Legality of Mennonite Semi-Communalism in Manitoba," *Manitoba Law Journal* 31, no. 1 (2005): 97; Pam Klassen-Dueck, "Books on the Border Land: A Mennonite Woman's Memoir of Reading and Remembering the Sacred" (M.A. Thesis, Brock University, 2010), 79; "Trump Reality Spills Over into Mennoland," *Canadian Mennonite*, 2017.

⁴ Shannon Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie: People, Land, and Water in Agricultural Manitoba* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

occurred, of course, alongside the demographic, social, and cultural changes brought about by the arrival of Mennonites and other settler groups. Though the West Reserve contained no large lakes or rivers – indeed, it has always been noted for its flat, broad, and unforested prairie environment – it contained (and still contains) many small creeks and streams, some of which fluctuate seasonally and others that contain water all year.

The purpose of this dissertation is to delve further into each of these themes that emerge from this one local story, in order to explore larger questions: how does Indigenous land become understood discursively and conceptually as settler space, even after the material and physical changes wrought by state-sponsored settler-colonists? What is the role of commemoration and local history-making in this process? How do established historical narratives relate to a place's physical environment? In a region so defined by flat agricultural land with no major waterbodies, what might history look like if “we begin with water?”⁵

In exploring these questions I argue that, in addition to Mennonites' historic complicity and involvement in Indigenous land dispossession, the land was continually dispossessed and unmade through the entrenchment of new settler histories of the land. Patrick Wolfe describes settler colonialism as “an inclusive, land-centred project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies, from the metropolitan centre to the frontier encampment, with a view to eliminating Indigenous societies.”⁶ Not nearly all such “agencies” are under examination in this dissertation, as I am more particularly interested in Wolfe's assertion that settler colonialism's “operations are not dependent on the presence or absence of formal state institutions or functionaries.”⁷ To put it

⁵ Adele Perry, “Presidential Address. Starting with Water: Canada, Colonialism, and History at 2019,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 30, no. 1 (2019): 7.

⁶ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 393.

⁷ Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 393.

another way, historian Paige Raibmon asserts that the governmental policies and laws that confined Indigenous peoples to reserves in Canada – making large swaths of land available to settlers – were of course instrumental in the ‘making’ of settler space and the ‘unmaking’ of Indigenous space. However, so too were the “mundane processes that comprised settler life even when [Indigenous] people themselves were out of settlers’ sight and, by extension, out of settlers’ minds.”⁸

While Raibmon focuses on local-level land-related practices, I consider the ways in which settler history-making and commemoration might be another example of such on-the-ground, place-specific “microtechniques of dispossession.”⁹ Mark Rifkin has theorized the connection between land dispossession and lived settler experiences by exploring how dispossessive processes “give rise to certain modes of feeling, and reciprocally, particular affective formations among non-Natives,” formations that “normalize[d] settler presence, privilege, and power.” Settlement, he argues, can be understood “as a structure of feeling” that “naturalize[s] non-Natives’ sense of entitlement to (once) Indigenous lands and sense of ease in the territory claimed by the settler state.”¹⁰ In the West Reserve, such feelings were partly bolstered by twentieth-century historical commemorations of nineteenth-century Mennonite settlement. Though Mennonites physically arrived to, occupied, and owned land once used and lived on by Indigenous Peoples, they also commemorated their time and presence on it through the written word, events, and other means. In the pages that follow, I suggest that Mennonite

⁸ Paige Raibmon, “Unmaking Native Space: A Genealogy of Indian Policy, Settler Practice, and the Microtechniques of Dispossession,” in *The Power of Promises: Rethinking Indian Treaties in the Pacific Northwest*, ed. Alexandra Harmon (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 57-59.

⁹ Raibmon, “Unmaking Native Space,” 72.

¹⁰ Mark Rifkin, “Settler States of Feeling: National Belonging and the Erasure of Native American Presence,” in *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 342.

commemoration in the West Reserve functioned to entrench “setter common sense”¹¹ as commonplace and irrefutable “by the very nature of [its] repetition.”¹²

However, this unmaking was never complete. Though in many ways, Mennonites who scouted land in Manitoba (and later came there to settle) in the 1870s were “party to a scene of Indigenous defeat,”¹³ this did not mean that Indigenous people disappeared from the region, with a fully-realized settler space established in their stead. First Nations had been consigned to small reserves, yes, and Metis¹⁴ peoples had dispersed, yes, but they still maintained presence in their homelands alongside, and despite, the establishment of a Mennonite settlement block along the 49th parallel. In settler and state archival records, examples of Indigenous people maintaining their presence in the region are subtle, yet they are there. These Indigenous responses to an imposed settler-colonial context become more visible when we consider them not only as either active resistance or timid accommodation, but rather as Anishinaabe historian Brittany Luby does: as varied, subtle, yet assertive actions ranging from “adaptation,” “cooperation,” and “passive resistance.”¹⁵ Further, settler accounts of Indigenous presence rarely made it into formal Mennonite histories and commemorations of West Reserve settlement, obscuring the extent and nature of cross-cultural interactions there. Similarly, everyday settler experiences of the reserve’s creeks – which sometimes included interactions with First Nations and Metis peoples – have also not always made it into written accounts of the region.

¹¹ Mark Rifkin, “Settler Common Sense,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, nos. 3–4 (2013): 322–40.

¹² Travis Wysote and Erin Morton, “‘The Depth of the Plough’: White Settler Tautologies and Pioneer Lies,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 9, no. 4 (2019): 480.

¹³ Royden Loewen, *Mennonite Farmers: A Global History of Place and Sustainability* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021), 30.

¹⁴ See “A Note on Terminology” in this Introduction for a discussion of my use of the unaccented ‘e’ in using the term ‘Metis.’

¹⁵ Brittany Luby, *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 13.

Taking these considerations into account, then, reveals a gap in our understanding of Mennonite West Reserve presence and history, a gap that has been made deeper and more difficult to fill by the very Mennonite historical narrations that have been established. And just as settler states of feeling can make it difficult to parse out histories of Indigenous presence and Indigenous-settler interactions, so too do they complicate our ability to “register histories of water.” In this way, “the invisibility of water,” argues historian Adele Perry, “is both reflective and constitutive of a lived history of settler colonialism.”¹⁶ In the case of the West Reserve, for example, its ‘creekful’¹⁷ characteristics were not always fully noted in Mennonite written histories, unless placed within the particular narrative frame of flooding and drainage ‘improvement.’ To help address these gaps, I look for other less-emphasized examples and experiences of water and Indigenous presence within settler accounts and state records.

In exploring these themes, “Land, Water, and Memory” contributes to the growing body of scholarly work aimed at understanding the relationships between histories of colonialism and immigration in Canada, and recognizing the connections between these two often-siloed historical fields. Raibmon has remarked that “historians have long treated colonization and immigration – the twin histories of indigenous lands and settler lands – as separate topics.”¹⁸ Though settler colonialism, argues Perry, is “organized around the double need to dispossess indigenous societies and build a settler population in their stead,” these related and intertwined goals are generally approached “in both scholarly literatures and popular discussions...as distinct

¹⁶ Perry, “Starting with Water,” 8.

¹⁷ With this term I take a cue from Frances Kaye’s discussion of how nineteenth-century settlers often perceived and characterized the North American grasslands as “treeless,” when instead we might rather think of them as “grassful.” Frances Kaye, *Goodlands: A Meditation and History on the Great Plains* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press), 20.

¹⁸ Raibmon, “Unmaking Native Space,” 57.

ones: colonization and immigration are presented as wholly separate topics with little in common.”¹⁹

Perry’s work has addressed this gap, as has Ryan Eyford’s research on settlement reserves, in which he too argues for the importance of “not only bring[ing] Indigenous people, immigrants, and the state into the same analytical frame,” but also “reveal[ing] the internal complexity and the dynamics of their relationships with each other.”²⁰ Similarly, Sheila McManus’ work on the Alberta-Montana borderlands, and L.K. Bertram’s research on Icelandic participants in the Canadian military campaign against the Metis at Batoche, both speak to the ways in which colonialism and immigration are two parts of the same historical story.²¹

In spite of such studies, argues Laura Madokoro, historians “have yet to fully consider the implications of a settler colonial framework that demands an accounting of all settlement.” This is partly due, she continues, to a lingering emphasis on “the need to write histories of migrants beyond the British and French worlds into national narratives.”²² In other words, although migration history has diversified its scope to include the experiences of a broad range of ethnic groups, the enfolding of these histories into an overarching story of the Canadian nation-state maintains that lingering disconnection between processes of migration and processes of settler-colonialism. Certainly, traces of this disconnection were present in Mennonite local histories of southern Manitoba, as will be discussed further below and in Chapter 1. West Reserve settlement is therefore an important and fruitful context in which to consider these issues.

¹⁹ Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 19.

²⁰ Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 16.

²¹ Sheila McManus, *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005); LK Bertram, “‘Eskimo’ Immigrants and Colonial Soldiers: Icelandic Immigrants and the North-West Resistance, 1885,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 99, no. 1 (2018): 63–97.

²² Laura Madokoro, “Peril and Possibility: A Contemplation of the Current State of Migration History and Settler Colonial Studies in Canada,” *History Compass* 17, no. 1 (2019): e12516.

Historical Context: The West Reserve, the Northern Plains, and Manitoba

My relatively small and localized geographic focus allows for a wider temporal scope. I examine a broad period from the arrival of Mennonite migrants to Manitoba in the 1870s (particularly to the West Reserve in 1875), to the years of the later twentieth century, when Mennonites began to commemorate their arrival to Manitoba in earnest. In terms of geography, both the East and West Reserve are located in the general area of the Manitoba Lowlands, a roughly 64-to-80-kilometre-wide swath of land bordered by the Escarpment to the west and the Precambrian Shield to the east, with the Red River flowing north approximately through the centre of the region.²³ Shannon Stunden Bower has pointed out that the Manitoba Lowlands, particularly from the international border to the southern end of Lake Winnipeg, can be described as a “large soup bowl...with slopes seemingly designed to collect precipitation and relatively impermeable soils that endured as water pooled.”²⁴ This “wet prairie” landscape is a result of Manitoba’s long geographical history, when, “between 10,000 and 30,000 years ago,” a glacier covered the province (and indeed most of North America), eventually melting and becoming glacial Lake Agassiz, which subsequently drained, leaving the landscape (along with Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba) behind.

²³ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 2.

²⁴ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 2.

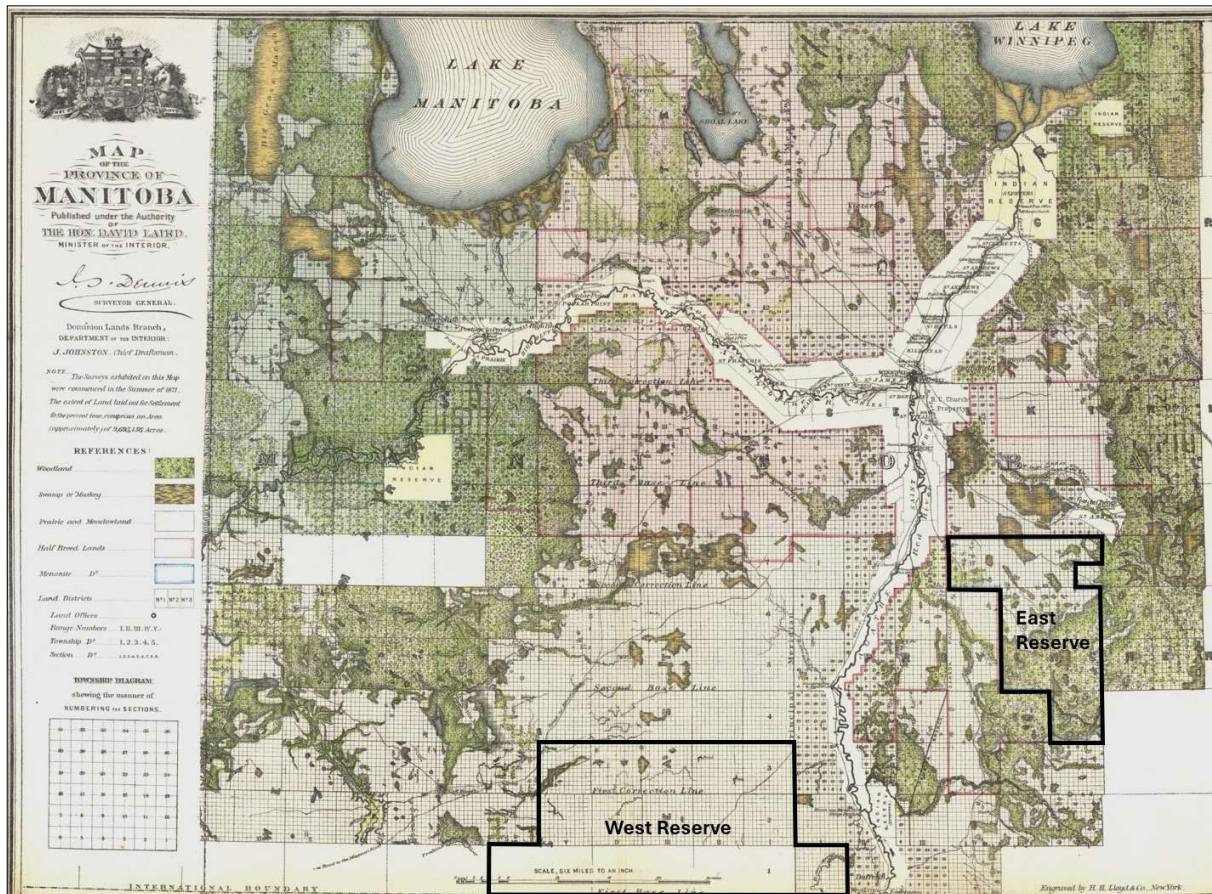


Figure 1: The East and West Reserves, overlaid on an 1874 Dominion Land Survey map of the province.²⁵

The land of the eventual West Reserve was well within southern Manitoba's soup-bowl-bottom, but was also seemingly devoid of the types of geographic features that typified other prairie locales to the north, east, and west within the Lowlands. Though streaked with many shallow and intermittent streams, none of these were nearly as large and as geographically significant as the Red or Pembina Rivers to the east and south respectively, or even the smaller La Salle and Scratching (Morris) Rivers to the north. While peppered with pockets of low marshlands, none was as large and expansive as the massive Great Marsh (or Boyne Marsh) to

²⁵ Most of the West Reserve's townships along the international boundary had not yet been surveyed at this time. Also, note the lands identified as "Indians Reserves" and "Half Breed Lands." "Map of the Province of Manitoba," based on: "Map Shewing the Townships Surveyed in the Province of Manitoba (and) North-West Territories in the Dominion of Canada, Published by Order of the Honourable David Laird, Minister of the Interior, December 31, 1874," <https://www.flickr.com/photos/manitobamaps/2230280043/in/album-72157603376358901/>.

the north, a wetland that was the focus of some of the Province's first drainage initiatives.²⁶ With the ribbons of trees along the Pembina River and the forested Pembina Escarpment to the west as the only notable sources of nearby timber, the reserve area itself had none of the large, forested areas that characterized some of the lands around the East Reserve and other portions of southern Manitoba. As a result, in many historical maps of southern Manitoba, West Reserve lands appear as almost a blank space, with few, if any, defining geographic features or even transportation routes. Part of this dissertation's aim, therefore, is to demonstrate the actual fine-grained environmental variation and dynamism of this area.

The specific West Reserve locale, between the Pembina Hills to the west, and the Red River to the east, was (and is) situated along an almost imperceptible west-to-east-slope, over which water gradually flows west from the Pembina Hills toward the Red River. The most significant waterways are the Dead Horse Creek, Plum River, Buffalo Creek, and Rivière aux Marais (or Marais River), in addition to many smaller unnamed creeks and streams. From the Hills, which stand roughly 300 to 400 feet above the plains to the east, the elevation drops "10 to 15 feet per mile" eastward until just west of the town of Winkler and village of Rosengart to the south (the location of a contour referred to as the Emerado Beach, one of the many glacial beaches of Lake Agassiz).²⁷ From the Emerado Beach, the land descends much more slowly at "3 to 5 feet per mile," with the various smaller streams becoming shallower and less defined²⁸ (through drainage initiatives over the decades have deepened and straightened some portions). East of the town of Altona – from the Principal Meridian to the Red River – the slope is even

²⁶ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 26, 90.

²⁷ R.E. Smith and W. Michalyna, *Soils of the Morden-Winkler Area: Manitoba Soil Survey, Soils Report No. 18* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Agriculture, 1973), 5; Allan Ashworth and John Bluemle, "The Pembina Escarpment," *NDGS Newsletter*, no. June (1990), <https://www.dmr.nd.gov/dmr/ndgs/pembina-escarpment#:~:text=The%20Pembina%20Escarpment%2C%20rising%20300,flat%20lowlands%20to%20the%20east.>

²⁸ Smith and Michalyna, *Soils of the Morden-Winkler Area*, 5.

more slight, at roughly two feet per mile.²⁹ Some of the lowest and marshiest areas in the nineteenth century were located in the northern and northeastern portions of the reserve, including around the “Buffalo Lake” area near present-day Rosenfeld.³⁰

These particularities are one of the reasons the first Mennonite arrivals to the area in 1875 and 1876 settled in the reserve’s western portion. That location had slightly higher elevation, better-drained soils, and closer proximity to the Pembina Hills’ timber, while still containing several wetlands to provide hay, and streams for water.³¹ Importantly, although the West Reserve almost seems like a historical pocket of blank prairie grassland in historical maps of Manitoba, this ‘pocket’ character changes when we look south of the forty-ninth parallel to recognize its location in the extreme northeastern corner of the expansive prairie grasslands of North America. Indeed, within that geographic scope, the West Reserve’s land is less of a unique pocket between the Pembina Escarpment and Red River, and more a continuation of a varied prairie grassland region extending through the heart of the continent. The West Reserve’s land, historically, was primarily tallgrass prairie, “an extension of the tall-grass prairie stretching north from the Dakotas.”³²

²⁹ Glen Podolsky, *Soils of the Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Soils Report No. D76* (Winnipeg: Agriculture Canada, Manitoba Department of Agriculture, 1991), 1.

³⁰ John H. Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba* (Steinbach: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 2000), 182.

³¹ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 44.

³² Geoffrey A.J. Scott, “Manitoba’s Ecoclimatic Regions,” in *The Geography of Manitoba: Its Land and People*, ed. John Welsted et al. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1996), 47.

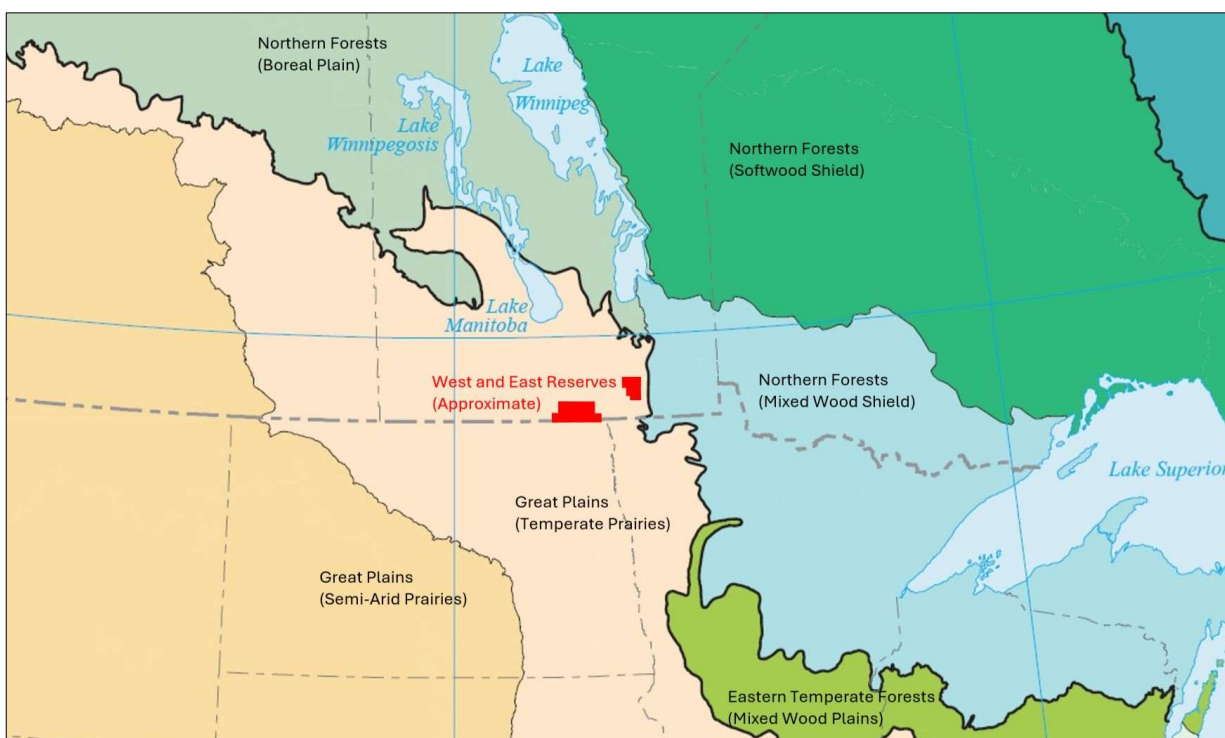


Figure 2: The Mennonite Reserves a broader geographical and ecological context.³³

The reserve's location on the edge of the Great Plains put it in proximity to several other ecoregions, from the forests toward Lake Superior to the Boreal Forests and Plains (see Figure 2).³⁴ As such, the reserve was also located within a broader, environmentally diverse Indigenous homeland where peoples from many different ecological regions and environments connected, converged, traded, hunted, and lived. From the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries in particular, the Nehiyaw Pwat, a polyethnic and confederacy of interrelated yet distinct Indigenous groups – primarily (but not only) the Nakota (Assiniboiné), nêhiyawak (Plains Cree), Anishinaabeg (Ojibwa, Saulteaux), and Métis – were well-established in this broad area.³⁵ The expansive

³³ Adapted from “Ecological Regions of North America, Level I-II,” Ecoregions of North America, United States Environmental Protection Agency, <https://www.epa.gov/eco-research/ecoregions-north-america>.

³⁴ Government of Canada, “Open Map,” Terrestrial Ecozones of Canada, 2025, <https://search.open.canada.ca/openmap/7ad7ea01-eb23-4824-bccc-66adb7c5bdf8>; United States Environmental Protection Agency, “Ecoregions of North America,” Ecosystems Research, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/eco-research/ecoregions-north-america>.

³⁵ Nicholas C.P. Vrooman, *The Whole Country Was... 'One Robe:': The Little Shell Tribe's America* (Helena: Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians and Drumlummon Institute, 2012), 6-7.

geography of their homeland encompassed the western edge of Lake of the Woods in the east, extended north to the mouth of the Red River at Lake Winnipeg, then southwest to the intersection of the Souris and Assiniboine Rivers (near present-day Brandon), then further south through the Turtle Mountains region, and on further southeast to Lake Traverse. Nicholas P. Vrooman has described this as the “Red River Settlement Zone.”³⁶ Kinship, trade, and a range of other factors also extended the Nehiyaw Pwat’s reach and presence as far west as the Rocky Mountains, overlapping and interacting with other groups.³⁷ At the centre of this approximate and expansive area was the settlement and trading hub of Pembina, in what would become North Dakota, just southeast of where the West Reserve would later be allocated.

Therefore, though the Nehiyaw Pwat’s influence had waned drastically by the time of Mennonite arrival to Manitoba (as outlined further below), it is still crucial to understanding both the historical context of West Reserve colonization and subsequent Mennonite-Indigenous interactions, as it was often largely people and groups of the Nehiyaw Pwat with whom Mennonites interacted when they established their own presence in the region. This was true of cross-cultural interactions in the early years of settlement, and also in later decades well into the twentieth century. At the same time, though, the Indigenous realities of the region were changing dramatically in the years immediately preceding Mennonites’ arrival in Manitoba.

This period – specifically the 1860s and 1870s – was marked by Manitoba’s entry into Confederation as an official province in 1870. At this time, Manitoba was “undeniably an Indigenous space,” with a population that – according to the 1870 census – was over 90 percent Metis and First Nation (though due to the racist notions and standards of whiteness in which the census methodologies were based, the number of First Nations people was likely not accurate,

³⁶ Vrooman, *The Whole Country Was... ‘One Robe,’* 19.

³⁷ Vrooman, *The Whole Country Was... ‘One Robe,’* 19-20.

and potentially higher).³⁸ Nevertheless, the Red River Settlement – by that time comprising the parishes along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers and the broader surrounding areas – was distinctly multicultural. It had already developed an agricultural character; First Nations and Metis Peoples engaged in farming along with many types of resource harvesting as part of a diversified and seasonal pattern of lifeways including the buffalo hunt, gardening, ranching, and fishing.³⁹ Leading up to 1870, the area consisted of several distinct population groups, including French and English Metis, various Nehiyaw Pwat peoples but by that time largely the Anishinaabeg, and Scottish settlers (the “Selkirk Settlers” who arrived in 1812), as well as missionaries and members of the clergy.⁴⁰ By the mid-1800s, “there was a developing racial tension that influenced status and upward mobility,” as nineteenth-century scientific racism – a potent force worldwide – influenced the thinking about social categories of the Red River Settlement’s world,⁴¹ a world in which Indigenous lived realities of identity and peoplehood had held considerable sway for a long time.

The volatility of the 1870s was profoundly impacted and accelerated by the Hudson’s Bay Company’s “transfer” of a massive land area known as Rupert’s Land to the Dominion of Canada in 1870 – a land mass so named because it was granted by King Charles II to his cousin Prince Rupert through the 1670 charter of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC). For the following 200 years, the HBC had, according to the charter, “exclusive right to trade furs” on all lands and

³⁸ Shelisa Klassen, “‘Heroes of a Flat Country’: Mennonite Life, Agriculture, and Mythmaking in Manitoban Newspapers, 1870s-1970s,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 39 (2021): 170.

³⁹ Norma Jean Hall, “A Casualty of Colonialism: Red River Métis Farming, 1810-1870,” *Mothers of the Resistance, 1869-1870: Red River Métis Genealogies*, n.d., <https://web.archive.org/web/20230615204838/https://resistancemothers.wordpress.com/a-casualty-of-colonialism/>, Chapter 1: Settling to Capitalize on Farming - Re-viewing Colonial Red River, Chapter 2: Red River Farming.

⁴⁰ Sarah Carter, *Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada to 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 62-82.

⁴¹ Carter, *Aboriginal People and Colonizers*, 78-79; Gerald Friesen, *The Honourable John Norquay: Indigenous Premier, Canadian Statesman* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2024), 64-65.

waterbodies that drained into Hudson Bay, as well as “the political authority to govern these lands,” thereby functioning not only as a trading company but as a governing authority.⁴² This land included the Red River Settlement Zone, and when the HBC negotiated the sale of this territory to the Dominion government for the price of 300,000 pounds (1.5 million dollars), the “legal dispossession of Native lands” in Manitoba was kickstarted in earnest.⁴³ As Adam Gaudry has argued, the sale was itself presumptively dispossessive, as it assumed an “imperial logic” whereby “Indigenous assertions of territoriality were secondary to European claims of sovereignty,” and that such a logic could be wielded “through an act of imperial legislation half a world away.”⁴⁴

Negotiated and enacted as it was “without the involvement or consent of the Indigenous peoples who were still the numerical majority” in the Hudson Bay watershed,⁴⁵ the transfer brought about much tension in the Red River Settlement, along with concern and suspicion on the part of the region’s majority Indigenous population (comprising both First Nations and Metis Peoples). Such suspicions were heightened by the fact that, though the sale had not yet taken place, Canada was already, throughout 1869, moving to assert its authority in Red River through a series of actions that spurred the Metis’ Red River Resistance, led by Louis Riel.

Indeed, Canadian colonists and speculators had already been arriving in the region throughout the 1860s, fuelled by an increasing spirit of Canadian expansionism and imperial ambition.⁴⁶ Further, in July of 1869, a Dominion government land survey had been ordered by

⁴² Adam Gaudry, “Fantasies of Sovereignty: Deconstructing British and Canadian Claims to Ownership of the Historic North-West,” *NAIS: Journal of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association* 3, no. 1 (2016): 50.

⁴³ Frank Tough, “*As Their Natural Resources Fail*”: *Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870-1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 8.

⁴⁴ Gaudry, “Fantasies of Sovereignty,” 46.

⁴⁵ Gaudry, “Fantasies of Sovereignty,” 46.

⁴⁶ Fred Shore, “The Canadians and the Métis: The Re-Creation of Manitoba, 1858-1872” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1991), 84, 38-41.

William McDougall, a strong proponent of Canadian westward expansion who would shortly thereafter be appointed as the first lieutenant-governor of the soon-to-be-acquired territory.⁴⁷ That fall, the Metis blocked a survey party from conducting its work, and prohibited McDougall from entering the territory from the United States.⁴⁸ That hundreds of rifles and thousands of ammunition rounds were stowed in McDougall's party's supplies only enhanced Metis suspicions, given the presence of pro-Canadian groups already in the settlement along with recently-arrived survey parties, all of whom could be armed with such a munitions supply.⁴⁹ Metis concerns over what these developments would mean for their place within their homeland spurred key events in the Red River Resistance. These events included the Metis occupation of Upper Fort Garry, the establishment of a provisional government, the imprisonment of several Ontario Canadians at the Fort, the execution of one of those Ontarians (Thomas Scott), and finally the Riel-led provisional government's negotiation of Manitoba's entry into Confederation. The eventual Manitoba Act of 1870 outlined the terms of Manitoba's entry into Confederation and recognized Metis concerns regarding land, as it stipulated that 1.4 million acres of land would be "distributed among the children of Métis heads of families residing in the province, and also guaranteeing "all 'old settlers' 'peaceable possession' of the lots they occupied in the Red River Settlement" prior to July 15, 1870.⁵⁰

The provisional government's agreement to the terms of the Manitoba Act did not end up being any kind of resolution for the Red River Metis. Though it came into law in May of 1870,

⁴⁷ Suzanne Zeller, "McDougall, William," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13 (University of Toronto, 1994), https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcdougall_william_13E.html.

⁴⁸ Lewis H. Thomas, "Riel, Louis," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 11 (University of Toronto, 1982), https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcdougall_william_13E.html.

⁴⁹ Shore, "The Canadians and the Métis," 84-86; Jean Teillet, *The North-West Is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 2019), 308-310.

⁵⁰ Evelyn Peters et al., *Rooster Town: The History of an Urban Metis Community, 1901-1961* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018), 10.

the Red River Expeditionary Force (RREF) – a military initiative led by British Colonel Garnet Wolseley, ostensibly aimed at “peacekeeping” and establishing “Canadian sovereignty” in the north-west – was on its way to Red River in 1870,⁵¹ subsequent to the passing of the Act. Its members “appear to have been guided by something other than peace-keeping...some of them wanted to seek farms, some wanted to experience the adventure in the exercise and” – crucially – “others wanted to avenge [the death of] Scott.”⁵² In the subsequent two years of the RREF’s occupation of Red River, the Metis were subjected to assaults, rapes, stabbings, shootings, property vandalism, and other forms of harassment and intimidation.⁵³ Roughly one month after the RREF’s arrival, a Metis man, Elzéar Goulet, was murdered while trying to escape a group of Canadians who recognized and pursued him. As he swam across the Red River to escape to St. Boniface, his pursuers threw rocks at him until he was struck in the head and drowned.⁵⁴ In its reporting of these events, the *Saint Paul Daily Press* proclaimed a “Reign of Terror at Red River,”⁵⁵ and the ‘Reign of Terror’ moniker has subsequently been used to describe this era of Metis history.

As a result of all this, argues Fred Shore, members of the Canada First party, Canadian “politicizers,” the RREF, and “a smattering of Ontario immigrants” in Red River “successfully removed the Métis as a political power in Manitoba.”⁵⁶ Subsequently, a range of economic and social factors, combined with the long, drawn out, and fraudulent processes by which the lands

⁵¹ Shore, “The Canadians and the Métis,” 147.

⁵² Shore, “The Canadians and the Métis,” 148.

⁵³ Lawrence J. Barkwell, *The Reign of Terror Against the Metis of Red River*, Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2017; Shore, “The Canadians and the Métis,” 217-299.

⁵⁴ J.A. Jackson, “Elzéar Goulet,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9 (University of Toronto / Université Laval, 2003), https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/goulet_elzear_9E.html.

⁵⁵ “A Reign of Terror at Red River,” *The Saint Paul Daily Press*, October 1, 1870, 1.

⁵⁶ Shore, “The Canadians and the Métis,” 217.

guaranteed to the Metis were transferred largely into the hands of land speculators and settlers, resulted in a dispersal of the Red River Metis from Manitoba,⁵⁷ though “many also stayed.”⁵⁸

Scrip in particular was a crucial factor in Metis dispossession of their homelands in Red River and across the Northwest. Though the Manitoba Act stipulated that heads of Metis families would receive 160 acres of land, with their children to receive 240 acres, subsequent Dominion government orders-in-council established that “provision of scrip” – essentially a certificate “redeemable for land or money” – would be the means by which this land would be allocated to the Metis.⁵⁹ However, in reality, it became “the administrative process of extinguishing Métis title to land.”⁶⁰ Land scrip certificates – representing an entitlement to either 160 or 240 acres – contained the name of the grantee and created a “paper trail” through which the grantee selected and received their land, but money scrip was crucially different in its “ease of convertibility.”⁶¹ Indeed, “the name of the grantee did not in most cases appear on the face of the coupon” for money scrip, “and it could be redeemed at any Dominion Lands Office by whoever bore the

⁵⁷ For some of the various and competing interpretations of dispersal, and of the scrip process, see Nicole St-Onge, “Metis and Merchant Capital in Red River: The Decline of Pointe à Grouette” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1983); Nicole St-Onge, “The Dissolution of a Métis Community: Pointe à Grouette, 1860-1885,” *Studies in Political Economy* 18 (1985): 149-72; D. N. Sprague, *Canada and the Métis, 1869-1885* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988); Thomas Flanagan, *Metis Lands in Manitoba* (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1991); Gerhard J. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Darren O’Toole, “Thomas Flanagan on the Stand: Revisiting Métis Land Claims and the List of Rights in Manitoba,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 137–77; Peters et al., *Rooster Town*, 159-167.

⁵⁸ Peters et al., *Rooster Town*, 11.

⁵⁹ Cheryl Troupe, *Putting Down Roots: Métis Agency, Land Use, and Women’s Food Labour in a Qu’Appelle Valley Road Allowance Community* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2025), 90.

⁶⁰ Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 90.

⁶¹ Frank Tough and Erin McGregor, “‘The Rights to the Land May Be Transferred’: Archival Records as Colonial Text - A Narrative of Metis Scrip,” in *Natives and Settlers, Now and Then: Historical Issues and Current Perspectives on Treaties and Land Claims in Canada*, ed. Paul W. DePasquale (University of Alberta Press, 2007), 38.

coupon.”⁶² As a result, land speculators could, and did, acquire most scrip coupons, using it “to gain title to large blocks of land that the could sell for profit.”⁶³

The question of whether or not this process was a deliberate Dominion government strategy to dispossess the Metis of their lands has been hotly debated. However, scholars have demonstrated and argued that the government was “apathetic about the future of the Metis,” that fraud and impersonation on the part of speculators took place, and that, through “legislation, delay, and administrative shuffle, Government failed to honour Métis land tenure and the promises made in the Manitoba Act.”⁶⁴

In addition to the Metis, the First Nations in and around Red River were also concerned by talks of the transfer and the growing influx of settlers in the region in the late nineteenth century. These issues, and the potential Rupert’s Land transfer in particular, were top-of-mind for Anishinaabe leader Ke-we-tay-ash (Flying Round)⁶⁵ of the Roseau River area, who met with McDougall during his stay south of the border at Pembina in 1869. Ke-we-tay-ash’s group of Anshinaabeg at that time laid claim to a large portion of southern Manitoba that included the land where both Mennonite reserves would be located several years later. According to McDougall’s account, the chief asked him pointedly, “Had I bought their (his) land from the Hudson’s Bay Company?.” Ke-we-tay-ash further asserted that, in McDougall’s words, “He and

⁶² Tough and McGregor, ““The Rights to the Land May Be Transferred,”” 38-39.

⁶³ Camilla Augustus, “The Scrip Solution: The North West Metis Scrip Policy, 1885-1887,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Calgary, 2005, 116; Tough and McGregor, ““The Rights to the Land May Be Transferred,”” 53-55, 57; Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 91. For additional scholarship that deals with these issues, see

⁶⁴ Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 91.

⁶⁵ Though there are several published spellings of Ke-we-tay-ash’s name, this appears to be the most common, and is the spelling used in the Treaty 1 document. Another spelling is “Qu-a-ty-ash (Driven Round by the Wind).” See Sheldon Krasowski, *No Surrender: The Land Remains Indigenous* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2019), 61.

his ancestors had never sold their title to any part of it,” and “now wanted to know what I was going to do with his land.”⁶⁶

During these years, other Anishinaabeg throughout the region were similarly concerned by what they were seeing, with the Portage Band “ward[ing] off settlers who were taking timber from their lands” in 1868, and other Indigenous groups in the Riding Mountain area “restricting access to their territories” until a treaty was negotiated and finalized.⁶⁷ Dissatisfied that the Dominion government had still not entered into treaty negotiations, leaders of the Portage Band, including Chief Yellow Quill, posted a notice in the town of Portage la Prairie asserting that their rights were being “encroached” upon, and that “we still hold the land for our children that will be born afterwards.” Calling for the government to enter into a treaty, and voicing their displeasure at the presence of settlers in their territory, the leaders stated that “When we speak first we speak softly, but when we speak again we will speak louder.”⁶⁸

When treaty negotiations began at Lower Fort Garry in the summer of 1871, they proved to be contentious at certain points. At times, government officials made statements of assurance that “There will still be plenty of land...where you can go and roam and hunt as you have always done” in addition to “your own reserve” “if you wish to farm.” At other times, officials turned to frustrated threats that, whether First Nations “wished it or not, immigrants would come and fill up the country [and would] pour into the Province, and in a little while would spread over it...”⁶⁹ Anishinaabe negotiators asserted their positions and desires and exhibited a great deal of frustration with the government negotiators’ words and approach, to the point that they were

⁶⁶ Canada. Parliament, “Paper No. 12: Correspondence and Papers Connected with Recent Occurrences in the North-West Territories,” *Sessional Papers V* (1870): 18–19.

⁶⁷ Aimée Craft, *Breathing Life into the Stone Fort Treaty: An Anishinabe Understanding of Treaty One* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2013), 43.

⁶⁸ “Communication,” *The Manitoban*, July 1, 1871.

⁶⁹ Craft, *Breathing Life into the Stone Fort Treaty*, 49, 53.

prepared to leave the negotiations. However, they were persuaded to stay one more night and, for an unexplained reason, shifted their position and signed the treaty the next day.⁷⁰ A “fundamentally problematic issue,” argues Aimée Craft, was that “concepts of surrender and extinguishment of title were never raised or discussed at the negotiations. Had they been, they would likely have resulted in an immediate breakdown in the negotiations, as the Anishinabe would not have agreed to a surrender of land.”⁷¹

Similar to the way that the Manitoba Act did not result in stability for the Metis, the signing of the treaty was not a harbinger of First Nations prosperity and independence, nor of positive relationships with governments and incoming settlers. The Dominion government’s insistence on interpreting the treaty only through its final written form without encompassing the spoken promises and assurances given in the negotiations – the “outside promises” – resulted in dissatisfaction and frustration on the part of the Anishinaabe almost immediately after the document was signed, with disputes over things like land use and reserves continuing for years afterward.⁷² As Sheldon Krasowski’s research on the Numbered Treaties argues, Indigenous leaders across the north-west “did not surrender their land through the treaty process,” but “agreed to share their land with settlers in exchange for treaty benefits offered by the Canadian government.” This key facet of the treaties is corroborated by additional research and oral histories from Indigenous Peoples across the prairies.⁷³

⁷⁰ Craft, *Breathing Life into the Stone Fort Treaty*, 59-60.

⁷¹ Craft, *Breathing Life into the Stone Fort Treaty*, 64.

⁷² Craft, *Breathing Life into the Stone Fort Treaty*, 102-106.

⁷³ Krasowski, *No Surrender*, 2; Dorothy First Rider et al., eds., *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty 7* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996); Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt, *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream Is That Our Peoples Will One Day Be Clearly Recognized as Nations* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000).

Historical Context: Mennonite Migration to Southern Manitoba

These events and processes comprised some of the “context of Canadian colonialism”⁷⁴ in which Mennonites found themselves able to migrate and settle on lands within southern Manitoba. Just as James Daschuk has shown how disease and hunger, combined with government actions and climactic and environmental factors, “cleared” the plains of robust Indigenous presence, control, and autonomy,⁷⁵ so too did the events listed above help make available the lands of southern Manitoba for Mennonites and other settlers. The Mennonites who came to Manitoba were part of a larger Mennonite migration from Ukraine (at that time within Imperial Russia) to North America in the 1870s. Faced with looming compulsory military service and a shift to state-administered education, including instruction in the Russian language⁷⁶ – changes that impacted their religious beliefs and previously-negotiated privileges – some groups of Mennonites in Imperial Russia began to consider migrating. They were looking for land in various locations in Canada and the United States, and negotiations “became a complex, international affair,” involving British, Canadian, and American officials. These processes demonstrated the Mennonites’ “adept negotiation skills” and ability to “leverage all three host states against each other to satisfy their varied interests.”⁷⁷ After a Mennonite delegation travelled to several locations across North America to examine land in 1873,⁷⁸ locations were chosen in both Canada

⁷⁴ Joseph R. Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland: Environment, Colonialism, and Settlement in Manitoba,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 35 (2017): 120.

⁷⁵ James W. Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013).

⁷⁶ Blake Hamm, “‘A Keen Eye for Their Own Interests’: Negotiating the 1870s Mennonite Migration to North America,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 41, no. 1 (2023): 148.

⁷⁷ Hamm, “‘A Keen Eye,’” 165-166, 146.

⁷⁸ Hans Werner, “‘Something...We Had Not Seen nor Heard of’: The 1873 Mennonite Delegation to Find Land in ‘America,’” *Preservings* 34 (2014): 11–20.

and the United States. In total, over 17,000 migrants – “one-third of the total Mennonite population in imperial Russia” – travelled to North America between 1873 and 1880.⁷⁹

Those who came to Manitoba did so because of several freedoms and privileges offered by Canada. Most notably, these included exemption from military service, blocks of land set aside exclusively for Mennonite use, and the “fullest privileges of exercising their religious principles...without any kind of molestation whatever, with that same privilege “extend[ing] to the education of their children in schools.”⁸⁰ However, educational matters technically fell under Provincial – not Federal – jurisdiction, and societal changes related to education and language, among other things, would be the cause of another migration of some Manitoba Mennonites to Latin America in the 1920s.

The initial privileges of 1873 were further enhanced by the so-called “hamlet privilege,” an amendment to the Dominion Lands Act allowing Mennonites to settle in their familiar semi-communal village patterns, rather than on individual homesteads as stipulated in the Act.⁸¹ The Manitoba block settlements – in other words, the East and West Reserves – were part of what Ryan Eyford has described as a broader state strategy of employing settler land reserves as spatial tools of social engineering and surveillance on the Canadian prairies, to facilitate the establishment of a liberal concepts of land ownership and social relations.⁸² Incoming Mennonites were also not unaware of the Indigenous peoples – particularly the Metis – to whose

⁷⁹ Hamm, ““A Keen Eye,”” 145.

⁸⁰ “Privilegium, or Letter from John Lowe to the Mennonite Delegates from Russia to Manitoba,” July 23, 1873, Volume 1417, File 16, Mennonite Heritage Archives, <https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Vol-1417-file-16-letter-of-invitation-1873-English-watermarked.pdf>; Loewen, *Mennonite Farmers*, 30.

⁸¹ Esau, “The Establishment, Preservation and Legality,” 89-92. This land-holding pattern deteriorated over time, and the communal-land village system was eventually disbanded, though the physical form of many villages remained, as discussed in subsequent chapters. In the West Reserve, a range of internal and external factors contributed to this dissolution, including the arrival of railways, increasing Mennonite prosperity and desire for larger landholdings, and the influence – enshrined in law – of the Dominion Land Survey system of land-parcel apportionment. See Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 137-140.

⁸² Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 10.

land they were arriving in southern Manitoba. For example, an 1873 promotional immigration tract written for incoming Mennonites by Jacob Shantz, a key facilitator of Mennonite migration to Manitoba, contained historical background and statements regarding the “Half breeds” and “Indians.”⁸³ Mennonites themselves – both the 1873 delegates and the first arrivals – also displayed an awareness that they were coming to “land in which the Métis had significant presence and authority.”⁸⁴

The first group of new arrivals arrived to Winnipeg in the summer of 1874, having come north on the Red River after a lengthy, treacherous and sometimes tragic transatlantic voyage followed by a trip over land and water from the east to the central plains. Following the Winnipeg stopover, they went back south up the Red River, disembarking at its junction with the Rat River, where they made their way to the East Reserve lands.⁸⁵ That winter, Mennonites applied for a second reserve,⁸⁶ and in the summer of 1875, more new arrivals disembarked at the makeshift immigration receiving site of Fort Dufferin on the Red River just north of Emerson (originally built as a post for the International Boundary Commission and then used by the North-West Mounted Police).⁸⁷ After a six-week stay in immigration sheds built for 300 people (which saw outbreaks of disease and the deaths of thirty children), the roughly 1,000 immigrants made their way to prospective village sites in the West Reserve.⁸⁸

⁸³ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland”; Reina C. Neufeldt, “Settler Colonial Conscripts: Mennonite Reserves and the Enfolding of Implicated Subjects,” *Postcolonial Studies*, 2021, 6; Jacob Y. Shantz, *Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba*, by J.Y. Shantz, *Together with an Extract from the Government Pamphlet on Manitoba* (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1873).

⁸⁴ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 114.

⁸⁵ Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 198-201.

⁸⁶ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 32.

⁸⁷ Eleanor Chornoboy, “1875 Immigrants to the West Reserve,” *Heritage Posting* 107, no. February (2024): 7.

⁸⁸ Chornoboy, “1875 Immigrants to the West Reserve,” 7.

West Reserve Mennonites were not a monolithic group. The initial arrivals in 1875 came from the Chortitza and Fürstenland Mennonite settlements in Imperial Russia, and established themselves in the more westerly portion of the reserve.⁸⁹ More families would arrive there from the East Reserve in the late 1870s and early 1880s, discouraged by the marshy and rocky lands east of the Red River.⁹⁰ These East Reserve families had originally migrated from a different colony in Imperial Russia, the Bergthal colony, and they established their West Reserve villages to the east of the Chortitza-Fürstenland settlements.⁹¹ Certain differences between the two groups became noticeable in several ways over the ensuing decades; for example, the Chortitza-Fürstenland groups adhered more strictly to traditional community governance and settlement models, education, and church life, whereas some Bergthalers more readily adapted to “the Canadian system of farming, government, school practices, and other forms of culture.”⁹² Overall, nearly 7,000 Mennonites came to Manitoba between 1873 and 1880,⁹³ comprising a notable portion of the province’s population at the time. The West Reserve families’ crop farming, which included wheat, canola, and later sunflowers,⁹⁴ among others, took hold over the decades, with the area referred to as the province’s “Famous Wheat District” by the 1920s.⁹⁵

“Land, Water, and Memory” engages with the periods of Mennonite arrival and initial settlement, but it also spans out to examine Mennonites’ commemorations of that settlement over

⁸⁹ Cornelius Krahn, “West Reserve (Manitoba),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (Web), 1959, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=West_Reserve_\(Manitoba,_Canada\)&oldid=163369](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=West_Reserve_(Manitoba,_Canada)&oldid=163369).

⁹⁰ Epp, *Mennonites in Canada: 1786-1920*, 219.

⁹¹ Krahn, “West Reserve.”

⁹² Krahn, “West Reserve;” Cornelius Krahn and Leonard Sawatzky, “Old Colony Mennonites,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (Web), https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Old_Colony_Mennonites&fbclid=IwAR3E8P0Qgl4zB0N8rgnVQ8bSVDOyilNGKJmU_49ltrYYTB6Nkk56jLPIMeU.

⁹³ Hamm, “A Keen Eye,” 145.

⁹⁴ Loewen, *Mennonite Farmers*, 5.

⁹⁵ “Gretna, Thriving Border Town, Serves Famous Wheat District,” *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, October 28, 1927, 25.

the subsequent decades. Commemorations took many different forms, beginning in the 1920s with events celebrating the 1874 arrival to Manitoba. The emphasis in these early events was on arrival to the East Reserve, and commemorations of West Reserve arrival began more in earnest during the 1940s, when events like the Rhineland Agricultural Fair and the sixtieth anniversary of the Rural Municipality of Rhineland offered occasion to remember, write about, and commemorate settlement in the West Reserve.

The establishment of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society in 1958 – built in part through earlier efforts of West Reserve Mennonites in the Altona area to write about and preserve Manitoba Mennonite history – brought about new initiatives, including the development of the Mennonite Heritage Village “open-air museum” in Steinbach.⁹⁶ Later years saw a proliferation of West Reserve town and village histories published in the 1970s and 1980s, as many of these settlements began celebrating anniversaries themselves. Along with these robust published histories, the year of Canada’s centennial – 1967 – also saw the initiation of a substantial three-volume history of Mennonites in Canada.⁹⁷ Perhaps somewhat grandly, the first volume was

written in part to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the [Mennonite/Anabaptist] movement itself, the approaching bicentennial of the arrival of Mennonite pioneers in Ontario, the sesquicentennial of the coming of the Amish, the centennial of the first immigration from Russia, and the 50th and 25th anniversaries of the other two major migrations of Mennonites from Europe to Canada.⁹⁸

In addition to the substantial 1974 centennial celebrations of Mennonite arrival to Manitoba, the 1970s also saw the establishment of a Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg,

⁹⁶ Robert Coutts, *Authorized Heritage: Place, Memory, and Historic Sites in Prairie Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021), 128-129; “Early MMHS Publications,” 1942-1953, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society Fonds, Series 20: Books Published, 1., Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁹⁷ Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People’s Struggle for Survival* (Macmillan of Canada, 1982), viii.

⁹⁸ Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 17.

which is still in existence today.⁹⁹ While not particularly ‘commemorative’ in nature or focus, its establishment did – along with the centennial celebrations – situate Mennonites and their history more squarely within an increasing national emphasis on Canadian multiculturalism,¹⁰⁰ and further illustrated the growing strength and heft of Manitoba Mennonite history-making as it developed from the 1920s to the 1980s.

Of course, Manitoba and West Reserve historical writing and commemorations during this period occurred within, alongside, and in relation to various historical processes occurring both within and outside Mennonite communities in Canada. The dissolution of the semi-communal landownership patterns, the aforementioned exodus to Latin America, the Great Depression, and the Second World War all impacted West Reserve life in various ways. Further, weather and climatic events, such as drought, rainfall, and constant overland flooding, all imprinted themselves on West Reserve residents during this period.

By the late-twentieth century, the innovations of industrialized agriculture, the development of more urbanized towns, and an overall increase in prosperity all constituted the complex reality in which Mennonites continued to consider their presence within the prairie land of the West Reserve. These processes also brought about changes and new developments in how settlers and Indigenous people interacted, and in how Mennonites considered – or didn’t – the context and implications of such interactions. It is not the purpose of this dissertation to consider the full complexity and implications of these varied historical processes for Mennonites (indeed, each of them, and many others, have been well-examined within the field of Mennonite Studies).

⁹⁹ Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies, “Directors and Members,” 2025, <https://ctms.uwinnipeg.ca/about/directors-and-members/>.

¹⁰⁰ Harry Loewen, “Establishing a Chair in Mennonite Studies,” *Mennonite Historian* 40, no. 3 (2014): 8–9; Jeremy Wiebe, “Performing Ethnicity in a Pluralistic Society: The 1974 Manitoba Mennonite Centennial,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 37 (2019): 285–303.

However, I do consider them in relation to, among other things, the region's environmental history, West Reserve Mennonite-Indigenous interactions, continued Indigenous presence and land use in the region, and Mennonite settlement commemorations.

Historiography and Relevant Scholarship

This dissertation is indebted to, and situated alongside, literature that deals with the many historical facets of settler colonialism, especially on the Canadian prairies. Sarah Carter's work, for example, has shown how government policies purportedly aimed at encouraging Indigenous agriculture actually hindered it, how Western Christian ideas of marriage impacted Indigenous peoples in western Canada, and the ways in which gender and race were intertwined with ideas of land ownership and colonization on the prairies.¹⁰¹ Scholars like Daschuk and Maureen Lux have applied similar lenses to hunger and disease, examining how notions of race informed state and settler ideas of Indigenous health, and also how climate and environment interacted with state policies and practices that resulted in hunger and malnutrition for Indigenous peoples.¹⁰² Robert Alexander Innes turns his gaze similarly to the interactions between legal, colonial definitions of "Indian" and Indigenous concepts of kinship and belonging, showing how the former disrupts and confounds the latter.¹⁰³ The throughlines of state actions on one hand and Indigenous agency on the other characterize these works, and are ones that I consider in this dissertation as well.

¹⁰¹ Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019); Sarah Carter, *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008); Sarah Carter, *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of British Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016).

¹⁰² Maureen K. Lux, *Medicine That Walks: Disease, Medicine, and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*.

¹⁰³ Robert Alexander Innes, *Elder Brother and Law of the People: Contemporary Kinship and Cowessess First Nation* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 6.

Though land – in addition to society, culture, and state – is central to the research noted above, it is even more so in other scholarship. Cole Harris’ research on histories of spatial segregation – specifically the reserve system in western Canada – focuses on ideas and concepts of segregated and racialized space, in addition to the very real geographic and material elements of such segregation. Further, that segregated reserve geographies were contested by Indigenous peoples speaks to how their imposition was immutable and not straightforward, and took shape through political processes.¹⁰⁴ Closer to the context of my research, Ryan Eyford has studied the use and imposition of *settler* land reserves – including those allocated for Mennonites in Manitoba – as one means by which the Canadian state undertook the colonization of the northwest. In particular, such reserves comprised part of a spatially segregated prairie landscape that ensured “peaceful relations between Indigenous peoples, the dominion government, and migrant settlers,” while also codifying individual property rights and “a new liberal colonial order in the Canadian Northwest.”¹⁰⁵

These themes have been considered by scholars of Mennonite history and culture as well, with the first forays into these issues occurring in the 1970s and early 1980s, when sociologist Leo Driedger considered Mennonite settlement in Manitoba as an “invasion” that was only possible “because the Canadian government had cleared away the Indians and the Métis in the West.”¹⁰⁶ Calvin Redekop later applied a global lens to these questions, examining Mennonite settlement in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Paraguay to argue that Mennonites “can be

¹⁰⁴ Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), xviii.

¹⁰⁵ Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 9-11.

¹⁰⁶ Leo Driedger, “Native Rebellion and Mennonite Invasion: An Examination of Two Canadian River Valleys,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46, no. 3 (1972): 290.

characterized as indirectly responsible” for the Indigenous displacement and “human rights...violat[i]ons)” attendant on Mennonite migration and settlement.¹⁰⁷

More recently, Mennonite-focused scholarship in these areas has increasingly drawn on the fields of settler colonial studies and Indigenous Studies to examine histories of Indigenous displacement and Mennonite settlement in Manitoba. In an extrapolation of Redekop’s and Driedger’s early analyses, Reina Nefueledt argues that Mennonites are implicated in the colonization of Manitoba, and she explores the concept of “implicated subjects” to examine how “collectives of people, who find themselves in the grey zone of implication, fe(e)d into and are responsible for aspects of settler colonialism.”¹⁰⁸ Shelisa Klassen has analyzed nineteenth-century newspaper influence and rhetoric relative to Mennonite settlement, finding that Mennonites “could be observed as outsiders while also praised as heroes for their good qualities that aligned with the racialized Canadian vision of the ideal settler.”¹⁰⁹ As I demonstrate in the ensuing chapters, similar sentiments were certainly at play in West Reserve historical commemorations, from both within and outside the Mennonite community. Both Blake Hamm and Jeremy Bergen have made similar arguments, showing how Mennonite migration and settlement the world over has combined with nation-state desires for colonists, and also the extent to which historical Mennonite settlement on Indigenous lands “presents a challenge to Mennonite identity.”¹¹⁰ My work provides a micro-historical view of these arguments, centering on a small geographic area to show how ‘common-sense’ narratives were employed to build up

¹⁰⁷ Calvin Redekop, “Mennonite Displacement of Indigenous Peoples,” 71.

¹⁰⁸ Nefueledt, “Settler Colonial Conscripts,” 3.

¹⁰⁹ Klassen, “Heroes of a Flat Country,” 182.

¹¹⁰ Blake Hamm, “Low German Mennonite Migration: A Geopolitical Framework and History,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 41, no. 2 (2023): 111–46; Jeremy Bergen, “Mennonite Dispossession of Lands as a Challenge to Mennonite Identity,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 41, no. 1 (2023): 129–44.

West Reserve Mennonites as ideal settlers for a seemingly empty land, and also how Mennonites themselves began re-assessing their historical identities and roles by the mid-twentieth century.

Mennonite colonization relative to Metis Peoples in particular has been examined by Donovan Giesbrecht and Joseph Wiebe, who argue against the idea of Indigenous and Mennonite histories as separate or unrelated.¹¹¹ I built on Giesbrecht's and Wiebe's assertions, arguing that Mennonite West Reserve settlement – and indeed Mennonite prairie settlement more generally – did not represent a supposed clean break between a vanishing era of Indigenous history and a new settler story of progress and modernity (though much Mennonite settler history-making did engage in such mythmaking). Rather, Mennonite and Indigenous stories overlapped in the West Reserve, and Mennonite arrival itself was connected to Canadian goals of prairie settlement and its attendant displacement of Indigenous peoples. Many of the work listed above centre on the East Reserve, though Susie Fisher's research is a notable exception in this regard. Fisher homes in on West Reserve Mennonites' horticultural practices and their role in shaping both settler identity and the "systemic apprehension of Indigenous lands."¹¹² "Land, Water, and Memory" takes several cues from Fisher's work, contributing to what is still a scant literature on West Reserve settler colonialism and Indigenous-Mennonite relations.

The particularity of land-and-water environments in this dissertation means that I rely on the contributions of Environmental History. In particular, I draw on work that examines the relationship between environments and narrative – in other words, as William Cronon has put it, the ways in which supposedly neutral landscapes are given meaning through language and story,

¹¹¹ Donovan Giesbrecht, "Metis, Mennonites, and the 'Unsettled Prairie,' 1874-1896," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 103–104; Wiebe, "On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland," 114.

¹¹² Susan Fisher, "Seeds from the Steppe: Mennonites, Horticulture, and the Construction of Landscapes on Manitoba's West Reserve, 1870-1950" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2017), 15.

and the way “Narrative is inescapably bound to the very names we give the world.”¹¹³ Others have built upon this theme, and of particular interest to me are scholars who have done so with an eye to Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous-settler relations. Jocelyn Thorpe, for example, shows how the conceptual category of “wilderness” has been applied to Indigenous lands in the Temagami region, discursively and materially “making” that place according to non-Indigenous and Canadian ideals and alongside the eviction of Anishinaabe peoples from broadly-spanned homelands onto small reserve lands.¹¹⁴ Sean Kheraj’s study of Vancouver’s Stanley Park explores similar questions, examining the intersecting roles of nature, culture, and historical memory in the evolving meanings of a place and its landscape constructions.¹¹⁵ Similarly, Julie Cruikshank has considered glaciers as “actors” in Tlingit histories and traditions, and in the histories of European-Indigenous encounters.¹¹⁶

All of these works bring the non-human environment and species into conversation with human societal and cultural phenomena. Additionally, they all touch on water in some way (or frozen water, in Cruikshank’s case), an important facet of environmental history for this dissertation. Anishinaabe scholars Brittany Luby and Leanne Leddy also examine histories of water, but from Indigenous perspectives and sources, alongside state and settler archives. Both Luby’s research on the Anishinaabeg of the Treaty 3 Lake of the Woods region, and Leddy’s work on the Serpent River and Elliot Lake north of Lake Huron, explore the impacts of colonialism and natural resource extraction on Indigenous lifeways, along with continual

¹¹³ William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1376.

¹¹⁴ Jocelyn Thorpe, *Temagami’s Tangled Wild: Race, Gender, and the Making of Canadian Nature* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 1, 4.

¹¹⁵ Sean Kheraj, *Inventing Stanley Park: An Environmental History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 3, 5-6, 203.

¹¹⁶ Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?: Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 3, 10, 16.

Indigenous contestation of such actions and impacts.¹¹⁷ Both are instructive in their study of colonialism and the natural environment, and of the ways in which these themes – and their implications – are still being experienced well beyond the postwar period.

Luby's and Leddy's focus on larger bodies of water in their work is reflective of much environmental history related to water, in that it has typically centred on large, well-known, and socially and culturally significant waterbodies. Jennifer Bonnell, for example, has shown how Toronto's Don River valley shaped – and was shaped by – the city and its own visions for itself, serving at turns as a potential space for settler farmland, an industrial dumping ground, a thoroughfare for motor-vehicle traffic, and a bucolic urban escape.¹¹⁸ Daniel Macfarlane's recent study of Niagara Falls demonstrates how the Falls have always been “a tangled blend of nature and culture,” manipulated and engineered to the point that can even be described as now “fake” and “quite *unnatural*.”¹¹⁹ Similar manipulative efforts were at play in the “drying” of the Mississippi River Valley's massive wetlands, which, argues Christopher Morris, was both an imaginative and material undertaking.¹²⁰ In the Manitoba context, Stunden Bower's work examines efforts to manipulate and drain prairie water, and also that water's resistance to behaving according to grid-based infrastructure.¹²¹

The focus on major rivers and lakes in histories of water means that much less has been written on smaller, seasonal, and seemingly minor waterbodies, such as the small creeks of the

¹¹⁷ Brittany Luby, *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020); Lianne C. Leddy, *Serpent River Resurgence: Confronting Uranium Mining at Elliot Lake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

¹¹⁸ Jennifer L. Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), xxi, xxiv, xvii.

¹¹⁹ Daniel Macfarlane, *Fixing Niagara Falls: Environment, Energy, and Engineers at the World's Most Famous Waterfall* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020), 3, 9.

¹²⁰ Christopher Morris, *The Big Muddy: And Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

¹²¹ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*.

West Reserve that are of interest in this dissertation. Certainly, wetlands and wetland loss are of interest to environmental historians (as Morris' work demonstrates), but even then, the West Reserve area was not a historically large and significant marsh like the "Great Marsh" (or "Boyne Marsh") just to the north. Stunden Bower, though, does pay some attention to the specific West Reserve region, outlining the drainage efforts undertaken there (along with the uneven privileges and experiences of drainage encountered by Mennonites on one hand, and First Nations on the other). My specific geographical focus pays similar attention to surface water and drainage, but considers these themes in relation to Mennonite narrations of their presence on this particular portion of a broader Indigenous homeland.

In different ways, these historians of water show the extent to which settler, state, and private-enterprise interests massively altered wet landscapes and waterways for a variety of economic and social ends, often with profound environmental implications. Additionally, though, as Stunden Bower shows, wet environments did not always conform to the designs of those who sought to manipulate them. I make similar arguments in this dissertation, applying the insights of these scholars to a microregion of small, fluctuating, and numerous creeks and streams. In doing so, I help to help fill a gap in historical research on water and its place in human settlement and colonialism, by focusing not on a large river, wetland, or lake, but on the overlooked and seemingly insignificant streams of the West Reserve.

The interrelatedness of culture and nature, explicated in many of the works mentioned above, also shapes the way in which physical places and environments – as well as the human settlements within them – are remembered and commemorated. As James Opp and John C. Walsh remark, places and environments in Canada have been understood and remembered both through commemorations of the "official" variety – "celebrations, museums, and memorial acts"

– and through “Inscriptions...situated in oral stories, photographs, and the landscape itself.”¹²²

Laurajane Smith has made similar observations, analyzing heritage not as “a thing” such as a place or building, but as “the present-day cultural processes and activities that are undertaken at or around them, and of which they become a part.”¹²³ In a Canadian context, William Turkel examines physical places and the historical “traces” in and on them as archives in and of themselves, archives through which different and sometimes contested meanings are developed.¹²⁴

Closer to the prairie context of “Land, Water, and Memory,” scholars like Frances Swyripa and Molly Rozum detail how settler knowledge and sensory experience of their new prairie homes both established new meanings of those landscapes,¹²⁵ and also fostered settler claims to land.¹²⁶ Rozum, in particular, interrogates settler claims to indigeneity through attachments to landscape. In doing so, she follows Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie’s characterization of such claims to land as acts of “settler emplacement” emerging from “the desire of settlers to resolve the experience of dis-location implicit in living on stolen land.”¹²⁷ Rozum’s work is also important for my research in its treatment of the North American grasslands and Canadian prairies as part of a single, border-spanning environmental context.¹²⁸

¹²² John C. Walsh and James Opp, eds., *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 9.

¹²³ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2, 3.

¹²⁴ William J. Turkel, *The Archive of Place: Unearthing the Pasts of the Chilcotin Plateau* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), xix, xxiv, xxiii.

¹²⁵ Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies*, 5 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010).

¹²⁶ Molly P. Rozum, *Grasslands Grown: Creating Place on the U.S. Northern Plains and Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021), 18.

¹²⁷ Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 97-99.

¹²⁸ Rozum, *Grasslands Grown*, 6, 8-9.

A transborder lens is important when talking about a settlement block like the West Reserve, given its location literally along the Canada-U.S. border. Scholars of Metis history in particular are extremely important in this regard, as they contextualize the land in which the West Reserve was allocated as an Indigenous homeland in which Metis trade, kinship, and lifeways were central elements. Michel Hogue has shown the extent to which Metis “claims of nationhood and presence on the Plains predated or were coterminous with those of Canada or the United States,” and how Metis “mobility meant that they inhabited both countries.”¹²⁹ As Brenda Macdougall and Nicole St-Onge have put it, the Metis’ “political, economic, and social space” that was “created because of, as well as in spite of, the once-porous 49th parallel” became “trapped by a foreign intellectualization of space and place” through the hardening of nation-state-based categories of belonging on both sides of the border.¹³⁰ The fact that newly-arrived West Reserve Mennonites stayed in buildings previously used by the Boundary Commission at Fort Dufferin tangibly illustrates the connections between Manitoba Mennonite arrival and the solidification of nation-state categories through border-making.

The ever-expanding historical field of borderland studies has also produced work that reconsiders the way Indigenous and national histories have typically been written. As David G. McCrady’s study of the Dakota in the nineteenth century argues, such a perspective can give a more nuanced picture of the historical Indigenous realities of life on lands demarcated by an international boundary.¹³¹ Sheila McManus demonstrates the role of the 49th parallel in both Canada’s and the United States’ attempts at nation-making in the west, pointing to the related

¹²⁹ Michel Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 229.

¹³⁰ Brenda Macdougall and Nicole St-Onge, “Metis in the Borderlands of the Northern Plains in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies* (London: Routledge, 2017), 258.

¹³¹ David G. McCrady, *Living with Strangers: The Nineteenth-Century Sioux and the Canadian-American Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 6, 114.

gendered and racist means through which Indigenous peoples were displaced, as well as the permeability and contestability of racial and gendered categories in the borderlands.¹³² As she puts it, the border was simultaneously a site of nation-“making and unmaking.”¹³³ Historical nation-making has had contemporary scholarly implications as well: as historian Jean M. O’Brien argues, Indigenous histories and historical narratives have often been implicitly dismissed as less legitimate or authoritative compared with histories oriented toward nation-state formation.¹³⁴

As O’Brien’s argument intimates, Indigenous scholarship is crucial to understanding both the histories of Indigenous peoples and also the conventional histories of Indigenous-settler relations which, as Emma Laroque remarks, are “rooted in the colonizer/colonized complex.” According to Laroque, while many “historical and literary texts” have “dehumanize[d]” Indigenous peoples, there is always an Indigenous “contrapuntal reply to Canada’s colonial constructs.”¹³⁵ Such replies are evident in the work of many Indigenous scholars, such as historian Susan M. Hill’s work on the Grand River Haudenosaunee, which centres longstanding Haudenosaunee histories and epistemologies in discussing interactions with increasingly forceful colonial and governmental entities.¹³⁶ The powerful re-orienting qualities of such research are also evident in Innes’ study of Cowessess First Nation. In showing the centrality of kinship in Cowessess’ history, Innes demonstrates how scholars have often missed or misinterpreted the profound multicultural nature of that community. Scholars’ focus on categorical distinctions

¹³² McManus, *The Line Which Separates*, xi-xii, xviii, 181-182.

¹³³ McManus, *The Line Which Separates*, xi-xii.

¹³⁴ Jean M. O’Brien, “Historical Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies: Touching the Past, Looking to the Future,” in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies* (London: Routledge, 2017), 15-16.

¹³⁵ Emma LaRocque, *When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850-1990* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 3.

¹³⁶ Susan M. Hill, *The Clay We Are Made of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017).

between Indigenous groups has elided the ways in which Nehiyaw Pwat groups were interrelated.¹³⁷ In some ways, then, he echoes Chris Andersen's argument against the idea of "mixedness" as the defining factor of Metis identity, as, in Andersen's words, "*all* Indigenous peoples are mixed."¹³⁸ For Andersen, scholarly fixations on Metis hybridity not only discount the profound multicultural nature of Indigenous Peoples, but also diminish the reality of "Metis" as a political category of peoplehood and nationhood. Michael Witgen also aims to re-orient common historical ideas of North America in his study of the North American interior as an "autonomous Native social world" and not as an unsettled wilderness as so many non-Indigenous narrations claim.¹³⁹

Luby's study of the Anishinaabeg of Treaty 3 demonstrates that Indigenous responses to colonial impositions were diverse, ranging from the content of everyday lived experiences, to more assertive, yet subtle, acts of resistance.¹⁴⁰ "Adaptation," she argues, encompassed "family strategies developed in response to environmental changes" by which Anishinaabe people continued "to subsist on and off reserve." On the other hand, "cooperation" entailed Anishinaabe "attempts to work with newcomers," while "passive resistance" characterized "non-violent expressions of discontent against federal and provincial legislation." These were not "public acts such as marches, sit-ins, or occupations," but "individual and family acts." Quoting Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Luby argues that, for the Anishinaabe, "presence is our weapon."¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Innes, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People*, 6-7, 69, 70-73.

¹³⁸ Chris Andersen, *"Métis": Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 5, 20, 91-92.

¹³⁹ Michael J. Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 20.

¹⁴⁰ Luby, *Dammed*, 13.

¹⁴¹ Luby, *Dammed*, 13. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 6, cited in Luby, *Dammed*, 13.

Luby's formulations are particularly useful in better situating and understanding instances of Indigenous presence and cross-cultural interactions within Mennonite West Reserve history.

All of the Indigenous scholars mentioned above demonstrate the historical realities of Indigenous sovereignty, complexity, and autonomy. Yet they also necessarily examine the disruptive and genocidal¹⁴² impacts of governmental policies and settler occupation across North America. The contributions of settler colonial studies and theory have been extremely important in framing these types of historical processes. Patrick Wolfe's now well-travelled work has been influential in how it frames settler colonialism – that is, not the development of settler colonies for the purpose of resource extraction and exploitation of Indigenous labour, but rather the “invasion” of settlers whose purpose is to stay and take the land. Settler colonialism, he argues, is not a one-and-done “event,” but a “structure” whose effects and implications continue to be felt today.¹⁴³ This structure, he states, is “premised on the elimination of native societies,”¹⁴⁴ which, argues Lorenzo Veracini, occurs in part through various forms of “transfer” that occur through a variety of discursive and physical means.¹⁴⁵

As useful and important as such theories have been to the study of Indigenous-settler relations, there remain some cautions, which I try my best to heed in the chapters that follow. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, for example, argue that non-Indigenous scholars, activists, and others who are interested in decolonization can become “entangled in resettlement, reoccupation,

¹⁴² For a discussion of the term “genocide” relative to the Canadian prairies, see Robert Alexander Innes, “Historians and Indigenous Genocide in Saskatchewan,” *Shekon Neechie: An Indigenous History Site*, June 21, 2018, <https://shekonnechie.ca/2018/06/21/historians-and-indigenous-genocide-in-saskatchewan/>.

¹⁴³ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (New York: Cassell, 1999), 1-2.

¹⁴⁴ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 39-58.

and reinhabitation that actually further[s] settler colonialism.”¹⁴⁶ As Corey Snelgrove, Rita Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel have put it, “decontextualized” or abstracted theories of settler colonialism “risk further eschewing Indigenous peoples and thereby reifying the stolen land [that settler colonialism] is founded upon.”¹⁴⁷ Some ways to mitigate such risks in research and analysis include attending to how settler colonialism has functioned not just at a broad and abstract level, but at fine-grained levels “across time and space.”¹⁴⁸ Further, it is crucial also to examine history for the ways in which settler colonialism has never been “inevitable,” but rather “conditioned and contingent.”¹⁴⁹ I try as much as possible in the ensuing chapters to take these reminders to heart.

Research: Positionality, Sources, and Methods

I come to this work with a certain level of attachment and investment. Though I live in Winnipeg, Manitoba, I was born and spent most of my growing-up years about 100 kilometres to the south in the small town of Altona, situated within the former West Reserve, and within an area of predominantly Mennonite settlement and presence. As a settler whose ancestors largely arrived to Manitoba in the migrations of the 1870s and 1880s, my attachment to, and familial history on, this specific piece of prairie is real, profound, and complicated. This is because that attachment is also tied to the settler anxieties attendant to living on stolen land, to paraphrase Tuck and McKenzie’s assertion.

Growing up where I did meant that I became increasingly cognizant of both the relatively monocultural geographic context in which I was raised, and also the extent to which Indigenous

¹⁴⁶ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1.

¹⁴⁷ Corey Snelgrove et al., “Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers, and Solidarity with Indigenous Nations,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 2 (2014), 26.

¹⁴⁸ Snelgrove et al., “Unsettling Settler Colonialism,” 26.

¹⁴⁹ Snelgrove et al., “Unsettling Settler Colonialism,” 26.

peoples were not part of that world, and indeed were largely seen – if not always explicitly then surely implicitly and subtly – as others, as outsiders. As my academic and professional life caused me to consider more and more the ironies and contradictions of these views, I found myself wanting to understand more deeply the place I am from and the implications of my, and my ancestors', presence there. "Land, Water, and Memory" is, among other things, an attempt at doing so, in order to better understand what it means to be a good neighbour and a citizen of Treaty 1 territory.¹⁵⁰ At the risk of according too much importance to a Ph.D. dissertation, this research is in part a response to LaRocque's assertion that "the responsibility to clean up colonial debris, whether in pop culture, historiography, or matters literary, lies first with the colonizer."¹⁵¹ I should also acknowledge that the way in which I am doing this – that is, through a work of historical study in an academic institution – has its limits, and is certainly no stand-in for other types of more relational and community-based work.

I researched a range of archival materials in addition to conducting oral interviews with Mennonite residents of the West Reserve who grew up along the region's creeks between the 1930s and 1970s. The project's narrow geographic scope allowed me to examine a wide range of records. The most significant of these included local newspapers (primarily the *Altona Echo*, renamed the *Red River Valley Echo* in 1955) in addition to a slew of land-related materials such as homestead files, land surveyor field books and township plans, land registers and patent

¹⁵⁰ In using the term "neighbour," I hope to connote not the "neighbour-to-neighbour" discourse employed by contemporary municipal and other non-Indigenous actors, which holds a "settler-colonial perspective...that has clear antecedents in liberal-economic notions of property, and that serves to conceal key aspects of Indigenous authority." Rather, I allude to the idea that "transformation is possible 'with a good mind that seeks friendship, embodies respect, and peace, and is committed to the strong bonds of covenantal relationship.'" See Janice Barry, "Being Neighbourly: Urban Reserves, Treaty Settlement Lands, and the Discursive Construction of Municipal—First Nation Relations," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 10, no. 5, 2019: 2, and Adrian Jacobs quoted in Steve Heinrichs and Esther Epp-Tiessen, eds., *Be It Resolved: Anabaptist & Partner Coalitions Advocate for Indigenous Justice* (Winnipeg: Mennonite Central Committee & Mennonite Church Canada, 2020), viii.

¹⁵¹ LaRocque, *When the Other Is Me*, 162.

records, and municipal records for the Rural Municipalities of Rhineland and Stanley, along with numerous digitized archival materials at Library and Archives Canada. Census and scrip records, paired with Metis genealogical scholarship, were also vital sources. As well, I reviewed various commemorative materials, Mennonite diaries, and Mennonite church and mission-work records. The significant body of published local histories for West Reserve towns, villages, and municipalities was a significant and important source.

Although I engage historical questions that relate to Indigenous peoples, the bulk of these sources have been of course created by non-Indigenous peoples, entities, organizations, and governments. In such archival materials, argues Dallas Hunt, “Indigenous peoples are often either absent, depicted as ciphers of the real individuals they are meant to represent, or presented as always already disappearing from the landscape.”¹⁵² Though this is true for many of the sources I consulted, two types in particular warrant further discussion: land records of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and published local histories from the 1970s and 1980s. Land-related records were created by federal and provincial governments to manage and administer the transfer of prairie Indigenous land to privately-owned agricultural property and have often been used in more contemporary times to document the history of that same process of settler-colonial transfer. As a substantial volume on writing and researching local history in Manitoba stated in 1981, for example, land records can be useful for the local historians “studying a building and want[ing] to know who has owned it over the years,” or “studying the life of one individual” and determining whether “they owned certain buildings or land...”¹⁵³

¹⁵² Dallas Hunt, “Nikîkîwân: Contesting Settler-Colonial Archives through Indigenous Oral History,” *Canadian Literature* 230, no. 231 (2016): 26.

¹⁵³ Robert A. Doyle, “Appendix 3: Land Records as a Source of Historical Information,” in *A Guide to the Study of Manitoba Local History*, by Gerald Friesen and Barry Potyondi (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1981), 136.

While utilizing these records provides useful historical information on settlers and settler communities, it is also important to note Eyford's observation that land records – in particular those of the Canadian Department of the Interior – “provide some of the most detailed and revealing documentation of settler colonialism in Western Canada.”¹⁵⁴ To put it another way, as Hunt does, state and settler archival sources provide a means to trace the “spatial” and “system[ic]” production of colonialism.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Michael Witgen points out how reading settler-and-state-created archival sources “without privileging [European] fantasies of discovery” can help us notice instances showing “the Native perspective of [the] ongoing colonial encounter.”¹⁵⁶ In discussing these types of records in the chapters that follow, I take cues from these scholars in my analysis, to hopefully find new or expanded historical insights of my geographical region of study, through the use of familiar and often well-worn sources.

Late-twentieth-century published local histories comprise an extremely interesting, rich, fickle, varied – in a word, complex – research source. Unsurprisingly, they often display, sometimes subtly or unconsciously, a “settler-triumphalist ideology.”¹⁵⁷ Yet Métis scholar Jade McDougall shows how they are also “storied space” in which, with careful reading, we might find “patterns of relating reinforcements of us/them hierarchies and inbuilt assumptions of settler ascendancy over Indigenous communities.”¹⁵⁸ Her deeply personal work does so by analyzing her own family's local history books through the lens of Metis “wāhkōhtowin (kinship, or being in relation).”¹⁵⁹ My work, the body of local histories I examine, and my relationship to those

¹⁵⁴ Ryan Eyford, “Transferred, Preserved, and Destroyed: The Dominion Lands Branch's Manitoba Files,” *Archivaria* 95 (2023): 99.

¹⁵⁵ Hunt, “Nikikiwān,” 26.

¹⁵⁶ Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 19.

¹⁵⁷ Jade McDougall, “I Can Tell You Now: Métis Kinship Narratives in Community History Volumes” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Saskatchewan, 2023), 71.

¹⁵⁸ McDougall, “I Can Tell You Now,” 102.

¹⁵⁹ McDougall, “I Can Tell You Now,” ii.

publications are all very different than McDougall's. However, like McDougall, I try and attend to these sources not only for their assertions of settler ascendancy but also for their rare glimmers of Indigenous presence, and of water stories that stick out that stick out against the grain of settler 'improvement.' Importantly, both the glimmers and their rarity are noteworthy.

Further, the local West Reserve histories I consulted for this work complicate the way historians typically thinking about 'primary' and 'secondary' sources ('primary' being what we usually think of as typical 'historical' sources, such as archival records, and 'secondary' being the scholarly literature produced within a field that has analyzed such records). Depending on a range of factors, local histories can sometimes be read as one or the other, or as both at once. For example, on one hand they can engage in the type of strong research and interpretive, analytical commentary often associated with secondary literature; on the other hand, they are full of diary excerpts, transcribed oral histories, church records, village plans, and homestead documents – what we typically refer to as 'primary' material. Some are based on rigorous research and written in a scholarly style; others compile stories and remembrances from area residents; some do both. Often they were overseen by a committee as one component of several commemorative events. Some were written collaboratively, and others by a single author.

Some of these sources reflect what Royden Loewen has referred to as the 1970s' "surge of scholarship" in Mennonite history characterized by "the microstudy of village society."¹⁶⁰ Others resemble volumes of which Paul Voisey has remarked on as written by communities "for themselves," with no expectation that "anyone outside [the] community" would read them.¹⁶¹ Merle Massie describes the differences between the various types of such publications by

¹⁶⁰ Royden Loewen, "Introducing 2024: A Sesquicentennial Jubilee of the 1870s Mennonite Migration to Manitoba," *Heritage Posting*, no. 107 (2024): 5.

¹⁶¹ Paul Voisey, "Rural Local History and the Prairie West," *Prairie Forum* 10 (1985): 335.

distinguishing “community” histories – those written collaboratively with multiple contributors and authors, from “local histories” – often written by a single author in a more narrative, scholarly style.¹⁶² Certainly both types are evident in the within the body of West Reserve historical publications. More often than not, they were also undertaken as part of commemorative efforts around the anniversary of a town, village, or municipality. Often, too, notes Voisey, these publications were spurred by “The anniversary celebrations of Canada and the three prairie provinces in 1967, 1970, and 1980,” as governments encouraged local historical writing and commemoration, and often “provided funds for local history projects.”¹⁶³ As Swyripa notes, settler anniversaries, including Mennonite ones, often produced both “scholarly research and popular jubilee histories.” She also begins to get at the complex relationship between these types of commemorative histories and historiography when she comments on the link between “founding stories, major anniversaries of immigration and settlement, and the evolution of a historiographical tradition.”¹⁶⁴ Keeping these complexities and variations in mind, I approach these materials largely as ‘primary sources’ given how they reflect, and are indicative of, a particular late-twentieth-century era of Mennonite settler commemoration. In doing so, I follow Antoinette Burton’s critique of the “binary logic” that so often “segregates primary from secondary sources.”¹⁶⁵

I also apply a similarly critical eye to what constitutes archives, considering them not just as physical repositories of historical documents, but more broadly as a “set of knowledges in and

¹⁶² Merle Massie, *Forest Prairie Edge: Place History in Saskatchewan* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014), 20-21.

¹⁶³ Voisey, “Rural Local History,” 334.

¹⁶⁴ Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 96.

¹⁶⁵ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 26.

of themselves.”¹⁶⁶ Diana Taylor teases out this idea further by contrasting the “archive” with the “repertoire.” Whereas the archive – though not unmediated nor static and unchanging – is typically a physical place housing a range of collected and curated physical media, the repertoire “enacts embodied memory,” encompassing “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing.”¹⁶⁷ Thinking of the wide range of West Reserve commemorative initiatives that occurred during the twentieth century, I would add to this list the erecting of monuments (and the large events – replete with various speeches and musical performances – put on for the unveiling of such monuments), historically-themed performances at fairs and community events, parades, settlement anniversary events and village homecomings, and even the collaborative community-based efforts involved in publishing local history books. All of these constitute, in a way, a “transmission” and “production” of historical knowledge, in which people participate by “being part of the transmission.”¹⁶⁸ As I argue in the following pages, the density and thickness of these various acts, and the repeated themes they communicated, over time helped define the history of the region as a predominantly settler story.

Along with archival and document-based research, I conducted oral interviews with seven people, Mennonite residents of the region who grew up or lived along any of the small creeks and waterways in the area, and whose childhood and adolescent years fell between the 1930s and 1970s. Most of the participants could trace their family histories in the West Reserve region to the late nineteenth century, meaning that some could recall snippets of stories from that era, passed down from previous generations. Most people’s recollections, though, centered on a

¹⁶⁶ Melissa Adams Campbell, Ashley Glassburn Falzetti, and Courtney Rivard, “Introduction: Indigeneity and the Work of Settler Archives,” *settler colonial studies* 5, no. 2 (2015): 111.

¹⁶⁷ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.

broadly-defined mid-nineteenth century. There was considerable variety in participants' backgrounds and life trajectories. Most grew up farming, and while some continued this work into adulthood, others pursued different professional paths, living in different locations throughout their lives, eventually settling down in the general region where they grew up. The key commonality between participants was that they lived and grew up along creeks in the region, from the Marais River in the eastern portion of the former reserve, to Buffalo Creek in the central-eastern area, and a smaller seasonal creek in the southwest corner near the Canada-U.S. boundary.

Part of the reason for including oral interviews was to supplement and broaden the written accounts of Mennonite West Reserve settlement. Written accounts rarely contain stories of interactions with Indigenous people, contributing to a sense that perhaps there *were* no proximities or interactions with Metis or First Nations people in that region. Yet, as a Mennonite person with continuing ties to the area, I would often hear, in conversations and discussions with people, stories that belied this seeming absence or silence in the bulk of the written record, and I was interested to see if oral histories might help illuminate this unwritten history. Similarly, the stories of creek life that I had heard from within my own family seemed to speak to another little-written-about side of Mennonite presence in the region – namely, the existence and experience of its many riparian microenvironments. Therefore, I was curious, again, if oral interviews might shed more light on these histories.

After receiving approval from the University of Manitoba's Joint Faculty Research Ethics Board to conduct interviews, I proceeded with the process. I conducted interviews in a semi-structured format, as opposed to a strict and linear structure of questions, which allowed for a more informal and conversational approach, while still allowing for certain topics and questions

to be covered, and making room for participants to expand on answers.¹⁶⁹ Given my personal and familial connections to the West Reserve region, I was cognizant of the ways in which oral histories are “not simply...sources to be mined for facts (data), but rather...complex social constructs that are inherently subjective and thus offer multiple layers of meaning.”¹⁷⁰ Indeed, in the process of conducting interviews, I became more and more aware that while I was in the role of interviewer and researcher, I was also discovering and contemplating aspects of *my own* history; even though participants were sharing their own experiences and memories, in some broad and general ways, the stories they shared were connected to my own experiences and background as a Mennonite settler from the same region.

Further, I was also sensitive to the fact that, though I am an ‘insider’ to the general Mennonite community of the West Reserve, I am also an ‘outsider. I visit frequently and live an hour-and-a-half away by car, but I don’t actually live there, and have not lived there permanently for over twenty years. The interviews sometimes illuminated both my insider and outsider positions simultaneously: while conversations often revealed minute and detailed experiences that I could only have understood by living in region, they also revealed personal and familial connections that I hadn’t even been aware of. For example, interviewees often knew who I was even if I didn’t know them, and in other cases a connection could be made after a short discussion of where I grew up and who my family is. In addition, though I was in one sense inhabiting the role of ‘scholarly researcher,’ in another sense I was often interviewing people who were themselves experts in the detailed, deep, and lived understandings of Mennonite familial, cultural, social, and environmental history in the region.

¹⁶⁹ David E. Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World*, 2nd. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 373.

¹⁷⁰ Alexander Freund, “Oral History as Process-Generated Data,” in *The Canadian Oral History Reader*, ed. Kristina Llewellyn et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 218.

As a researcher, engaging with the layers of meaning comprising oral histories also entails the “need to understand [the] active process through which a narrator creates meaningful stories about [the] past.”¹⁷¹ Analysis of the interviews, then, sometimes meant critically interrogating them as I did numerous written and archival sources, for the ways in which they upheld, or dovetailed with, certain myths or narratives about West Reserve Mennonites and Indigenous peoples. At the same time, though, the insights of interviewees’ memories sometimes contributed to this interrogative work, revealing cross-cultural interactions and environmental experiences not fully described in written and commemorative sources. Throughout this component of the project, then, I was constantly seeking to balance a respectful approach to the community in which I was both insider and outsider, with a critical approach that probed and questioned some of the participants’ memories.¹⁷²

Just as most of the archival materials consulted for this project came from settler or state sources, so too were interviews conducted with only non-Indigenous participants. This is reflective of how cross-cultural relationships – and trust – can take a long time to be built between researchers and Indigenous communities, and how trying to ‘fit’ such relationship-building into the temporal parameters of an academic research project can risk establishing a hierarchical and potentially exploitative structure between “studied” and “studier.”¹⁷³ In wrestling with these considerations, and with my work’s limitations, I take methodological cues from settler scholars who demonstrate how research that is based in Indigenous communities can nevertheless interpret and critique settler colonial sources, in combination with a reliance on

¹⁷¹ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, “Interpreting Memories,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2015), 297.

¹⁷² Susie Fisher discusses a similar approach in her own work on Mennonites and the West Reserve, commenting on how to be “present...in the history I was [also] aiming to revise.” Fisher, “Seeds from the Steppe,” 27-29.

¹⁷³ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 17.

“Indigenous voices and scholarly critiques,” to interrogate the impact of state and settler forces on Indigenous communities.¹⁷⁴

Chapter Descriptions

The following chapters take a thematic rather than chronological approach, with each one centred on discussion and analysis of how a particular issue or theme existed and evolved over time. The first two chapters are concerned largely with the Mennonite settler narratives of the West Reserve area and how they were historically developed and entrenched. The following three chapters then seek to broaden and deepen these familiar and well-known elements of Mennonite West Reserve history in various ways. Chapter 1 is concerned with how the commemoration and writing of West Reserve Mennonite histories described, considered, and thought of the land and water of the West Reserve, and of settlers’ historical relationships to this environment. It notes several key themes and narratives that became entrenched as part of the region’s “settler common sense.”¹⁷⁵ Chapter 2 extends this analysis by considering the extent to which the Indigenous peoples and histories of the region were, or were not, engaged with in Mennonite commemorations, memories, and accounts of settler presence and history in the region.

The region’s watery qualities are the focus of Chapter 3, which considers the less-understood historical experiences of the West Reserve’s many creeks and seasonal floods. This includes a discussion of how the area has been historically mapped, and the ways in which other

¹⁷⁴ Erika Dyck and Maureen K. Lux, *Challenging Choices: Canada’s Population Control in the 1970s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), 73-74. Similarly, in his foundational research on Canada’s Indian Residential School system, John Milloy writes of his initial trepidation at writing such a history as “a non-Aboriginal person,” and his subsequent realization, in combing through state and settler archives, that this entire system was one “conceived, designed, and managed by non-Aboriginal people.” As Mary Jane McCallum writes in her commentary on Milloy’s work, this “was a story he could tell.” John Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, Anniversary edition, 2017), xlii; Mary Jane Logan McCallum, “Forward,” in Milloy, *A National Crime*, xxiii.

¹⁷⁵ Rifkin, “Settler Common Sense.”

cartographic understandings might help us better understand this creek-filled environment. In Chapter 4, I turn to the varied ways in which Indigenous people remained present in and around Mennonite settlement, from the colonists' initial arrival into the 1970s and early 1980s. This includes an examination of the various arenas in which settler-Indigenous interactions occurred, from creekbanks and farmyards to missionary work and beet-field labour. Finally, Chapter 5 centres on themes of Indigenous presence – and settler erasure of that presence – in its focus on the Metis people who lived and were present in and around the reserve's borderland location. More specifically, this chapter discusses the existence of several Metis land-owning families on homesteads just inside the boundaries of the Mennonite reserve from the late 1870s into the early 1900s, a topic that does not appear to have been addressed in any of the Mennonite historiography of the West Reserve.

The region under study in this dissertation been well-documented and analyzed by scholars of Mennonite history both amateur and professional. However, these chapters, when taken as a whole, demonstrate that there are histories of Mennonite presence in Manitoba, and the West Reserve in particular, that have yet to be fully told. One of the energizing factors underlying this work is my curiosity as to how, and why, stories of Indigenous presence and Indigenous-Mennonite interactions make up so little of the written common knowledge of the place I'm from. "Land, Water, and Memory" demonstrates that settler commemorative narratives played a part in defining the scope of common historical knowledge of the West Reserve, resulting in parameters that largely, though not exclusively, excluded Indigenous and cross-cultural histories. Further, these narrative and *discursive* changes to the meaning of this place occurred alongside profound *physical* changes to the region's environment. Attending to both the physical and the discursive, analyzing archival sources with a different perspective, and

examining more closely the reserve's many watery environments all help to tell a broader and deeper history of Mennonite presence in southern Manitoba, but more specifically in the West Reserve. Studying the region's history in this way also shows how Indigenous people continued to exist and interact with Mennonites in the area in spite of settler narratives that downplayed such occurrences, and gives further fine-grained detail to the environmental dynamism of a place largely understood today as primarily agricultural space.

A Note on Terminology

There are a few terms used and referred to repeatedly in this dissertation that deserve some description and explanation. First, 'West Reserve': though this term is used to describe the settler reserve allocated by Order-in-Council in 1876, in a way that differentiates it from the reserve east of the Red River, it was actually referred to by other names in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The East Reserve was sometimes termed the "Rat River Reserve" given its location east of the Rat-Red confluence, and the West Reserve was referred to alternately as the "Dufferin Reserve" or "Pembina Reserve."¹⁷⁶ Further, the West Reserve technically ceased to be a 'Mennonite-only' settlement block in 1898, when the land was officially made available to other settlers.¹⁷⁷ However, much of the land remained Mennonite-owned and the area retained its reputation as a 'Mennonite' region over the ensuing decades (further, the term 'West Reserve' has retained its descriptive significance in the historiography of Mennonite settlement). I use the terms 'West Reserve' or 'former West Reserve' alternately throughout the dissertation as useful,

¹⁷⁶ "Mennonites, Dufferin Reserve, Jacob Y. Shantz, Mennonites Loan, William Hespeler, Rat River Reserve (List)," 1892 1885, Library and Archives Canada, <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?idnumber=1471039&app=fonandcol&resource=folderlist&ecopy=>; Edwin D. Hoeppner, "Fort Dufferin, the Fortyninth, and the West Reserve 1875," *Heritage Posting* 28 (2000): 3, 7; Lawrence Klippenstein, "Manitoba Settlement and the Mennonite West Reserve," *Heritage Posting* 84 (2016): 6–7.

¹⁷⁷ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 129.

if complicated, descriptive terms connoting a specific geographic location. While that location is not officially or legally a ‘Mennonite’ settlement today, it is often still understood in such terms.

Secondly, the terms ‘Indigenous,’ ‘First Nations,’ and ‘Metis’: I use the term ‘Indigenous’ in its general sense that describes First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples in Canada, and use ‘First Nations’ when referring specifically to non-Metis and non-Inuit First Nations groups. When referring to Indigenous groups, “Peoples” refers to “the distinct societies of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada,” whereas I use “people” when referring to Indigenous people in a more general way “where their specific identity is not at issue.”¹⁷⁸

When using the term ‘Metis,’ I gratefully rely on the careful thought that both Brenda Macdougall and Chris Andersen have given to the use of the accented, or unaccented ‘e.’ Andersen has explained his use of the accented ‘é’ to “reflect the French, non-tribal influences in the creation of Métis nationhood,” while still acknowledging “the broad anglicization of twentieth-century Métis politics in Canada, as well as the role played by non-Francophone ‘half-breeds’ in the creation of Métis nationhood in the events in Red River of 1869-70.”¹⁷⁹ Macdougall’s work on nineteenth-century Metis kinship, on the other hand, posits that use of the accent “privileges their Frenchness over their Aboriginal heritages or alternative European lineages.”¹⁸⁰ Therefore, her study uses an unaccented ‘e’ “to denote mixed-descent people who created communities for themselves that were separate and distinct from both their Indian and European ancestors, regardless of their association with fur companies or European/Euro-Canadian paternity.” While remaining cognizant of both approaches, I use the unaccented term

¹⁷⁸ Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and About Indigenous Peoples* (Brush Education, 2018), 65.

¹⁷⁹ Andersen, *Métis*, 213.

¹⁸⁰ Brenda Macdougall, *One of the Family: Metis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 260.

here (unless accented within a quotation), as a way of acknowledging both French and English Metis Peoples, and specifically in light of the fact that the Metis who owned land in the West Reserve had both French and English names.

CHAPTER 1

“As if to say they belong:” Commemorations of Land, Water, and Mennonite Settlement

In an early draft of his 1955 book on Manitoba Mennonites, anthropologist E.K. Francis wrote of the “great interest that exists among Mennonites in books and publications referring to their history. They are outright enamoured with it, and can never hear enough of it.”¹ Around seven decades later, when Manitoba Mennonites were celebrating the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of their arrival in Manitoba, a Mennonite commentator wryly observed that “Mennonites are in the midst of a wave of commemorations. And we seem to love it.”² These observations capture something that becomes apparent when surveying the history of Mennonites in Manitoba: that is, once the commemoration and historicization of their arrival and settlement began, it kept going and never stopped, accruing a well-established body of repeated and familiar themes in the telling and retelling.

Available historical documents indicate that Manitoba Mennonites had begun formally commemorating their arrival to the Canadian prairies by the 1920s. As commemorations and local histories of the West Reserve developed over time, they exhibited many thematic throughlines and accumulated layers of continually repeated narratives. A few themes become noticeable about the depiction of the landscape and environment in which the West Reserve was situated. Firstly, the flat, prairie character of the West Reserve region was described with an emphasis on ideas of emptiness and barrenness at the time of Mennonite arrival. Historical comparisons with the East Reserve’s landscape also enhanced this characterization. Further, this emphasis on emptiness and featurelessness minimized the extent to which environmental features such as creeks defined, and were intrinsic to, the contoured landscape. Related to the

¹“In Search of Utopia - Draft Manuscript,” Emerich K. Francis Fonds, “Chapter XIII: The Structure of the Group,” 663, 1945-47, P7587/2, Archives of Manitoba.

² David Driedger, “The Past Is More Popular,” *Canadian Mennonite*, 2025.

theme of emptiness was the idea of the West Reserve as overlooked or ignored (given that earlier Euro-Canadian settlers chose to locate closer to timber sources), and the historical position of Mennonites as ideal settlers to colonize the region and fully realize its agricultural potential.

The realization of this potential was in turn tied to themes of land ‘improvement,’ conquest over nature, and national narratives associated with progress and prosperity, all of which were asserted both by Mennonites and government officials. Discourses of improvement and reclamation extended to the region’s small waterways, low wet prairie, and seasonal flooding, which were often viewed as an indicator of the land’s need for improvement and reclamation from deficiency.

Finally, the ways in which the reserve’s new patterns of land use were written about and remembered – in particular the new villages, planted trees, and drainage efforts – highlighted not only the resilience and unique contributions of this settler group, but also that group’s role as a ‘civilizing’ force on the prairies. This in turn rendered some stories of the West Reserve’s land and history more legible and apparent than others.

While Mennonite leader Gerhard Wiebe’s 1900 book, *Causes and History of the Emigration of the Mennonites from Russia to America*, may have been “the first book to be published” on the 1870s migration to North America,³ Mennonites’ first official celebration of their arrival and settlement to Manitoba came in 1924. That year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the 1874 arrival to the East Reserve (Mennonites would arrive to the West Reserve a year later), and was predominantly an ‘East Reserve’ celebration, taking place in the town of Steinbach, east of the Red River. Likewise, the sixtieth and seventieth-fifth-anniversary celebrations, held in 1934 and 1949 respectively, also took place in Steinbach and focused

³ Royden Loewen, “Introducing 2024:” 4.

primarily on East Reserve settlement, although West Reserve residents also attended these events.⁴ Overall, the speeches, reports, and activities at these occasions tended to focus on the still-tangible connections to those migrants who crossed the Atlantic in 1874, as several of them were still alive during these years, though both events emphasized the extent to which their numbers were declining. At the 1934 event, a moment of silence was held for those “original pioneers” who had passed away in the ensuing years.⁵ The intense hardships of the early years in Manitoba were emphasized at these ceremonies, as was the desire for younger generations to understand the extent of those difficulties.⁶

Though these formal anniversary events were held in the East Reserve, communities in the West Reserve also commemorated the 1870s migration during the mid-twentieth century, in several ways. 1944 marked the Rural Municipality of Rhineland’s sixtieth anniversary, and, as the R.M. comprised (as it does now) roughly half of what was previously the West Reserve, this was an opportunity also to celebrate the 1875 arrival of Mennonites to that area. As well, the annual Rhineland Agricultural Fair sometimes gave occasion to remember and commemorate the history of Mennonites in Manitoba and the West Reserve. In 1951, a cairn commemorating Mennonite settlement in the West Reserve was erected, capping an organizational and fundraising campaign initiated in 1948, and representing a significant early monument to Mennonite arrival in that region. One of the West Reserve region’s major newspapers, the *Altona / Red River Valley Echo*, celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 1956 and this was – for the newspaper at least – cause to remember the arrival and settlement of Mennonites in the region. In

⁴ *Das 60-jaehrige Jubilaem der Mennonitischen Ost-Reserve*, 1935, 3, 9, 10, CA MHC EMC-VI-3-6166-4, *Gedenkfeier der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Manitoba, Canada*, 1949, CA MHC EMC-VI-3-6166-6, 8, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁵ *Das 60-jaehrige Jubilaem der Mennonitischen Ost-Reserve*, 7, Mennonite Heritage Archives,.

⁶ Dietrich Neufeld, *Kanadische Mennoniten: Bunte Bilder Aus Dem 50 Jaehrigen Siedlerleben. Zum Jubiläumsjahr 1924* (Rundschau Publishing House, 1925); *Das 60-jaehrige Jubilaem der Mennonitischen Ost-Reserve*, 1, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

later years, Manitoba's centennial in 1970 saw celebrations throughout the West Reserve that emphasized the history of Mennonite presence there, and the 1974 centennial of Mennonite arrival was a major event celebrated by Mennonites throughout the province and in the West Reserve. Then, in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, town, village, and municipal histories were researched, written, and published, often correlating with an anniversary of a given settlement. The discussion below describes some of the key themes and narratives that emerged in West Reserve history-making over this broad span of time.

Constructing Emptiness

When Mennonites arrived in Manitoba, the land lying between the Red River and the Pembina Escarpment was tallgrass prairie and a small piece of the expansive North American grasslands.⁷ While this portion of southern Manitoba is often referred to as the Red River Valley, historian Shannon Stunden Bower contends that it is more accurately characterized as a "soup bowl" in which surface water sits for a long time and drains slowly.⁸ The differentiation between the West Reserve's grassland and its surrounding environments can be seen in maps of the region, which indeed often show a relatively featureless space where the West Reserve would be located, contrasted with increasing forested areas and marshes to the east, west, and north (see Figure 2, for example).

Today, the former West Reserve region remains almost uniformly flat, and Mennonite commemorators and writers over the years described this topography in evocative terms that painted a picture of the area as a barren, desolate, and empty wilderness when Mennonites first laid eyes on it. Imagining the prairie as experienced by settlers in the vicinity of Rosenfeld, a 1944 article published in the *Echo* wrote, "The loneliness of the long winter evenings was

⁷ Geoffrey A.J. Scott, "Manitoba's Ecoclimatic Regions," 45; Rozum, *Grasslands Grown*, xx-xxi.

⁸ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 4, 2, 12.

marked by the distant howl of the coyote, and this haunting, hopeless wail, re-echoed through the prairie wastes. It seemed the very spirit of the wilderness hovered over this untrodden and endless plain.”⁹ The conflation of the “howl of the coyote” with ideas of a lonely prairie wasteland reflects historical Canadian settler tendencies to, in the words of environmental scholar Stephanie Rutherford, view the howl of a wolf as “an unsettling sound in a place that ached for settledness.”¹⁰

This bleak characterization evoked the “emotional underpinnings” of migrant experiences of a new “local environment,”¹¹ and also corresponded to the messages conveyed in the early East Reserve anniversary events. For example, a fictional scripted drama written for the fiftieth anniversary in 1924 focused its early acts on a sick and dying Mennonite settler in the winter of 1875, and the associated feelings of disillusionment and despair brought on by the harsh prairie winter.¹² Adding to such themes, the above-mentioned 1944 newspaper piece also characterized the environment in which Mennonites found themselves as waste and wilderness, so empty as to be “untrodden.” The categorization of a place as “wilderness,” argues Jocelyn Thorpe, is “a product of history and relationships of power rather than simply of nature,”¹³ and the narrative constructions of the West Reserve’s landscapes certainly demonstrate this. However, whereas Thorpe has shown how supposedly “natural” spaces were imbued with European ideas of “savagery and wildness” (as were European perceptions of Indigenous people),¹⁴ settler narratives of the West Reserve drew more heavily on ideas of emptiness, barrenness, and featurelessness.

⁹ “Recollections from Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, June 28, 1944.

¹⁰ Stephanie Rutherford, *Villain, Vermin, Icon, Kin: Wolves and the Making of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022), 30.

¹¹ Fisher, “Seeds from the Steppe,” 13.

¹² Neufeld, *Kanadische Mennoniten*.

¹³ Thorpe, *Temagami’s Tangled Wild*, 4.

¹⁴ Thorpe, *Temagami’s Tangled Wild*, 91.

These themes were evident in the erecting and unveiling of the memorial cairn in 1951. This monument, located at the junction of a highway and a rural road near the town of Gretna, commemorated the arrival of Mennonites to the West Reserve in 1875. It also commemorated the historic 'Post Road,' an oxcart trail formalized by Mennonites who erected wooden posts along the route, and a key transportation route in the reserve's early years.¹⁵ Speaking at the unveiling, Manitoba's then-Lieutenant Governor R.F. McWilliams remarked that the "open plains" encountered by the "first settlers" were "only an open expanse, blotted occasionally by a group of trees, or a buffalo wallow."¹⁶ The *Mennonite Weekly Review*'s coverage of the event similarly recalled the "bald treeless plain."¹⁷ One year later, when Gretna hosted the Conference of Mennonites in Canada's national meeting, the *Echo* relied on similar themes in an outline of that town's history, stating that "70 years ago, the site of this village was a barren prairie, undistinguishable from the rest of the country."¹⁸

Recollections of Mennonites who migrated to the West Reserve as children portrayed the landscape in similar terms. In 1952, a newspaper story on David D. Klassen's memories of the "pioneer days" included the statement that, "when his parents arrived in 1875 they found nothing but swamp, prairie grass, and clouds of mosquitoes."¹⁹ Likewise, Jacob Fehr, who arrived to the West Reserve as a boy with his family in the late 1800s, remarked in 1942 that "the land was a barren wilderness."²⁰ Local history books from the region used similar terms to describe the environment. At the time of Mennonite arrival, according to one publication, the land "appeared

¹⁵ Conrad Stoesz, "The Post Road," in *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 81-90.

¹⁶ "3,000 Attend Memorial Dedication at Gretna," *Altona Echo*, June 20, 1951.

¹⁷ "Colorful Ceremony Marks Cairn Dedication," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, June 28, 1951.

¹⁸ "Gretna Founded in 1882 Has Unique History," *Altona Echo*, July 2, 1952.

¹⁹ "David D. Klassen Recalls Early Pioneer Days," *Altona Echo*, August 13, 1952.

²⁰ "Jakob Fehr (1859-1952) Journal," *Preservings* 16 (2000): 16.

very much as it had for years. The flat lowlands stretched for miles devoid of any trees.”²¹ A passage in another volume remarked that, in 1884, Gretna “still looked as if it were caught in the middle of a barren wasteland.”²² Other accounts alternately describe the region as “treeless prairie country,”²³ “barren prairielands,”²⁴ “virgin land”²⁵ and “virgin prairie soil.”²⁶ As the second-place entry in a 1950 student essay contest on the topic of Mennonite settlement in the West Reserve put it, “As far as the eye could see, the land lay covered with prairie grass; a few straggling trees here and there, and the cloudless sky composed the entire picture.”²⁷

It is worth considering how the West Reserve landscape itself may have more easily engendered narratives of emptiness, particularly in comparison with the East Reserve. Both settlement blocks were located in the Manitoba Lowlands, Stunden Bower’s “soup-bowl” bottom of the Red River Valley.²⁸ However, the East Reserve’s forested patches and rocky, marshier conditions resulted in numerous families eventually relocating to the comparatively flat and open grasslands (and more fertile soils) west of the Red River by the late 1870s and early 1880s.²⁹ These two environmentally distinct east and west poles of Manitoba Mennonite colonization have remained durable geographic elements of Mennonites’ historical memory in the province.³⁰ Geographer John H. Warkentin has noted that the two reserves could occupy positions of both dichotomy and commonality for Mennonites. In recalling his own growing-up years near the

²¹ Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Altona: The Story of a Prairie Town* (Altona: D.W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1982), 1-2.

²² F.G. Enns, *Gretna: Window on the Northwest* (Altona: D.W. Friesen & Sons, Ltd., 1987), 52.

²³ Halbstadt Centennial Committee, “The Spirit of ’70: Reunion,” 1970, Manitoba Local Histories, UM Digital Collections, https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3Amanitoba_books_1.

²⁴ Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal, 1880-1980* (Altona: D.W. Friesen & Sons, Ltd., 1982), 28.

²⁵ Irene Friesen Petkau and Peter A. Petkau, *Blumenfeld: Where Land and People Meet* (Winkler: Blumenfeld Historical Committee, 1981), 137.

²⁶ Peter D. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community* (Altona: Reinland Centennial Committee, 1976), 145.

²⁷ “Cairn Committee Announces Essay Competition Results,” *Altona Echo*, July 5, 1950.

²⁸ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 5-6.

²⁹ Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 219.

³⁰ John H. Warkentin, “Through the Looking Glass: ‘Ditsied/Jantsied’ and the Geographical Imagination,” *Preservings*, no. 47 (2023): 47.

West Reserve, he remarks that, “All I knew of the [East Reserve]...was that in contrast to our naturally treeless landscape, it was where prairie and woodland met, and it was populated by Low German-speaking Mennonites, like us.”³¹

The distinctly different contexts of these two settler reserves has also resulted in some differences in their more recent historiographies. The more forested East Reserve was close to Metis communities such as Pointe de Chênes (present-day Ste. Anne), to Metis river lots along the Red River, and to land initially designated “Half-breed Lands” under the 1870 Manitoba Act (see Figure 2), which has produced a stronger Mennonite sense and awareness of Indigenous presence there. Indeed, most of the scholarship on Indigenous-Mennonite encounters in southern Manitoba has focused on the East Reserve area. This has included topics such as land conflicts between Metis and Mennonites,³² the extent to which Mennonites were aware of Metis presence in region,³³ and the East Reserve within the context of the Manitoba Act and Metis land dispersals.³⁴ The comparative dearth of similar research on the West Reserve would seem to confirm the narrative of that location as having become, as one local history put it, merely “an area to pass through” by the 1860s,³⁵ and empty both in terms of landscape features and people.

Desirable Immigrants and Undesirable Land

Connected to this perceived emptiness was the fact that earlier European settlers in the immediate West Reserve region had chosen to locate closer to the forested areas and waterways on the fringes of the reserve, rather than the more open grassland at its centre.³⁶ Historian Shelisa Klassen has noted how Mennonite settlement in the reserve’s prairie portions was held up as a

³¹ Warkentin, “Through the Looking Glass,” 47.

³² Giesbrecht, “Metis, Mennonites, and the ‘Unsettled Prairie.’”

³³ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland.”

³⁴ Gerhard J. Ens, “The Manitoba Act, the Metis, and the Mennonites: A Tale of Two Reserves,” *Preservings*, no. 36 (2016): 4–11.

³⁵ Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, 2.

³⁶ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 32–33.

“lesson for current settlers,” with West Reserve Mennonites “praised as extraordinary immigrants.”³⁷ In 1881 Ontarian J.F. Galbraith, writing under the pseudonym “Jeff Gee,” wrote a pamphlet on settlement in Manitoba that implied the same. Gee noted that, in 1875, the few English settlers near the wooded Pembina Hills hoped that, “in the course of fifteen or twenty years,” the reserve’s prairie portions “would become settled, notwithstanding the absence of timber.”³⁸ That same summer, “a long line of camp fires, extending for miles and miles, announced to the lonely settlers that six thousand Mennonites had located on seventeen townships.”³⁹ Gee went on to remark that the Mennonites’ prairie farms were, by 1879, “as hard to get,” and “as valuable as our much vaunted timber claims along the mountain.”⁴⁰ As a result, “west a hundred miles to Turtle Mountain rolls the tide of immigration.”⁴¹

In later years, Gee’s observations of the West Reserve became well-used passages in highlighting Mennonites as exceptional and the right type to settle the flat, open, and previously undesirable prairie. An early academic history of the Mennonites in North America, published in 1927, quoted Gee’s observations verbatim,⁴² as did several Mennonite commemorative sources around a century later. Blumenfeld’s local history book mentioned it,⁴³ as did a substantial book published in part to commemorate the centennial of Mennonite arrival to Manitoba.⁴⁴ The village of Reinland’s history book made heavy use of the evocative ‘campfires’ imagery, commenting that, in the summer of 1875, “a strange caravan started wending its way westward...Men, women

³⁷ Klassen, “‘Heroes of a Flat Country,’” 178.

³⁸ Jeff Gee, *A Sketch of Both Sides of Manitoba, Perpetrated by Jeff Gee, Being a Narrative of Seven Years’ Varied Experiences in the Prairie Province of the Dominion of Canada: Something Fresh and Interesting on the Subject* (Nelsonville: Manitoba Mountaineer Book and Job Printing Establishment, 1881), 107.

³⁹ Gee, *A Sketch of Both Sides*, 107.

⁴⁰ Gee, *A Sketch of Both Sides*, 107.

⁴¹ Gee, *A Sketch of Both Sides*, 107.

⁴² C. Henry Smith, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites: An Episode in the Settling of the Last Frontier, 1874-1884* (Berne: Mennonite Book Concern, 1927), 189.

⁴³ Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 20.

⁴⁴ Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 17.

and children in unmistakable European garb...were moving across the plains towards the regions beneath the Pembina Hills.” Then, “rows of campfires” appeared and “flickered slowly in the gathering prairie dusk,” the initial precursors to the village of Reinland.⁴⁵

In several commemorative descriptions, then, these new campfires rhetorically signalled a wave of permanent settler presence to a region bypassed by previous Canadian and European settlers. Twentieth-century Mennonite sources often highlighted the West Reserve landscape as ‘overlooked.’ Further, in the context of a nation “very anxious to populate the newly acquired province”⁴⁶ of Manitoba, Mennonites were sometimes typified as the historical actors who could best settle and ‘break’ the land, thereby meeting the nation’s need for colonization. A 1949 newspaper article on the seventy-fifth anniversary of Mennonite arrival spoke of the prairie land as “Not inviting,” evidenced by those “other immigrants – English, Scottish, Irish and French – [who] had passed over the fertile plain.”⁴⁷ In another recollection, the land between the Red River and Pembina Hills was, to the Ontario settlers living in the region prior to 1875, “the most undesirable land imaginable – as far as they were concerned it was truly the land nobody wanted.”⁴⁸ The 1951 inscription of the aforementioned cairn memorialized this as well, stating that Mennonite settlers “braved the wild treeless plains shunned by other immigrants,” and Blumenfeld’s village history remarked that “the Ontario settlers realized their mistake in bypassing the barren low-lands only after the Mennonites had demonstrated the land’s value.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Zacharias, *Reinland*, “Introduction.”

⁴⁶ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 2.

⁴⁷ “Seventy-Five Years of Settlement,” *Altona Echo*, June 15, 1949.

⁴⁸ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 42.

⁴⁹ “Program: Unveiling of Memorial Monument Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of Settlement and Progress in Southern Manitoba, 1875-1950,” CA MHC EMC-V-6135-167, Mennonite Heritage Archives; Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 132.

The Mennonites, the book went on, “saw a future in the bald prairies which had been avoided by the British settlers from Ontario.”⁵⁰

Contrasted with other settlers who opted for locations nearer to wood and water, Mennonites were “not intimidated by the treeless plain,”⁵¹ and “converted the open prairie into a thriving settlement.”⁵² As one centennial church history put it years later, the Dominion government “desired...reputable farmers,” and after Mennonite arrival to the West Reserve in 1875, “The bare prairie west of the Red River, which had been avoided by other settlers, was suddenly alive with activity.” The book went on to state that, “in a short time” these settlers “made the prairie bloom.”⁵³ In the context of barren and empty land that had not yet seen permanent European settlement, repeated referrals to Mennonites as the ones willing and able to colonize a ‘forgotten’ area serve as a powerful example of what Anishinaabe historian Jean O’Brien has called “firsting,” a process through which settler societies are implicitly established as a “first social order.”⁵⁴

It was certainly true that the West Reserve lacked both significant forested areas and large bodies of water. The absence of any significant timber stands and waterbodies, however, was often paired with narratives of the region’s emptiness and of Mennonites ‘stepping in’ to an as-yet ‘unsettled’ patch of prairie. This was true of the first scholarly studies of Manitoba Mennonites in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. C. Henry Smith’s 1927 book, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites: An Episode in the Settling of the Last Frontier, 1874-1884*, for example, remarked that the West Reserve’s prairie was, prior to Mennonite arrival, “still virgin

⁵⁰ Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 129.

⁵¹ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 5.

⁵² Enns, *Gretna*, 5.

⁵³ William Neufeld, *From Faith to Faith: The History of the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Church* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1989), 13, 14.

⁵⁴ Jean M. O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 6.

soil, entirely uninhabited, if you exclude the prairie hen, the muskrat, and their relatives,” with no settler yet having “had the courage to settle in open spaces, far from fuel and bush.” He continued that the Mennonites “were the first settlers in Canada to prove that it was just as possible to establish a home on the open prairie as it was in or near a wooded landscape,” and that this was “a contribution for which history will forever owe recognition to the Mennonites.”⁵⁵

In a historical survey of Manitoba written in 1928, Margaret McWilliams offered a similar comment on West Reserve Mennonites, remarking that they were “the first settlers to demonstrate that it was possible to live and farm well on the open treeless prairie.”⁵⁶ Several decades later, E.K. Francis’ anthropological study used similar language, stating that “the West Reserve...was really the first permanent agricultural settlement ever established in the open prairies of Western Canada without direct access to a major body or current of water.”⁵⁷ Francis also noted that nineteenth-century officials characterized West Reserve Mennonites in similar terms, with Lady Dufferin writing of the vice-regal visit in 1877 that Mennonites could “settle in a woodless places which no other people will do.”⁵⁸

These early scholarly reflections formed the basis of one of the more repeated themes that subsequent commemorations of West Reserve settlement would pick up on and emphasize. The proceedings of the 1934 sixtieth anniversary event included an article written in the *Steinbach Post* written by G.G. Kornelsen, who quoted heavily from Smith, including Smith's comment on West Reserve Mennonites as the “first settlers” to live and settle on the “open prairie” without access to wood.⁵⁹ A dramatic “panorama” display and performance on Mennonite settlement,

⁵⁵ Smith, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites*, 188.

⁵⁶ Margaret McWilliams, *Manitoba Milestones* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1928), 155.

⁵⁷ E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955), 62.

⁵⁸ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 79.

⁵⁹ *Das 60-jaehrige Jubilaeum der Mennonitischen Ost-Reserve*, 42-43, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

presented at the 1941 Rhineland Agricultural Society's fair, likewise built on this theme: after a musical performance of "Home on the Range," a vignette on the hardships experienced by initial settlers referred to McWilliams' characterization of Mennonites as "the first to demonstrate it was possible to live and farm" on the "open prairie."⁶⁰ This event was hugely popular, requiring a second performance (attended by 250 people) to accommodate all the spectators.⁶¹

Several years later, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of Mennonite arrival to Manitoba, a "Progress Edition" of the *Echo* contained "A Tribute to Our Mennonite Pioneers," which included the same quote from McWilliams.⁶² Further, Francis' remark on Mennonite settlement without access to water was quoted in Reinland's local history in 1976.⁶³ Similarly, the town of Winkler's 1973 history book opened with the McWilliams quote, continuing on to state that, "Mennonite successes on the treeless plain between the Red River and the Pembina Hills whetted the appetites of the Ontario settlers in 1879 and they began to arrive here in ever increasing numbers."⁶⁴ In this instance, the West Reserve was not only a location for Mennonites to settle, but also an accelerator of the prairies' ongoing and westward colonization.

Mennonites' ability to colonize a region with little to no timber on it was dependent on their ability to procure timber from elsewhere. Two early sources of wood were the Pembina River in Dakota Territory to the south – Mennonites would purchase some timber lots along that river to supply the West Reserve⁶⁵ – and the Pembina Hills to the west. However, the Roseau River, which flows into the Red River roughly twelve to fifteen kilometres from the West

⁶⁰ "A Panorama of the Mennonite Settlement in Manitoba 1874-1941," *Altona Echo*, September 17, 1941.

⁶¹ "What's Happening Around Town," *Altona Echo*, October 4, 1941.

⁶² "A Tribute to Our Mennonite Pioneers," *Altona Echo*, September 7, 1949.

⁶³ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 44.

⁶⁴ Brown, *A History of the Town of Winkler*, 1.

⁶⁵ Bruce Wiebe, "The Timberlots of the Manitoba Mennonites in St. Joseph Township, Pembina County, Dakota Territory," *Preservings*, no. 27 (2007): 47–52.

Reserve's easternmost edges, was also considered briefly.⁶⁶ This was during a period when the Anishinaabeg there had been continually alerting the Dominion government's Department of Indian Affairs that "other settlers had been cutting wood on lands understood to be set aside for the Anishinaabeg."⁶⁷ There is no concrete evidence that the Roseau River was actually used by early West Reserve Mennonites for wood, although some vague statements refer to "firewood" being harvested "east of the Red River,"⁶⁸ or from "across the river" in the "Dominion City" and "Stuartburn" areas,⁶⁹ which are in the vicinity of the Roseau River reserve and certainly within the First Nation's traditional territories. Nevertheless, the government's consideration of the Roseau River as a Mennonite timber source, at a time when Indigenous People were advocating *against* the loss of trees there, does speak "to a broader Canadian settler-colonial context into which Mennonites were 'subtly and overtly incorporated.'"⁷⁰

The Wrong Type of Water

The idea that West Reserve Mennonites were the first to settle in a Western Canadian location "without direct access to a major body or current of water" also belies the fact that there was no shortage of water in this portion of the prairies – though it ebbed and flowed with the seasons – and underplays the significance of the streams and wetlands that characterized the region. As

⁶⁶ "Telegram, Donald Codd to J.S. Dennis," July 23, 1875, RG15-D-II-1, Volume 232, File 3129 Part 1, Microfilm Reel Number T-12180, Library and Archives Canada, quoted in Indian Claims Commission, *Indian Claims Commission Proceedings: Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation – Inquiry Medical Claim Aid* (Ottawa: Indian Claims Commission, 2001), 54.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual:' Surface Water in the West Reserve," *Preservings* 49 (2024): 47; "Report of Interview between the Honourable the Minister of the Interior, and Certain Indians Residing on the Reserve at Roseau River, at Winnipeg, October 1st, 1875," n.d., RG10, Volume 3598, File 1447, Microfilm Reel Number C-10104, Library and Archives Canada, quoted in Indian Claims Commission : *Indian Claims Commission Proceedings: Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation – Inquiry Medical Claim Aid* (Ottawa: Indian Claims Commission, 2001), 54.

⁶⁸ "A Historical Sketch of Altona," *Altona Echo*, Sep. 7, 1949. This 1949 story, including the statement about timber harvesting east of the Red River was, was reprinted in the *Echo* in 1970, for the special issue celebrating Manitoba's centennial anniversary, and Mennonite arrival to Manitoba.

⁶⁹ "Olga Hamm," "Personal Interview," Transcript, January 30, 2023, Neuberghal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

⁷⁰ Hildebrand, "Surface Water," 47; Neufeldt, "Settler Colonial Conscripts," 508.

Chapter 3 discusses in more depth, these small waterways were extremely important for early settlers, and as water sources even into the twentieth century. However, as the decades wore on, wells, creeks, dugouts, and rainwater capture became less and less sufficient to meet growing potable-water needs of the region. As a federal government official put it in 1954, “there’s always been lots of water in the district, but it’s never been here at exactly the right time.”⁷¹ The “right time,” along with the type and quantity of water desired, is of course a matter of perspective; certainly the agricultural development desired by state and settlers alike was not aided well enough by the natural hydrology of the West Reserve prairie. As a result, infrastructure projects were undertaken to develop larger water supplies, and efforts were made to find water sources from further and further afield.

In the western portion of the reserve, the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) constructed a dam across the Dead Horse Creek near the town of Morden, not far from a historical Indigenous crossing of the creek known as Pinancewaywining (meaning “on the way down to the ford”). This was also the name of a small trading outpost initiated there by Alexander Henry the Younger, who employed “Augustin Cadotte” and “Antoine Payet [or Paget],” along with five other men, to built the post in 1802.⁷² The post itself was positioned, in Henry’s words, along “the common route by which the Assiniboine River Indians pass over the mountain to hunt bear and buffalo on the E. side.”⁷³ The dam created a small reservoir, but it was not long until a larger supply was required for both industry and household use. As a result, the PFRA began work in 1952 to increase the size of the dam, creating a much larger lake covering

⁷¹ “6000 Attend Opening of Morden Dam Monday,” *Altona Echo*, July 28, 1954.

⁷² Alexander Henry and David Thompson, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry, Fur Trader of the Northwest Company and of David Thompson, Official Geographer and Explorer of the Same Company*, ed. Elliott Coues (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), 204; Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Historic Metis Settlements in Manitoba and Geographical Place Names,” Winnipeg, 2018, Louis Riel Institute, 49.

⁷³ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 119.

144 acres of land,⁷⁴ today known as Lake Minnewasta, which serves both as a water source and a recreation amenity.⁷⁵ As a newspaper remarked on the occasion of the dam's official ceremonial opening in 1954, "a wistful dream of the settlers is now a happy reality."⁷⁶

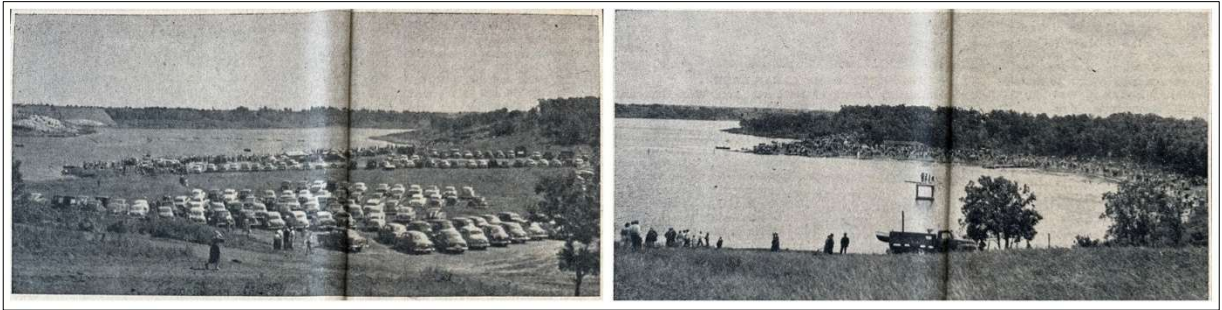


Figure 3: Lake Minnewasta. This comparison shows the lake level after its dam was raised fifteen feet in 1954.⁷⁷

The happiness would be short-lived. In the eastern portion of the former West Reserve, the search for a water source was increasingly dominating public discourse throughout the 1950s. By 1960, Morden was facing concerns about the capacity of its water supply, despite the dam having been raised in the early part of that decade (it would be raised again by over two metres in 1982).⁷⁸ Towns like Winkler and Plum Coulee were requesting access to Lake Minnewasta as a water source, though Winkler got its own source in 1964, via wells dug into an underground aquifer.⁷⁹ With an increasingly industrializing West Reserve region, though, the search continued, particularly in the eastern part of the former reserve. Just as timber had to be procured from locations outside the settlement area in the early years of Mennonite arrival, so too did local interests and government partners look further outside the region for a potable-water source to meet the region's growing needs in later years. In Altona, the Coop Vegetable Oils processing

⁷⁴ "Lake Minnewashta Now Full, Covers Total of 144 Acres," *Altona Echo*, June 30, 1954.

⁷⁵ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 259.

⁷⁶ "Lake Minnewashta Now Full, Covers Total of 144 Acres," *Altona Echo*.

⁷⁷ "Before...and After," *Altona Echo*, August 11, 1954; "6000 Attend Opening of Morden Dam Monday," *Altona Echo*, July 28, 1954.

⁷⁸ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 259; Landmark Planning & Design, *Morden Drought Plan* (2022), 7.

⁷⁹ Brown, *A History of the Town of Winkler*, 86-87.

plant petitioned the municipal council to engage the PFRA in studying the feasibility of damming the 'Buffalo Lake' portion of Buffalo Creek to create a lake, with local commentators speculating on both the recreational and industrial benefits of such a project throughout the early 1950s.⁸⁰

The Buffalo Lake dam project was deemed unfeasible,⁸¹ and local leaders along with government partners and consultants pursued a range of options throughout the 1950s. These included a study into damming the Pembina River west of Morden to create a lake roughly thirty miles long and one mile wide, which a newspaper editorial speculated could help turn the region "into another Niagara peninsula"⁸² (even in the early 1970s, the prospect of a Pembina River dam excited one local business owner who anticipated "progress even beyond our wildest dreams!").⁸³ The feasibility of piping water down from Winnipeg's Shoal Lake aqueduct roughly sixty miles to the north was also studied,⁸⁴ as was an initiative to access water from Lake of the Woods in the southeastern corner of the province. This ambitious project would have entailed the construction of a canal to divert water from roughly three miles north of Buffalo Point on Lake of the Woods into the Roseau River, which would continue its natural flow into the Red River. On the west side of the Red, the Plum River's natural eastward flow into the Red River – well

⁸⁰ Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965), May 25, 1949, Microfilm #382, Mennonite Heritage Archives; "Rosenfeld;" *Altona Echo*, June 8, 1949; "Of Things Local," *Altona Echo*, June 15, 1949; "Reservoir or Dam-Site for Buffalo Lake," *Altona Echo*, July 26, 1950; "Buffalo Creek Dam," *Altona Echo*, July 11, 1951.

⁸¹ "The Buffalo Lake Reservoir," *Altona Echo*, November 4, 1953.

⁸² "Pembina River Dam Proposal Expected to Get Wide Support," *Altona Echo*, February 9, 1955; "The Pembina River Dam," *Altona Echo*, February 16, 1955.

⁸³ Brown, *A History of the Town of Winkler*, 68.

⁸⁴ "Water Committee Will Ask for Pipeline Survey," *Red River Valley Echo*, December 19, 1956.

over 100 miles away from Buffalo Point – would be reversed, allowing it to flow west and access the towns of the former West Reserve.⁸⁵

Though these projects were deemed unfeasible and were never undertaken, even “unbuilt environments,” argues Jonathan Peyton, can reveal how various plans and dreams regarding resource extraction can be “made to seem possible, logical, and correct.”⁸⁶ The fact the Shoal Lake and Buffalo Point projects proposed extracting water from Anishinaabe lands in Treaty 3 territory reveals the existence of a settler-colonial logic wherein extraction of Indigenous water resources – even from a great geographical distance – was within the realm of possibility to further develop settler spaces. This was the same logic that, as Adele Perry argues, enabled the creation of Winnipeg’s water supply from Shoal Lake in the early 1900s, and also fueled its commemoration in the late-twentieth century.⁸⁷

Conquering Empty Land

Within such an expansionist colonial logic, argues Aileen Moreton-Robinson, land itself becomes framed as an “oppressor,” something that must be “conquered, claimed, and named” as such, which in turn obfuscates the oppression and marginalization experienced by Indigenous people in their own lands.⁸⁸ The narratives revolving around this oppression and marginalization will be discussed further in Chapter 2. Both government officials and Mennonite writers

⁸⁵ Manitoba Department of Mines, Resources and Environmental Management Water Resources Branch, Planning Division, *Lake of the Woods to Pembina Triangle Preliminary Design*, 1971, MAN Manitoba Mines R&EM WRB, Manitoba Legislative Library.

⁸⁶ Jonathan Peyton, *Unbuilt Environments: Tracing Postwar Development in Northwest British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 9.

⁸⁷ Adele Perry, *Aqueduct: Colonialism, Resources, and the Histories We Remember* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2016), 93. Not only was Winnipeg’s extractive aqueduct being commemorated in the late twentieth century, it was also being expanded. An extension, servicing the city’s southern suburbs, was constructed in 1959-1960, the same general period as the West Reserve’s ‘search for water.’ Manitoba Historical Society, “Historic Sites of Manitoba: Great Winnipeg Water District Second Branch Aqueduct Plaque (Abinojii Mikanah, Winnipeg),” 2023, <https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/aqueduct2.shtml>.

⁸⁸ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 29.

throughout the West Reserve's history drew upon the idea of southern Manitoba's environment as a force to be conquered.

Nowhere was this narrative more prevalent than in a speech delivered by the Governor General of Canada, Lord Dufferin, to the recently settled East Reserve Mennonites in 1877.

Speaking to the assembled settlers, Dufferin characterized Mennonites' role in the colonization project as that of participants in a "war to which we invite you as recruits and comrades."

Continuing, he stated that this war would be

waged against the brute forces of nature; but those forces will welcome our domination, and reward our attack by placing their treasures at our disposal. It is a war of ambition, – for we intend to annex territory after territory, – but neither blazing villages nor devastating fields will mark our ruthless track; our battalions will march across the illimitable plains which stretch out before us as sunshine steals athwart the ocean; the rolling prairie will blossom in our wake, and corn and peace and plenty will spring where we have trod.⁸⁹

Recent analyses of this speech by historians of Mennonites point to its significant "aim" of "communicat[ing] how the Mennonites fit into the narrative of Canadian colonialism," and their place within the type of battle – one against the "forces of nature" – that could perhaps be tolerated by a pacifist people.⁹⁰ Scholars have argued further that Mennonites themselves received this speech in ways that were "conducive" to its purported vision,⁹¹ and that confirmed their position as "model settlers."⁹² Beyond these analyses, however, it is also important to note the extent to which both the Governor General's visit as a historical event, and the themes relayed in his address, became throughlines of Mennonite local historical memory well into the twentieth century. In fact, Mennonite commemorations and writings would themselves present West Reserve land in similar ways to Dufferin's speech, exhibiting a remarkable durability,

⁸⁹ "The Vice Regal Visit: The Trip to the Mennonites," *Manitoba Free Press*, August 25, 1877.

⁹⁰ Klassen, "Heroes of a Flat Country," 178.

⁹¹ Wiebe, "On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland," 112.

⁹² Neufeldt, "Settler Colonial Conscripts," 10.

across a century or more, of these themes. Further, while the 1877 speech took place in the East Reserve, it frequently comprised a component of West Reserve commemorations in subsequent decades.

For the Mennonites who in later years recalled attending the Vice-Regal visit as children, it remained an understandably strong memory. The visit was mentioned at the sixtieth-anniversary event in Steinbach, where John R. Dueck, who arrived in Manitoba as a ten-year-old boy, remarked on it as a “holiday” occasion in his remembrances of “pioneer life.”⁹³ At the same celebration, Johann Isaac Friesen remembered arriving and settling in the East Reserve at fourteen years old, devoting a fair amount of his address to the Dufferin visit, and quoting from the Governor General’s “remarkable speech to the settlers.” In particular, Friesen noted that the honoured guest’s remarks on the battle against nature’s wild forces “will remain in the memory of our people.”⁹⁴

Later commemorative celebrations both east and west of the Red River also pointed to the importance of the vice-regal visit. The panorama display at the 1941 agricultural fair in the West Reserve town of Altona described the Governor-General’s visit as “one of the most significant events in those first years,” where “Her Majesty’s representative addressed an awe-inspired audience.”⁹⁵ A fiftieth-anniversary listing of “several interesting facts from Canadian history” in 1949 included mention of the Governor General’s visit, noting that Dufferin “expressed great satisfaction with the economic development of the new settlement.”⁹⁶ Thirty-three years later, Altona’s history book would also note Dufferin’s visit, including an excerpt

⁹³ *Das 60-jaehrige Jubilaeum der Mennonitischen Ost-Reserve*, 24, 17, Mennonite Heritage Archives, translation by Elfrieda Schroeder.

⁹⁴ *Das 60-jaehrige Jubilaeum der Mennonitischen Ost-Reserve*, 32, Mennonite Heritage Archives, translation by Elfrieda Schroeder.

⁹⁵ “A Panorama of the Mennonite Settlement in Manitoba 1874-1941,” *Altona Echo*, September 17, 1941.

⁹⁶ *Gedenkfeier der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Manitoba, Canada*, 146, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

from the Governor General's later comments to a crowd in Winnipeg where he lauded the East Reserve's "conveniences and incidents of European comfort and a scientific agriculture."⁹⁷

While the Dufferin speech itself became a significant event to be recalled in future decades, the themes and language of his exhortation to those East Reserve settlers were also employed in settlement celebrations and writings. Such events and historical reflections were often opportunities for both Mennonites and government officials to assert and confirm Mennonites as exemplary beacons of Canada's settler-colonial goals for the prairies. These assertions were communicated through language that, first, reflected Dufferin's metaphors of warfare with nature; second, cemented Mennonites' place within national narratives of progress and citizenship; and third, celebrated Mennonites as settlers who were able – particularly in the flat landscape of the West Reserve – to reclaim and improve a barren and empty prairie from deficiency and realize the land's true and proper potential.

As an anniversary publication for the R.M. of Rhineland stated in 1944, the first Mennonite arrivals to the West Reserve found "no railroads, no roads, only buffalo grass, swamps and mosquitos...drought, floods and all other forces of nature had to be overcome."⁹⁸ This particular quote was repeated verbatim in various other places, including a 1944 "Progress Edition" of the *Echo*,⁹⁹ and in the second-place entry in the "Mennonite Commemorative essay contest" held in late 1949 and early 1950 to raise awareness and funds for the commemorative cairn.¹⁰⁰ As a report on the unveiling event remarked, Mennonite arrivals to the West Reserve "camped on the bald treeless plains," and "began man's inexorable conquest of the forces of

⁹⁷ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 15.

⁹⁸ H.H. Hamm, *Sixty Years of Progress, 1884-1944: The Rural Municipality of Rhineland* (Altona: D.W. Friesen & Sons, Ltd., 1944), 10.

⁹⁹ "'Rhineland,' Sixty Years a Rural Municipality," *Altona Echo*, June 28, 1944.

¹⁰⁰ *Altona Echo*, "Cairn Committee Announces Essay Competition Results."

nature that has made this Mennonite community of Southern Manitoba one of the garden spots of the province.”¹⁰¹ The one-hundredth anniversary book on the R.M. of Rhineland evinced similar sentiments in its dedication to “the pioneers who settled this area,” and their “devoted effort” in “subduing a formidable environment.”¹⁰² By the 1980s, then, nearly a century after Lord Dufferin first exhorted Mennonites to engage a war of conquest on an environment seen as empty and desolate, shades of that exhortation could still be seen in how Mennonites celebrated and commemorated their presence on the land, reflecting what historian Daniel Rück has called the “continuity of settler colonial narratives.”¹⁰³

Progress, Improvement, and the Nation

The theme of environmental and agricultural conquest was often connected to ideas of national progress in the rhetoric of government officials who spoke at various commemoration events, and in various other arenas. National narratives were also prominent in much late nineteenth and early twentieth-century public dialogue on Mennonite settlement in Manitoba. As Klassen has shown, English-language newspapers at that time positioned Mennonites within a national “mythmaking project.” Journalistic commentaries sought to “create a peaceful, agricultural myth to replace the violent, racialized history of Indigenous land theft and displacement.”¹⁰⁴ The positioning of Mennonites as enactors of state settlement goals was not only a feature of discourse in the late 1800s and early 1900s, however. Once settlement anniversaries started to occur later in the twentieth century, government officials continued to build on this theme.

¹⁰¹ *Mennonite Weekly Review*, “Colorful Ceremony Marks Cairn Dedication.”

¹⁰² Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, vi.

¹⁰³ Daniel Rück, “The Continuity of Settler Colonial Narratives: The Diary of a Nineteenth-Century Dominion Land Surveyor and the Enduring Language of Harm,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 14, no. 3 (2024): 264–90.

¹⁰⁴ Klassen, “Heroes of a Flat Country,” 169–170.

One such example occurred during the 1934 diamond anniversary celebrations in the East Reserve. In a speech to Mennonites gathered for the event, Member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly Albert Prefontaine remarked that, “Our Canada is a nation created by peoples of different racial backgrounds who worked together to build it...among whom the Mennonites hold a place of honor.” He stated further that by “transforming this part of the province into a productive agricultural area through their hard work, they rendered a service to the land that deserves full recognition in Canadian history.” In doing so, he continued, Mennonites “have faithfully fulfilled their duties...and are among the finest Canadian citizens.”¹⁰⁵ At the same ceremony, Member of Parliament A.L. Beaubien covered similar territory when he told the assembled Mennonites that, “You have made your contributions to this country,” and have “shown the Canadian settlers the way. You showed Canadians how to cultivate the land of the open prairie.”¹⁰⁶

At the 1949 celebrations in Steinbach, Member of Parliament René Jutras offered similar sentiments, comparing Mennonite colonists to “the original pioneers of our country,” who “were driven by a burning desire of Christianity into every corner of this vast wilderness and keeping it burning at all costs.” Jutras continued by asking, “was it not the same honourable motives” that gave Mennonites “the necessary fortitude and stamina to break this soil and to give it a new vitality?” By renewing the land and bringing prosperity, said the M.P. to those assembled, “you have cut yourselves an honourable place among the Canadian communities.”¹⁰⁷ On the West Reserve, Lieutenant-Governor Roland McWilliams’ 1941 speech at the municipal agricultural

¹⁰⁵ *Das 60-jaehrige Jubilaeum der Mennonitischen Ost-Reserve*, 11, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁰⁶ *Das 60-jaehrige Jubilaeum der Mennonitischen Ost-Reserve*, 13, Mennonite Heritage Archives. Such sentiments were not exclusive to the West Reserve during this period. Ralph Friesen has recently noted that, in the 1930s, “the strongest movement influencing Steinbach...was British and Canadian nationalism.” Ralph Friesen, *Prosperity Ever, Depression Never: Steinbach in the 1930s* (Winnipeg: The Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2024), 196.

¹⁰⁷ *Gedenkfeier der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Manitoba, Canada*, 104, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

fair echoed Lord Dufferin's laudatory observations sixty-four years earlier, when he congratulated West Reserve Mennonites on "the thriving villages, the homes, and the splendid progress that has been made." Indeed, he continued, "you have done a great task, Province building, one people out of many people, establishing in this Province and Dominion a type of life, a system of government which will build up a new unit which will discount the wars and enmities existing in the world today."¹⁰⁸

These comments, while positioning Mennonites as contributors to nation-building, also hinted at the spectre that hovered over all the various West Reserve commemorations in the 1940s – the Second World War. Provincial Minister of Agriculture D.L. Campbell's speech at the 1942 Rhineland Agricultural Fair addressed this overtly. Campbell spoke of western Canada and the "prairie provinces" specifically as "the granary and larder of the empire," supplying "Great Britain and her allies" with food. "Agricultural Societies such as yours," he continued, "are greatly responsible for the great strides that have been made." He further drew on the theme of agricultural production by quoting from Rudyard Kipling regarding "the terrible strength [France] draws from her soil," remarking that, "the strength of our soil is not 'terrible' but beneficial, except in a war. Then we are determined to use its strength to the utmost."¹⁰⁹ Once again, as in 1877, agriculture – and specifically Manitoba Mennonites' working of the land – was to be a contributing factor in national efforts. In these efforts, Mennonite "children of the soil"¹¹⁰ were praised for their agricultural role.

Mennonite commentary sometimes corresponded to the themes communicated by government officials, responding in particular to the correlations between conflict, nation-

¹⁰⁸ "Lieutenant Governor Addresses Large Gathering," *Altona Echo*, September 17, 1941.

¹⁰⁹ "'Western Canada the Granary and Larder of the Empire,' Says Campbell," *Altona Echo*, September 16, 1942.

¹¹⁰ "Pioneer Life," *Altona Echo*, May 24, 1950.

building, and settler agriculture through the celebration of Manitoba Mennonite history. In the *Echo*'s celebration of the R.M. of Rhineland's sixtieth anniversary, a "Tribute to Our Mennonite Pioneers" echoed John Macrae's war poem "In Flanders Fields," stating that the "pioneers gave of their best to develop and enrich the Red River Valley; the Mennonite men and women of our day will 'take up the torch which they from failing hands have thrown.'"¹¹¹ After the war, the seventieth anniversary of the village of Neuanlage in the West Reserve in 1949 was occasion for similar confirmations of Mennonites' claim to nation-building through settler colonization, where the 1870s arrivals were remembered as having "establish[ed] a better way of life in a country which they knew as a wilderness." Through a "love for Canada, the land they helped to build," they made contributions "as good Christians and worthwhile Canadians."¹¹²

Though such sentiments made for florid and dramatic commemorative writing, they were also likely rooted in the complexities of Manitoba Mennonites' experiences as Canadian citizens in war time. For example, the pro-German sympathies of some Mennonites, along with the refusal of many others to participate in military service on religious grounds (through "conscientious objector" status), likely played some role in more closely identifying Mennonite agricultural settlement with patriotic pride.¹¹³

These types of themes were strong in the mid-to-late 1940s, given that this era saw both the sixtieth anniversary of the Rhineland Municipality in the West Reserve, and the seventy-fifth anniversary of Mennonite arrival to Manitoba in the East Reserve. The latter anniversary was also an impetus for the cairn initiative in the West Reserve, the idea for which seems to have

¹¹¹ "A Tribute to Our Mennonite Pioneers," *Altona Echo*, June 28, 1944.

¹¹² "70th Anniversary, Founding of Neuanlage Celebrated," *Altona Echo*, September 1, 1948.

¹¹³ James Urry examines these issues in his recent study of Grunthal, Manitoba. Though too complex to fully outline here, various Mennonite responses to the war could often depend on denominational allegiances, or on familial connection to either the 1870s migration to Manitoba or the later 1920s migration of Mennonites fleeing the upheaval and violence of the Soviet Union. James Urry, *On Stony Ground: Russländer Mennonites and the Rebuilding of Community in Grunthal* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2024), 159-177.

been first raised in 1948 at a Chamber of Commerce meeting in the town of Gretna.¹¹⁴ Continual organization, advocacy, and fundraising were undertaken over the ensuing years to realize this goal. An *Echo* editorial of July 1949 favoured this project, stating that, since those in the West Reserve were “descendants of the hardy Mennonite pioneers who settled the prairie region, it is especially significant, at this time – the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Mennonite settlements in southern Manitoba – to erect a cairn in honor of the people who opened up this fertile and progressive district.”¹¹⁵

It became clear that the cairn would harken not only to Mennonite West Reserve colonization, but also Mennonite settlement’s relationship with Canadian settler colonialism and prairie transformation more broadly. The 1951 ceremony itself was attended by 3,000 people,¹¹⁶ opening with the national anthem, and closing with “God Save the King.” When the cairn was unveiled, it emerged from behind a curtain of Union Jack flags, further solidifying the connection between Mennonite “faith in God to preserve their way of life”¹¹⁷ and their contribution to “build[ing] a civilization upon the barren Manitoba plains.”¹¹⁸

Ceremonial statements of fidelity to the British monarchy were not uncommon at Mennonite commemorative events during this period, reflecting Mennonites’ historical role within the British Empire’s nineteenth-century hopes for the Canadian prairies to become “the brightest agricultural jewel in the imperial diadem,” and a place “where they could plant, grow, and prune a ‘dominating race.’”¹¹⁹ Although nineteenth-century Mennonite colonists were not

¹¹⁴ “Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, November 17, 1948.

¹¹⁵ “Cairn Project,” *Altona Echo*, July 6, 1949.

¹¹⁶ This is a significant number, especially considering that, at the time, the three largest towns in the former reserve had populations of 1,863 (Morden), 1,438 (Altona), and 1,331 (Winkler). Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 260.

¹¹⁷ *Altona Echo*, “A Tribute to Our Mennonite Pioneers,” June 28, 1944.

¹¹⁸ “Before the Memorial Unveiling,” *Altona Echo*, June 20, 1951.

¹¹⁹ Carter, *Imperial Plots*, 5.

British English-speakers themselves, Klassen has shown how they became a part of English national mythmaking “because they occupied a distinct position in the history of the province as the first group of immigrants to settle” there.¹²⁰ They were connected, in other words, to the broader project of prairie colonization, and the threads of this connection were still evident at the 1951 cairn ceremony. The connection to success and economic prosperity in the national context was also evident in some local histories published in later years, such as Blumenfeld’s, which commented that “one hundred years later [after Mennonite arrival], the treeless expanse has been transformed into fertile farmland that produces special crops for Canadian and foreign markets.”¹²¹

The relationship between Mennonite colonization and national progress was sometimes implicitly stated in the very narrative structures used to convey Mennonite history in Manitoba generally, and the West Reserve area specifically. The popular panorama display and presentation at the 1941 agricultural fair, for example, consisted of a linear array of sketches “from the early settler days until modern times.” The sketches were “Drawn on a long roll of heavy paper” that was “slowly unrolled behind the scenes to give the effect of a moving picture, one scene following the other in chronological order.”¹²² The drama was accompanied by a choir and a string trio, along with a reading of “a short history of the Mennonite settlement.”¹²³

The text of the narrated scenes was subsequently printed in the *Echo*, and it followed a trajectory beginning with an introduction on the “Faith of our Fathers,” to some context on the “Land of the Maple” and the Mennonites’ “Route-Map” and “Arrival.” This was then followed by vignettes on settlement – “the “Village Main Street,” the “Old Village Church and School,”

¹²⁰ Klassen, “Heroes of a Flat Country,” 182.

¹²¹ Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 129.

¹²² “A Panorama of the Mennonite Settlement in Manitoba 1874-1941,” *Altona Echo*,

¹²³ “A Panorama of the Mennonite Settlement in Manitoba 1874-1941, *Altona Echo*, ”

and the “Village Farm House.” The later displays then focused on increased development of “Towns, Business, Industry, Institutions,” and “Contributions” made by Mennonites in the establishment “of a prosperously developed community on a prairie which once beheld the silent tread of the Red-man.” Next came the “Advantages Enjoyed in a Democracy,” where Mennonites were exhorted to “join their fellow Canadians and sing with grateful hearts: We’re proud of Canada, Our King and gracious Queen.” Finally came “Prospects for the Future,” where Mennonites were encouraged to “take up the torch” thrown from the “failing hands” of those “pioneers” to “gave of their best to develop and enrich the Red River Valley.”¹²⁴

The panorama display connected the idea of the empty and barren prairie with a passive, quiet, and nearly invisible “Red-man” (a theme that will be explored in more detail in the following chapter). It also conveyed a sense of linear settler and national progress, from arrival to a void and wild landscape all the way to Mennonite roles in realizing national uplift, prosperity, and pride. In doing so, the panorama presented a type of linear narrative structure that could be seen in the many town and village histories published decades later, long before such formal histories were being written in the West Reserve.

While some of these local histories were more haphazard in their compilation (consisting of stories and memories submitted by local families, for example), the more formally-written ones typically began with chapters on Mennonite origins in sixteenth-century Europe (for example, “Mennonite Beginnings,” “The Heritage,” “The People Called Mennonites,” and “The

¹²⁴ “A Panorama of the Mennonite Settlement in Manitoba 1874-1941,” *Altona Echo*. Note, again, the connection made to the Canadian nation and British monarch. This connection was also at the forefront of initial Mennonite efforts to migrate to Manitoba in the 1870s. As nineteenth-century Mennonite leader and minister remarked in 1900, “We chose Canada because it was under the protection of the Queen of England; and we believed that our freedom from military service would survive longer there and also that the church and school would remain under our own jurisdiction.” Gerhard Wiebe, *Causes and History of the Emigration of Mennonites from Russia to America*, trans. Helen Janzen (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1981, originally published in 1900), 34.

Birth of Anabaptism”).¹²⁵ Sections on the migration from Imperial Russia to North America often followed (“To Canada,” “In Search of a Homeland,” “Seeking a Homeland,” “The New Land”), along with sections on early settlement patterns (“Prairie Village,” “Village Organization,” “Building a Community,” “Building the Reserves”).¹²⁶ Church life and educational institutions usually received substantial attention, as did developments in agriculture, which often highlighted the ‘threshing gang’ days, and typically noted the striking changes in the evolution toward more intensive and industrialized practices.¹²⁷

A gradual movement toward postwar prosperity was often communicated, particularly in chapters devoted to later periods and the increased development of various local businesses (“Growth and Modernization,” “Modern Times,” “Industry, Modernity, Continuity”).¹²⁸ These types of historical interpretations corresponded to well-established narratives of the postwar period as one of uplift, progress, and overall economic improvement for Canadians as a whole. Historian Brittany Luby argues that these interpretations of postwar Canada were codified in several Canadian history textbooks, and in Canadian understandings more broadly, in ways that implied prosperity for all Canadians during this era when, in reality, such national wealth was realized in part “by extracting resources from Indigenous lands” and from Indigenous people, who “did not form part of Canada’s affluent society after 1945.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, vii; Zacharias, *Reinland*; Julius G. Toews and Lawrence Klippenstein, eds., *Manitoba Mennonite Memories: 1874-1974* (Rosenort: Lark Printing, Ltd., 1974); Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 2.

¹²⁶ Julius G. Toews and Lawrence Klippenstein, eds., *Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada* (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977), iii, 58; Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 16, 61; Zacharias, *Reinland*, 33, 69; Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal, 1880-1980*, 10.

¹²⁷ Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal, 1880-1980*, 117-146.

¹²⁸ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 237; Enns, *Gretna*, 277; Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, 175.

¹²⁹ Luby, *Dammed*, 12-13. Similarly, as Gail Crystal Fraser has shown, the postwar years in Canada’s north were also ones in which “there was very little enthusiasm to allow Indigenous lifestyles to flourish, and policies were enacted that actively sought to destroy Indigenous ways of life.” Gail Crystal Fraser, *By Strength, We Are Still Here: Indigenous Peoples and Indian Residential Schooling in Inuvik, Northwest Territories* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2024), 6.

From Swamp to Paradise: Reclamation and Improvement

In the grassland portions of the West Reserve, such postwar settler-spurred economic growth would of course occur through radical changes to its land and waterscapes (as the example of the Morden dam illustrates). This occurred through the turning and tilling of grasslands, and, critically, through intensive and ongoing drainage initiatives aimed at drying out marshes and low areas.¹³⁰ Flooding and drainage, then, were often some of the main lenses through which Mennonite histories remembered the region's watery characteristics. The lower and wetter northern portions of the reserve were depicted as places where, in the early years of settlement, "Millions of gallons of water annually spilled over these waste lands, flat as a pancake." Over time, though, drainage initiatives would result in the fact that "Prosperous farms are within this area of once low, wet lands..."¹³¹ In the words of another account, "our forebears...have made what was nothing but a swamp, a veritable garden – one of the most progressive and most densely populated rural areas in Manitoba."¹³² In other commemorations, Mennonites' agricultural drainage initiatives in the Vistula Delta region around present-day Poland during the seventeenth century was called upon in lauding the improvements brought to the West Reserve region some two centuries later. As one source put it, Mennonites' draining of "swamp lands" in that region resulted in "Useless lands [having] been transformed into profitable pastures and wheat farms."¹³³ This had been "their first great pioneering experience," in which they had drained "swampy and uninviting land" and had "converted the swamplands into productive farmland."¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*.

¹³¹ Hamm, *Sixty Years of Progress*, 18, 20.

¹³² "Progress Edition 1874-1949," *Altona Echo*, September 7, 1949.

¹³³ Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 9.

¹³⁴ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 15; Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal, 1880-1980*, 110.

As the above examples indicate, public commemorations and histories that addressed the changes brought to the land by Mennonite settlement often did so by contrasting the perceived barrenness of the landscape with the physical and cultural transformations implemented in the region by settlers. Juxtaposed with the ‘barren prairielands’ encountered by the 1870s settlers was the “paradise” that Mennonites had “made...of the southern part of Manitoba, situated on the West side of the Red River and up to the Pembina Mountains.”¹³⁵ Similarly, at an event for the R.M. of Rhineland’s Municipality’s anniversary, a tribute was read on behalf of “the younger generation,” which asserted that “half a century ago our fair community was wilderness” but had since been transformed “into endless fields of waving grain, interspersed with the flowering gardens and prosperous villages.”¹³⁶

This ‘garden’ terminology was commonly used, as in the celebrations of the municipality’s anniversary, where the region was described as “the garden of the Red River Valley,”¹³⁷ and in a 1945 *Echo* editorial which contrasted drier environments in Alberta and Saskatchewan with the Red River Valley’s “‘Garden of Manitoba’ – waving green fields of grain, water filled creeks, thousands of thickly leaved acres of sugar beets, corn and sunflowers, orchards covered with fruit-laden trees, roadways lined with stately trees, interspersed with thickly foliated hedges, flower and vegetable gardens to behold. Truly, a veritable paradise.”¹³⁸ A commemorative piece on Altona’s history in 1949 further remarked that the town “is truly situated in the Eden of Manitoba, the Red River Valley.”¹³⁹ Speaking at the cairn unveiling in 1951, Cairn Committee chairman P.H. Funk called upon similar imagery, asserting that West

¹³⁵ *Altona Echo*, “Rhineland.”

¹³⁶ “A Tribute to the Pioneers of the Municipality of Rhineland by the Younger Generation (As Read by Harvey Toews),” *Altona Echo*, July 5, 1944.

¹³⁷ “Sixty Healthy Years of Progress,” *Altona Echo*, June 28, 1944.

¹³⁸ “The Garden of Manitoba,” *Altona Echo*, August 1, 1945.

¹³⁹ “A Historical Sketch of Altona,” sec. 2, *Altona Echo* (Altona), September 7, 1949.

Reserve settlers “gradually tamed the wild prairie. The land was broken and cultivated; homes were built; churches and schools were established. Through a short period of time, seventy-five years, this area has become a virtual ‘Land of Milk and Honey.’”¹⁴⁰

In the examples above, the West Reserve prairie was, to paraphrase literary scholar Frances Kaye, seen as deficient grassland that had to be “reclaimed.”¹⁴¹ Whereas North-American settler-colonial agriculture “at least acknowledged” timber as “having value”¹⁴² – indeed, so much value and necessity that Mennonites on the West Reserve grasslands would need to procure it from elsewhere – Kaye argues that grasslands had no such status for settlers, and were instead seen through the lens of “deficiency.”¹⁴³ It was necessary, then, for both settlers and the larger nation-state, that new land uses, settlement patterns, and agricultural practices be inscribed on and into the landscape, to realize a better, more garden-like and economically prosperous environment. The *Echo*’s 1949 “Progress Edition” characterized this as a transformation whereby

the wild, tough prairie gave way to human effort. In a short time well-treed villages with picturesque farmyards were established. The land was broken up and cultivated and, as far as the eye could see stretched fields of grain. Churches and schools were established and life once more resumed its normal course in the European pattern.¹⁴⁴

Here, Kaye’s argument regarding the idea of reclamation is evidenced as almost a course correction – steering the “wild, tough prairie” away from the path of deficiency and barrenness to a more recognizable and normative trajectory of European-based settlement and land use.

¹⁴⁰ “A Tribute to Our Pioneers,” *Altona Echo*, June 20, 1951. The use of garden imagery in relation to environments previously seen as marginal or flawed was not unique to the Manitoba Mennonite context. Ben Nobbs Thiessen has noted the existence of similar narratives in the context of Mennonite colonization in Paraguay’s Chaco region. Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, “Reshaping the Chaco: Migrant Foodways, Place-Making, and the Chaco War,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 50, no. 3 (2018), 592.

¹⁴¹ Kaye, *Goodlands*, 213.

¹⁴² Kaye, *Goodlands*, 213.

¹⁴³ Kaye, *Goodlands*, 5.

¹⁴⁴ “Seventy-Five Years of Progress,” *Altona Echo*, September 7, 1949.

Further, the utilization of language in certain ways, in numerous commemorative instances, also functioned to position the West Reserve's prairie landscape as "a potential but not yet *actual*" place [emphasis added].¹⁴⁵ Literary scholar Tom Lynch has argued how this happens in historical and literary texts through the small yet powerful "'nothing but' construction," whereby land is described with "a dismissive attitude toward whatever follows, highlighting its inadequacy and implying the wish for the presence of something more worthwhile."¹⁴⁶

Bearing this insight in mind, commemorative descriptions of West Reserve land take on heightened meaning in how they positioned the landscape relative to Mennonite arrival. Mennonites arriving to the region saw "only an open expanse,"¹⁴⁷ "only buffalo grass, swamps, and mosquitos,"¹⁴⁸ and "nothing but swamp, prairie grass, and clouds of mosquitos."¹⁴⁹ Once their first earthen structures were built, the landscape "was only marked by prairie and a few sod huts."¹⁵⁰ Of course, the West Reserve *was* flat prairie land with little significant tree cover. However, these linguistic constructions, combined with discourses of empty land, did more than simply describe the environmental reality of the region. They also positioned that environment as one in need of improvement and reclamation, which Mennonite settlers were then able to realize through the agricultural and demographic changes desired by the Canadian government for the prairies.

Remembering and Forgetting: Trees, Villages, and Vegetation

This shift from a landscape of nothing to a civilized something entailed a whole constellation of environmental, cultural, social, and economic changes on the West Reserve and across the

¹⁴⁵ Tom Lynch, "'Nothing But Land': Women's Narratives, Gardens, and the Settler-Colonial Imaginary in the US West and Australian Outback," *Western American Literature* 48, no. 4 (2014): 382.

¹⁴⁶ Lynch, "Nothing But Land," 375.

¹⁴⁷ *Altona Echo*, "3,000 Attend Memorial."

¹⁴⁸ Hamm, *Sixty Years of Progress*, 10.

¹⁴⁹ *Altona Echo*, "David D. Klassen Recalls."

¹⁵⁰ "Blumenort Has Features of Mennonite Village," *Altona Echo*, December 19, 1951.

Canadian prairies. These changes comprise a major feature of Mennonite history in southern Manitoba and, as such, featured strongly in historical writing and commemorative events. The planting of trees and the establishment of villages in particular were major changes that received repeated emphasis in the region's local history-making, helping imbue the West Reserve land with new meanings.

Tree planting was a major element of the West Reserve's settler-initiated landscape transformation, as Susie Fisher has extensively shown,¹⁵¹ and it later became a significant part of how Mennonites narrated their past on this land. A 1941 newspaper article on crops around the town of Winkler, for example, included some historical background on the area, noting that Mennonite arrival to the region introduced the "Oldest Prairie Settlement" and "the first real attempt...to farm the open prairie in western Canada." While the Winkler area had once been "bare prairie," the writer pointed to trees – specifically the many shelter-belts that were planted – as the reason that "this is now one of the most attractive districts in the west."¹⁵² Another account highlighted the "pioneers'" role in "introduc[ing] the groves of trees as windbreaks on the hitherto treeless prairie."¹⁵³ Since that time, this commentator continued, what "was once wide open grassy expanse" had been transformed into "groves dotting the countryside and indicating the existence of farm homes; also within site are villages with their long avenues of trees."¹⁵⁴ Here, trees were not only new and significant environmental features but also indicators of settler presence, of farms and villages.

The planting of trees was also a prominent feature in an *Echo* article describing the town of Gretna's founding. Written on the occasion of the Mennonite Conference of Canada's national

¹⁵¹ Fisher, "Seeds from the Steppe," 102-157.

¹⁵² "Corn Replaces Fallow in Morden and Winkler," *Altona Echo*, August 6, 1941.

¹⁵³ *Altona Echo*, "A Tribute to Our Mennonite Pioneers," June 28, 1944.

¹⁵⁴ *Altona Echo*, "A Tribute to Our Mennonite Pioneers," June 28, 1944.

gathering held there in 1952, the writer remarked that visitors might comment on “what a well-treed town Gretna is,” but “little do [they] know that 70 years ago the site of this village was a barren prairie, undistinguishable from the rest of the country.”¹⁵⁵ Gretna’s published community history, written decades later, made similar remarks when it recalled the establishment of an annual Tree Planting Day there during the 1880s, an event that changed “the barren landscape into a well-treed garden.”¹⁵⁶ Local histories also noted the existence of trees within and around communities one hundred years later, mentioning how abandoned portions of villages were still evidenced by the trees that “are still standing,”¹⁵⁷ or how or how the shelter belts between fields “add much to the attractiveness of the landscape.”¹⁵⁸

In these examples, it was transplanted nature installed by settlers – and connected to the settlers themselves – that inscribed the landscape with a new meaning, transforming it from barren, underutilized land to beautiful, productive settlement – or, to traces and remnants of old villages. As a celebratory newspaper article on the town of Plum Coulee’s fiftieth anniversary of incorporation put it, “most of the town’s scenic qualities have been man-made,” seeing as how the town had been situated “on the bald, open prairie.”¹⁵⁹ The “tree-lined, broad quiet streets” were noted as a major scenic focal point, with the writer stating that, while they “do not suggest antiquity, they do, nevertheless depict the maturity, the permanence not found in most, newer settlements.”¹⁶⁰ Permanence, then, as opposed to the shiftless, empty space of the prairiescape – was indicated not only through the presence of settler agriculturalists, but through the trees they planted. As Molly Rozum has argued, trees have historically played a significant role in

¹⁵⁵ *Altona Echo*, “Gretna Founded.”

¹⁵⁶ Enns, *Gretna*, 104.

¹⁵⁷ Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 234.

¹⁵⁸ Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal, 1880-1980*, 123.

¹⁵⁹ “Jubilee Issue, Plum Coulee (in Commemoration of 50 Years of Incorporation, 1902-1952),” *Altona Echo*, June 4, 1952.

¹⁶⁰ *Altona Echo*, “Jubilee Issue, Plum Coulee.”

constructing European settlers' sense of place on the plains and grasslands of Canada and the United States, deeply informing how "settler society took root" in these regions,¹⁶¹ a phenomenon clearly discernible in the West Reserve.

Trees were therefore a major component of both the West Reserve's environmental transformation and Mennonite commemorations of it. Mennonite villages played a similar role, and were often written about in local histories as intertwined with the land and with settler-planted trees. The typical Mennonite street village was an important social, cultural, economic, and agricultural feature of early Mennonite settlement in Manitoba, and as such, has retained a central role in the telling of Mennonite history.¹⁶² These villages were not only a physical form of land settlement, but also of land ownership and tenure, as they allowed for land to be held semi-communally. By pooling several homesteads together, settlers "superimpose[ed]...a particular village plan onto those lands allowing for a combination of private and communal spaces and resources."¹⁶³ This was legally enabled through an amendment to the Dominion Lands Act, allowing for Mennonites to settle in this pattern, rather than on individual homesteads as anticipated by the Act and the grid of the Dominion Land Survey.¹⁶⁴ Though a range of factors resulted in the eventual dissolution of this type of land tenure roughly around the turn of the century,¹⁶⁵ the *form* of many West Reserve street villages – the central treed street fronted by narrow farmyards, in particular – has endured. As Robert Coutts argues, street villages have remained a strong element in Mennonites' telling of their history in southern Manitoba.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Rozum, *Grasslands Grown*, 110.

¹⁶² The West Reserve village of Neuberghthal is perhaps the most well-known such village, and is a designated national heritage site of Canada. "Neuberghthal Street Village National Historic Site of Canada," Parks Canada Directory of Federal Heritage Designations, https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=1600.

¹⁶³ Esau, "The Establishment, Preservation and Legality," 89-92.

¹⁶⁴ Esau, "The Establishment, Preservation and Legality," 92; Loewen, *Mennonite Farmers*, 32.

¹⁶⁵ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 137-146.

¹⁶⁶ Coutts, *Authorized Heritage*, 132-135.

In commemorations, the typical Mennonite street village was accorded a place of significance specifically related to its establishment on and entrenchment within a landscape that was new to Mennonite arrivals. Beyond a simple accounting of the various physical characteristics and social significances of the street village, local historical writing also described ‘the village’ in terms that accorded an intractable and inevitable permanence to Mennonite presence on the prairies.

In some cases, villages were heralded as “a reminder of the early settlers who opened up the district,” examples of “the Old World which was transplanted into southern Manitoba over 75 years ago...reminders from a past, that are evident in a modern world.”¹⁶⁷ The names of villages, too – some evoking flowers, or hope – as an *Echo* commentary pondered – were perhaps given by “settlers” who “must have been permeated with some of the European qualities of grace, and inward appreciation to transmit their secret hopes and ambitions into an expression of an optimistic place-name.”¹⁶⁸ This commentary continued that “throughout the district [of the West Reserve] there is not one old name which suggests abandonment.”¹⁶⁹ The villages were evidence of presence – settler presence – and thus antithetical to any idea of bleakness or “abandonment” associated with the seemingly empty prairie.

Similar themes of European transplantation were touched upon in writings on Altona’s village, where the settlers were characterized as “recreating the old country on the new land,”¹⁷⁰ and the village of Reinland, whose community history included a nineteenth-century newspaper report on the village. The report noted in particular that, “a village of these houses, seen when flooded with the mellow October sunshine against a backdrop of yellow stubble fields, presents a

¹⁶⁷ “‘Old World’ Charm Still Exists in Southern Manitoba Villages,” *Altona Echo*, May 21, 1952.

¹⁶⁸ *Altona Echo*, “‘Old World’ Charm.”

¹⁶⁹ *Altona Echo*, “‘Old World’ Charm.”

¹⁷⁰ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 25.

wonderful harmony of color, and is more suggestive of Holland in the sixteenth, than of Manitoba in the nineteenth, century.”¹⁷¹

While villages could be held up as examples of the ‘old world,’ they were also posited as models of tradition and progress. In a 1949 newspaper piece celebrating the village of Gnadenthal, the settlement was described not only as a living piece of Mennonite settlement history, but also an exemplar of progress and modernity – indeed, “just the right proportion...of the traditional Mennonite and the modern trend”¹⁷² – in how many of the buildings were “the original ones built when the settlement was founded in the middle 1870’s”, and yet did not reveal their age. Rather, through upkeep and paint colours that “blend[ed] strikingly with the flower gardens,” they seemed “plucked out of a fairy tale book” and “breathed prosperity.”¹⁷³ Fisher argues that these types of settlement narratives – in this case, drawing on both the transplantation of quiet village life and the place of villages within a progressive national context – are “creative acts” through which West Reserve Mennonites could “at once reinforce settler-colonial agendas of progress or success in the Canadian prairie West, and tie themselves emotionally to an imagined Edenic, utopian, self-sufficient, and separate history.”¹⁷⁴

Further, the blending of these two themes could also appear in West Reserve historical writing in ways that entrenched the village form as an intrinsic prairie feature. As one commentator remarked on the occasion of the West Reserve village of Blumenort’s ninety-fifth anniversary, while that village “has retained much of its quaint setting brought over from Russia,” it was also “so deeply rooted in the soil as to be almost native.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 69.

¹⁷² “Gnadenthal,” *Altona Echo*, September 7, 1949.

¹⁷³ “Gnadenthal,” *Altona Echo*.

¹⁷⁴ Fisher, “Seeds from the Steppe,” 6-7.

¹⁷⁵ “Blumenort: Bald Prairie 95 Years Ago,” *Red River Valley Echo*, November 25, 1970.

This notion of the street village as an almost native or indigenous element of the prairie landscape occurred in other instances as well. For example, some commemorative writings commented on the qualities and characteristics of both the villages and their planted trees, connecting them together inseparably. As Blumenfeld's history book remarked, "in the early years, the house-barn structures that lined the village street appeared like impositions that overwhelmed the prairie landscape. Today, however, these structures are hidden behind tall trees. They blend into the landscape as if to say they belong."¹⁷⁶ Rows of settler-planted trees (often cottonwoods grown from seeds transported from Imperial Russia, or from cuttings taken from nearby waterways),¹⁷⁷ in this case were a means through which Mennonite buildings and farms could become almost intrinsic to the prairie landscape.

Similarly, Reinland's history book utilized the concept of the "prairie shelter" as an overarching theme, using the term to describe first the rough sod dwellings erected by the settlers, and then the fully established street village, tied together "as it should be bound together" by the huge cottonwood trees that were planted along the central street.¹⁷⁸ The trees, along with the numerous other gardens, orchards, and plants that were established, "turned the *dorp* [village] into a thing of beauty. Underneath the shadow of the trees, new houses and barns and summer kitchens linked together to form their own private refuge. Yet on the horizon these all merged into one, one rising bluff, one prairie shelter."¹⁷⁹ These types of commemorative writings positioned the village, and its planted trees, as an expression of settler 'indigeneity' on

¹⁷⁶ Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 215.

¹⁷⁷ Fisher, "Seeds from the Steppe," 1-4.

¹⁷⁸ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 85.

¹⁷⁹ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 85.

the prairies, confirming “sense of place”¹⁸⁰ based on the village as a seamless and natural part of the landscape.

Though Mennonite memory in the postwar period accorded high importance to trees and tree planting, not all trees held the same significant cause for celebration and remembrance.

When the construction of a golf course began near Gretna in the early 1950s, its location along a small, forested creek meant that existing brush and trees would have to be removed. An update on the project in the *Echo* communicated that, “Part of the newly-seeded open ground has been harroed [sic] and dragged and underbrush in the wooded area has been burned out. A big bulldozer is expected within a week to take out about 100 of the bigger oak trees.”¹⁸¹ This work was undertaken the following week when a “D8 bulldozer...did its stuff for an admiring throng of golfers and onlookers. With the greatest of ease it took out nearly one hundred big oak trees, stumps and all, levelled large tracts of ground and moved small growth and underbrush with contempt.”¹⁸² In addition, “an appeal by postcard” was sent to over sixty people “for axe gangs to turn out” and help clear brush.¹⁸³ Subsequent work that spring would involve “preparation of fairways in the bush proper,” along with the planting of many new trees such as “elms, spruce, and ornamental shrubs,” with a “tree-planting day” planned.¹⁸⁴

It is instructive to consider that this relatively heavily treed area was in the same general location as a longstanding grove of trees known at least 150 years previously as “D’Isle du Passage,” or “Passage Island” – so named as an island because it was the only stand of trees for miles in this portion of the tallgrass prairie landscape (Figure 4). Trader Alexander Henry, in his

¹⁸⁰ Rozum, *Grasslands Grown*, 12.

¹⁸¹ “Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, April 23, 1952.

¹⁸² “Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, April 30, 1952.

¹⁸³ “Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, April 23, 1952.

¹⁸⁴ “Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, April 30, 1952.

trading and hunting work with the Anishinaabe and Assiniboine in the area, observed in 1800 that the grove included “large elms and oaks.”¹⁸⁵ When the area was surveyed as Township 1, Range 1 West, in 1875, the surveyor noted these trees along a small creek, remarking that “the only timber in this Township contains Islands in Sections Nos. 5 & 8.”¹⁸⁶ Indeed, the golf course today remains located in Section 8.

Interestingly, then, on one hand the planting and transplanting of species like cottonwoods and various fruit trees functioned to establish “living evidence of Mennonite efforts in the reconstruction of the southern Manitoba landscape,” while also making a seemingly “wild and desolate landscape” something more “manageable, familiar, and progressive.”¹⁸⁷ Indeed, settler-planted trees – cottonwoods in particular – have attained a symbolic quality for contemporary West Reserve Mennonites, “generat[ing] a sense of material heritage and invit[ing] an imaged sense of connectedness to both the people who planted them, and the prairie landscape.”¹⁸⁸ On the other hand, the case of the golf course construction suggests that some trees – no matter how old or how historically intrinsic to the region’s landscape – did not hold the same affective power or importance for Mennonite settler identity and presence, and were therefore more easily disposed of to make way for a modern recreational amenity.

¹⁸⁵ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 119; Boundary Trail National Heritage Region, “A Guide to the Principal Historic Sites on and in the Vicinity of The Trail,” 1993, <https://www.bthr.ca/notes-ed/1993%20BTHR%20Sites%20Guide%20-%20website%20ver.pdf>.

¹⁸⁶ Land Surveyors Field Books, Survey Notebook #582: Township 1 Range 1 W, NR 0157, GR 1601, G 14349, Archives of Manitoba, .

¹⁸⁷ Fisher, “Seeds from the Steppe,” 120, 124.

¹⁸⁸ Fisher, “Seeds from the Steppe,” 156.

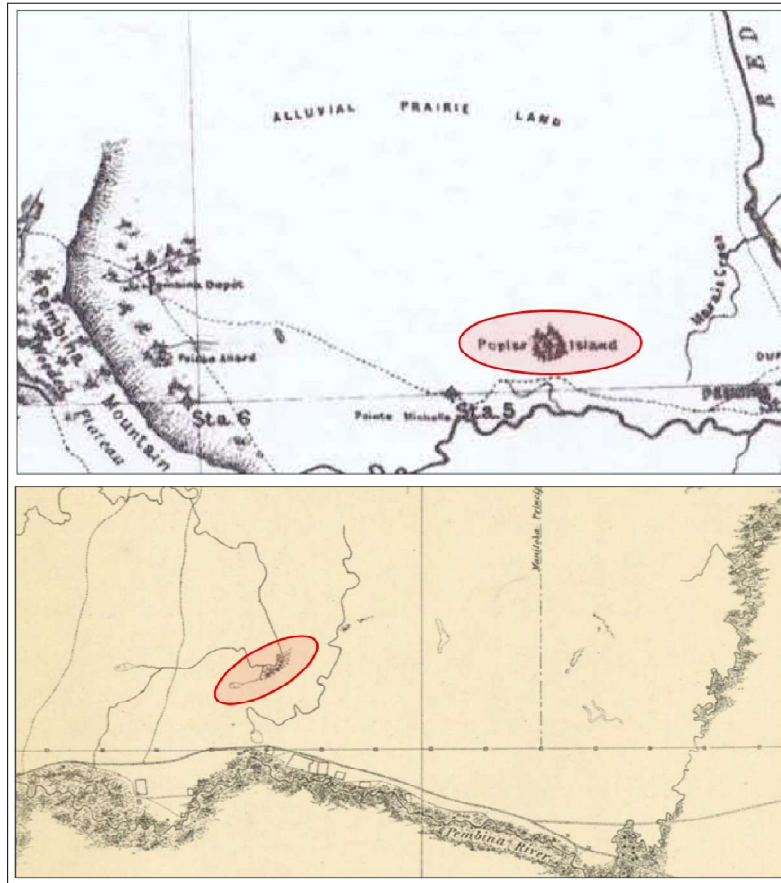


Figure 4: Passage Island noted on two different maps (at different scales) based on the International Boundary Commission's survey work conducted in 1873. The first map calls it "Poplar Island" while the second notes its connection to adjacent creeks.¹⁸⁹

Certainly, many of the smaller species of trees and shrubs native to the region were often a hindrance – literally – to quick drainage. Efforts toward draining the region's wet prairie were still going strong in the late-twentieth century, and often entailed the maintenance of ditches, channels, and creeks through the removal of vegetation such as willows that regularly sprouted

¹⁸⁹ Top image from "Map of Part of the International Boundary Line, Under 2nd Art. Convention of London 20th October 1818, Surveyed in 1872 and 1873 by Her Majestys Boundary Commission," reproduced in John Warkentin and Richard I. Ruggles, *Historical Atlas of Manitoba, 1612 to 1969* (Winnipeg: The Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, 1970), 174; bottom image from Twining, W.J. "Joint Map, United States Northern Boundary Commission," United States Northern Boundary Commission, 1878. University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Libraries: American Geographical Society Digital Map Collection, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agdm/id/32718>, based on survey work conducted in 1873 as described in Archibald Campbell and W.J. Twining, *Reports Upon the Survey of the Boundary Between the Territory of the United States and the Possessions of Great Britain from the Lake of the Woods to the Summit of the Rocky Mountains, Authorized by an Act of Congress Approved March 19, 1872* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1878), 332-334.

up in these locations (as Chapter 3 shows, willows and other wetland-associated vegetation were common species in the area). The existence of native-growing willows was identified as a problem causing “considerable worry” by the Province’s Drainage Division in 1935,¹⁹⁰ and efforts to clear them from waterways were ongoing over the coming decades. In the lower land around Rosenfeld and Buffalo Creek, teams of men cleared out vegetation in the late fall of 1949, “where the dense willow brush has obstructed the flow of water in spring when straw and stubble formed barriers where these small trees grow.”¹⁹¹ Other waterways saw similar initiatives, as in the winter of 1957 when the *Echo* reported that “two crews of men [were] working in the Marais river [sic], clearing the banks of brush,” with the hope “that this will speed the spring flow of water.”¹⁹²

Residents who grew up during the latter half of the twentieth century recalled similar instances as part of their growing-up years, which apparently served the dual purpose of providing some people with employment while also speeding up water flow. “To alleviate the financial need that so many of the residents in the area had,” recalled one resident from the Buffalo Creek area, “the government instituted a make-work project that involved cleaning out the creek, the underbrush – sawing in out, chopping it up, piling it up, burning it. The intent being...to supply an income for these...farmers...but then also to clear out the creek, to help the water flow quicker, to improve the drainage.”¹⁹³ Another resident recalled their father and uncle working on these jobs, “to clear the brush and small trees out of the creek path.”¹⁹⁴ A resident who grew up along a creek south of Morden and Winkler remembered that “there was always

¹⁹⁰ “F.E. Humphrey to W.R. Clubb,” March 4, 1939, Drainage Maintenance Boards Letters etc., Drainage Division Minutes and Office Files, A 0044, GR 7784, Q 32694, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁹¹ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, November 9, 1949.

¹⁹² “Marais,” *Red River Valley Echo*, December 18, 1957.

¹⁹³ Gary Klassen, “Personal Interview,” May 6, 2024.

¹⁹⁴ Glenda Hildebrand, “Personal Interview,” April 29, 2024.

deadfall that landed in the creek and would kind of plug the creek up,” and “there was a time when there was sort of a government make-work project – there was a crew of men that showed up in the creek area...and their job was to clear the creek of deadfall debris.”¹⁹⁵

Such observations are certainly in line with local government’s concerns and initiatives. During the 1960s and 1970s, the R.M. of Rhineland often made requests of the Provincial Government for “brushing,” “brush cutting,” or removal of “brush and trees” in both creeks and Provincially-managed drainage channels.¹⁹⁶ The ongoing removal of shrubs and small trees in the name of faster drainage speaks to the ways in which Mennonites reshaped the West Reserve’s prairie landscapes, in both the planting of some types of trees and vegetation, and the removal of others.

The regular removal of willows is particularly notable, given the documented importance of that plant for Metis and Anishinaabe medicinal uses, decorative and artistic purposes, and basket-weaving.¹⁹⁷ In the Mennonite-settled area of Rosenort and Rosenhoff, roughly ten kilometres north of the West Reserve, Mennonite oral and family histories recall an early settler’s interaction with an Anishinaabe person harvesting willows along the Scratching River.

¹⁹⁵ Richard Warkentin, “Personal Interview,” January 20, 2024.

¹⁹⁶ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965),” Microfilm #382, September 4, 1962, Mennonite Heritage Archives; “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland, and of Douglas: Minutes of Council Meetings (1965-75), By-laws (1-699), and (1-41),” Microfilm #383, August 5, 1969; August 8, 1972; October 7, 1975, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁹⁷ For example, Jill Falcon Ramaker mentions how, in the lodges of small Anishinaabe winter camps, beds “were sometimes constructed of willow”: Jill Falcon Ramaker, “Gichi Bizhiki (Grandfather Buffalo): Anishinaabe Sovereignty, the Seasonal Round, and Resistance to the Colonization of the Web of Life” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Montana State University, 2021), 255. Red Osier Dogwood, also known as Red Willow, had many household and medicinal uses for the Anishinaabeg: Mary Siisip Geniusz, *Plants Have so Much to Give Us, All We Have to do is Ask: Anishinaabe Botanical Teachings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 150-151. Also, Lawrence Barkwell’s research outlines the importance of Wolf Willow and Red Willow (or Red Osier Dogwood) for Metis and Cree peoples: Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Wolf Willow,” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2009; Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Red Willow Baskets: The Louis Riel Institute Collection,” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2014; Lawrence J. Barkwell, “La Michinn: Traditional Metis Medicines and Healing,” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2018, 4, 21, 26. There is also some Mennonite oral history of interactions between Anishinaabe and Mennonite peoples in the Rosenort/Rosenhoff area of Manitoba involving the use of willows and red willow baskets. See Lorilee Loewen Scharfenberg, “Lorilee’s Treaty Story,” *Treaty Education: Storytelling*, Summer 2022.

According to this story, the Mennonite was told that Mennonites were welcome to utilize the land, but that “the river was ‘for everyone and no one’ because it was life.” “Sadly,” writes a local historian whose ancestor was the Mennonite who interacted with the Anishinaabe man, “after one of the major floods in the area, the municipality did major dredging and clear-cut most of the trees along the river. Most of the desired willow disappeared.”¹⁹⁸ In Mennonite-settled areas, and across the province, new settler-and-state-induced patterns of land use and agriculture impacted both the land and the availability of its resources for Indigenous Peoples.

Conclusion

Did Ontario settlers largely bypass the broad grasslands of the West Reserve in the nineteenth century? Yes. Did Mennonites then settle in places where other Canadian settlers had not? Yes. Did they plant trees, establish villages, and expand the amount of arable land through private, municipal, and provincial drainage projects? Yes. Did West Reserve colonists experience extreme hardship in those early years? Of course, all of these things did occur. In fact, a simple drive through the area today reveals how broad and flat the landscape is, and how these features, along with the dearth of significant trees, must surely have been foreboding to Mennonite colonists in the reserve’s early years.

But in terms of these themes’ roles in building established *meanings* of the West Reserve and its landscape over time, it is instructive to recall William Turkel’s assertion that “Places don’t speak for themselves about their past; rather their pasts emerge from the interpretive activities of many people.”¹⁹⁹ The most dominant stories of the West Reserve, established through Mennonite historical commemoration, were established as such through long-running and continual repetition. This repetition was especially pronounced with themes of empty and

¹⁹⁸ Lorilee Loewen Scharfenberg, “Lorilee’s Treaty Story,” *Treaty Education: Storytelling*, Summer 2022.

¹⁹⁹ Turkel, *The Archive of Place*, 107.

deficient land, of the West Reserve as overlooked, of Mennonite conquest of nature and land improvement as a component of national progress, and of new inscriptions on the land such as villages and trees. Further, continual repetition can establish certain stories as “irrefutab[ly]” true and “logical,” simply through their repeated tellings, turning them into what Travis Wysote and Erin Morton have called “white settler tautologies.”²⁰⁰ It is worth thinking about this when we ask why, and how, certain histories of the West Reserve became more legible and visible than others. When considering commemorations of settler presence on particular *land*, the entrenching of histories through repetition is also aided by the extreme transformations made to the landscape itself (for example, the Mennonite-induced changes to the West Reserve’s grassland). The land then also tells a story of settler presence that is made even more visceral by the “dramatic” environmental changes wrought by colonization.²⁰¹ The arrival of settlers and the accompanying landscape transformations of course had profound implications for Indigenous Peoples and their presence within their homelands. Settler historical memory of the West Reserve addressed this presence in several ways, which is what the following chapter now turns to.

²⁰⁰ Wysote and Morton, ““The Depth of the Plough,”” 2.

²⁰¹ Wysote and Morton, ““The Depth of the Plough,”” 2.

CHAPTER 2

Mennonite Settler Narratives of Indigenous Land and People

As we have seen in Chapter 1, depictions of the Manitoba prairie as empty and deficient land existed throughout West Reserve histories and commemorations from the 1920s to 1980s. These narratives dovetailed with characterizations of the region's Indigenous inhabitants, and while Mennonite narrations did not uniformly characterize Indigenous people as invisible, or the land devoid of people when Mennonites first arrived, the narratives nevertheless portrayed Indigenous people in ways that privileged settler histories of the region.

To be sure, West Reserve histories were by and large *Mennonite* stories, and in that sense we should be careful about pointing to what they 'didn't do' in terms of engaging with Indigenous histories and stories of that place. To put it another way, it is understandable that West Reserve history-making did not emphasize Indigenous presence and stories alongside the stories of Mennonite arrival. However, that history-making is still open to an analysis of how it did or didn't approach Indigenous presence in southern Manitoba. Further, when histories and commemorative initiatives of a specific geographic area focus on certain stories and narratives, it is then worth asking what the effects and implications are for Indigenous histories of that same location. LK Bertram has identified a kind of "ethnic colonial amnesia" that treats histories of "mass immigration and colonial oppression" as unrelated and separate from each other.¹ Analyzing West Reserve commemorations with this in mind can attune us to the role of local historical commemoration in such amnesia.

In this chapter, I raise and analyze several key narrative themes present in Mennonite West Reserve history-making from the 1920s to 1980s and related to Indigenous presence in, and claims to, the Mennonite-settled southern Manitoba prairies. Specifically, I analyze how the

¹ Bertram, "'Eskimo' Immigrants and Colonial Soldiers," 71-72.

historical framing and contextualizing of Mennonite arrival was often done in general and vague ways, describing complex, dispossessive, and violent processes as benign and inevitable. Further, narratives of First Nations and Metis populations correlated with narratives of empty and deficient land. This occurred through descriptions of Indigenous people as part of the empty ‘wild’ landscape itself, and also through rhetoric that characterized them as disappearing and marginal to the Mennonite story of the land between the Red River and the Pembina Hills. Related to this latter phenomenon were the ways in which an interest in the ‘ancient’ Indigenous past of the West Reserve manifested itself among area Mennonites in the twentieth century, in commemorative events and in hobbyist archaeological collecting.

In exploring these themes, it is important to remember that settler-colonial discourse is not the same thing as the material dispossession of land or the physical relocations of Indigenous people from most of that land, though they are connected. Cole Harris cautions against an overemphasis on “texts, systems of signification, and procedures of knowledge generation” in studies of colonialism. He argues that doing so “obscures other forms of colonial power,” notably the state’s “physical power” and “supporting infrastructure,” that made the dispossession of Indigenous lands possible. However, he also notes the role of texts and discourses in “the legitimation of and moral justification for dispossession,” a link that is of particular interest in the pages that follow.

Vague and Inevitable Historical Processes

Given that West Reserve local histories and commemorative activities were of course focused on the Mennonite story of the region, mentions of Indigenous inhabitants were often contextual in nature, typically located in the front end of documents or the brief introductory sections of a speaker’s remarks as part of descriptions of ‘what came before.’ Additionally, these

introductory-type narrative structures entailed descriptions of the various political and social historical processes that resulted in Mennonites being able to come to Manitoba. These descriptions were regularly vague, often assigning a sense of benign inevitability to processes that, in reality, were dispossessive and violent, and that favoured the settlement of the prairies by White settlers.

As one local history described, the southern Manitoba prairie of the late nineteenth century was part of a broader North American frontier that was “gradually being pushed back by increasing numbers of settlers.” In the small spaces of such introductory sections of local histories, this was an era when “boundaries were firmed up in Western Canada,” and “lands in Kansas and the Dakota Territories were falling to the plough.”² These descriptions call to mind how the idea of “the frontier” (particularly in American history) has been employed as a broad and totalizing concept that makes hazy the historical realities of conquest over lands and peoples.³ We can see here, too, how the language employed in these examples – for example, land “falling” to the plough, boundaries being “firmed up,” and a frontier “being pushed back” – is passive, emptied of the actual processes, people, decisions, and structures that enabled such occurrences. The period that saw Mennonites arrive to Manitoba and to the West Reserve was one in which the “era of the buffalo hunt [was] ending and the era of agricultural settlement [was] beginning;” the “disappearance of the buffalo herald[ing] the coming of the settler.”⁴

Decades of historical scholarship, however, has filled in the cracks of what these seemingly benign and inevitable processes were. Indeed, as John Weaver’s influential research has shown, the global “land rush” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries entailed “land-

² Enns, *Gretna*, 2.

³ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), 24-27.

⁴ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 1-2.

taking,” “violence,” and “intimidation” by Europeans toward Indigenous Peoples across North America. Those peoples were “invariably measured...by European religion, laws, science, technology, political organization, knack for warfare, and use of land.”⁵ In the prairies, these factors took the shape of, among other things, the Dominion government’s “use [of] food as a means to control the Indian population to meet its development agenda;”⁶ government treaty interpretations, such as those of Treaty 1, that caused immense dissatisfaction and protest among First Nations of treaties;⁷ Dominion troops’ ‘Reign of Terror’ against the Metis of Red River;⁸ and the fraudulent and problematic failures of Metis land dispersals.⁹

In Mennonite historical accounts, these events and processes were not necessarily ignored, but were rather described as smooth and necessary processes that paved the way for Mennonite arrival. In a point-form survey of key historical events written for the seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations of Mennonite arrival in 1949, for example, 1870 was the year when Manitoba joined confederation, and 1871 was described as a year “of great significance for the settlement of the province,” due to the signing of Treaty 1. From there the text then jumped to 1874, when the first Mennonites arrived in Manitoba, and when the North-West Mounted Police undertook its task of “keep[ing] about 30,000 Indians and many Métis in check....”¹⁰

In later decades, community histories contained similar characterizations. Treaty 1, for example, was described in one local history as a document that smoothly “ceded much of

⁵ John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 5.

⁶ Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, xix.

⁷ Craft, *Breathing Life Into the Stone Fort Treaty*, 103.

⁸ Barkwell, “The Reign of Terror;” Ruth Swan and Edward A. Jerome, “‘Unequal Justice:’ The Metis in O’Donoghue’s Raid of 1871,” *Manitoba History* 39 (2000): 24–38.

⁹ Adam Gaudry and Karen Drake, “The Resilience of Métis Title: Rejecting Assumptions of Extinguishment,” in *Bead by Bead: Constitutional Rights and Métis Community*, ed. Yvonne Boyer and Larry Chartrand (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021), 81-82.

¹⁰ *Gedenkfeier der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Manitoba, Canada*, 146, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

southern Manitoba,”¹¹ while another source remarked that, with the treaty’s signing and the Manitoba Act’s confirmation, “the land in southern Manitoba was thrown open to settlement.”¹² Though the village of Reinland’s community history hinted at the back-and-forth nature of the treaty negotiations, which included “the Indians demand[ing] two-thirds of the land,” in the end it was characterized by a “promise of ‘perpetual peace.’”¹³ Touching on the Red River Resistance and the Manitoba Act, another source remarked, “Riel’s provisional government negotiated the formation of a new province joining confederation [sic] in 1870,” continuing on to state that this was one of several events that “happened in the early 1870s to speed up the settlement of lands in southern Manitoba.”¹⁴ A similarly vague chronology remarked that, “Following the Red River uprising led by Metis leader Louis Riel, the Province of Manitoba was created in 1870.”¹⁵ With historical events described in these ways, Mennonites were depicted as able to occupy their settlement reserves under the blessing of smooth and unproblematic government agreements with First Nations and Metis Peoples.

Anishinaabe historian Jean M. O’Brien, in her study of nineteenth-century New England local histories, calls these types of rhetorical constructions “replacement narratives” – statements that “narrated a process by which non-Indians replaced Indians in their homelands,”¹⁶ sometimes “collapsing the story into a few terse yet evocative phrases,” and glossing over “lengthy, complex, and contested histor[ies] of Indian relations...in a set of sweeping assertions and dismiss Indians as long gone...”¹⁷ Treaty 1, the Red River Resistance, and the Manitoba Act were all processes rooted in, and related to, longstanding Indigenous relations and claims to the land

¹¹ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 41.

¹² Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, 9.

¹³ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 41.

¹⁴ Enns, *Gretna*, 3.

¹⁵ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 41.

¹⁶ O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting*, 56.

¹⁷ O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting*, 55.

of southern Manitoba. Additionally, they were all processes that were contested, contentious, and problematic in how they were interpreted and enacted by the Federal Government. However, by being emptied of such complications within Mennonite tellings, they acted as narrative ‘replacement’ devices, events that made it possible for land to be “thrown open” for Mennonite agricultural settlement.

Disappearing Natives

This is not to say that Mennonites ignored the presence of Indigenous people in the region when reflecting on their ancestors’ arrival to Manitoba. In fact, they did address this historical reality, although in very particular ways. On occasion, some writings devoted an uncommon amount of space to critical readings of Mennonite arrival to the province. The R.M. of Rhineland’s centennial history, for example, opened with a chapter on “Manitoba, the Mennonites, and the Metis,” describing the “context of early Manitoba history” and, in particular, contrasting the Mennonite experience with that of the Metis. Whereas Mennonites “prospered on their reserves...and were considered progressive, honest, and industrious” by nineteenth-century observers, “over 90 percent of Metis land had been alienated both legally and illegally and many had left the province.”¹⁸

Though not overly common, these types of reflections – made in 1982 – had some precedent in the Mennonite centennial commemorations in the previous decade. This was a period in which Mennonites were considering in new ways their place within, and relationship to, the world around them. As Jeremy Wiebe notes, the 1974 centennial of Mennonite arrival functioned to establish a “vision of a [Mennonite] collective identity that fit within and was

¹⁸ Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, 13. This amount of focus on concurrent Metis and Mennonite experiences is perhaps indicative of the fact that the Municipality’s history was written in the 1980s by Gerhard Ens, who would go on to become a prominent historian of Western Canada and of the Metis particularly.

partly constructed by the framework of state-sponsored cultural pluralism and official multiculturalism,” and that would further “confer advantage to Mennonites as they acculturated to the cultural mainstream.”¹⁹ Although the event-planning process raised several ideas regarding “ways to involve Indigenous people in the celebration,” these ideas “gained little traction.”²⁰ This may have reflected the complex and conflicted layers in which twentieth-century Mennonites both interacted with Indigenous people and considered their roles within those interactions.

Though nothing came of these ideas, some critical reflections made their way into a book published for the centennial. These pieces interrogated Mennonites’ place on Indigenous land in southern Manitoba, pointedly asking, “Whose Land did Mennonites get?,” investigating the ways in which First Nations and Metis people helped Mennonites survive their first years on the prairies, and stating that, “it is true that the Mennonites did nothing to help Indians or Metis in their fight to stay alive as a people and to keep the country for themselves, or aid them in their effort to adapt to the new way of life.”²¹ Commenting on this era of prairie settler commemoration, Frances Swyripa notes that “No other immigrant settler population compromised their centennial celebrations with such soul-searching,”²² something which is also evidenced in some of the critical scholarship on Indigenous-Mennonite relations produced by Mennonites during this period.

Just as often, though (and perhaps more often), when Mennonites commemorated and reflected on their history in southern Manitoba, Indigenous Peoples were portrayed as belonging

¹⁹ Jeremy Wiebe, “Performing Ethnicity in a Pluralistic Society: The 1974 Manitoba Mennonite Centennial,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 37 (2019): 285–303.

²⁰ Wiebe, “Performing Ethnicity,” 291.

²¹ Toews and Klippenstein, *Manitoba Mennonite Memories*, 52.

²² Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 101.

to an era prior to Mennonite arrival, on whom the pages of history were being turned as a new settler story was now being told. While some narrations glossed over Indigenous presence and resistance to government and settler impingements on their ways of life, other narrations acknowledged Indigenous histories of the region, but only as *histories*, precursors to a new settler-colonial present. Mennonites, remarked a representative of the Pembina Hills Historical Society at the 1951 cairn unveiling, “came...to establish a new living space” in the “land of the early Indian tribes, and later of the fur trader and explorers.”²³

Within this chronology – from Indian tribes to fur traders and explorers, and finally to the Mennonite agricultural present – “Indians” became cultural artifacts and symbols of a period prefatory to the arrival of Mennonites, the subject of parade floats, like in the town of Winkler’s fiftieth-anniversary parade in 1956, where a Grade 4 class’s float contained “an Indian wigwam and tent,” alongside other floats showing ‘Snow White and the seven dwarfs’ and a ‘Gypsy Caravan.’”²⁴ In the fall of 1953, students from the Wakeham school went for an afternoon hike in the Pembina Hills, visiting “an old Indian chief’s grave on the eastern or sunrise slope,” the grave having “been known to exist by early English settlers of the Pembinas.”²⁵ Whereas, in some instances, Indigenous histories were compressed and glossed over, here they were acknowledged, but as a relic of “bygone days,”²⁶ knowledge of which was now filtered through settler narrations and experienced as a historical curiosity and resting point on an afternoon hike.²⁷

²³ “3,000 Attend Memorial Dedication at Gretna,” *Altona Echo*.

²⁴ “Huge Parade Features Winkler’s 50th Birthday,” *Red River Valley Echo*, June 20, 1956.

²⁵ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, November 18, 1953.

²⁶ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, November 18, 1953.

²⁷ These examples contain shades of both “the vanishing-Indian ideology of the nineteenth century” and the “modernist primitivism of the twentieth,” the later of which sought and emphasized ideas of Indigenous people’s “premodern authenticity.” Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 13, 198.

Similarly, when commenting on the extent of any Indigenous presence in the West Reserve by 1875, Reinland's history book stated that, "When Mennonites moved to the West Reserve there was only one group of Indians that had not yet left that tract of land after the signing of the 1871 treaty – those that lived in the Pembina Hills region close to the international boundary."²⁸ The village of Gnadenfeld's anniversary history remarked that in the early days of that portion of the West Reserve, there "was very little contact with native people in the area, although a group of Indians migrated north to the southern edge of the Mennonite community near Haskett. Eventually their migration ceased and Mennonites had no further significant contact with native groups for many years."²⁹ In the context of historical factors seen as inevitably resulting in Indigenous marginalization and settler arrival, the mention of these marginal Indigenous groups on the geographic fringes of the Mennonite-settled areas made sense, and were made legible and understandable, as a marginal presence.

One of the most prominent elements of Mennonite commemorations in the West Reserve was the former 'Post Road.' This route, alongside and in comparison with other historical transportation links through the region, exemplifies the connected histories of Indigenous displacement and settler presence in the region. The trail was formalized by Mennonites in 1875 by posts that were erected every 15 rods (or approximately seventy-five metres) along a pre-existing trail through the reserve.³⁰ The road was the main thoroughfare through the reserve and connected its villages to the railway town of Emerson. In the West Reserve's early years, prior to the establishment of a railway there, it was an extremely important thoroughfare for Mennonites as well as travellers and settlers passing through the area.

²⁸ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 41.

²⁹ Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal, 1880-1980*, 7.

³⁰ Conrad Stoesz, "The Post Road," in *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 81-90.

The Post Road occupied a prominent place in commemorations and local histories of the West Reserve. Indeed, one of the purposes of erecting the memorial cairn in 1951 – in addition to remembering Mennonite settlement in the region – was to mark and remember the Post Road as one of the key features of that settlement.³¹ The cairn itself was located at a point along what was the road’s historical route, near a former Mennonite farmyard that had served as an overnight stopping point for travellers in the late nineteenth century.³² In terms of the messages conveyed in commemorations of the trail, Swyripa has argued that for local Mennonites, the Post Road represented not the colonization and “civilizing” of the plains by settlers, but rather “a more elementary response to the land as a forbidding and sometimes deadly place,” in addition to a mode of connecting isolating Mennonite villages to the “outside non-Mennonite world.”³³

The severity of the winters experienced by initial settlers could result in people losing their way and occasionally dying in the snow, as one local history book noted.³⁴ Further, the importance of the road as a reliable route for Mennonites to get their grain and produce to market was mentioned, along with the “flow” of “of new information and ideas” that could be enabled by such a transportation link.³⁵ Its status as an early mail route was also highlighted, allowing for news and communication with family around North America and “enabl[ing] them to send messages to the outside world.”³⁶ Yet local histories also celebrated the Post Road as a bringer of ‘civilization’ to the prairies. In fact, when the idea of erecting the memorial cairn in the West Reserve was first broached in 1948, it was framed as a way to “commemorate the famous old Post Road from Emerson to Gretna,” and to “realize historical recognition of this early route of

³¹ “Favor Erection of Cairn at Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, January 19, 1949.

³² Conrad Stoesz, “The Post Road (Part 2),” *Mennonite Historian* 26, no. 3 (2000), 4.

³³ Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 195-197, 48.

³⁴ Enns, *Gretna*, 11.

³⁵ Enns, *Gretna*, 11; Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 69.

³⁶ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 115.

the first settlers of western Manitoba.”³⁷ In the ensuing decades, the route was also described as a “Colonization Trail” that “transported many immigrants from Emerson to points west,”³⁸ and as “the first main road west from Emerson into the Manitoba wilderness.”³⁹ Beyond facilitating only Mennonite settlement, another source noted that the trail “also carried homesteaders west to establish places like Mountain City, Nelsonville, Alexandria, Calf Mountain, Archibald, Pembina Crossing, Ruttanville, Crystal City and Deloraine,”⁴⁰ thereby facilitating settler expansion further beyond the Mennonite reserve.

The inscription on the West Reserve’s cairn itself connected the road to the “peace and prosperity” realized by the “pioneers and their descendants,” and brought about by those settlers who “braved the wild treeless plains.”⁴¹ A written piece on “The Meaning of the Cairn,” included in the program from the unveiling ceremony, positioned the trail “as one of the first transportation arteries connecting the villages with the outside world,” situating it alongside the story of “agricultural progress,” the “gradual mechanization of farming methods,” and “the initial sod huts,” which had “given way to modern homes of new architectural design.”⁴² As the president of the Pembina Hills Historical Society put it in a speech at the unveiling, the cairn symbolized the passage of “thousands of settlers” along the Post Road, “going west on the trail which would lead to such places as Reinland, Schanzenfeld, Glencross, Mountain City, Nelson, Snowflake, Pilot Mound and Crystal City”⁴³ – that is, through the Mennonite reserve and well beyond. Post Road commemorations, then, not only recalled the hardships of settlement on the

³⁷ “Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, November 17, 1948.

³⁸ Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 69.

³⁹ “Gretna News,” *Red River Valley Echo*, August 10, 1955.

⁴⁰ Enns, *Gretna*, 8.

⁴¹ “Program: Unveiling of Memorial Monument Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of Settlement and Progress in Southern Manitoba, 1875-1950,” Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁴² “Program: Unveiling of Memorial Monument Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of Settlement and Progress in Southern Manitoba, 1875-1950,” Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁴³ “3,000 Attend,” *Altona Echo*.

West Reserve's prairie land and the necessity for wayfinding and legible transportation routes, but were also enmeshed with themes of colonization.

The enmeshing of these themes is perhaps most apparent at the location of the old trail's genesis near the town of Emerson and the Fort Dufferin National Historic site along the Red River just east of the West Reserve lands. In the early 1870s, the collection of buildings known as Fort Dufferin was first the headquarters for the Canadian component of the North American Boundary Commission tasked with surveying the forty-ninth parallel, and was also the starting point of the North-West Mounted Police's (NWMP) 'March West' in 1874. Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster have noted how the contemporary site, through its interpretive features, plaques, and signs, memorializes both of these elements – but more particularly the NWMP's March West – as a “Genesis story” of Canadian nation-building through its assertion of sovereignty over the western prairies.⁴⁴

Crucially, though, Fort Dufferin was also “an immigration station” in the latter half of the 1870s, where thousands of newcomers would arrive by Red River steamboat, bound for points further west on the prairies. The site today therefore also includes references to the immigrant settlers who would follow in the wake of the NWMP's sovereignty-asserting trek,⁴⁵ including the first West Reserve Mennonites. As of 2020, various write-ups at the site included diary excerpts from Mennonites chronicling the transatlantic journey that took them from Europe through the United States and eventually to Fort Dufferin, maps showing the routes taken, and a map of the West Reserve showing the original Post Road route from the Fort Dufferin area.⁴⁶ Another

⁴⁴ Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster, “The NWMP in Canadian Historical Memory,” in *Place and Replace: Essays on Western Canada*, eds. Adele Perry, Esyllt W. Jones, and Leah Morton (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014), 81.

⁴⁵ Nettelbeck and Foster, “The NWMP,” 81.

⁴⁶ Personal visit by the author, October 12, 2020.

plaque providing information on Mennonite arrival comments that “the Canadian government...needed hardworking and experienced farmers to settle the west,”⁴⁷ which they found in the thousands of Mennonites who arrived in Manitoba, and to the West Reserve specifically. As both the starting point of the March West and the starting point for Mennonites coming to the West Reserve along what would soon become known as the Post Road, the contemporary meanings of Fort Dufferin, relayed through its commemorative story-telling, are multi-layered. The pairing of the Mennonite arrival story and the NWMP’s ‘March West’ story together at the site shows how both these stories are connected through the police “as the figures who mediate between the pre-settler world and the world to come – precursors to the settlers who would build a life on the land.”⁴⁸

West Reserve community histories made similar connections between the Post Road and Fort Dufferin in relation to Canada’s nineteenth-century goals for prairie settlement. Reinland’s history book noted how that village was an early West Reserve hub, and located directly along the route from Emerson and West Lynne. One of that book’s sections, titled “Along the Post Road,” included substantial attention to the fact that the village of Reinland was a NWMP detachment from the late 1880s to 1892. The book noted that the police force was intended “to bring a semblance of law and order to the North-West...and to calm the increasingly restless Indian population of the Northwest Territories,” enacting “a combination of restraining and beneficent controls over both Indians and whites.”⁴⁹ It also alluded to the connected dual purposes of Fort Dufferin, noting that it was the NWMP’s point of assembly and the place where “the first West Reserve immigrants arrived a year later.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Personal visit by the author, October 12, 2020.

⁴⁸ Nettelbeck and Foster, “The NWMP,” 89.

⁴⁹ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 119.

⁵⁰ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 119.

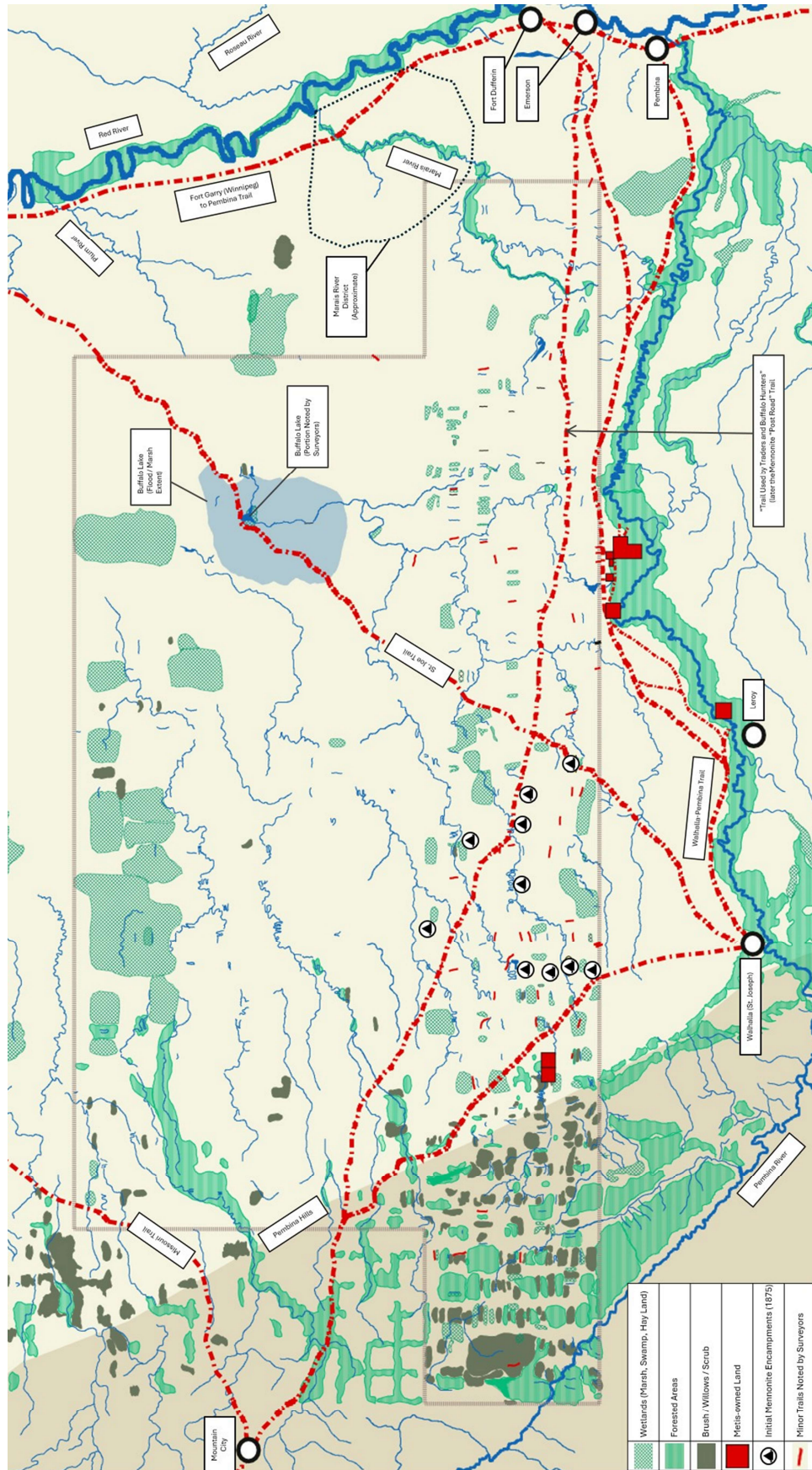


Figure 5: The West Reserve at Approximately the Time of Mennonite Arrival

The somewhat vague origins of the Post Road in relation to the other trails in the region could sometimes result in the conflation of these historic routes within commemorative sources and histories. While more recent sources identify the historic Post Road as having been a slightly separate (though generally similar) route from the Boundary Commission and NWMP trails,⁵¹ earlier commemorative sources appeared to occasionally conflate these various east-west routes through the West Reserve into a single thematic thrust of westward settler expansion. In one instance “an old fur trade and exploration route” was purported to be “later known as the Boundary Commission Trail or Post Road.”⁵² Another source stated that, in 1885, the NWMP “followed the Post Road west to the territories where Riel and his followers were providing a show of armed strength,” alluding to the Northwest Resistance.⁵³ While the Post Road appears to have been a distinct route somewhat differentiated from the Boundary Commission Trail and NWMP trail, its sometimes indistinguishable association with processes of European settlement demonstrates that, at least to some extent, the Post Road of Mennonite lore was connected in historical memory to more general ideas of westward expansion across seemingly empty lands.

Despite the purported emptiness of West Reserve land, Indigenous presence was acknowledged in relation to transportation routes, albeit vaguely and minimally. Recent scholarship has pointed out the Post Road’s antecedency as an “Indigenous Road” used by First Nations and Metis Peoples.⁵⁴ Though its later use as a connector of various westward-spreading towns was lauded in Mennonite histories, it significantly also passed “Pinancewaywining or Buffalo Head (now called Calf Mountain)...where the People made offerings of tobacco, other

⁵¹ Boundary Trail National Heritage Region, “A Guide to the Principal Historic Sites,” John Rempel and William Harms, *Atlas of the Original Mennonite Villages, Homesteaders, and Some Burial Plots of the Mennonite West Reserve* (Altona: Friesen Printers, 1990), 4; Stoesz, “The Post Road,” 79.

⁵² Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, 2.

⁵³ Enns, *Gretna*, 56.

⁵⁴ Falcon Ramaker, “Gichi Bizhiki,” 179-181; Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Buffalo Hunting Trails from Red River: Calf Mountain, Buffalo Head or ‘Tete de Boeuf’ and Star Mound,” Winnipeg, Louis Riel Institute, 2013.

gifts, and the bull heads left behind with their noses pointing east.”⁵⁵ In Mennonite histories, brief statements were sometimes made referring to the Post Road’s longer history, stating for example that it “may have been an old Indian trail or Buffalo trail worn into the terrain and used by the settlers.”⁵⁶ Another publication claimed that it “followed the early Indian trails which took travellers from the junction of the Red and Pembina Rivers to the Turtle Mountains,” and that these early routes “were followed by the International Boundary Commission surveyors.”⁵⁷ Elsewhere, the Post Road was characterized as having been “used by Buffalo hunters” in earlier times.⁵⁸ Dominion Land Surveyor maps of the West Reserve region show a near-innumerable amount of trails crisscrossing the reserve area, some after Mennonite arrival, others well before.

Perhaps the most significant pre-Mennonite route through the area was the ‘St. Joe Trail.’ This Metis oxcart route branched off of the major West Plains, or Pembina, Trail that stretched from Fort Garry south to Pembina and further beyond into the United States. From the Pembina Trail, it extended at a southwest angle through the West Reserve to the Metis community of St. Joseph (later named Walhalla) in Dakota Territory. The St. Joe Trail was part of a regional network of cart trails in and around the West Reserve (Figure 5), which was itself a small part of the extensive cart network at the heart of the dynamic borderland economy, both north and south of the forty-ninth parallel, in which the Metis were key players, particularly during the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁹

By the late 1880s, though, the St. Joe Trail and the Post Road began to slowly disappear. Both crossed the land in ways that did not conform to the right-angle grid of the Dominion Land

⁵⁵ Falcon Ramaker, “Gichi Bizhi,” 180.

⁵⁶ Conrad Stoesz, “The Post Road,” *Mennonite Historian* 26, no. 2 (2000): 2.

⁵⁷ Enns, *Gretna*, 8.

⁵⁸ “Gretna News, *Altona Echo*, August 10, 1955.

⁵⁹ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 48-51.

Survey, a grid that set the template for the creation of the eventual gridded road network. Many factors played into the disappearance of these and other old trails,⁶⁰ one of which was the breakdown of the Mennonite villages' communal land-holding system in the mid-to-late 1880s.⁶¹ Farmers began to abandon this system in favour of the land survey's homestead system that was based on individually-held 160-acre "perfectly square parcels" of land defined by the survey grid, a "state apparatus" which "created an orderly settlement process" and then "began to sway farmers to abandon their old communitarian approaches to land management."⁶²

As the road grid became predominant, previous transportation routes through the reserve became increasingly inconvenient for settlers. Many of the old trails connecting Mennonite villages had "completely ignored" the survey grid's road allowances,⁶³ as had much of the Post Road, which was "cultivated and put into agricultural production" wherever it was not aligned with the survey grid's road rights-of-way.⁶⁴ Mennonites began to petition local government councils on these matters, as in the Rural Municipality of Rhineland, where a farmer stated his intention "to plough up the road leading to [the village of] Chortitz through his farm...and to prohibit the travelling on the said road."⁶⁵

Similar petitions were initiated when the Dominion government surveyed the St. Joe Trail at the request of the Province for a potential roadway.⁶⁶ This was part of a larger project, initiated in 1876, devoted to surveying all the major trails in Manitoba that had been established

⁶⁰ Stoesz, "The Post Road (Part 2)," 5.

⁶¹ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 137-140.

⁶² Loewen, *Mennonite Farmers*, 182.

⁶³ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 167.

⁶⁴ Stoesz, "The Post Road (Part 2)," 9.

⁶⁵ "Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland, and of Douglas: Minutes of Council Meetings (1884-1925, and 1884-1891)," May 25, 1886, Microfilm #381, Microfilm Project #109, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁶⁶ "Order in Council Re: Trails to be Surveyed," Highways Branch Office Files, A 0045, GR 1618, G 833, Archives of Manitoba.

prior to 1870.⁶⁷ When surveyors were noticed along the St. Joe Trail route in 1886, Enoch Winkler, Member of the Legislative Assembly representing the West Reserve area, wrote to the Surveyor General on behalf of local farmers. He stated that, if the route were “intended as a road allowance...it is cutting up their farms into very inconvenient shapes running over them in a zig zag way.”⁶⁸ Winkler wrote again in September 1889, this time to the Chief Clerk of Public Works, to state that the trail known “by the name of Halfbreed trail from Ste Agathe to St. Joe, Dakota,” was “no longer required.”⁶⁹ The following November, the Rhineland Municipal Council officially passed a resolution requesting that “the Halfbreed trail from Morris to Walhalla...be closed.”⁷⁰

Thus, the survey grid – more tangibly, its corresponding network of road rights-of-way and quarter sections of agricultural fields – increasingly rendered previous transportation patterns inconvenient and obsolete. Yet, of the St. Joe and Post Road trails, it was the Post Road that survived in historical memory as the more important part of the region’s history, at least in written and formal commemorative Mennonite expressions. It was in part the subject of one of the region’s first significant Mennonite monuments in 1951, and noted in published local histories through the late twentieth century. In more recent times, it has been further formalized as a “Memorial Trail” marked with a large sign and commemorated with a detailed tour brochure for people interested in travelling to various sites along the route.⁷¹

⁶⁷ “Order in Council Re: Trails to be Surveyed,” Archives of Manitoba.

⁶⁸ Winkler to Surveyor General, November 25, 1886, Administrative Files Including Correspondence and Reports Regarding Land Survey of Manitoba, NR 0004, GR 0289, G 402, Archives of Manitoba.

⁶⁹ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland, and of Douglas: Minutes of Council Meetings (1884-1925, and 1884-1891),” November 19, 1889, Microfilm #381, Microfilm Project #109, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁷⁰ Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland, and of Douglas: Minutes of Council Meetings (1884-1925, and 1884-1891),” November 19, 1889.

⁷¹ Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, *The Mennonite West Reserve Post Road Memorial Tour* (Winkler: Southman Commercial Printing, 2015), <https://mmhs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Post-Road-Map-2.pdf>.

The trail's durability within the Mennonite West Reserve story is surely due in part to its initial function of ensuring more safe travel in a difficult climate that could even be lethal in winter, as Swyripa has argued. Yet the trail was also commemorated in ways that positioned it within and alongside narratives of national progress and westward settler colonization. Its historic connection to Fort Dufferin and the commemoration of that site speak to this, as does the fact that the trail's whole eastern half was located more or less along an east-west road right-of-way as determined by the Dominion Land Survey. This alignment with the grid's legal and spatial power – inscribed in the earth by road rights-of-way⁷² – has made the route's commemoration as a “Memorial Trail” more feasible: today the route's eastern half can be driven via a rural road, and the western half, while not aligned exactly with contemporary roads, can be driven approximately via nearby roads.⁷³

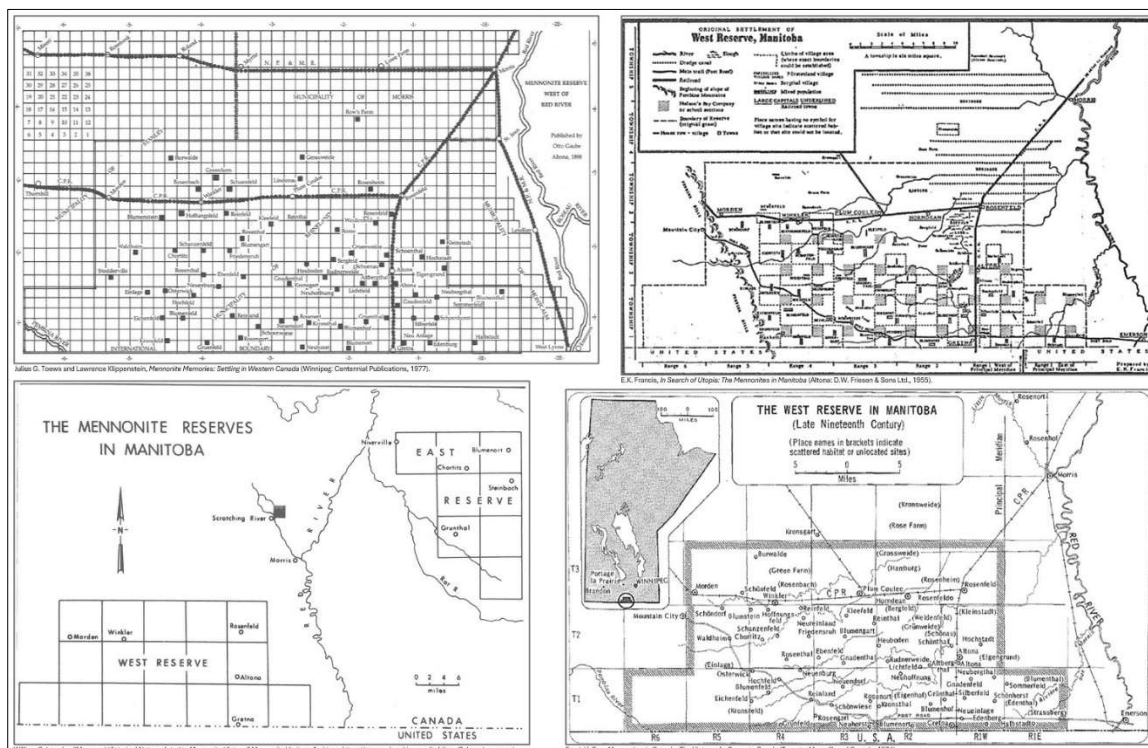


Figure 6: Commonly-used West Reserve maps.

⁷² Rod Bantjes, *Improved Earth: Prairie Space as Modern Artefact, 1869-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 5.

⁷³ Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, *The Mennonite West Reserve Post Road Memorial Tour*.

By way of contrast, the trail to St. Joseph did not align at all with any of the survey grid's rights-of-way but rather crossed those lines at an angle, resulting in the zig-zag pieces of land so inconvenient to the expanding and ascendant settler agriculture of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Whereas the Post Road figured prominently in mid-to-late-twentieth century historical writing by Mennonites, mentions of the Metis trail in formal local historical writings were scant.⁷⁴ This was reflected in many of the West Reserve maps most commonly used in local histories from the 1970s to 1990 (Figure 6). These maps tended to emphasize the townships and ranges of the survey grid, the railway locations, towns and villages, and, in three of the four maps shown, the Post Road. A notable exception to this was the Municipality of Rhineland's substantial anniversary history, which included a more comprehensive map of the trails that cut across Manitoba in 1875 (Figure 7). More recently, the brochure for the Post Road commemorative tour, mentioned above, includes a West Reserve map showing, among other things, the St. Joe trail route plotted out and labelled as "Metis Trail," albeit with no accompanying explanation.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ A notable exception is Leonard Doell's unpublished research paper, written in 1978: Leonard Doell, "Walhalla Trail," Volume 4998, File 26, CA MHC ORG-C, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁷⁵ Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, *The Mennonite West Reserve Post Road Memorial Tour*. Other examples of maps highlighting the St. Joe trail include Leonard Doell's unpublished "Walhalla Trail" article of 1978, and a map by Ed Hoepfner and Bert Friesen included in a *Heritage Posting* report on a conference related to Mennonite-Indigenous relations in 2000. Leonard Doell, "Walhalla Trail," 1978, CA MHC ORG-C, Volume 4998, File 26, Mennonite Heritage Archives; Leonard Doell, "Aboriginal-Mennonite Conference," *Heritage Posting* no. 31 (2000): 2.

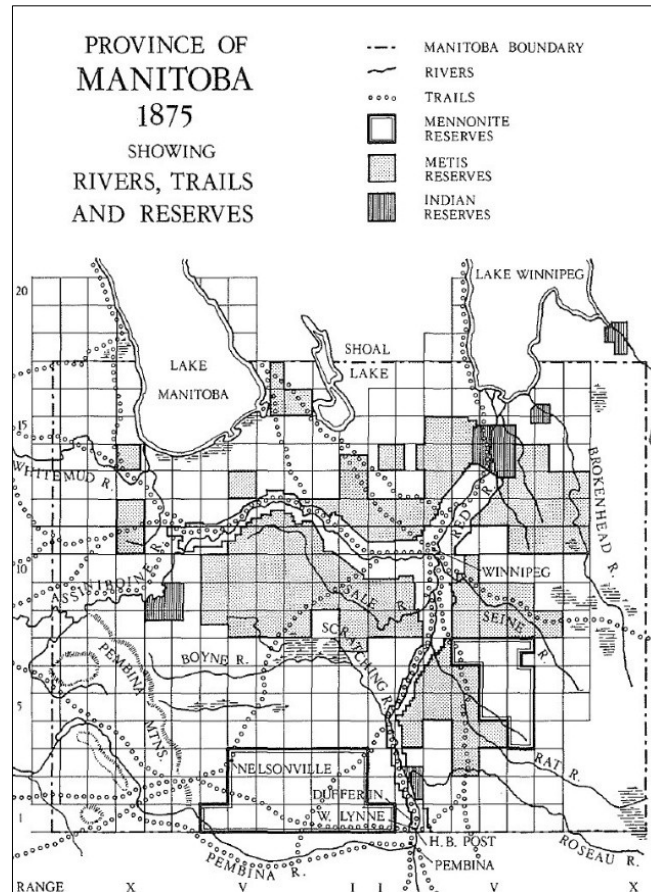


Figure 7: Source: *Volost and Municipality: The Rural Municipality of Rhineland* (Altona: R.M. of Rhineland, 1984), 12.

Within formal Mennonite commemorations and histories of the West Reserve, then, the St. Joe Trail and its associated histories of Metis land use and transportation have been vague, and largely subsumed by other narratives. On one hand, this makes complete sense, given that these histories were dedicated to telling the story of *Mennonite* arrival on the prairies. As Francis opined in 1955, it was perhaps a way for Mennonites to “remain conscious of the historical continuity of their group,”⁷⁶ strengthening awareness of that continuity and highlighting the Post Road’s part in that history.

⁷⁶ “In Search of Utopia - Draft Manuscript,” Emerich K. Francis Fonds, “Chapter XIII: The Structure of the Group,” 663, 1945-47, P7587/2, Archives of Manitoba.

On the other hand, the peripheral nature of Indigenous transportation routes, such as the St. Joe Trail, in West Reserve histories and commemorations dovetailed with the eventual dominance of the Dominion Land Survey grid as the organizational framework of settlement, travel, and life on the prairies. As a result, Mennonite commemorative efforts – which not only strengthened their sense of identity and historical presence in Manitoba, but also positioned their history alongside the broader processes of Canadian settler colonialism – imbued the land with certain meanings and not others, further obscuring Indigenous histories of the region. This process exemplifies the relationship between “legitimiz[ing]” discourses of dispossession and the “disciplinary technologies” – that is, the “maps, numbers, law, and the geography of settlement itself” that “manage[d]” dispossession.⁷⁷

As these examples demonstrate, the “replacement” of Indigenous Peoples by settlers was both “literal” and “discursive.”⁷⁸ Throughout the immigrant-settled agricultural areas of southern Manitoba, including the West Reserve, this replacement entailed both “actual ownership of the soil” and also “Christianization of the landscape,” as Frances Swyripa has argued. Connections between faith and settlement were often made in Mennonite remembrances, as in a recounting of the construction of the West Reserve’s first church, in 1876. In imagining the atmosphere of that first worship service, Reinland’s village history remarked that, “The feeling of gratitude and rejoicing was real...It was ‘the day which the Lord has made,’ that crowned the toil and sweat of the frontier.”⁷⁹

Themes of gratitude and faithfulness typified these types of expressions, and such messages could also be subtly intertwined with themes of the settling in, and arrival to, ‘new’

⁷⁷ Harris, “How Did Colonialism Dispossession?,” 165.

⁷⁸ Eve Tuck et al., “Land Education: Indigenous, Post-Colonial, and Decolonizing Perspectives on Place and Environmental Education Research,” *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 1 (2014): 15.

⁷⁹ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 190.

lands. At the celebrations for the village of Blumenfeld's anniversary in July of 1978, a sermon was preached based on Deuteronomy 6:1-2, which emphasizes the keeping of God's commandments, to be observed and kept "in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess." Similarly, a sermon delivered at Reinland's Jubilee celebrations in 1975 drew on Numbers 32:7, which asks, "Now why will you discourage the heart of the children of Israel from going over into the land which the Lord has given them?"⁸⁰

Closely related to narratives of prefatory, marginal Indigenous presence and replacement by settlers was the idea that Indigenous people "were a part of and belonged in the wilderness."⁸¹ In other words, they were part of the environmental context in which Mennonites would settle, and therefore outside of, or foreign to, incoming European concepts of modernity and civilization.⁸²

As an account marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of Mennonite arrival stated, the land of the West Reserve in 1875 was "a bald, flat prairie, traversed only here and there by buffalo trails, and Indian trails, with only a few permanent settlers."⁸³ Another seventy-fifth-anniversary piece similarly remarked that the land to which the "doughty pioneers" arrived had been "thus far inhabited only by the red man, the beaver and the bison."⁸⁴ Gretna's community history stated that settlers "create[d] a new home where tall grass, roaming buffalo and Indian hunters

⁸⁰ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 313. The biblical quotation cited here is from the New King James Version. However, other translations, while worded slightly differently, also refer to "the land which the Lord hath given them" (King James Version), "the land the Lord has given them" (Revised Standard Version), or "the land which Jehovah hath given them" (American Standard Version).

⁸¹ Thorpe, *Temagami's Tangled Wild*, 65-66.

⁸² O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting*, 50. Royden Loewen has noted a similar theme in the writings of some late-twentieth-century Manitoba Mennonites, who saw First Nations people in Manitoba as "an indelible part of the natural world" who "don't belong to wider society." Loewen, "Eleven Settler Stories that Matter: An Environmental History of the 1870s Migration to Manitoba," *Preservings* 49 (2024): 17.

⁸³ "A Tribute to Our Mennonite Pioneers," *Altona Echo*, September 7, 1949.

⁸⁴ "A Brief Visit with the Old Timers," *Altona Echo*, September 7, 1949.

had dominated.”⁸⁵ Writing about his parents’ 1874 journey to Manitoba in a 1933 diary entry, Bernard P. Hamm reflected on what it would have been like to leave behind their flourishing gardens and orchards in Imperial Russia for a land “which was known to them only as a wild territory which was home to the Indians.”⁸⁶ As one local family history put it in the early 1970s, Mennonite arrivals to the West Reserve were coming to “a land inhabited by wild people and savage animals.”⁸⁷

Indigenous people in these descriptions were assigned to the past, not only as “generic ‘Indians’ who existed as part of the wilderness,”⁸⁸ but crucially as belonging to a landscape and wilderness that no longer existed, because it had been progressively transformed and improved through decades of Mennonite settlement. Additionally, the gendered assumptions of terms like “hunters” and “the red man” implicitly discounted the fact that the region was a homeland for Indigenous families, kinship groups, women, children, and people of all ages and with various roles and occupations – a diverse reality not accounted for in the use of such terms.

Twentieth-century commemorations often also took an interest in the region’s pre-settler history, and occasionally attempted to address it in certain ways. Different types of commemorations coalesced somewhat in 1949, when efforts to establish the West Reserve Mennonite cairn began alongside the Pembina Hills Historical Society’s initiative to erect a similar monument near Morden, outside the former reserve’s boundaries. The latter was aimed at commemorating the travels of explorer Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye, through the region during the eighteenth century – particularly his journey “to the country of the

⁸⁵ Enns, *Gretna*, 35.

⁸⁶ “Journal of Bernhard P. Hamm,” transl. John Dyck, *Preservings* 26 (2006): 54.

⁸⁷ Peter Brown, ed., *The Brauns of Osterwick* (Winnipeg: Peter Brown, 1972), 36.

⁸⁸ Thorpe, *Temagami’s Tangled Wild*, 89.

Mandans” further south.⁸⁹ Early that year, a representative of the Gretna community and chamber of commerce spoke at a Pembina Historical Society meeting, requesting support for the Mennonite cairn initiative, which the Society offered. This dovetailed with the Society’s ongoing La Verendrye cairn initiative, which was the subject of further discussion around the possibilities of using documentary films to tell a “complete story of the historical opening up of southern Manitoba by such men as La Verendrye, Alexander Henry, jr. [sic], David Thompson, and others.” Such films, if developed, “could be tied up with the story of the early settlers, e.g. the Mennonite settlements” and others.⁹⁰ The La Verendrye cairn, according to the Society’s plans, would consist of a large boulder flanked on either side by smaller cairns “principally composed of Indian hammers and relics.” Further, “interested citizens and schools” were encouraged “to collect Indian hammers, etc., to be cemented into the decorative stonework.”⁹¹

In an announcement of the monument’s official opening, a newspaper headline read, “Original Mandan Indians to Give Historic Setting at La Verendrye Unveiling this Labor Day.” The piece made a connection between European exploration and Mennonite colonization, remarking that “Here in the West great men came to explore, build and prepare for future generations, here we could at a later and more settled era follow in the footsteps of the great and build the West as we know it today.” Archaeologist George F. Will – “eminent authority on the Mandans and their history” – was anticipated to speak at the event, and, “In keeping with the day it is expected that several full-blooded Mandans will be on hand at the ceremony.”⁹² In an *Echo*

⁸⁹ Parks Canada Directory of Federal Heritage Designations. Gaultier de La Vérendrye's Journey to the Mandans National Historic Event. https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=956&i=58962.

⁹⁰ “Favor Erection of Cairn at Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, January 19, 1949.

⁹¹ “Favor Erection of Cairn at Gretna,” *Altona Echo*.”

⁹² “Original Mandan Indians to Give Historic Setting at La Verendrye Unveiling this Labor Day,” *Altona Echo*, June 1, 1949.

report on the unveiling event, no mention was made of any such “full blooded Mandan” attendees.

The event, though, was reported on, with the cairn described as “a large field stone found locally, weighing probably 17 tons and standing probably eight feet high.” Next to the stone were “two smaller structures consisting of many imbedded [sic] Indian hammers.” Among the remarks made by various speakers was the statement that “while the total population of what is now Manitoba was less than 12,000 in 1871, five years later 7,146 Mennonites...had occupied the long grass country of the valley which they found to be well-watered and luscious.”⁹³ Juxtaposing the existing population (a population that was largely First Nation and Metis) with a significant population bloc of incoming Mennonites assigned the new arrivals a role in the region’s future prosperity. Indigenous Peoples and histories, as evidenced by the tools cemented into the two smaller cairns, became a part of the past, part of the context into which Mennonites and other settlers arrived.

Indeed, though the cairn’s west-of-Morden location was outside of the West Reserve’s former boundaries and of the historical “area of [Mennonite] dominance,” it had become, by the early 1955, part of an “area of influence,”⁹⁴ as Mennonite farming began to slowly expand westward.⁹⁵ Further, as O’Brien argues, historical monuments “engage both the past and the present to make claims about the future.”⁹⁶ In the examples discussed here, alongside the commemorations mentioned in Chapter 1, Indigenous Peoples played a supporting and prefatory role in the region’s settler present and future. Indeed, as the *Echo* headline purported, they provided a “historic setting.” The La Verendrye cairn and unveiling event were not specifically

⁹³ “La Verendrye Cairn Unveiled at Labor Day Ceremony,” *Altona Echo*, September 7, 1949.

⁹⁴ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 245.

⁹⁵ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 152-153.

⁹⁶ O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting*, 59.

‘Mennonite’ commemorations, though their development, as demonstrated above, was intertwined at least in the planning and speculative phases with Mennonite commemorative efforts.

Though narratives of the prairies as empty and wild persisted into the 1970s, Joseph Wiebe has shown that many late-nineteenth Mennonites “were not only aware of prior Métis presence,” but also “saw the Métis as having an historic authority, including over land-use practices” in southern Manitoba.⁹⁷ Writings in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* newspaper during the 1880s, for example, included reports on the 1885 Metis Northwest Resistance, exhibiting both an awareness of Indigenous attempts at autonomy and settler narratives that were “decidedly pro-government and ambivalent to the Métis.”⁹⁸ Remnants of these narratives and of this awareness continued in later years. Area resident Ray Hamm of the village of Neubergthal recently recalled an entry in his great-uncle’s journal where, “he noted, on whatever day it was in fall of 1885, that Louis Riel was executed...so there was news from somewhere” about events outside the West Reserve’s small Mennonite world. There was some interest in – or at least an awareness of – a significant conflict between the Dominion of Canada and Indigenous Peoples attempting to assert claims to land and rights in their traditional homelands.⁹⁹

Mennonites reflected on the existence of Indigenous people around them in southern Manitoba, as John W. Dyck’s recollections of settlement life in southern Manitoba demonstrate. As a child, Dyck arrived in Manitoba with his family in 1874, where they settled in the East Reserve. Throughout his adult life, Dyck spent time throughout the Mennonite settlements in Manitoba, including two years as a schoolteacher in the West Reserve village of Neuanlage in

⁹⁷ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 114.

⁹⁸ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 117.

⁹⁹ Ray Hamm, “Personal Interview,” August 31, 2023, Neubergthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

the late 1890s.¹⁰⁰ In a complex set of reflections on the “natives,” written in 1914, he remarked that they

were friendly and not sly as had been feared. The coming of the white man has not been a blessing for the natives because their land base has been taken away. As well, the hunting of the buffalo (bison) by whites has decimated the herds, and consequently the natives had had to give up their nomadic life-style. They are now no longer the proud and mighty bow-hunters of the prairies, but are living on reserves in a somewhat confined style, possibly selling a few rugs and baskets which they have made. The white man’s culture has worked negatively on their lives. The government’s efforts to teach them to farm appear to be fruitless; they seem to be somewhat sad and sullen.¹⁰¹

Dyck’s quotation illuminates several things. The subtle lament for First Nations having to ‘give up’ their previous lifestyles as ‘proud and mighty’ hunters at once notes a significant and devastating historical shift while also invoking tropes of the “regrettable” yet inevitable disappearance of the ‘noble savage.’¹⁰² The passage also pointedly notes the stark loss of a land base “taken away,” though any reflection on the role of Mennonite migration within that process would not come in any concerted way until the 1970s, as demonstrated above. Similarly, the observation of “fruitless” government efforts at agricultural education likely speaks more to broad misconceptions of Indigenous people as unsuited for agriculture¹⁰³ than to any observed reality or experience of such. In any case, in the early decades of settlement, the Federal Government’s contemporaneous and inhibitive policies related to agriculture on Indian reserves would likely not have been observable to West Reserve Mennonites.¹⁰⁴ This in itself speaks to

¹⁰⁰ John W. Dyck, *Prairie Pioneer: The Writings of John W. Dyck* (John W. Dyck Book Committee, 1995), 228, 327.

¹⁰¹ John W. Dyck, Maria Kroeker Dueck, and Peter L. Dueck, *Prairie Pilgrims: The Sequel to Prairie Pioneer* (John W. Dyck Book Committee, 1999), 25.

¹⁰² Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, 7th edition (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), 35-36.

¹⁰³ Carter, *Lost Harvests*, 3-4.

¹⁰⁴ See Carter’s *Lost Harvests* for an analysis of the Federal Government’s contradictory and restrictive approaches to fostering First Nations agriculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

nineteenth and twentieth-century government policies that discouraged First Nations' agricultural development, off-reserve movement, and interactions with settler communities.

Beyond the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Mennonites continued to think about, and reflect on Indigenous histories on the prairies, with some of the narratives established in that era continuing into later settlement commemorations. At the seventy-fifth-anniversary celebration of Mennonite arrival held in Steinbach in 1949, for example, a speaker at that event remembered that

The East Reserve was somewhat disturbed in the summer of 1885. There had been undetermined rumours reaching us here that the half breed Louis Riel and a number of like-minded ones were in open rebellion against the government for the second time. A number of like-minded ones in Manitoba sympathized with them there and our parents recounted that some in the villages began to lock their doors at night. The rebellion only lasted a short time, however. The instigator was sentenced and none of our people were harassed in any way.¹⁰⁵

At commemorative events such as this, then, the memories and sentiments shared regarding the 1885 Resistance reflect similar perceptions of nineteenth-century Mennonites who, according to Wiebe, viewed the Resistance in a way that “cast the Métis in the role of rebellion” with the main concern being about “disorder leading to rebellion,” thereby “delegitim[izing] Metis claims to land and strengthen[ing] Mennonite attachment through Canada’s political control of the land.”¹⁰⁶ In both the writings of early settlers and in the settlement commemorations of later generations, Mennonites considered Indigenous people in ways that often enforced ideas of them as disappearing and as precursors to a settler story.

¹⁰⁵ “Gedenkfeier Der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Manitoba, Canada,” 1949, 146, Translated by Elfrieda Schroeder.

¹⁰⁶ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 118, 120.

“A ‘Clang’ on the Hoe:” Finding and Collecting

As the establishment of the La Verendrye cairn shows, Indigenous material culture was of interest to some people in the region. In fact, collecting these types of items was a somewhat popular, if little-noted, pastime among West Reserve Mennonites in roughly the later half of the twentieth century. Certainly there were many such items to be found, a fact that further gives lie to the idea of empty and unpopulated land. Amateur collecting and various archaeological studies demonstrate the proliferation of various tools, arrowheads, pottery shards, and numerous other items. As studies of the area have demonstrated, these pieces often connote significant hunting, camping, animal harvesting, and burial sites. Found belongings have ranged from between 9,500 to 9,000 years in age all the way to between 100 and 400 years old, with various other ages in between, demonstrating the profoundly varied and long history of Indigenous occupation, land use, and lifeways in the small West Reserve region.¹⁰⁷

One of the more notable instances of Mennonite amateur archaeological collecting in the region was perhaps George C. Enns, as Royden Loewen has pointed out. Enns first undertook this hobby as a sixteen-year-old in the 1930s, and by the 1970s had built up a significant collection of tools, pottery, arrowheads, and numerous other items.¹⁰⁸ Though his collection was perhaps the most substantial in the area, it was not the only one, as similar collections were amassed by other amateur archaeologists. According to a small collection currently housed at the Pembina Threshermen’s Museum near Winkler, Isaac F. Friesen was another such collector, who

¹⁰⁷ James Graham, “Blackduck Sites in South-Western Manitoba: Land Use and Site Selection” (M.A. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2005), 6, 164-167, 213-215; Northern Lights Heritage Services Inc., *St. Joseph Wind Energy Project - Manitoba: Heritage Resource Desktop Study* (Winnipeg: Northern Lights Heritage Services Inc., 2008), 7-8; Michael M. Dobson, *A Reference to Projectile Points of Manitoba* (Minnedosa: The Minnedosa Tribune, 1994), 25.

¹⁰⁸ Loewen, *Mennonite Farmers*, 86; “Early Indians Left Many Traces,” *Red River Valley Echo*, August 18, 1971.

regularly looked for items on a piece of land “close to the old Glencross townsite,”¹⁰⁹ which historically was also close to the intersection of a creek and an old Metis cart trail (see Chapters 5 and 6 for more detail). Collecting was a notable enough hobby that, in a questionnaire developed to gather stories and information from extended family members for a published 1972 family history, one of the items regarding people’s hobbies and interests included, as an example, “collections of Indian artifacts, fossils rocks.”¹¹⁰

The extent to which hobbyist collecting occurred among the region’s Mennonites is somewhat striking, especially in light of the near-complete dearth of any mentions of it in West Reserve written histories. Despite this absence in the area’s formal local histories, though, personal remembrances and oral histories reveal the extent to which people pursued this hobby. Though the region had several dedicated collectors like Enns and Friesen, Indigenous tools and implements were prolific enough that finding them “mostly just sort of happened when you were working [on the fields], or someone might find something...”¹¹¹

The era of pre-mechanized sugar-beet farming – which necessitated laborious manual hoeing and weeding close to the ground – resulted in items being readily noticed. “The best place [to find items] was when they were growing sugar beets, and you were hoeing the sugar beets...that’s when we found our arrowheads, when you were hoeing the rows.” Then, “you would hit something – a ‘clang’ on the hoe – and you would look; ‘oh!’.”¹¹² One resident remembered having “a whole pocketful of arrowheads” that he found as a boy weeding beets

¹⁰⁹ “Native Artifacts Collection: Donated by the Isaac F. Friesen Estate,” written description, Pembina Thresherman’s Museum, Winkler, Manitoba, personal visit by author, August 2, 2023.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *The Brauns of Osterwick*, 63.

¹¹¹ Bill Schroeder, “Personal Interview,” November 20, 2023.

¹¹² West Reserve Resident, “Personal Interview,” March 20, 2024.

around the late 1930s to early 1940s. He recalled that, “after a rain shower, arrowheads were washed off; you could see them and just pick them up.”¹¹³

Near the U.S. border south of Winkler, another resident recalled that, “we could easily find Indian artifacts like stone hammers – we didn’t really look for them, we just stumbled upon things on occasion.”¹¹⁴ Further to the east in the Silberfeld School District, it was common to find “arrowheads and stuff like that” in the area.¹¹⁵ To some people, such items comprised large, well-curated collections while for others, they were more like curiosities – a source of fascination, yet peripheral to day-to-day agricultural life, and often misplaced over time. “In our moves and what have you, I’ve lost track of them,” remembered one resident. “My dad had a collection, and I don’t know where it went,” stated another resident who grew up near Buffalo Creek.¹¹⁶ Another Buffalo Creek-raised resident remembered that, “we had a boxful, and I do not know what happened to it.”¹¹⁷

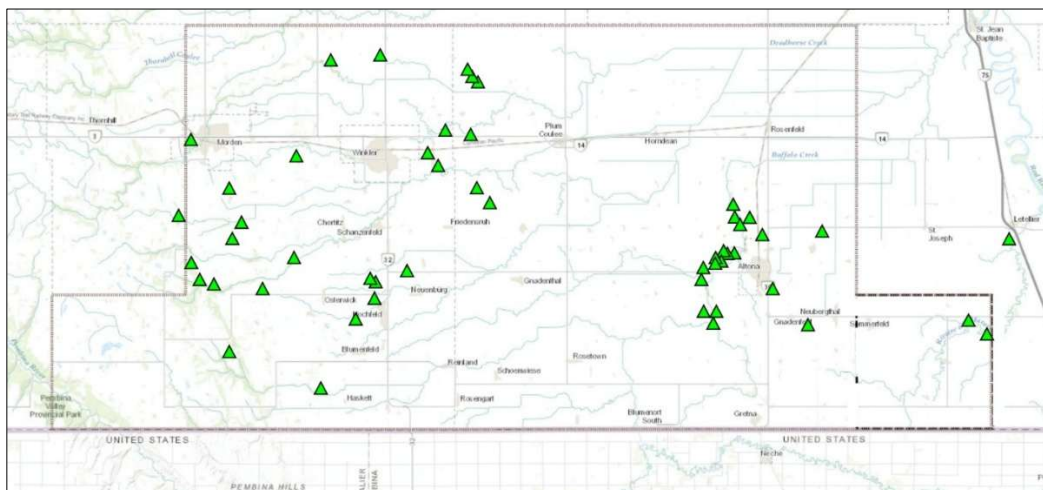


Figure 8: Some settler findings of Indigenous material culture, 1940s-1980s¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Lawrence Giesbrecht, “Personal Interview,” November 21, 2022, Neuberghthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

¹¹⁴ Richard Warkentin, “Personal Interview,” January 20, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Mary Loewen and Benno Loewen, “Personal Interview,” March 2, 2023, Neuberghthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

¹¹⁶ Glenda Hildebrand, “Personal Interview,” April 29, 2024.

¹¹⁷ West Reserve Resident, “Personal Interview,” March 20, 2024.

¹¹⁸ Locations based on the following sources: Northern Lights Heritage Services Inc., *St. Joseph Wind Energy Project*; Graham, “Blackduck Sites in South-Western Manitoba;” Bill Schroeder, “Personal Interview;” Lawrence

Nevertheless, twentieth-century amateur archaeology in the West Reserve saw the descendants of Mennonite immigrants – who had arrived there roughly sixty to eighty years previous – come face-to-face with evidence of the area’s hundreds-to-thousands-of-years-old human history. Collecting was also an arena in which late-twentieth-century Mennonites reflected, to varying degrees, on the longer histories of the land on which they now lived. George Enns and his wife used portions of their collection for presentations to area schools, as part of their efforts to – in the *Echo*’s phrasing – “piece together Manitoba’s pre-history.”¹¹⁹ For those not into serious collecting, coming across items could be exciting and fascinating. “Oh, of course, it was interesting to find an artifact” remembered one resident.¹²⁰ For others, it was more of an off-hand curiosity within the work of beet-weeding: “[it] wasn’t a big [thing], like, ‘oh, I found one!’” but rather, ““oh, yeah, there’s a nice one – then you chuck it in your pocket and, you know, never do anything with it.”¹²¹

Paired with the longstanding narratives of inevitable settler ascendancy and the supposed disappearance of Indigenous people from West Reserve land, these archaeological interactions were, to use O’Brien’s terminology, instances in which settlers “paused to consider the stories behind the artifacts they so enthusiastically collected, musing about the peoples they insisted they had replaced.”¹²² Additionally, though, these musings were occurring in mid-to-late-twentieth-century context in which Mennonites in southern Manitoba – particularly those in the former West Reserve – were interacting with First Nations and Metis people face-to-face. In this

Giesbrecht, “Personal Interview;” West Reserve Resident, “Personal Interview;” Mary and Benno Loewen, “Personal Interview;” John Goertzen, Municipal Maps Marked with Locations of Found Artifacts, Provided to Author, May 8, 2024. Base map: North Dakota Geographic Information Systems, “NDGISHUB Streams and Rivers 110k,” <https://gishubdata-ndgov.hub.arcgis.com/datasets/NDGOV::ndgishub-streams-and-rivers-100k/explore>.

¹¹⁹ Echo, “Early Indians Left Many Traces,” August 18, 1971.

¹²⁰ Richard Warkentin, “Personal Interview,” January 20, 2024.

¹²¹ West Reserve Resident, “Personal Interview,” March 20, 2024.

¹²² O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting*, 56.

layered context, imagined settler “expectations” of Indigenous people – established by colonial narratives and present within hobbyist collecting – bumped up against real settler interactions with contemporary Indigenous people.¹²³ These interactions occurred in the varied contexts of missionary work, farm labour, and resource harvesting, which Chapter 5 examines more fully.

Conclusion

As Mark Rifkin remarks, settler colonialism has been described as “a structure, a system, and a logic,” yet there remain gaps in understanding how the “administrative projects of settlement and accompanying legal categories, geographies, and subjectivities” become deeply entrenched as “part of the everyday life of non-Natives.”¹²⁴ One way to fill in this gap, he argues, is to more closely consider the role of “everyday experiences of embodiment, location, and belonging” in making “processes of settlement come to appear self-evident.”¹²⁵ We might consider the many examples of Mennonite commemorations and historical writing discussed above as forms of establishing Mennonite embodiment, location, and belonging, and in doing so, we can begin to see the roles played by historical narratives of Indigenous Peoples and Mennonite settlers in shaping strong perceptions of the West Region as settler space.

Mennonites from the 1880s to the 1980s were not uniform in how they described, conceptualized, and perceived the Indigenous Peoples to whose land they had arrived in 1875. Nevertheless, their histories of the region exhibited some definable narratives of Canadian colonialism, particularly ideas of dissipating and inconsequential Indigenous presence, and a smooth, inevitable transition to peaceable settler occupation. When paired with concepts of

¹²³ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 4-7, 11.

¹²⁴ Mark Rifkin, “Settler Common Sense,” 322.

¹²⁵ Mark Rifkin, “Settler States of Feeling,” 342. Rifkin’s argument here calls to mind Raibmon’s discussion – mentioned previously – of everyday settler practices.

empty and barren land, these narratives played a notable role in making less legible the idea of the West Reserve as Indigenous land.

CHAPTER 3

Creeks, Flooding, and “Unusual Attraction:” Experiences of Surface Water in the West Reserve

Stories of Mennonite history in the West Reserve have typically (though not exclusively) invoked concepts of empty land, and of highly variable hydrology that contributed to the land’s deficiency. How might our understanding of the reserve’s history be deepened beyond these narratives? Are there histories of water to be told in this place that do not centre on the need to drain it, combat it, and remove it from the land as quickly as possible? Put another way, if agricultural progress and transition from barren wilderness to garden have typified the Mennonite stories of the region, one result has been that the reserve’s innumerable fluctuating creeks, gullies, wetlands, and coulees have been left underexamined and less understood.

Looking for these histories of water requires attending to the familiar historical sources undergirding the region’s Mennonite historical narratives, including newspapers, land-related files, and municipal documents, to give a few examples. Scattered references to the West Reserve’s surface water in these sources sheds some light on experiences of, characteristics of, and social relations attendant with, water and waterways. Though such instances are indeed there in the sources, they have not made it into the local histories of rural agricultural life in the region in any significant way, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Illuminating the histories of water in the West Reserve can also be aided by a borderlands perspective of its watersheds. Given the region’s location along the forty-ninth parallel such a perspective is, in fact, intrinsic to this task. In recent years, environmental historians have begun incorporating a borderlands approach to their work, something that Andrew R. Graybill applauds as an obviously necessary development, given “the extent to which political demarcations

arbitrarily divide the natural world.”¹ This is particularly true of the Canada-United States border, where things like watersheds and traditional Indigenous homelands – networks of life and relationships not beholden to the borders defining nation-states – “make visible the social, ecological, and political consequences of bordering.”²

In the case of the West Reserve, one of these consequences has been a lack of attention given to the reserve’s historical place within a larger environmental context, and – as Chapters 5 and 6 will discuss – a larger context of overlapping and interrelated Indigenous homelands. Water is one way in which to explore these themes, since, as Simpson writes, it “*decentres* itself: it leaks, moves, flows and reconnects, not as real estate or enclosure, or property, but as a living network, linking endless forms of life working with each other to bring about more life, more diversity of life, more abundance of life.”³ Coming to West Reserve history with these perspectives on water allows us to see more clearly the significance of the small waterways within it, north of the border, as well as the proximity of the transborder Pembina River.⁴

The reserve’s small, fluctuating ribbons of water and vegetation were – and remain, though decreasingly so over time – unique microenvironments within an increasingly uniform agricultural space. Though often straightened, deepened, and cleared of their vegetation to help with quicker drainage, portions of these waterways remain as ongoing departures from the survey grid that was imposed on the prairies and upon which subsequent roads, drainage ditches,

¹ Graybill, “Boundless Nature: Borders and the Environment in North America and Beyond,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 668-669.

² Emma S. Norman and Alice Cohen, “Treaties, Wars, and Salish Sea Watersheds: The Constructed Boundaries of Water Governance,” in *Border Flows: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship*, eds. Lynne Heasley and Daniel Macfarlane (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2016), 66.

³ Simpson, *Theory of Water*, 155.

⁴ Taking a similar perspective, Karl S. Hele has commented on the Great Lakes as a border-spanning watershed in which national boundaries have often been “disrupted or even erased altogether by the lived experiences of First Nations people.” Karl S. Hele, “Introduction,” in *Lines Drawn Upon the Water: First Nations and the Great Lakes Borders and Borderlands*, ed. Karl S. Hele (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008), xvi.

settlements, and transportation patterns were based. As such, we might consider them, if not ecotones as Merle Massie has described Saskatchewan's "forest-prairie edge,"⁵ perhaps ecotones-in-miniature: distinct environmental seams that, in the face of settler-colonial ascendancy, were at once remnant evidence of earlier environmental realities and land uses, and also ongoing integral elements of a continually variable wet-prairie landscape. As such, their closer examination broadens our understandings of the region's water beyond the drainage-improvement focus that has often characterized Mennonite narrations of the region.

Visualizing Place: West Reserve Maps and Water

Mennonite historical examinations of the region's environment and geography certainly describe the plains between the Pembina Hills and Red River as wet and slow-draining, usually taking care to describe its gradual elevation change, the more low and flood-prone eastern portions of the West Reserve, and the consequent choice of Mennonites to initially settle in its central-western portion. Though the maps most often used to explain the general historical context of the West Reserve do not focus on environmental features, some scholars have attempted to cartographically visualize the West Reserve region's land and water at the time of Mennonite arrival in the 1870s. Most notable are perhaps geographer John H. Warkentin's maps in his deep study of Mennonite arrival and settlement in Manitoba. Though his re-creation of the region's "pre-settlement vegetation" – based on Dominion Land Surveyor records – paints a general picture that includes the small marshlands dotting the prairie locales at the centre of the reserve, many smaller creeks and coulees are not shown.⁶ Though many of these were seasonal and dry at the time of the surveys – often noted as "dry water course" or "dry creek bed" in surveyor field books, for example – not all of them were.

⁵ Massie, *Forest Prairie Edge*.

⁶ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 23.

Dry coulees and creeks, though invisible on a map, would have been very visible on the ground at certain times of the year when they were full of water. To an extent, then, this dynamic hydrology isn't as clearly communicated in Warkentin's map. By extension, the map also visually downplays the dynamic seasonality of the reserve's creeks and marshes, a seasonality that was a crucial element of First Nations and Metis lifeways. Jill Falcon Ramaker describes the Anishinaabe people's "seasonal round," as a "highly complex pattern of movements on the land to hunt, harvest, cultivate, and trade foods as part of a holistic way of life, patterned on ancestral reciprocal obligations to place."⁷ In such an environment and set of lifeways, writes Simpson, spring flooding "used to be a normal and welcome part of the season, snow transforming to water and replenishing the land with rich minerals and nutrients."⁸ Anishinaabe people, by extension, "did not live on flood plains during the spring so that Nibi [water] could do their work."⁹ In light of this knowledge, we can see even more clearly the extent to which settler-created maps of the West Reserve subtly convey and privilege a more static and sedentary interpretation of place. This is an interpretation that views the land and water through the lens of – and indeed, is made possible by – drainage-assisted settler agriculture.¹⁰

⁷ Falcon Ramaker "Gichi Bizhi," xv.

⁸ Simpson, *Theory of Water*, 32.

⁹ Simpson, *Theory of Water*, 32.

¹⁰ A more extreme example of drainage-related agricultural landscape transformation is the drainage of Sumas Lake in British Columbia, examined by Chad Reimer. This was an area of deep importance to the Sto:lo people, and to which Mennonites began arriving around the late 1920s. Reimer, *Before We Lost the Lake: A Natural and Human History of Sumas Valley* (Halfmoon Bay: Caitlin Press, 2008).

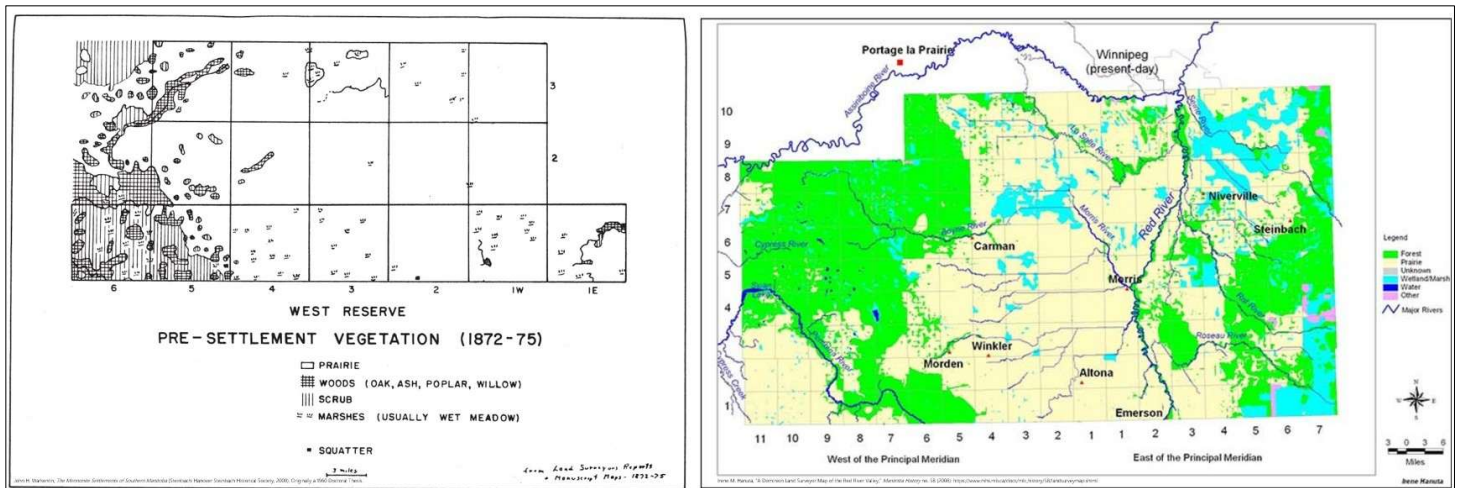


Figure 9: Warkentin's and Hanuta's maps showing West Reserve land and water at time of Mennonite Arrival.

Irene Hanuta has also catalogued this region – indeed all of southern Manitoba – in her extensive and meticulous comparison of the province's 1870s landscape with that of the early twenty-first century. Again, using Dominion Land Survey records (as well as Geographic Information Systems technology not available to Warkentin roughly four decades prior),¹¹ she perhaps paints a more accurate picture of the waterways and marshes that dotted the eventual West Reserve. Rather than depicting marshes (as Warkentin does) with small tufts of grass, she highlights them in blue, emphasizing them as “wetlands.”¹² Indeed, she includes a map that highlights their locations specifically. Further, she shows some of the main watercourses through the former reserve, notably the Dead Horse, Plum, and Buffalo Creeks, though it is important to note that she also includes straightened drainage channels constructed after European settlement that would not have been in existence at the time the land was surveyed. Unlike Warkentin's, Hanuta's map also includes Buffalo Lake, or at least the truncated version of it depicted on the Township plan, which was a locally significant body of water.

¹¹ A digital form of mapping and data visualization, abbreviated as “GIS.”

¹² Irene Hanuta, “Land Cover and Climate for Part of Southern Manitoba: A Reconstruction from Dominion Land Survey Maps and Historical Records of the 1870s” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2006), 108-110, 198, 287.

More recently, Norma J. Hall's "Map of Assiniboia," includes the prairie region where the West Reserve would later be located, though it lacks much of the fine-grained environmental detail present in the preceding examples. However, Hall's map is notable for its inclusion of trails, nineteenth-century placenames, and areas of Indigenous land ownership and occupation (Figure 10). Though based on the Surveyor General J.S. Dennis' 1871 "Map of the Province of Manitoba," Hall supplements this with other maps and sources, with the goal of communicating a "sense of place as it had been constructed before" the Dominion Land Survey's "disruptive, annexation-bent arrival."¹³ Hall's aim at a decolonial map of southern Manitoba is instructive, as it assumes Indigenous presence, occupation, and land use in the area. In contrast, Warkentin and Hanuta focus solely on environmental features, implicitly depicting a place that was empty of people, and in existence only as an environmental or geographic container for subsequent colonization. Additionally, though, Warkentin's map does also reference two locations of "squatters," something Chapter 6 will pick up in more detail.

¹³ Norma J. Hall, "Reconstructing Place, Red River 1870," <https://web.archive.org/web/20230615193042/https://resistancemothers.wordpress.com/reconstructing-place-red-river-1870/>.

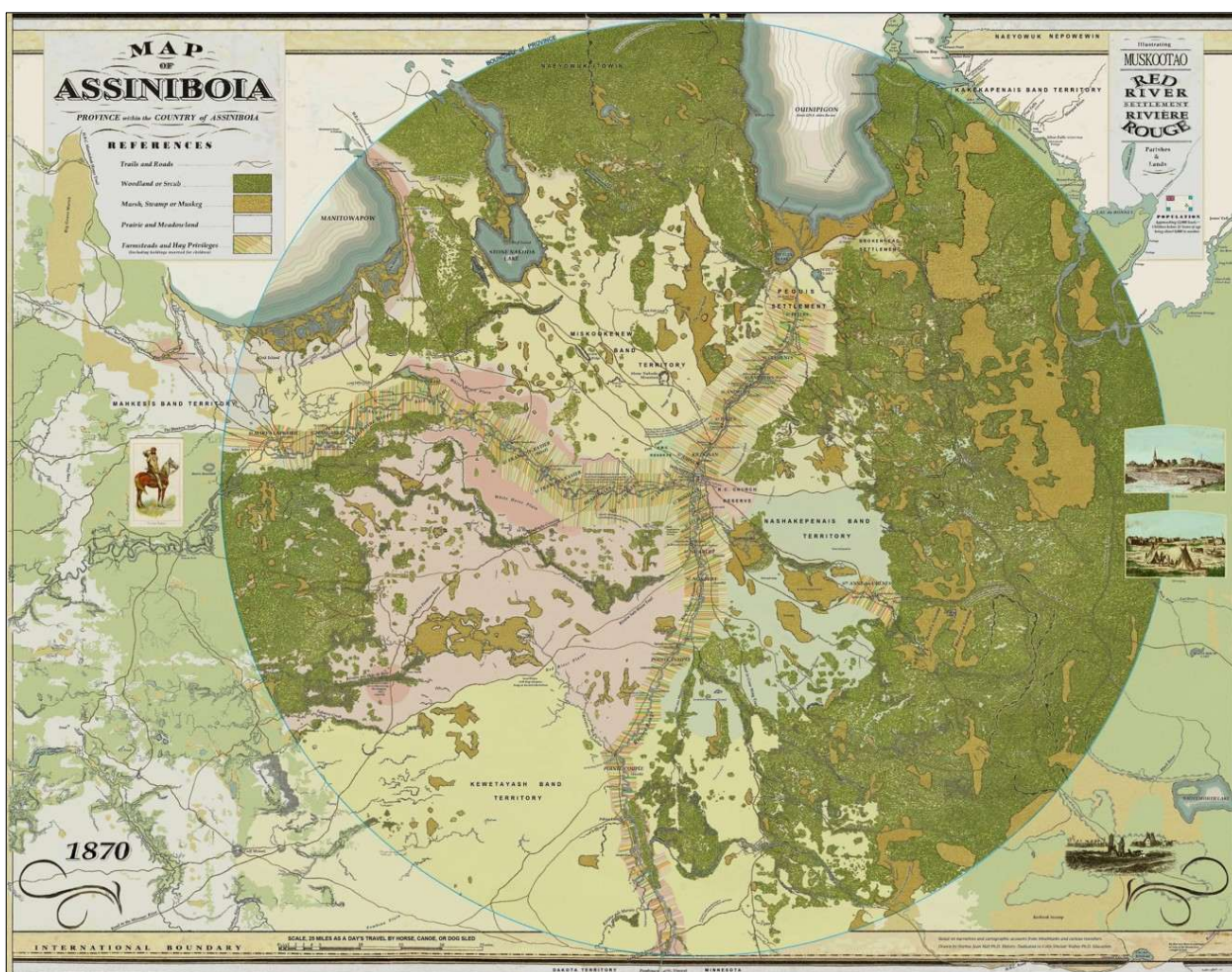


Figure 10: Norma J. Hall, “Reconstructing Place, Red River 1870” (Mothers of the Resistance: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230615193042/https://resistancemothers.wordpress.com/reconstructing-place-red-river-1870/>)

One overarching gap in these maps is that they fail to show certain things *in relation* to each other, particularly hydrological features in relation to things like cart trails, Mennonite villages, and instances of Indigenous presence such as hunting, trapping, and homesteading. Also, in stopping at the international border, all of them underplay the proximity of Mennonite settlement to the Pembina River, though most West Reserve histories do mention the Pembina River as a major timber source for the first colonists. Bruce Wiebe’s work on the woodlots

purchased along the Pembina River by Mennonites for timber harvesting particularly stands out as one instance of transborder patterns and connections in the West Reserve.¹⁴

While we might consider such cartographic gaps as deficiencies or shortcomings, they are also, to a certain degree, to be expected. After all, a map is itself a narrative aimed at communicating certain information, and as such, will necessarily not include other information. However, given all that the above-mentioned maps do not show, I became interested in trying to create a map that addressed them. The result – shown previously in Figure 5 – is based largely, though not exclusively, on the same sources the other maps relied on, and attempts to give a stronger sense of the waterways and hydrology that West Reserve Mennonites would have encountered when they arrived in 1875. Though similar at a general level to existing West Reserve maps, the map I made relies more heavily on a detailed reading of all the Dominion Land Surveyor field books for the townships of the West Reserve, which document the surveyors' on-the-ground notes and observations, rather than the township plans that were created using the field-book information. Indeed, some township plans do not include all, or any, of the surveyors' initial notes.

My approach to this mapping of course has its own challenges and potential pitfalls. For example, surveyors could be inconsistent in how much detail they provided, resulting in vastly different notes, depending on the surveyor. Also, they surveyed along the road rights-of-way – those corridors of land to be set aside for roads, which also served as the 'lines' or borders around separate sections of land to be settled. A creek or cart trail, for example, might only be shown where it crossed a road right-of-way, and be non-existent in the rest of the section, reappearing only at the next road right-of-way where it was again noted by a surveyor. To

¹⁴ Wiebe, "The Timberlots of the Manitoba Mennonites," 47-52.

address this, I also consulted contemporary watershed maps for an approximation of where some of these streams might be connected (understanding that some of these may have been deepened and thus more defined by drainage projects over the years). Finally, surveyors were not always exact in delineating within their field books where a patch of prairie ended and a marsh began; land in one place might be given the designation “flat, undulating prairie” at one point, and “hay land” (usually a low marshy) area at another. In designating wetland areas in Figure 5 then, I approximated a point between these types of designations.

The resultant map hopefully shows things not often shown in relation to one another in typical West Reserve maps – for example, Buffalo Lake, various creeks, cart trails, Mennonite villages, the close proximity of the Pembina River, and also areas of Indigenous presence. In doing so, the map seeks to help subvert, in Hall’s words, “the visual project of colonialism,”¹⁵ but does so while relying on the historical materials that aided the *material* project of colonialism. Indeed, the very lens through which surveyors were demarcating the prairies was the land’s potential and suitability for European agricultural colonization. Also, historical land records have often been consulted in the writing of local settler histories that, over time, have continued to legitimize “the European transformation and appropriation of Indigenous topographies and ecologies.”¹⁶ Often they have done so by utilizing sources such as township plans and land surveyor field books to demonstrate the land ‘as it was’ at the point that settlers first laid eyes on it, thereby emphasizing a discursive tipping point between the untouched landscape of a vanishing Indigenous past on one hand, and the focal-point story of settler improvement and prosperity on the other. Though my map in Figure 5 is undergirded by many of the same archival sources, I utilize them in order to better understand hydrological conditions,

¹⁵ Hall, “Reconstructing Place, Red River 1870.”

¹⁶ Wysote and Morton, “The Depth of the Plough,” 2.

environmental characteristics, and – to the extent possible – Indigenous land relations and Mennonite-Indigenous interactions. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate some of the possibilities in utilizing settler and colonial sources to read beyond (returning to Witgen again) European “fantasies of discovery.”¹⁷ Conversely, the use of these types of sources also retains, in Dallas Hunt and Shaun A. Stevenson’s words, “some element of the dominant mapping practice.”¹⁸ As such, there are limits to my map’s subversive potential, and it should therefore be read with caution and qualification.¹⁹

Land and Water Prior to Mennonite Arrival

At the very least, the map helps us understand that the West Reserve was dynamically wet, full of small watercourses, adjacent to two large rivers and, while indeed flat, more environmentally varied than many of the Mennonite historical writings and commemorations undertaken over the years have allowed. This is a key insight, given how much of the region’s historical literature and commemorative events of later years focused on monotony and featurelessness as some of the area’s defining ideas. The Red and Pembina Rivers of course bordered the West Reserve to the east and south, and in addition to the many small and unnamed low portions and coulees, several more notable creeks flowed – and continue to flow today – through the West Reserve area. These include the Dead Horse (or Mort Cheval) Creek, the Plum River or Creek, Buffalo Creek, and the Marais River.

The Red River has always been characterized by flooding, with large nineteenth-century flood events occurring in 1826, 1852, and 1861.²⁰ Some of these impacted the eastern part of the

¹⁷ Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 15.

¹⁸ Dallas Hunt and Shaun Stevenson, “Decolonizing Geographies of Power: Indigenous Digital Counter-Mapping Practices on Turtle Island” *Settler Colonial Studies* 7, no. 3 (2017): 373, 381.

¹⁹ Hunt and Stevenson, “Decolonizing Geographies,” 373.

²⁰ Samuel P. Matheson, “Floods at Red River: Some Tales of the Great Inundations of 1826, 1852, and 1861,” *Manitoba History*, 1946-47.

eventual West Reserve, as did some twentieth-century floods as well.²¹ But high-water periods also had an impact on the region's smaller creeks. Roughly seventy years before Mennonites arrived, Northwest Company trader Alexander Henry noted certain times when the plains between the Red and the Pembina Hills could be covered in water. On a trip in the area around the Marais and Plum Rivers in the spring of 1806, he noted that, "in many places we found several feet of water, every little hollow formed a pond and every rivulet appeared like a river...Our horses sank up to their knees in mud, and at times had water up to their bellies."²² Journeying further north, his party found the Plum River flowing so high near its mouth into the Red that they "were obliged to make a long circuit in the plains, before we could find a convenient place to swim it."²³

Several months later, journeying down the escarpment near present-day Morden toward the Pembina River, Henry's party again "found a great quantity of water, and for a long distance our horses had it up to their bellies."²⁴ Illustrating the seasonal environmental diversity of the region is the fact that, in the autumn of 1800, Henry was in the same general vicinity of the Marais River and observed not water, but a sea of bison: travelling west from the Marais River toward "L'Isle du Passage" (a small grove of trees near the present-day town of Gretna just north of the Pembina River),²⁵ he passed through "one continuous herd of buffalo" that stretched across the plains "as far as the eye could reach."²⁶

²¹ W.F. Rannie, "Some Observations on Peak Stages during the 1826 Red River Flood and the 'Fleming Conundrum,'" in *Prairie Perspectives, Volume 6*, ed. Derrek Eberts and Dion Wiseman (Brandon: Brandon University, 2003), 2; "'The Water Passes and We're Moving On' – But there are Lessons in 5 of Manitoba's Worst Floods, Expert Says," CBC News Manitoba, March 23, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-5-worst-floods-1.5047030>.

²² Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 285

²³ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 286.

²⁴ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 420-421.

²⁵ Boundary Trail Heritage Region, "A Guide to the Principal Historic Sites on and in the Vicinity of the Trail."

²⁶ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 117.

Bison traversed the land where the West Reserve would later be designated, and were often noted around water. “Numerous herds of buffaloes” could be found along the Plum and Marais Rivers in the early 1800s,²⁷ and the oak and elm trees of “D’Isle du Passage” – themselves located along a small waterway – were described by Henry as having been “polished to the height of the buffalo by their perpetual rubbing.”²⁸ Fish, too, populated the nearby Pembina River in the early nineteenth century, with Henry regularly noting sturgeon in that watercourse, including catching “30 to 40...a day” in June of 1803.²⁹ Over ten years previous to this – in the period when Anishinaabe presence was becoming more pronounced and established in the Red River region – explorer Alexander Mackenzie observed that on both sides of the Red River, south of the Assiniboine, the plains were “covered with herds of buffalo, and elk, especially on the Western side.”³⁰ During this time, sturgeon and other smaller fish could be found in the Marais River, particularly at its mouth into the Red.³¹ Although, by the 1870s, buffalo were no longer seen in this area, other animals and biodiversity remained, as at Buffalo Lake (north of present-day Altona), which was a widening of Buffalo Creek that often grew into a larger shallow lake during high-water seasons, and was described by a land surveyor in 1872 as “abounding with game.”³²

The larger Red and Pembina Rivers, along with the Pembina escarpment, contained the most significant forested areas near to the reserve. Timbered areas of oaks and basswoods also

²⁷ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 67-68.

²⁸ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 119.

²⁹ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 211, 213.

³⁰ Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal Through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in 1789 and 1793* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1891), lxii.

³¹ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 192.

³² “Survey Notebook #225: Township 3 Range 1 W,” 1872, Land Surveyors Field Books. NR 0157. GR 1601. G 1430, Archives of Manitoba.

lined the Marais River and Dead Horse Creek in the 1870s.³³ Large trees, at least as recorded by surveyors, were much more scant throughout the prairie land between the Hills and the Red River, though some small pockets were noted throughout this area of the reserve, often near to wetlands or creeks. D’Isle du Passage was one of these, as was a small clump of trees noted by Henry along the Plum River roughly “halfway between the hills and Red River,” where “willows and chance elms” were noted.³⁴

Aside from the vegetation found along waterways, the prairie portions of the region could contain a variety of vegetation, in addition to the numerous prairie grasses. Strawberries, for example, grew in various locations, particularly in areas near the border where the village of Gretna currently sits. Martha Marion Elford, whose family settled in Dakota Territory adjacent to the international border in the 1880s, recalled that they “would go over to the Minnonite [sic] settlement and pick strawberries. The ground would be red with berries.”³⁵ Strawberries were still found and picked in this general area in the 1890s,³⁶ and several miles to the southeast, in North Dakota, “wild strawberries” could be picked in an area roughly seven miles west of Pembina in the 1870s,³⁷ suggesting that they were a common plant in this portion of the borderland prairie. Willows were also dispersed in various locations throughout the plains, as noted by surveyors in 1872 and 1875 and shown in Figure 5. Henry noted the proliferation of willows in other places such as the east side of the Red River near the Marais River, where “the

³³ Surveyor field book 1-1E. “Survey Notebook #486: Township 1 Range 1E,” 1874, Land Surveyors Field Books, NR 0157, GR 1601, G 14347, Archives of Manitoba.

³⁴ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 68.

³⁵ Historical Data Project of the Works Progress Administration, “Pioneer Women’s Histories: Walhalla,” 1940-1949, Pembina County Historical Society, North Dakota Histories (ND State Library), <https://digitalhorizonsonline.org/digital/collection/ndsl-books/id/95933/rec/17>.

³⁶ Fisher, “Seeds from the Steppe,” 142.

³⁷ Historical Data Project of the Works Progress Administration, “Pioneer Women’s Histories: Pembina,” 1940-1949, Pembina County Historical Society, North Dakota Histories (ND State Library), <https://digitalhorizonsonline.org/digital/collection/ndsl-books/id/97244/rec/5>.

country for more than two miles from the river is overgrown by low willows.”³⁸ In addition were the many dispersed wetland areas, often noted by 1870s surveyors as marshes, hay land, soughs, bogs, meadows, swamps, or muskeg,³⁹ all indicative of the region’s moisture and slow drainage.

Surface Water as Settler Necessity

As mentioned above, wetlands quickly became problematic for settler agriculturalists. In the first years of Mennonite arrival, however, the available water was of course integral to settlement, particularly in an area containing no major or significantly large bodies of water within it or running through it.⁴⁰ Jacob Shantz noted this in his March 1877 remarks to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization. He declared that the immigrants initially objected to the West Reserve’s prairie location because “there was scarcely enough hay land in that section for them,” though “when they went on one side of it, they found a great big marsh, and that pleased them; there was hay land in this part.”⁴¹

Shantz was likely referring to the northeastern part of the reserve where Buffalo Creek and Buffalo Lake were located. Although the very first Mennonites did not settle in this spot, they nevertheless did settle within short distances to creeks or wetlands.⁴² All of the Mennonite camps noted by Dominion Land Surveyors in the south-central portion of the reserve in 1875 “were located next to a pond, small creek, or meadow area.”⁴³ Many of the single-street villages that were later established were also situated in close proximity to water or wetlands as well.

Examining John Rempel and William Harms’ *Atlas of the Original Mennonite Villages*,

³⁸ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 79.

³⁹ Hanuta, “Land Cover,” 109.

⁴⁰ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 33.

⁴¹ “House of Commons Journals, 3rd Parliament, 4th Session: Vol. 11 App,” A6-111 (Maclean, Roger, 1877), Library and Archives Canada, https://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.9_07171_11_2.

⁴² Hildebrand, “Necessary, Problematic, and ‘Unusual,’” 47.

⁴³ “Survey Notebook #584: Township 1 Range 3W,” 1875, Surveyors Field Books, NR 0157, GR1601, G 14349, Archives of Manitoba; “Survey Notebook #585: Township 1 Range 4W,” 1875, Surveyors Field Books, NR 0157, GR1601, G 14349, Archives of Manitoba; Hildebrand, “Necessary, Problematic, and ‘Unusual,’” 47.

Homesteaders, and Some Burial Plots of the Mennonite West Reserve in tandem with surveyors' notebooks showing the locations of creeks and marshes reveals that around twenty of the forty-five villages noted were located next to some form of water.⁴⁴

Memoirs from the early settlement days indicate the importance of small bodies of water in those years. Susanna Banman, who grew up in Altbergthal along Buffalo Creek during the late nineteenth century, remarked that "we carried all the water from the creek."⁴⁵ In early village life, the proximity to water was important for livestock, as in the village of Gnadenthal, where a creek in the settlement's communal pasture was dammed "to provide adequate water for the cattle."⁴⁶ The village of Reinland was also located near a creek that was used as drinking water for livestock, but due to its seasonal volatility it did not always provide a consistent supply. As in Gnadenthal, a dam was built "to hold back a quantity of water sufficient to last through the summer."⁴⁷

Proximity to creeks and marshes was also important in order to source building materials for some of the first structures to be built. Eva Friesen, who arrived to the West Reserve as a child with her family in 1876, recalled that their house "was roof-covered with slough reeds,"⁴⁸ and in Blumenfeld, reeds from a nearby marsh "provided thatch for the roofs" of the

⁴⁴ Twenty is an approximate number, and it is probable that there were more villages than that near water – since surveyors typically only made note of what they saw along the road allowance lines on the borders of quarter sections, any marshy areas or sections of creeks in the middle of a quarter section could be missed, and therefore would not appear in the survey notes. Thus, a village that doesn't appear to have been next to water may actually have been so, if it was a body of water that a surveyor missed. John Rempel and William Harms, *Atlas of the Original Mennonite Villages, Homesteaders, and Some Burial Plots of the Mennonite West Reserve* (Altona: Friesen Printers, 1990); Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 48; "Survey Notebook #584: Township 1 Range 3W"; "Survey Notebook #585: Township 1 Range 4W."

⁴⁵ "Mother's writings translated by her daughter Susana (my explanations are in ()), 1966, Jake Peters Sommerfeld Mennonite Church Collection, File 5267-27, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁴⁶ Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal*, 10.

⁴⁷ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 156.

⁴⁸ "Written the 21st of March 1949 by Mrs. Eva Friesen of Hague - mother of Jacob E Friesen upon request," 1949, MHA, Volume (box) 5267: Jake Peters Sommerfeld Mennonite Church Collection. Folder 21: Immigrant & Later Diary Material & Corresp.

community's initial sod huts, or "semlins."⁴⁹ Jakob Fehr recalled that the roof of his family's semlin was "covered with grass instead of straw...Tall grass was growing along the creek ['ritch'] and the two sisters tied it into bundles for the roof...."⁵⁰ John A. Friesen's memories of settling in the Neuenburg area included the recollection that the roof of his family's barn was "constructed of slough weeds or tall grass – or rye straw – at times gable and all."⁵¹ Many of the trails noted in Dominion Land Surveyor notes pre-dated Mennonite arrival, demonstrating the longstanding Indigenous patterns of land use and occupation in the region. However, one trail in the West Reserve was marked as a "Hay Road," indicating "the significance of these transportation routes in relation to the resources provided by marshy areas."⁵²

Further, despite the ongoing push toward removing water from the land – which continued and intensified in the mid-to-late-twentieth century – and increasingly mechanized and industrial farming practices, this period was also one in which the water found in the area's creeks and streams remained a necessity for some farming families. Historian Ruth Sandwell has noted how, up until 1940, Canada was a "rural majority" where "most rural homes," including those on the prairies, "lacked both electricity and running water."⁵³ This was indeed the case for many West Reserve farms "even beyond the 1940s,"⁵⁴ such as some along Buffalo Creek. Families would "supplement their drinking water supply by cutting ice blocks from the creek to put into their cisterns."⁵⁵ For one family who cut and sold ice to people in Altona, this was also

⁴⁹ Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 215.

⁵⁰ "Jakob Fehr (1859-1952) Journal as Translated and Published in Peter Zacharias, Reinland: An Experience in Community, 1976," n.d., Jakob Fehr Fonds, 4891-5, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁵¹ "Jacob Friesen Collection, Document 2," n.d., Jake Peters Sommerfeld Mennonite Church Collection, 5267-21, Mennonite Heritage Archives; Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 48.

⁵² "Survey Notebook #584: Township 1 Range 3W;" Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 48.

⁵³ R.W. Sandwell, *Canada's Rural Majority: Households, Environments, and Economies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 8.

⁵⁴ Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 50.

⁵⁵ Martha Martens, "Personal Interview," November 16, 2023; Glenda Hildebrand, "Personal Interview," April 29, 2024; Gary Klassen, "Personal Interview," May 6, 2024; Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 50.

an extra source of income.⁵⁶ As Martha Martens recalled from her childhood along Buffalo Creek, “Altona had a lot of people that didn’t have a cistern,” so the ice that her family cut from the creek was sold for people’s “drinking water, and laundry water...in the house.”⁵⁷ For families in the Rosenfeld area, even the Red River was a source of ice into the 1940s, for household uses such as “drinking water” and “soft water for...washing machine jobs.”⁵⁸ Such cases illustrate both the continued importance of the region’s surface water and the growing efforts in this era – discussed in Chapter 1 – to develop a larger and more reliable source of water for the region.

Creeks remained an important resource for some households even into the 1960s. This was the case for the Klassen family who lived along Buffalo Creek, and filled their basement cistern with ice cut from the creek in winter, along with collecting rainwater in the same cistern during the summer. In years when the creek didn’t supply enough ice, they would have water trucked in.⁵⁹ Where waterways had more significant tree stands along their banks, wood was a primary heat source for families in the mid-and-late-twentieth century as well. Bill Schroeder’s childhood family home on the Marais River “was always heated by trees that we cut down” during the 1930s and 1940s, and Richard Warkentin, who grew up along a wooded creek near the Pembina Hills in the 1960s, remembered that “the woods...was our source of heat” for the family’s wood furnace.⁶⁰ Creeks and wetland areas, then, were simultaneously an agricultural problem that required solving through drainage, as well as a vital and necessary natural resource.

⁵⁶ Martens, “Personal Interview,” November 16, 2023.

⁵⁷ Martha Martens, “Personal Interview,” November 16, 2023.

⁵⁸ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, December 12, 1945; “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, December 18, 1946.

⁵⁹ Glenda Hildebrand, “Personal Interview;” Gary Klassem, “Personal Interview.”

⁶⁰ Bill Schroeder, “Personal Interview;” Richard Warkentin, “Personal Interview.”

Surface Water as Flooding: Settler Experiences of Dynamic Hydrology

Although surface water was an early necessity for Mennonite settlers, the seasonal fluctuations of the Red River Valley's wet prairie could also wreak havoc with villages. Blumenfeld, in particular, was relocated not long after its initial settlement in 1875, after "the runoff from the Pembina Hills came" and "nearly every house in Blumenfeld was flooded."⁶¹ Likewise, while homesteads on quarter sections conformed to the Dominion government's ideal of individual families settling on individual pieces of land, this "grid-based settlement pattern" was not always aligned with existing hydrological patterns.⁶² The region's moisture was highly variable and dynamic; "lands selected as dry did not always stay dry, and locations that provided ready access to wetland resources often proved vulnerable to flooding."⁶³ This became all too clear for some West Reserve Mennonites in 1883. Isaak Krahn, Heinrich Peters, and John Martens were inspecting portions of Township 3, Range 2 West for which they had applied for homestead entry the previous August, "having never seen the said lands." They found their quarter-sections "covered with water to the depth of one foot or more, and totally unfit for cultivation."⁶⁴ A similar situation occurred in 1896 when another Mennonite with land in Township 3, Range 1 West, applied to have his land purchase transferred to a different quarter section in the township, "on account of the land he now holds being covered with water several inches deep."⁶⁵

⁶¹ This quotation comes from a piece written by Elias in 1926, recalling his days in Blumenfeld: Peter Elias, "Streiflichter aus der Mennonitegeschichte," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, April 21, 1926, 7 (a translation is provided in Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 1). Elias' nineteenth-century diary provides a similar account: Peter Elias, *A Voice in the Wilderness: Memoirs of Peter A. Ellias, 1843-1925* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2013), 40.

⁶² Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 38.

⁶³ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 25.

⁶⁴ "Letter to Surveyor General," June 9, 1883, Digitized West Reserve Homestead Files, Mennonite Heritage Archives; Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 50.

⁶⁵ "Secretary, Department of the Interior, to D. Stewart, Rosenfeld," May 30, 1896, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, NR 0215, GR 2060, Microfilm Reel 2182, Archives of Manitoba; Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 50.

Some land surveyor field notes hint at the variability of the region's surface water, as in 1872 when a surveyor commented on Township 3, Range 3 West, that, a "Small Creek of good water wends its circuitous course through the Southeastern part of the Township in addition to a number of Water-runs...but as in other Prairie Townships we found quite dry. During the Spring and Autumn however these Water-courses are full of water."⁶⁶ In 1884, a Homestead Inspector made a similar observation in the Buffalo Lake area, remarking that, "This land was covered with water ten days ago but is now dry except the slough or as they [the Mennonites] call it, the lake."⁶⁷ Other surveyor notes encapsulate this variability even more starkly. A surveyor's report on Township 1, Range 1 East, for example, described "beautiful undulating Prairie, intersected...by the bed of the River Aux Marais, which contains in some places ponds of water." (Around fifty years earlier, the Marais was dry when encountered by Geologist William H. Keating).⁶⁸ The township was further described as "thoroughly drained by the River Marias, and its various tributary coulees,"⁶⁹ an assessment that stands in contrast to the experience of farmers some sixty years later, when land along the Marais was acquired by the Rural Municipality of Rhineland for drainage infrastructure purposes.⁷⁰

The hydrology of the West Reserve was such that newspaper social columns also functioned as seasonal weather reports, coming alive each spring with updates on the status of

⁶⁶ "Survey Notebook #192, Township 3 Range 3W," Land Surveyors Field Books, NR 0157, GR 1601, G 14339, Archives of Manitoba.

⁶⁷ "S.E. 1/4 6-3-1 West," April 24, 1884, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, NR 0215, GR 2060, Microfilm Reel 2182, Archives of Manitoba.

⁶⁸ William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of Saint Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, &c. Performed in the Year 1823 by Order of the Hon. J.C. Calhoun, Secretary of War, Under the Command of Stephen H. Long, U.S.T.E.* Volume II (London: Geo. B Whittaker, 1825), 76.

⁶⁹ "Survey Notebook #486: Township 1 Range 1E," Land Surveyors Field Books, NR 0157, GR 1601, G 14347, Archives of Manitoba.

⁷⁰ "By-Law No. 452...to Authorize the Conveyance to the Municipality of Land for Drainage Purposes," May 7, 1935, Municipal Affairs Branch Files, Rhineland - Rural, MA 0115, GR 0127, 0-8-8-18 [1913-1935], Archives of Manitoba.

the regular spring flooding that would engorge the creeks and coulees. By the mid-twentieth century, anxieties around the springtime swelling of waterways were an annual feature of West Reserve life. Local newspaper reports on snowy weather were often framed with an eye to spring flooding, as in May of 1946 when one reporter commented that, “if the snow that lies in the bushes and along the Pembina Hills will thaw in a few days the people [further to the east] in Altona and district surely won’t have to be thirsty for a while.”⁷¹ Another columnist commented in the early spring of 1948 that “there is plenty of snow to justify...fears” of a spring flood.⁷² When the flood eventually came, the newspapers provided weekly reports on “torrents of water rushing eastward”⁷³ from the Pembina Hills, “streets and ditches...filled with running water,”⁷⁴ and washed-out roads.⁷⁵

Periods of heavy rain could easily impact both seeding and harvest times, especially in the lower regions of the former reserve. In April of 1943, the *Altona Echo*’s Rosenfeld correspondent reported that “seeding operations have begun” in “one of the earliest springs on record.”⁷⁶ Roughly a month later, reports of “excessive rains...dampened many farmers’ hopes for a good crop,” with “many fields...partly under water.”⁷⁷ One week later a stretch of sunshine brought positive declarations of “excellent” crop growth,⁷⁸ which, by mid-July, had evolved into reports of “badly lodged” and “partly flooded fields.”⁷⁹ Autumn, too, could see excessively wet conditions. In October of 1944, a particular field became so muddy that one combine and two tractors got stuck, and “the mosquitos attacked with such ferocity that the farmer in

⁷¹ “Blumenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, May 13, 1946.

⁷² “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, March 17, 1948.

⁷³ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, April 12, 1944.

⁷⁴ “Winkler,” *Altona Echo*, March 14, 1945.

⁷⁵ “Plum Coulee,” *Altona Echo*, April 8, 1942; Hildebrand, “Necessary, Problematic, and ‘Unusual,’” 50.

⁷⁶ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, April 14, 1943.

⁷⁷ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, June 9, 1943.

⁷⁸ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, June 20, 1943.

⁷⁹ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, July 14, 1943; Hildebrand, “Necessary, Problematic, and ‘Unusual,’” 50.

desperation lit part of the swathed field. The flames, however, became desperate and spread rapidly too,” creating a fire that had to be doused before the workers could turn back to dislodging the machinery.⁸⁰

Newspaper reports give an ample picture of fluctuating creek levels and the impact that significant rain had on its lower-lying areas. The visceral nature of such environmental dynamism throughout the 1920s to 1960s was also enough to warrant short mention in some residents’ personal diaries, though the brief and clipped nature of such written sources belies the extent of such flood events. Nevertheless, water levels were, on occasion, enough of an event to make an appearance even in these short and matter-of-fact diaries. Frank G. Blatz’s diary of farming in the Horndean area contained many such passages throughout the 1920s: “High water, all aflood” in April of 1923;” “Spring flood” on March 16, 1925; “Big, big, rain. Much water, wet for 3 week” on June 8, 1925. Entries in March and May of 1927 read “Flood” and “Big flood,” respectively, while an April 5th entry reads “High flood,” with the quick turnaround of flood season evident in an entry one week later reading, “Roads dry, cars going.”⁸¹ Other memories were slightly more verbose. Anna Friesen, writing from the Winkler area in February of 1930, noted that, due to sunshine and mild weather, “the ditches are full of running water.”⁸² She remarked in May of 1933 that, “At 6:00 a.m. the town people were awakened by the town bell and on getting up [and] looking about, the biggest flood ever greeted us.”⁸³ A diary entry by Frank Braun decades later in April 1966 remarked that, “We came home from Winnipeg today. Buffalo Creek is full of water.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, October 11, 1943; Hildebrand, “Necessary, Problematic, and ‘Unusual,’” 50.

⁸¹ Horndean Reunion Committee, *Horndean Heritage* (Winkler: Horndean Reunion Committee, 1984), 22.

⁸² “Anna Friesen, 1930-1934,” CA MHC PP-Volume 5707-5707-26, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

⁸³ “Anna Friesen, 1930-1934,” CA MHC PP-Volume 5707-5707-26.

⁸⁴ “Tina and Frank Braun Diaries - 1953-1978, Translated by Erica Ens, 2020,” CA MHC PP-Volume 5707-18, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

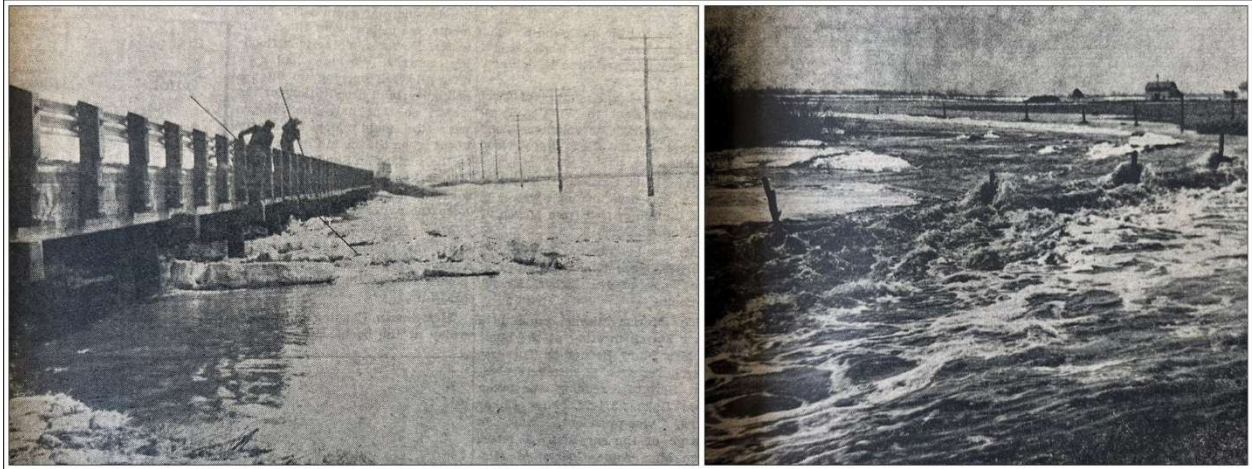


Figure 11: Examples of spring flooding and ice jam on Buffalo Creek north of Rosenfeld (April 1955), and rapid runoff east of Winkler near Highway 14 (April 1956).⁸⁵

Other personal reminiscences of childhood during the 1960s and 1970s reveal the lasting impressions made by the volatility of water during springtime. “When the water came, you *heard* it; the sound, like, you heard the *whoosh*,” recalled Marilyn Elias of her time growing up along the Plum (or Hespeler) Creek south of Winkler.⁸⁶ Nervous excitement often characterized this time of year, “with the water rushing in, and we were always wondering, how far was it going to come up?”⁸⁷ The spring run-off was “a bit of a thrill” along Buffalo Creek, remembered Glenda Hildebrand, “when the whole creek filled with water from the snowmelt coming from out west. And we would always be watching for it – when was the flood going to come, the water? And sometimes, when we came home from school at the end of the day, there it was – the creek was full.”⁸⁸ Richard Warkentin had similar memories growing up along a creek near the foot of the Pembina Hills. “[In] springtime, when it was flooding, that was always, like, ‘the creek is

⁸⁵ *Altona Echo*, April 6, 1955, 3; *Red River Valley Echo*, 1, April 18, 1956.

⁸⁶ Marilyn Elias, “Personal Interview,” January 27, 2024.

⁸⁷ Marilyn Elias, “Personal Interview.”

⁸⁸ Glenda Hildebrand, “Personal Interview.”

running, the creek is running!,’ you know? ‘It’s going to run over the bridge,’ and those kinds of things.”⁸⁹

“Often knee-high rubber boots weren’t enough” during flood season around the Horndean area in the mid-twentieth century. Residents there remembered floating chickens to safety on a wooden door, moving livestock up to a hayloft, and basements fully filled with water during springtime.⁹⁰ Sometimes older forms of transportation were the best means of getting out of flooded areas, as in 1948 when Abram D. Wiebe’s family recalled “help[ing] some of our neighbours get out with horse and wagon.”⁹¹ Mirroring Alexander Henry’s experiences of riding on horseback through the region in the early 1800s, they remembered that “the horses walked in water to the depth of their mid-ribs.”⁹² Similarly to how early settlers in the North American grasslands developed a “sense of place” deeply informed by “the sounds of freely flowing rivers, icy water, cracking ice, and gushing roars,”⁹³ so too did West Reserve Mennonites in the mid-to-late twentieth century.

The Assertive Wet Prairie

Constant efforts were made at mitigating the area’s regular flooding, as outlined in Chapter 1. Already in 1906, the Province’s Department of Public Works was reporting that the capacity of the Buffalo Lake channel, dug two years earlier,⁹⁴ had been increased by building a dike along the channel’s southern edge. Even in reporting on this expansion, however, the Department was

⁸⁹ Richard Warkentin, “Personal Interview.”

⁹⁰ Horndean Reunion Committee, *Horndean Heritage*, 37, 53, 78.

⁹¹ Horndean Reunion Committee, *Horndean Heritage*, 123.

⁹² Horndean Reunion Committee, *Horndean Heritage*, 123.

⁹³ Rozum, *Grasslands Grown*, 106.

⁹⁴ Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, 98.

already anticipating that “it will probably be necessary to enlarge this channel in the near future.”⁹⁵

In later decades, local newspaper reports on the construction of various drainage works often speculated – sometimes definitively, sometimes hopefully – that a given project would adequately address the region’s problematic water. The construction of a new dike north of Rosenfeld in 1945 was to “take care of the spring flood water,”⁹⁶ for example. This type of extensive drainage infrastructure was described two years later as being able to “help in leading the flood waters quickly to the river.”⁹⁷ Similarly, additional work on the Hespeler Dike in 1952 was expected to “eliminate” the “dangers of wash-outs,”⁹⁸ and improvements to a bridge in the Rosenfeld area were hoped to make it strong enough to “withstand the worst that our area can offer in flood waters.”⁹⁹ As another report cautiously noted in 1947, a “large drainage project in the area north of Rosenfeld was partially completed last year,” and “if the flood waters from the hills [do] not come in too large volume [sic], the spillway should be able to handle it.”¹⁰⁰

Even as drainage projects continued over the decades, though, the watery environment of the region continued to persist, reflecting the incongruity of “chequer board squares in a dynamic landscape.”¹⁰¹ Infrastructure often proved insufficient, and required ongoing improvements to deal with the continual spring flooding that characterized the region’s environment.¹⁰² A 1938 petition of farmers for a drainage ditch in Township 2, Range 1 West complained that certain

⁹⁵ Manitoba Department of Public Works, “Report of the Department of Public Works for the Year Ending December 31st 1906,” 440-441, MAN Public Work Annual. 1901-1920 c.1. Annual report, Public Works, Manitoba Legislative Library.

⁹⁶ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, August 22, 1945.

⁹⁷ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, March 19, 1947.

⁹⁸ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, January 20, 1952.

⁹⁹ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, June 21, 1950.

¹⁰⁰ “Danger of Flood Minimized,” *Altona Echo*, March 26, 1947.

¹⁰¹ Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 164.

¹⁰² Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, 210, 235.

sections were being “flooded every spring” due to “uncompleted and poorly planned ditches and drainage.”¹⁰³ A local newspaper report on the huge flood of 1948 made sure to point out the Hespeler Dike’s initial \$100,000 price tag when stating that it “was washed out in several places,” with additional water running “across the highway at Plum Coulee, spilling over the dike there.”¹⁰⁴ As the *Altona Echo* reported in 1950, regarding improvements being made to the dike north of Rosenfeld, “since 1948 the project has proven too weak to cope with the spring water.”¹⁰⁵

Later into the twentieth century, drainage became a more and more prevalent issue for the Rural Municipality of Rhineland, and drainage items regularly filled the council’s meeting minutes. Numerous motions for the Provincial Government to improve their infrastructure in the region regularly commented on this, as in 1952 when the “present Buffalo Lake Double Dyke” was described as “inadequate to handle the spring run off,”¹⁰⁶ and in 1957, when the Hespeler Dike “as presently constructed” was characterized as unable to deal with spring floods, with “considerable break through dykes in places when water is high.”¹⁰⁷ In 1958, drainage ditches west of the town of Altona were described as “inadequate to take the spring run-off and heavy rains during summer,”¹⁰⁸ and in 1959 the Hespeler channel – which took water from “the Middle

¹⁰³ “Petition,” May 23, 1938, Municipal Affairs Branch Files, Rural Municipality of Rhineland 1935-1953, MA0115, GR7177, O-1-3-15, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁰⁴ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, April 21, 1948.

¹⁰⁵ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, September 13, 1950.

¹⁰⁶ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965),” April 9, 1952, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁰⁷ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965),” April 3, 1957, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁰⁸ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965),” May 24, 1958, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

Plum Coulee” – came under fire again, when a Council motion argued that it was “inadequate to carry all the water for which it was intended.”¹⁰⁹

Through the 1960s and 1970s, as well, various drains and ditches were at turns described as “no longer effective,”¹¹⁰ “inadequate,”¹¹¹ and “not adequate to drain the large amount of water that flows...during spring run-off and heavy rains in summer.”¹¹² Though an ever-expanding “settler colonial model of export-oriented agriculture”¹¹³ had taken root in this corner of the Canadian prairies, requiring concomitant expansive drainage projects, it appeared to be at continual odds with the region’s hydrological patterns and environmental realities. As a Rhineland council motion of 1961 remarked, such realities included the fact that the region’s creeks, streams, and coulees did not align with certain approaches to drainage. The “Upper Hespeler Coulee Channel” (itself a component of the pre-existing Plum Creek or Plum River watercourse) in fact was described as being so “irregular and winding in its course” that “it now appears impractical to follow a system of dykes 200’ apart along the Channel....”¹¹⁴

The perceived irregularity of waterways proved inconvenient to farmers in other ways. Creekbanks were habitats for various types of animals who often interacted with agricultural infrastructure in ways that frustrated farmers. A dam built “of boulder rock” by a farmer in the Waldheim area south of Morden and Winkler, for example, was described in 1945 as a “rampart

¹⁰⁹ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965),” March 10, 1959, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹¹⁰ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965),” June 7, 1960, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹¹¹ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965),” February 9, 1960, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹¹² “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland, and of Douglas: Minutes of Council Meetings (1965-75), By-laws (1-699), and (1-41),” December 27, 1971, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹¹³ Shelisa Klassen, “Land, Sovereignty, and Migration During an Era of Change: Manitoba, 1870s” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2022), 160.

¹¹⁴ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Minutes of Council Meetings (1926-1965),” November 7, 1961, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

of strength” until it “yielded to the mighty impact of rushing flood waters” in March of that year, due to “an army of muskrats [that] had tunneled and mined and taken possession of this dam since the preceding fall.”¹¹⁵ Two years later in the nearby Wakeham School District, “Muskrats tunneled” a “farm dam,” resulting in floodwaters breaking through and “flooding large areas of land that was ready for seeding.”¹¹⁶

Further to the east on Buffalo Creek, several beavers were noticed in the spring of 1952 “causing trouble” by “plugging the culvert at one of the mile lines crossing Buffalo Lake.” Area farmers had “opened this culvert repeatedly” due to the resultant flooding, but “the following day they find that the beavers have plugged it again.”¹¹⁷ Minks had a habit of raiding one family’s chicken coop along Buffalo Creek,¹¹⁸ and on another farm, muskrats would dig and burrow in the bank where a farmer had installed a pipe to draw up drinking water to the livestock in the barn. “They would find that [pipe],” remembered a resident, “and they would try and keep the water from escaping, and pack that up, and we’d have such rancid, dirty, black...water coming out in the barn that the cattle wouldn’t even want to drink.”¹¹⁹ Farmyards and largescale crop farming therefore created a new context on the prairies in which such animals were now nuisances and impediments to productive farm life. This friction is brought into sharper relief against some traditional Ojibwe knowledge, which speaks of the importance of beaver habitats to prairie wetlands, the “symbiotic” relationship between beavers and muskrats, and the importance of beavers’ familial and social characteristics to prairie land and water.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, March 21, 1945.

¹¹⁶ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, April 30, 1947.

¹¹⁷ “Gretna,” *Altona Echo*, April 9, 1952.

¹¹⁸ West Reserve Resident, “Personal Interview.”

¹¹⁹ Gary Klassen “Personal Interview.”

¹²⁰ Finn Rachul, *Beavers as Bioengineers: A Guidebook on Stream Restoration in Manitoba* (Prairie Ojibwe Environmental, 2025), 9-11, <https://www.prairieojibweenvironmental.ca/post/beavers-as-bioengineers-a-guidebook-on-stream-restoration-in-manitoba-download-link-and-preview>.

*Surface Water as “An Unusual Attraction”*¹²¹

Although more and more land was brought under cultivation during Mennonites’ increasingly prosperous settlement in the West Reserve, and although low areas were drained and creeks were channelized to quicken their flow, creek environments remained part of the landscape, if in diminished ways, and still offered a setting for experiences that were very different from much of the environment within a prairie agricultural context. The region’s waterways – sources of fruit, berries, and medicinal plants for First Nations and Metis Peoples prior to Mennonite arrival – were also places where early Mennonite settlers harvested various types of vegetation for transplanting on yards and in orchards.¹²²

The Marais River, remembered Bill Schroeder, had “quite a lot of fruit...like, saskatoons, and plums, and chokecherries – well, there were at least three different cherries.” And, “at the end of the bush, we also had hops growing wild, and my mother would pick that and used that to make bread.”¹²³ In the 1960s and 1970s, Buffalo Creek had “wild plums we could go pick, and mulberries you could after the first frost,”¹²⁴ and wooded creek areas south of Winkler and Morden were sometimes of interest for “the type of wildflowers that were there.” Richard Warkentin remembered his father taking the children into the bush, “show[ing] us the different wildflowers...And an interesting wildflower was the...nodding trillium...it’s known as the wake robin...Wake robin was rare, and that was the sign of, you know, it’s time to plant, when you see wake robins. And if we found a wake robin, it was a significant find.”¹²⁵

¹²¹ Hildebrand, “Necessary, Problematic, and ‘Unusual.’”

¹²² Fisher, “Seeds from the Steppe,” 42; Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 72.

¹²³ Bill Schroeder, “Personal Interview.”

¹²⁴ Glenda Hildebrand, “Personal Interview.”

¹²⁵ Richard Warkentin, “Personal Interview.”

These riparian seams were also sites of distinct wildlife encounters. The *Morden Monitor* reported in 1887 that a Mennonite farmer's horse was attacked by either "a lynx or a wolf" in a pasture adjacent to "the scrub near the banks of the Dead Horse Creek."¹²⁶ In the western part of the reserve near the Pembina Hills, bears were occasionally spotted into the late nineteenth century, as when the *Morden Monitor* reported in the fall of 1888 that "no less than four or five [had] been killed in the last week," including a "large one out in the Mennonite settlement."¹²⁷ Newspaper social columns sometimes made note of similar predator sightings into the twentieth century, as when the *Echo* reported that "bush wolves" had "moved down the [Pembina] mountain to invade the foothills," having travelled "via the Derksen Coulees."¹²⁸ Big-cat sightings also continued occasionally throughout the twentieth century, as in February of 1945, when "a number of farmers living near the wooded creeks" at the base of the Pembina Hills "have reported seeing 'lynx' this winter,"¹²⁹ and in late winter of 1953 in the Halbstadt area (through which the Marais River flows), when a cat – possibly a lynx – was shot.¹³⁰ That same fall, "several bobcats and bears were shot" in the area, with a moose also having been sighted in the following autumn.¹³¹

Descriptions of creek wildlife "sometimes verged on the exotic,"¹³² as in the case of a pelican that was shot by a farmer in 1945. A newspaper report included a description of the bird's size, continuing that it was now "on display" in Rosenfeld, with "many people, including youngsters," viewing it "with considerable interest – said interest being in the strange bill of the

¹²⁶ "Town and Country," *Morden Monitor*, July 14, 1887; Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 51.

¹²⁷ "Town and Country," *Morden Monitor*, October 4, 1888.

¹²⁸ "Pembina Mountain Murmurs," *Altona Echo*, March 19, 1947; Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 51.

¹²⁹ "Pembina Mountain Murmurs," *Altona Echo*, February 14, 1945.

¹³⁰ "Wildcat Shot at Halbstadt," *Altona Echo*, April 1, 1953.

¹³¹ "Moose Seen in District," *Altona Echo*, October 20, 1954.

¹³² Hildebrand, "Necessary, Problematic, and 'Unusual,'" 51.

bird.”¹³³ Though pelicans were not unheard of along the region’s small creeks, by the mid-twentieth century they were “rarely seen,” and sightings often warranted mentions local newspapers, such as in 1955 when another pelican was found tangled in hydro wires in the Buffalo Creek area north of Altona.¹³⁴ Other waterfowl, though, were more common. Ducks in particular, though more plentiful in earlier years according to one newspaper correspondent who remembered “ducks galore” in the areas near several waterways including Buffalo Lake, were also present in creeks and marshy areas during this period.¹³⁵ On occasion, hunters would still make “frequent excursions into the wet and marshy regions” in search of “mallards that are on their southward journey.”¹³⁶

Although the numerous creeks did not typically contain much in terms of large fish, at least at a level significant for larger-scale harvesting, fish were present in some of these waterways, providing an occasional childhood diversion. “If the weather wasn’t swimming weather, then we’d be fishing” for “bullheads,” remembered a resident who grew up along a wide and deep section of Buffalo Creek in the 1960s. “You could catch five, six, seven within an hour or two.”¹³⁷ Martha Martens recalled that, in springtime, “when the Pembina River would overflow, we would get fish.” Her father had built a homemade fish trap of sorts attached to a rope, and “we would pull the rope and roll it out [through the creek] and then we’d catch a fish!”¹³⁸

It was indeed the high water of springtime that produced some of the more noteworthy instances of angling around the postwar period. “The small creeks running into the Red River

¹³³ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, October 3, 1945.

¹³⁴ “Large Pelican Found in District,” *Altona Echo*, September 14, 1955.

¹³⁵ “Gretna,” *Red River Valley Echo*, September 19, 1956.

¹³⁶ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, October 22, 1947.

¹³⁷ West Reserve Resident, “Personal Interview.”

¹³⁸ Martha Martens, “Personal Interview.”

have been full of fish the last few years and hundreds of them have been caught,” stated the *Echo* in May of 1945, in a report on two farmers catching fish in their fields.¹³⁹ Depending on water levels, later spring and summer could also be times when fish were found, as in June of 1947, when farmers from the village of Schoenthal on Buffalo Creek reported spearing several fish, ranging from fifteen to twenty-four inches, out of the water with pitchforks, and others claiming to have caught some with bare hands. “...it was indeed an odd sight to see one of the farmers walk home with an armful of fish caught in this fashion,” observed the *Echo*.¹⁴⁰ On some occasions, wet conditions brought childhood opportunities for “crab digging” near creeks¹⁴¹ or in ditches, sometimes resulting in “enough to make a meal of them.”¹⁴²

Such instances, atypical of most prairie agricultural life in the West Reserve, were not the only times that the unique microenvironments of small waterways were noticed or utilized. As the *Echo* remarked in the summer of 1947, “Buffalo Lake has an unusual attraction for outdoor lovers during these fine summer days. If it isn't fishing and wiener roasts it's boating. The latter was jolly fun for a group of seven local girls Tuesday morning.”¹⁴³ Another example of these frequent outings occurred in 1948, when the local teachers' association held its annual picnic at a farm near Buffalo Creek, spending some of their time rowing boats in the water.¹⁴⁴ A creek to the west of the village of Gnadenthal provided similar recreational opportunities, and was the location of a yearly spring outing for school students to play games and swim.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, the

¹³⁹ “Another True Fish Story,” *Altona Echo*, May 9, 1945.

¹⁴⁰ “Good Fishing at Schoenthal,” *Altona Echo*, June 18, 1947.

¹⁴¹ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 284.

¹⁴² Horndean Reunion Committee, *Horndean Heritage*, 27.

¹⁴³ “What's Happening Around Town,” *Altona Echo*, July 2, 1947.

¹⁴⁴ “Teacher's Picnic,” *Altona Echo*, June 23, 1948.

¹⁴⁵ Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal*, 107.

creek that wound through the village of Reinland was both “an excellent crab digging area” as well as a swimming hole.¹⁴⁶

Though these examples are perhaps indicative of a postwar era in which there was more room for leisure time and recreational activities, other glimpses into earlier Mennonite settler life indicate that water could provide recreational diversions even in the difficult first years of settlement. Reflecting on those years, one settler recalled “pool[s] of water” near both Reinland and Neuenburg, which often “remained all summer” and offered an occasion for cousins to swim.¹⁴⁷ The opportunity for a more “unusual” recreational environment within a prairie agricultural setting commonly drew people to the creeks and the nearby Pembina River¹⁴⁸ throughout the mid and later twentieth century for school, youth, and Sunday school events, as well as church events such as baptisms. The first Mennonite Brethren baptism in the West Reserve was held in May of 1886 “near Burwalde in the Dead Horse Creek,” and in subsequent decades baptisms in the Gnadenthal Mennonite Brethren Church “were usually held in the little creek running between Gnadenthal and the Blumengart Colony.”¹⁴⁹

Creeks also offered winter recreational opportunities when, if the ice froze in the right way, children would sometimes have a skating rink “two miles, three miles long” on the Marais,¹⁵⁰ or could “skate for a mile or two...to the neighbours” along Buffalo Creek.¹⁵¹ The shift from winter to spring brought about another memorable occurrence – the breakup of creek ice as it began to melt and water started to flow. “I can’t describe it,” stated Martha Martens, but “it’s noisy.” Ice “would break up in big chunks, and then, all of a sudden, with the force of the

¹⁴⁶ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 284.

¹⁴⁷ "Jacob Friesen Collection, Document 3", CA MHC PP-21, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁴⁸ “What’s Happening Around Town”; “Winkler,” *Altona Echo*, July 30, 1941.

¹⁴⁹ Gnadenthal History Book Committee, *Gnadenthal*, 86, 68.

¹⁵⁰ Bill Schroeder, “Personal Interview.”

¹⁵¹ Glenda Hildebrand, “Personal Interview.”

stream...sometimes these ice pieces would stand on end, you know, and block [the flow]. Then you could see the water rise on the [other] side, until it was strong enough that it threw the ice block over...we would stay outside most of the day, just to watch.” With ice chunks ten to twelve feet in length and width,¹⁵² spring breakup would have undoubtedly been an interesting time of year for prairie settlers. More than interesting, it also – like flood season – could be a bit dangerous. Gordon Jantz remembered standing on a bridge during spring runoff season, where “Large chunks of ice were floating swiftly under” it, “and I thought it would be interesting to take a stick and tip one over.” Jantz was “pried into the fast moving ice cold water” under the bridge, before being rescued by a companion.¹⁵³

Gender and Settler Creek Environments

Escapades like the one experienced by Gordon Jantz are perhaps representative of the “rebellious behaviour” to which Mennonite boys were considered, within their social and familial contexts, to be more naturally susceptible than their female counterparts.¹⁵⁴ Such gendered expectations – a major feature of the familial unit, “either nuclear or extended” that was “a central institution for organizing community life and transmitting beliefs”¹⁵⁵ – might cause us to ask if, or how, creek environments were experienced differently by male and female members of farm families situated along these waterways. Certainly creek areas – sites perhaps seen as more wild or unkempt – were sometimes perceived, enacted, and remembered as male spaces. Crab-digging, for example, was an activity “for young boys”¹⁵⁶ and hunting muskrats was similarly an activity that kept “local boys” busy.¹⁵⁷ When swollen creeks were full of fish, historical sources typically

¹⁵² Martha Martens “Personal Interview.”

¹⁵³ Horndean Reunion Committee, *Horndean*, 97.

¹⁵⁴ Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 62.

¹⁵⁵ Epp, *Mennonite Women*, 61

¹⁵⁶ Zacharias, *Reinland*, 284.

¹⁵⁷ “Altberghthal,” *Red River Valley Echo*, April 3, 1957.

state that it was “boys” catching them “by pail or by hand,” and “older men” still using “the conventional hook and line.”¹⁵⁸

Some seemed to remember these environments as places of interest more specifically to them than their sisters during their childhood. As one person recalled of his growing-up years, these spaces were more a location where his father spent time, but “not my mom...she was, you know, the cook, and she took care of the household...We had very specific jobs...you know, girls do this, boys do that, so to speak.”¹⁵⁹ Another resident who grew up along a creek recalled that, though his sister did spend time playing around the creek during childhood, it was largely, at least in his memory, a place where the brothers spent more time.¹⁶⁰ Another person, recalling himself “as the only boy in a family of three siblings,” situated his experience of the creek being his “playground” in contrast with some other pursuits engaged in by his sisters – “the music aspect...or the Barbie dolls and stuff like this.”¹⁶¹

Yet this was not exclusively so. Indeed, scholars of Mennonite history have also pointed to the ways in which historical gender roles within Mennonite families could be “unpredictable,”¹⁶² and the extent to which Mennonite women asserted influence within familial contexts.¹⁶³ It should not be surprising, then, that waterways were places where both Mennonite women and girls played and worked. At the Schroeder farm near the Marais River, where plentiful berries grew along the banks, wife and mother Helena Schroeder was the one to interact with the people who “would come and ask if they could pick berries in the bush.” According to her son, “she’d say yeah, but half-and-half – you keep half for yourself, and we’ll take the other

¹⁵⁸ “Rosenfeld,” *Altona Echo*, June 27, 1945.

¹⁵⁹ Richard Warkentin, “Personal Interview.”

¹⁶⁰ West Reserve Resident, “Personal Interview.”

¹⁶¹ Gary Klassen, “Personal Interview.”

¹⁶² Epp, *Mennonite Women*, 86.

¹⁶³ Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 106.

half...she'd sell the berries they had picked" and "when the hydro came in 1948, she bought a deep freeze from that money."¹⁶⁴

Growing up along Buffalo Creek, Martha Martens remembered that, as a girl in a family with no boys, "I was a 'son' to Dad, rather than a daughter." As a result, she was "always out on the ice" helping with ice-cutting in the winter, something that "was much better than [being] in the house."¹⁶⁵ And when the thick trees along the creek attracted blackbirds that would feast on the nearby field of sunflowers, she went to ask their neighbour, Mr. Wiebe, to come shoot some of them, to which he replied, "'you can do it. So, he showed me how, and I went and did it!...a new experience for me."¹⁶⁶ And other women, too, remembered childhoods along waterways spent "build[ing] forts...climbing trees," and learning to swim,¹⁶⁷ or spending time in the forest along as a form of solitude to climb trees, listen to a portable radio, read, or take photographs.¹⁶⁸

Growing up Near Water

As some of the above examples intimate, childhoods spent in and near creek environments could foster distinct senses of both self and place, especially in comparison with others who did not live in such environments. "Not common, not common," remarked Richard Warkentin of his growing-up-years. "Where I grew up...it was a unique environment among my classmates, you know, growing up in the woods. The woods was our playground, you know? And my chums did not have the woods as their playground...I would say our yard was fairly unique in the sense that we were woodlot people."¹⁶⁹ Glenda Hildebrand had similar memories, remarking that, "I always felt there was a kind of importance to being able to grow up along the creek – we had a water

¹⁶⁴ Bill Schroeder, "Personal Interview."

¹⁶⁵ Martha Martens, "Personal Interview."

¹⁶⁶ Martha Martens, "Personal Interview."

¹⁶⁷ Glenda Hildebrand, "Personal Interview."

¹⁶⁸ Marilyn Elias, "Personal Interview."

¹⁶⁹ Richard Warkentin, "Personal Interview."

source for our farm animals and domestic animals, and it was a lot of fun to play along the creek. And many of my peers, in school, didn't have that."¹⁷⁰ Marilyn Elias remembered that "I was so proud, growing up" at her grandparents' farmyard, "because – like, the bush – and my friends loved to come and play there."¹⁷¹

Certain elements of these environments weren't always relatable to friends who hadn't also experienced them, as Gary Klassen offered: "I do remember...in playing with our school friends who didn't live on the creek, I sometimes felt as if they couldn't quite understand my experience." The experience of seeing the creek slowly begin to flow in early spring, "watching the water inch along, fill up a bit, and get over that bank, the flood over...some years it was fast, some years it was slow...these friends of ours couldn't relate to that."¹⁷² Beavers, often seen as nuisances in other contexts, offered an interesting object of study and observation for creek-adjacent children, for whom it was "a treat...just to sit there and watch the beavers work."¹⁷³ It "was interesting, you know, the intelligence of beavers, how they do it."¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Glenda Hildebrand, "Personal Interview."

¹⁷¹ Marilyn Elias, "Personal Interview."

¹⁷² Gary Klassen, "Personal Interview."

¹⁷³ Gary Klassen, "Personal Interview."

¹⁷⁴ Martha Martens, "Personal Interview."

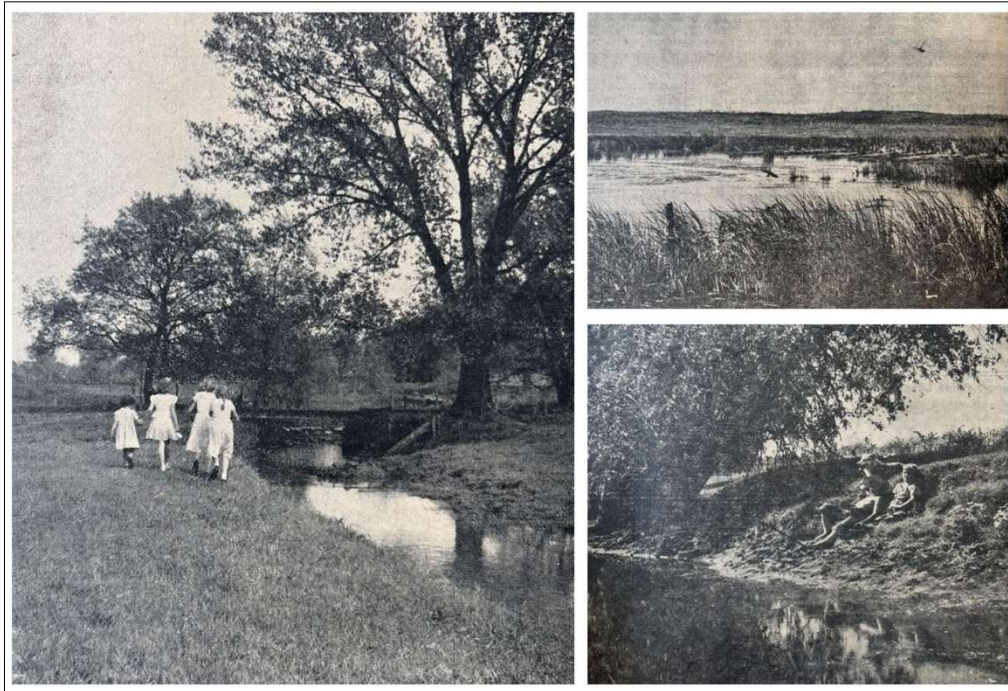


Figure 12: Summer creek environments in the West Reserve, 1950s.¹⁷⁵

Such memories are notable for how they illuminate a different sense of place and aspect to West Reserve Mennonite identity than the ones typically communicated in commemorations and histories. This is notably similar to the ways in which Mennonite stories of interactions with First Nations and Metis people exist either only as short peripheral snippets in local histories and newspapers, or in oral histories and rapidly fading collective memory (although the place of ‘creek stories’ in local Mennonite collective memory is likely more prominent than that of historical Indigenous presence). Royden Loewen has recently argued how seemingly mundane environmental experiences – from thoughtful observation of a “lowly spider” to personal reflection on the impact and implications of changing seasons – have largely been brushed aside “in the annals of anthropocentric Mennonite history.”¹⁷⁶ Attending to West Reserve creek stories reveals similarly brushed-aside histories. In a region commemorated with images of wheat fields,

¹⁷⁵ *Altona Echo*, July 2, 1953, 2; *Altona Echo*, August 13, 1952, 1; *Altona Echo*, August 24, 1955, 2.

¹⁷⁶ Loewen, “Eleven Settler Stories that Matter,” 14-15.

threshing gangs, and agricultural villages, creek environments and Mennonite experiences of them help broaden the historical picture West Reserve life beyond these themes.

It is equally important to note that, as distinct as these microenvironments were *from* much of the larger tallgrass-prairie-turned-farmland context around them, they were still themselves integral parts *of* the wet prairie landscape as a whole. As such, Mennonite attachments to these spaces – and the identities formed through those attachments – demonstrate how, in Rozum’s words, “settler senses of place and regional identities” functioned as both “sincere personal attachments to grassland spaces” and proclamations of “the successful transfer of the northern grasslands from Indigenous ‘Indian Country’ to settler-society nations.”¹⁷⁷ To be clear, Rozum is here speaking of the “grasslands grown” generation of children who were the first generation of settlers to experience the North American grasslands within their growing-up years.¹⁷⁸ Yet if we consider Patrick Wolfe’s assertion that settler colonization of land is not a one-time event, but a structure that stays and establishes itself over time, we can see echoes within these postwar Mennonite reflections of how “settler society gathered up sensuous environmental experiences” in making claims to “‘indigeneity’ in the northern grasslands.”¹⁷⁹

Conclusion

The dynamic wetness and variable creekfulness of the West Reserve’s surface water was not a notable element in Mennonite historical interpretations of the region. More often, efforts at draining water and thereby improving land were the most predominant ways in which surface water was addressed in Mennonite histories. This leaves ample room to probe for other histories and understandings of water within the experiences of West Reserve settlers. Among these other

¹⁷⁷ Rozum, *Grasslands Grown*, 12.

¹⁷⁸ Rozum, *Grasslands Grown*, 10-12

¹⁷⁹ Rozum 12. Here Rozum interprets Veracini’s concept of “Narrative transfer” within settler colonialism: Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, 42-43.

understandings we can see the many unique ways in which West Reserve water asserted itself, impacted settler life, and shaped Mennonite identities in ways distinctly different from those who did not live near creek environments. These environments – especially their dynamic hydrology, biodiversity, and wildlife – related to, with, and against ideas of improvement, progress, and order. And, just as the West Reserve’s wet prairie remained wet, so too did it remain a place where First Nations and Metis people continued to occupy and live within their homelands – a subject to which the subsequent two chapters now turn.

CHAPTER 4

Hydrosocial Spaces, Agricultural Labour, and Home Missions: Indigenous-Mennonite Interactions

The 1875 arrivals to the West Reserve encountered more than just a barren, featureless prairie – indeed, it was one with a fair amount of hydrological dynamism. So too did they arrive to prairie space that was known and utilized, if in ways less visible to settlers, by Indigenous Peoples. The presence of First Nations and Metis people around Mennonite settlers, and instances of interactions between the two groups, has been more extensively discussed in the context of the East rather than West Reserve, particularly in relation to Metis land claims, settlements, and presence in that area.¹ However, combing familiar historical sources such as newspapers, trader and explorer journals, and church-related documents, along with oral and written local histories, reveals the land was not vacant of Indigenous people when Mennonites arrived, and that cross-cultural interactions continued well into the twentieth century.

Many such interactions occurred near the region's waterways, especially in the nineteenth century, but also in the twentieth, as these were often spaces where hunting, trapping, and resource harvesting continued. As such, we might think of these small riparian ribbons as “hydrosocial” spaces, where different cultures and cultural approaches to water overlapped² through personal interaction. This is significant, because these two historical realities – dynamic water and Indigenous presence – were often addressed or recognized only marginally in settler histories. Yet, in pursuing a deeper understanding of the region's history beyond these narrations, creeks and wet areas become central, not marginal, as spaces in which Indigenous Peoples continued to utilize their traditional territories, and in which Mennonite consciousness of

¹ Giesbrecht, “Metis, Mennonites, and the 'Unsettled Prairie;” Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland;” Ens, “The Manitoba Act, the Métis, and the Mennonites.”

² Shaun A. Stevenson, “Decolonizing Hydrosocial Relations: The River as a Site of Ethical Encounter in Alan Michelson's TwoRow II,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 6, no. 2 (2018): 94.

Indigenous presence continued, as it had, since the 1870s. In addition to hydrosocial interactions, though, other factors also brought West Reserve Mennonites and Indigenous people into contact with one another as the twentieth century progressed. In particular, Mennonite sugar-beet farming and mission work became arenas of encounter, revealing racist paternalism, ongoing colonialism, and also growing discomfort among some Mennonites with the worldviews and approaches that had come to define Mennonite views of their history in Manitoba and their presence on Indigenous land.

The West Reserve within a Broader Indigenous homeland

Indigenous oral traditions and historical knowledge, along with historical scholarship, have long documented how the North American grasslands³ had been, and are, the homelands of many different (and often interrelated) Indigenous Peoples, such as the Mandans, Cree, Assiniboine, Anishinaabe, Metis, and Dakota. This was true also for the small northeast corner of this large region in which the West Reserve would be demarcated within the drainage basin of the Red River. Historian Michael Witgen has shown how much of the North American interior – the Great Lakes and northern Great Plains regions particularly – comprised, in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, a world in which Indigenous Peoples were the autonomous and governing social and political presence. As such, it was not a place or time in which European settlers and institutions dominated and pushed aside Indigenous people. Rather, it was “a process of encounter and mutual transformation where the outcome was not always one-sided or unidirectional.”⁴ Similarly, although the Red River region of the plains underwent tremendous upheaval and change during the 1870s and 1880s as European settlement took over and First

³ Molly Rozum articulates how this border-spanning “ecological region” has been impacted, fashioned, and articulated in both different and similar ways on both the Canadian and American sides of the border. Rozum, *Grasslands Grown*, 8-9.

⁴ Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 20, 18-19.

Nations and Metis Peoples were displaced, it had not been very long prior to Mennonite arrival that it was profoundly “an Indigenous space,” with Metis and First Nations Peoples making up the majority of the population.⁵

By the time Mennonites arrived on the West Reserve scene in 1875, the Metis and Anishinaabe presence that had characterized the region was being increasingly displaced. The reserve system, the lack of government adherence to Treaty agreements, the lack of a proper and effective implementation of the Manitoba Act and the lands it guaranteed to the Metis, the ‘Reign of Terror’ inflicted upon the Metis by Canadian troops, the many strictures of the Indian Act, and an overarching desire and goal for Euro-Canadian agricultural settlement all profoundly changed the social, political, and environmental character of the region. And while most West Reserve histories begin with general background on the Red River fur trade, followed by brief mentions of Treaty 1, the Red River Resistance, and the Manitoba Act, this micro focus on the years immediately preceding Mennonite arrival minimizes how the prairies between the Red River and Escarpment had been long-known and used by Indigenous Peoples – a difficulty enhanced by the settler historical narratives discussed in Chapter 3. By zooming out from the Mennonite reserve to the northern plains more broadly, we can get a better sense of how the West Reserve sits within a far-reaching Indigenous homeland.

By the 1820s, the Anishinaabe in the Red River region had been living and trading in an area that included the region spanning from Turtle Mountain and the Pembina Hills, to Netley Creek near the south basin of Lake Winnipeg, as well as the shores of Lake Manitoba,⁶ though the Anishinaabe homelands – by then stretching broadly from “the edge of the woodlands around

⁵ Klassen, “Heroes of a Flat Country,” 170.

⁶ Laura Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780 to 1870* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994), 123-124

the Great Lakes north to Hudson's Bay and west to the Rocky Mountains.”⁷ This expansive homeland and social space was “created by the relationships” between the different peoples living and interacting within it,⁸ and was part of the Anishinaabeg' long story and history of westward movement, which resulted in a marked presence in the plains by the eighteenth century.⁹ It also reflected the Anishinaabe “seasonal round,” described by Jill Falcon Ramaker as “a highly complex pattern of movements on the land to hunt, harvest, cultivate, and trade foods as part of a holistic way of life, patterned on ancestral reciprocal obligations to place.”¹⁰

Further, the multicultural nature of Indigenous groups in this large area can be seen in the example of the Nehiyaw Pwat, or “Iron Alliance,” an “economic, social and military alliance” among the Cree, Assiniboine, Anishinaabe, and Metis Peoples.¹¹ Though this alliance was diminished by 1870,¹² understanding its longer history on both sides of the border is crucial to understanding the continuance of Indigenous presence among and around West Reserve settlers into the twentieth century. Doing so helps explain that this presence was not happenstance or random – though it may have seemed so to Mennonites – but was connected to a long and far-reaching presence in the plains.

During the 1870s – the tumultuous, transformational, and dispossessive years that immediately preceded Mennonite arrival to Manitoba – multicultural Anishinaabe groups north of the border in Manitoba had generally become identified as comprising three distinct yet

⁷ Falcon Ramaker, “Gichi Bizhi,” 80.

⁸ Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 129.

⁹ For a summation and review of the Anishinaabeg's movements toward the central plains from areas further east – as well as the social, cultural, spiritual, and geographic elements of this movement – see Chapter 3 of Jill Falcon Ramaker's recent Ph.D. dissertation.

¹⁰ Falcon Ramaker, “Gichi Bizhi,” xv.

¹¹ Innes, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People*, 43. For a fuller discussion of this alliance and the multiple, multicultural, and interrelated bands and groupings within it, see Innes, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People*, 43-69.

¹² Innes, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People*, 61.

interrelated bands: the Portage Band (generally thought of as today's Long Plain, Swan Lake, and Sandy Bay First Nations), the Fort Garry Band (sometimes associated with semi-permanent settlement around Upper Fort Garry in the mid-nineteenth century, with the Oak Point area, and with today's Brokenhead First Nation),¹³ and the Pembina Band (today associated with Roseau River First Nation). This description generally – though largely from a colonial point of view, it is important to note – describes the groupings of Anishinaabe peoples in southern Manitoba at the time. However, it also reflects fixed and named geographic sites that were merely “among many that were used” by the Anishinaabeg.¹⁴ Further, it does not fully capture the larger and more interrelated way in which Anishinaabeg and Metis presence spanned the lands that would become bisected by the international boundary (not to mention those groups' historic place within the broader Nehiyaw Pwat).

Today, for example, although First Nations at Turtle Mountain, North Dakota, as well as Red Lake and White Earth, Minnesota, are located in the United States, they were previously part of the larger Anishinaabe presence in the broader northeast plains region. Roseau River Anishinaabe First Nation in Treaty 1 territory of southern Manitoba was historically connected to what became known as the “Pembina Band” south of the border. The Turtle Mountain Band of

¹³ Lawrence J. Barkwell, “The Métis-First Nation Band at Upper Fort Garry,” Winnipeg, Louis Riel Institute, 2017; Indian Claims Commission, “Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation: 1903 Surrender Inquiry,” in *Indian Claims Commission Proceedings (2009) 23 ICCIP* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2009), 13, 17; Hilderman Thomas Frank Cram, *Swan Lake First Nation Review of Manitoba Hydro's Bipole III Environmental Impact Statement* (2012), 9.

¹⁴ Barkwell, “The Métis-First Nation Band,” 121.

Chippewa, too, was at one time part of – or closely related to – the Pembina Band,¹⁵ before becoming a more autonomous group through a variety of factors.¹⁶

To understand this border-spanning historical context of the West Reserve is in part to realize how, as Jean O’Brien has argued, the discipline of history itself “is deeply wedded to national narratives” and to the idea of the nation-state as the overarching interpretive, geographical, and temporal framework that structures much of the discipline in North America.¹⁷ Understanding history beyond the framework of the nation-state is important particularly in case of the West Reserve, given its borderland location. Doing so requires reading historical sources without “privileging the fantasies of [European] discovery,”¹⁸ and against the “fantasies of [British] sovereignty”¹⁹ that justified the colonization of the prairies (and, indeed, which inform the nation-based histories critiqued by O’Brien).

Indigenous Presence in the West Reserve and Surrounding Region

Zooming in from the broader North American plains, the particular prairie of the West Reserve was also utilized, lived in, and traversed by Indigenous people. On the eventual reserve’s western edge, the Pembina Hills stand out as an example of this. Local Mennonite histories sometimes mentioned Alexander Henry’s Fort Pinancewaywining, named after a Cree word meaning “on

¹⁵ Keith Richotte, Jr., ““We the Indians of the Turtle Mountain Reservation...”: Rethinking Tribal Constitutionalism Beyond the Colonialist/Revolutionary Dialectic” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2009), 51-64; John M. Shaw, “In Order that Justice May be Done’: The Legal Struggle of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa, 1795-1905” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Arizona, 2004), 77-80.

¹⁶ For more detail on the Turtle Mountain and Pembina/Red Lake Bands, see Vrooman, “The Whole Country was...‘One Robe;’” Richotte, Jr., *Claiming Turtle Mountain’s Constitution: The History, Legacy, and Future of a Tribal Nation’s Founding Documents* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); John M. Shaw, *In Order That Justice May Be Done: The Legal Struggle of the Turtle Mountain Band of Pembina Chippewa, 1795–1905* (Fargo: North Dakota State University Press, 2023); Anton Treuer, *Warrior Nation: A History of the Red Lake Ojibwe* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2015); Margaret Huettl, “Nindanishinaabewimin: Ojibwe Peoplehood in the North American West, 1854-1954,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2016); North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, *The History and Culture of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa* (Bismarck: North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 1997).

¹⁷ O’Brien, “Historical Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies,” 16.

¹⁸ Wittgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 19.

¹⁹ Gaudry, “Fantasies of Sovereignty.”

the way down to the ford.”²⁰ This small post was built in 1802 at the foot of the Pembina Hills where a creek intersected with the cart trail from Pembina to Calf Mountain,²¹ which belies the importance of the Pembina Hills. Historically referred to as the Hair Hills or Pembina Mountain, the Pembina Escarpment is a defining feature on the West Reserve’s western flank. It was somewhere in the Pembina Hills during the 1790s where the Anishinaabeg, according to several sources including Chief Peguis, solidified their connection with the Cree and Assiniboine, who had been decimated by smallpox and were continually impacted by battles with the Dakota (or Sioux) to the south:

The Saulteaux [Anishinaabeg] found the Assiniboines and the Crees encamped at the Pembina Mountain, where they were received in the most friendly manner, and after smoking and feasting for two or three days, the children of the forest were formally invited to dwell on the plains – to eat out of the same dish, to warm themselves at the same fire, and to make common cause with them against their enemies the Sioux [Dakota].²²

In 1885, nineteenth-century Anishinaabe historian William Warren relayed a similar story, based on the account of Anishinaabe chief Eshkibagikoonzhe (alternately Esh-ke-bug-e-coshe, or “Flat Mouth”). Eshkibagikoonzhe recounted how the Cree and Assiniboine first entered into an alliance against the Dakota, “shortly after” which “the Ojibway made his [sic] appearance among them, and he too became a party to the mutual compact which has been kept unbroken to this day.”²³ This aligns with oral histories from Swan Lake First Nation, which recount how the Anishinaabe moved westward to the prairies to Cree territory and “set up camp north of the medicine line for protection.”²⁴

²⁰ Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Fort Pinaceawaywining, Manitoba,” Winnipeg, Louis Riel Institute, 2018.

²¹ Manitoba Conservation, *Geographical Names of Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Conservation, 2001), 61.

²² “Peguis Vindicated,” *Nor-Wester*, April 28, 1860; Ramaker, “Gichi Bizhi,” 132-133.

²³ William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibways, Based Upon Traditions and Oral Statements* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1885), 138-140.

²⁴ Black River First Nation, Long Plain First Nation, and Swan Lake First Nation, “Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Study Community Report,” in *Manitoba-Minnesota Transmission Project - Environmental Impact Assessment Appendix A: Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Studies*, Manitoba Hydro (2015), 19.

The Pembina Hills were significant for other reasons, too. Beginning in the early 1800s, they became an important winter-settlement location for “a mix of Ojibwa, Cree, and Assiniboine families, along with the freemen who married into these families.”²⁵ Subsequently, the burgeoning Metis community of St. Joseph, at the foot of the hills south of the forty-ninth parallel, was a crucial staging and supply point for “Metis buffalo-hunting parties bound for the Dakota plains.”²⁶ Further up into the hills to the northwest of where the Mennonite reserve would be located was Buffalo Head, or Calf Mountain, an important ceremonial location along a longstanding Indigenous trail that connected the Red River valley with points further west.²⁷ This trail would later become part of the Mennonite Post Road discussed in Chapter 1.²⁸

Though the forested heights of the Pembina Escarpment were geographically and socially significant for Indigenous Peoples, so too were the prairie grasslands that stretched to the east. The imbuelement of these eventual ‘West Reserve’ prairies with settler ideas of emptiness and deficiency stands in contrast to the ways in which they had long been utilized by Indigenous Peoples. In the late eighteenth century, the Anishinaabeg who were involved in the fur trade often hunted along the streams “north of Pembina” such as the Scratching (Morris), Roseau, Sale, and Rat Rivers that flowed east into the Red.²⁹ The Plum and Marais Rivers – closer to where the West Reserve would be located – were also hunting and camping locations, and places where buffalo could often be found, as noted by Henry in his trade, work, and travels with the Anishinaabe people of the region (see Chapter 4). In fact, Henry set up a small sub-post at the

²⁵ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 23

²⁶ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 50.

²⁷ Falcon Ramaker, “Gichi Bizhi,” 180.

²⁸ Sometimes also referred to as Tête de Beauf, Buffalo Head or Calf Mountain was a significant site often noted on early European maps of the region and also mentioned in Alexander Henry the Younger’s journals.

²⁹ Harold Hickerson, “The Genesis of a Trading Post Band: The Pembina Chippewa,” *Ethnohistory* 3, no. 4 (1956): 303

Marais River.³⁰ The Plum was also apparently known as the “Pekasun” River as noted by geologist William H. Keating in 1824, which bears resemblance to “bagesaan,” the word for “plum” in Anishinaabemowin.³¹ This Indigenous name helps demonstrate the deeper and more longstanding knowledge of this waterbody than is typically conveyed in Mennonite stories, which often associate the ‘Plum’ name with the founding of the town of Plum Coulee (along the Plum River), which was apparently so named by railway workers who noticed the abundance of that fruit in the area.³²

By the early 1800s, the area around Pembina was increasingly being used by Indigenous families involved in the fur trade, including for gardening crops like “potatoes, corn, and squash.”³³ As well, Indigenous women would gather, in Henry’s terminology, “rat-tails,” or “root[s]...about the size of a pipe-stem, and from 6 to 10 inches long,” which grew around the region “in pools and marshes,”³⁴ further highlighting the importance of the region’s small wetlands and waterways. Travel across the plains between the post at Pembina and the Hair Hills to the west became more and more significant, often comprising large caravans of Metis and First Nations families. Michel Hogue notes Henry’s description of one such caravan which departed for the Hills from Pembina in autumn of 1803, to supply the post in the Hills with goods for winter.³⁵ Henry noted another similar caravan of “Indians” the following spring on their way to the Hills, “form[ing] a string in the plains over a mile long – 65 men and women, 10 horses, and 60 dogs.”³⁶ In the Hills were “50 tents of Assiniboines and Crees.”³⁷

³⁰ Hickerson, “The Genesis of a Trading Post Band,” 312.

³¹ “plum n,” The Ojibwe People’s Dictionary, <https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=plum&commit=Search&type=english>.

³² Town of Plum Coulee, *Plum Coulee: A Century - Plus: 1901-2001* (Town of Plum Coulee, 2001), 12.

³³ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 243.

³⁴ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 211.

³⁵ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 15.

³⁶ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 243-244.

³⁷ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 244.

The backgrounds and familial connections of many of the Indigenous hunters who worked with Henry in the Pembina region and the plains of the West Reserve demonstrate the deep rootedness of Indigenous people there. They also reveal the simultaneous yet interrelated nature of the Pembina Band (who were generally located east of the Red River) and the Turtle Mountain Band (who generally “resided west of the river”).³⁸ For example, Aisance (or Little Shell) and his son Tabashaw both hunted as part of Henry’s brigade (Tabashaw appears numerous times in Henry’s journals, including instances around the Plum and Marais Rivers).³⁹ Little Shell became “the most prominent leader of the nascent Pembina Chippewa,” and “personified their physical migration to, and cultural shift in, the Red River region by residing at Devil’s Lake (*Minnewaukan*, or Spirit Lake) and trading at Pembina.”⁴⁰ He was also the first in a succession of Anishinaabe hereditary leaders who assumed the Little Shell moniker. His son, Weeshadamo, known historically as Little Shell II, was recognized, in Warren’s words, as “chief of the Pembina section of the Ojibway tribe.”⁴¹ His treaty negotiations with the U.S. government in 1851 and in 1863 – when he brought over a thousand “Metis” and “Chippewa” members of the Pembina and Turtle Mountain people with him to the negotiation of the Treaty of Old Crossing – helped solidify his position and significance as a leader.⁴² In 1875, his son Ayabewaywetung (Little Shell III) took on leadership of the increasingly distinct and autonomous Turtle Mountain Band during a period of increased advocacy in Washington, D.C. for a reservation within their traditional homelands.⁴³ This work was done alongside Band

³⁸ Richotte, Jr., “We the Indians of the Turtle Mountain Reservation,” 60.

³⁹ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 67-68.

⁴⁰ Shaw, “In Order that Justice May be Done,” 58.

⁴¹ Warren, *History of the Ojibways*, 47-48.

⁴² Richotte, Jr., “We the Indians of the Turtle Mountain Reservation,” 61-62.

⁴³ Richotte, Jr., “We the Indians of the Turtle Mountain Reservation,” 68, 70-71

attorney Jean Baptiste Bottineau, whose extended family had significant connections to the West Reserve area, as Chapter 5 will explore.

Also with Little Shell II at the Treaty of Old Crossing negotiations in 1863 was Chief Miscomukquah, or Red Bear, of the Pembina Band.⁴⁴ In the negotiations, both the Pembina and Turtle Mountain leaders argued their claim to lands south of the American border, adjacent to the eventual West Reserve.⁴⁵ As part of those negotiations, Red Bear was to have a 640-acre reservation designated “on the north side of the Pembina River,”⁴⁶ an offer that was made by the government, possibly as an inducement to sign the treaty (the Anishnaabe did not request the reservation).⁴⁷ An 1893 Pembina County map notes a 640-acre piece of land just north of Walhalla as “Tib-is-go-go-sheg Indian Reservation” roughly five miles south of the Manitoba border.⁴⁸ It is unclear whether that land was actually utilized by the Anishinaabe as a reservation, or for how long it remained designated as such, but the name likely refers to Tabishkegeshig or “Equal Sky,” a Pembina Band leader who signed the 1863 treaty with Red Bear.⁴⁹ Further, the ancestors of Red Bear – particularly those of his sister, Marguerite Ahdik Songab – indicate kinship connections to the Metis and the deep Metis attachment to the region as their homeland as well, which will be examined further in Chapter 5.

⁴⁴ Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Turtle Mountain Tribal Government,” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2; Shaw, “In Order that Justice May be Done,” 168-169.

⁴⁵ Shaw, “In Order that Justice May be Done,” 198.

⁴⁶ “Treaty with the Chippewa - Red Lake and Pembina Bands, 1863,” in Charles J. Kappler, *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties, Vol. 2 (Treaties)* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904), 853-855.
<https://dc.library.okstate.edu/digital/collection/kapplers/id/29679>

⁴⁷ Shaw, “In Order that Justice May be Done,” 275-276.

⁴⁸ “Walhalla Township, Walhalla,” Plat Book of Grand Forks, Walsh and Pembina Counties, North Dakota: Drawn and Compiled from Personal Observations, Actual Surveys, and County Records, D.W. Ensign & Co., Historic Map Works,
<https://historicmapworks.com/Map/US/501745/Walhalla+Township++Walhalla/Pembina+County+1893/North+Dakota/>.

⁴⁹ Barkwell, “Turtle Mountain Tribal Government,” 2; North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, *The History and Culture of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa*, 75.

The connections between Anishinaabe groups on either side of the international boundary, and the perseverance of such connections after and in spite of the boundary's imposition, is evident in the instance of "a large deputation from the Pembina bands" that visited Canadian Indian Agent Molyneux St. John in September of 1872. This group came with a list of concerns and demands arising from the signing of Treaty 1 the previous summer, and included leaders from Roseau River such as Ke-way-ta-yash, Na-ha-wa-nanan (Centre of Bird's Tail), and Wa-ko-wush (Whippoorwill) – all signatories of Treaty 1. One of their several demands was regarding "Keweelayash's [sic] brother-in-law being moved from American band."⁵⁰ Further, the Manitoba census of 1870 noted several Indigenous people living near the U.S. border and Pembina as children of "Kewetayash" or "Ke-wi-ta-yash."⁵¹ Such connections are further evident in the examples, highlighted by historian Margaret Huettl, of "Ka-ki-ka-yash" and "Pe-wa-pi-koo-kwa-na," who were affiliated with both the Swan Lake Reserve in Manitoba and the Turtle Mountain Band in North Dakota in the early 1900s – Pe-wa-pi-koo-kwa-na was actually "married to the daughter of Little Shell."⁵² Considering later Mennonite settlement within the context of such histories and geographies illuminates that settlement as taking place on lands that had long been and continued to be Indigenous territory.

Early Mennonite-Indigenous Encounters

Given these histories of both Indigenous presence and water, it is not surprising that late-nineteenth-century Mennonite arrivals to the West Reserve would encounter Indigenous people both in and around the newly-created settler reserve, often along small waterways. Also not

⁵⁰ Molyneux St John, Indian Agent, to William Spragge, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, February 24, 1873, Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1873, No. 23, "Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs, 13-14, quoted in Indian Claims Commission : *Indian Claims Commission Proceedings: Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation – Inquiry Medical Claim Aid* (Ottawa: Indian Claims Commission, 2001), 42-43.

⁵¹ "Census of Manitoba, 1870," Near Pembina, 51, MG 9 E3 Manitoba Census Returns, Microfilm Reel Number C-2170, Library and Archives Canada.

⁵² Huettl, "Nindanishinaabewimin," 159.

surprising, in light of the settler narratives discussed in Chapter 1, is that most such interactions were not ever discussed or recorded in formal written histories and commemorations of the region. Instead, these fragments can be found in small newspaper stories on settler remembrances, newspaper social columns, and local oral histories.

Though Mennonite recollections of such interactions are partial in nature, they do speak with additional detail to early cross-cultural encounters. Martha Martens, whose maternal great-grandparents lived near Buffalo Creek in the Altbergthal area during the 1880s, recalled family stories, passed down from her mother, of Indigenous people camping along the creek where Martha's own childhood yard would later be located. Her great-grandfather "had gone there and visited them...what language [they used] I don't know," she remembered, "because I'm sure he didn't know anything but Low German and High German. But...Mom always said that her grandpa had been friends with" them.⁵³

The location of this campsite was not very far from Buffalo Lake, and was along a portion of Buffalo Creek with significance for various Indigenous groups going back thousands of years. Area residents often recalled finding various types of Indigenous material culture along this stretch of the waterway,⁵⁴ and local Mennonite lore holds that early settlers noticed Indigenous people visiting and utilizing an area around a slight rise in the land (about two miles west of the present town of Altona near Buffalo Creek). The number of bison bone fragments and archaeological items from the "Late Woodland," "Late Plains," and possibly "Blackduck" periods⁵⁵ suggests the area's significance as a bison pound or hunting site stretching back

⁵³ Martha Martens, "Personal Interview."

⁵⁴ West Reserve Resident, "Personal Interview;" Lawrence Giesbrecht, "Personal Interview."

⁵⁵ James Graham, "Blackduck Settlement in South-Western Manitoba, 165-166; Manitoba Hydro Asset Planning and Delivery, *Dominion City to Altona Gas Transmission Pipeline: Environmental Assessment Report* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Hydro, 2024), 11.

hundreds if not thousands of years.⁵⁶ Mennonite memory of this area today is somewhat clouded in a mix of speculation and confusion as to its significance, though stories have been passed down that speak of Indigenous women working in the vicinity of the rise, carrying dirt in their aprons.⁵⁷ Along with these historical fragments, more recent study into Metis traditional knowledge of the area has also identified the location as a traditional Metis hunting site.⁵⁸

In Mennonite oral traditions, the site is known as the “Fausting,” or “Fastinj,”⁵⁹ a Plautdietsch or Low German word meaning “fortress.”⁶⁰ This perhaps aligns with local settler notions of battles and warfare at the site (which are likely not accurate), and is even more confusing in light of the fact that the terms ‘feast’ or ‘feasting’ are also associated with the site and its ‘Fausting’ nomenclature.⁶¹ Speculatively, the ‘feast’ terminology is perhaps more accurate given the likely ceremonial importance of the area, as well as the fact that the Michif term for ‘feast’ – “en groo *festaen*” (emphasis added) – bears, on the surface at least, some auditory resemblance to the ‘Fausting’ term.⁶²

Other settler stories further indicate both the continued use of the land by Indigenous people in the immediate years of Mennonite arrival, as well as the land’s continued multifarious importance for Indigenous people during that time. Five or six miles southeast of Buffalo Creek, in the district of Silberfeld, some residents remembered that, “in the early years, [Indigenous

⁵⁶ Conrad Stoesz, “Two Oral Traditions Engage,” *Mennonite Historian* 43, no. 2 (2017): 6, 8; John Giesbrecht, “Personal Interview,” February 12, 2023, Neuberghthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

⁵⁷ Elmer Heinrichs, “Schoenau: School District on the West Reserve,” *Heritage Posting* 62 (2008), 3.

⁵⁸ Shared Value Solutions, *Manitoba Métis Traditional Knowledge & Land Use Study for the Southwest Region: Enbridge Line 3 Replacement Project* (Shared Value Solutions: Guelph, 2015), 150.

⁵⁹ Heinrichs, “Schoenau;” Stoesz, “Two Oral Traditions.”

⁶⁰ Jack Thiessen, *Mennonite Low German Dictionary, Revised Edition* (New Bothwell: The Friends of Jack Thiessen, 2018), 368.

⁶¹ Fisher, “Seeds from the Steppe,” 134.

⁶² “feast,” *Heritage Michif Dictionary*, Gabriel Dumont Institute, https://www.metismuseum.ca/michif_dictionary.php; “feast,” *Michif Talking Dictionary* (A Digital Adaptation of *The Michif Dictionary: Turtle Mountain Chippewa Cree*, Ida Rose Allard, Patline Laverdure and John Crawford, Turtle Mountain Community College, 1983), <https://dictionary.michif.org/search>.

people] had come there...to visit [a] gravesite” in an area not far from a seasonal creek.⁶³ Further to the northeast of that location, just outside of the Mennonite reserve, Johan Siemens, speaking in 1944, recalled an on-foot trip south towards Fort Dufferin from Scratching River (Morris) with his father, brother, and two other men, probably in the mid-to-late 1870s. According to Siemens, they made it about fifteen miles before stopping, likely in the vicinity of where the Plum and Marais Rivers flow into the Red. There they encountered “a collection of Indian huts and tents and, while “they were shy, and so were we,” the Mennonites “managed to buy some bannock” that a woman had been making. The travelers then “picked a suitable spot in the bush nearby” for the night, falling asleep to the “low tinkling of the copper rattles” on the necks of horses and cows in the encampment.⁶⁴

This early period of Mennonite arrival and settlement was also a time in which Ojibwe oral history from Swan Lake First Nation (historically part of larger Portage Band, yet connected and related to the Pembina Band)⁶⁵ states that Kii-chin-ika, or Kitchi Nika (Big Goose), encountered a group of Mennonites after having just “completed his ceremonial responsibilities in the open plains” around the present-day location of Altona.⁶⁶ This story, shared and published in recent years, holds that Kii-chin-ika’s Ojibwe party and the settlers managed to come to an understanding or agreement of knowledge-sharing, and of peace and friendship, with duties and expectations – at least in the Ojibwe’s understanding – of mutual help and assistance.⁶⁷ However,

⁶³ Mary and Benno Loewen, “Personal Interview.”

⁶⁴ “A North Dakota Pioneer,” *Altona Echo*, June 28, 1944.

⁶⁵ An example of this relatedness comes from Swan Lake Elder David Scott, who states that Kii-chin-ika, or Kitchi Nika (Big Goose) from Swan Lake, was related through marriage to Chief Wakowush (Whippoorwill) from Roseau River. Dave Scott and Jonathan Dyck, *The Secret Treaty* (Altona: Friesens Corporation, 2024).

⁶⁶ David Scott, “Keynote Address: Oral Histories of Indigenous-Mennonite Encounters,” Presentation, Subjects, Settlers, Citizens: The 1870s Mennonites in Historical Context, University of Winnipeg, October 5, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZM3BZTQoKeA&list=PLI9kssXGKUnSVyrMAH_-UPaYuaJXuGyJ_&index=5.

⁶⁷ David Scott and Jonathan Dyck, *The Secret Treaty*; Scott, “Keynote Address.”

it became clear that government actions and policies were assuring Mennonites of their reserves and favouring their agricultural settlement. Conversely, the Ojibwe were still pressing the government to meet the obligations of Treaty 1, and even to confirm their reserved lands, which had still not happened years after that treaty's signing. As a result, and with it becoming obvious that no forthcoming assistance or advocacy would come from the Mennonites – which amounted to an unfulfillment of this Mennonite-Ojibwe “treaty” – the Ojibwe ended the agreement.⁶⁸

These connected histories – that is, the histories of Mennonite settlement, and the marginalization and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples that made such settlement possible – would symbolically overlap in August of 1877, when some Mennonites had a more formal opportunity to encounter “forty or fifty” Anishinaabe people from Roseau River at an event held in Emerson to welcome Lord Dufferin to the new province.⁶⁹ This was part of the well-publicized Vice-Regal visit, and Dufferin would make his well-known speech to Mennonites on the East Reserve several days later.

Accounts of the Emerson event do not indicate explicitly where the Mennonites had come from, although it seems possible given Emerson's proximity to the West Reserve that some would have come from there. According to a newspaper report on the event, Dufferin spoke to both a “prominent Mennonite from the neighboring reserves,” and a “high church dignitary of the Mennonites.”⁷⁰ The Mennonites would also have heard speeches given by leaders from Roseau River, including Chief Ke-we-tay-ash.⁷¹ The translated version of his address, printed in the *Manitoba Free Press*, spoke in glowing terms of thankfulness to the government.⁷² Not

⁶⁸ David Scott and Jonathan Dyck, *The Secret Treaty*.

⁶⁹ William Leggo, *The History of the Administration of the Right Honorable Frederick Temple, Earl of Dufferin, K.P., G.C.M.G., K.C.B., F.R.S., Late Governor General of Canada* (Montreal: Lovell Print. and Pub. Company, 1878), 588.

⁷⁰ “The Viceregal Visit,” *Manitoba Free Press*, August 6, 1877.

⁷¹ Krasowski, *No Surrender*, 61.

⁷² “The Viceregal Visit,” *Manitoba Free Press*.

reported in the *Free Press*, but recalled later by Lady Dufferin in her journal, was that a second speech by another Anishinaabe leader from Roseau River was given, only this one “named some grievance to be redressed.”⁷³

Certainly there were many grievances to be had around this time – while Mennonites were establishing themselves on their recently-reserved lands, the Anishinaabe at Roseau River were still attempting to confirm with the government the precise size and location of their reserve east of the Red River – and issue that accelerated the end of the Ojibwe-Mennonite agreement mentioned previously – and had, since the signing of Treaty 1 in 1871, been dealing with settlers cutting timber on lands supposed to be reserved for the Anishinaabeg.⁷⁴

Although the Mennonites at the event would not likely have understood the English translation of the chiefs’ speeches, let alone the original Ojibwe, this was nevertheless a moment in which the connected histories of Mennonite settlement, and of the Indigenous removal that made such settlement possible, overlapped in person. Emerson and the Mennonite reserves were, after all, located in Anishinaabe territory, which Ke-we-tay-ash had made clear years earlier in a conversation with Lieutenant-Governor William McDougall at Pembina in 1869, when he stated that his peoples’ land covered an area “bounded by Scratching River and the Government [Dawson] Road on the north, Pembina Mountain on the west, White Mouth River on the east, and the American boundary on the south.”⁷⁵ Further, the late-nineteenth century was also a

⁷³ Harriot Georgina Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, *My Canadian Journal, 1872-8 : Extracts from My Letters Home Written While Lord Dufferin Was Governor-General* (London: J. Murray, 1891), 318.

⁷⁴ Indian Claims Commission, “Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation: 1903 Surrender Inquiry,” 107-109; “Report of Interview between the Honourable the Minister of the Interior, and Certain Indians Residing on the Reserve at Roseau River, at Winnipeg, October 1st, 1875,” n.d., RG10, Volume 3598, File 1447, Microfilm Reel Number C-10104, Library and Archives Canada.

⁷⁵ Canada. Parliament, “Paper No. 12: Correspondence and Papers Connected with Recent Occurrences in the North-West Territories,” *Sessional Papers* V (1870): 18–19.

period in which Metis people were living and occupying land both in and around the nascent West Reserve, something that Chapter 6 will tackle in more detail.

‘Stopping Places for Years:’ Mid-Twentieth-Century Interactions

Our understanding of the West Reserve as modern Indigenous territory is made more tangible by historical instances of continued Anishinaabe land use in and around Mennonite settlements later into the twentieth century. As time went on, though the region’s waterways became play spaces for settler children, locations for leisure activity, and a means of draining the land more quickly, they also retained importance for Indigenous people, even in diminished ways, long past the time of initial Mennonite arrival. Despite common narratives of modern agricultural progress necessarily displacing Indigenous people from the region, Indigenous presence remained, sometimes through efforts at cooperation with Mennonite settlers, on a local scale, that would bolster Indigenous “socio-economic stability.”⁷⁶

In April 1948, the *Altona Echo* reported that “Three Indian hunters...from East of the Red” – Peter Tom, Willie Tom, and one other person, from Roseau River – were fox-hunting in the Pembina Hills area, and “received shelter at the home of David Fehr” in Winkler for two nights.⁷⁷ A few weeks later, “Joe Tom, grandson of Peter Tom,” was staying at the Fehrs for a period of hunting in the area.⁷⁸ Apparently this relationship went on for some time – in the spring of 1954, two members of the Tom family returned to the area to hunt wolves along with David Fehr.⁷⁹ In the winter of 1959, according to a newspaper account, “Indians of the Roseau Indian reservation [were] reviewing trapping possibilities in the Pembinas.” On this trip, they stayed for a few days with a family up in the hills, and also “made camp on the farm of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob

⁷⁶ Luby, *Dammed*, 13.

⁷⁷ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, April 21, 1948.

⁷⁸ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, May 5, 1948.

⁷⁹ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, April 7, 1954.

L. Sawatzky” in the area south of Morden and Winkler, with both spots having “been stopping places for years.”⁸⁰

In addition to the forested Pembina Hills, the flat prairie land to the east saw similar hydrosocial interactions during the mid-to-late twentieth century, as recalled by older residents of the region. In the 1930s near Buffalo Creek, a young Lawrence Giesbrecht met a group of Indigenous people camped near a road within sight of his family’s farmyard. The group, he remembered, “travelled with horse and wagon, on which they had all their things, their cooking equipment and so forth.” Approaching them, he recalled that, “there was an elderly gentleman who came to meet me and started talking to me. And we quickly realized that we did not talk the same language...but there were other ways of showing friendship, and I think we were off to a good start.”⁸¹ Just over a mile to the north along the creek, Martens remembered Indigenous people visiting her family’s yard – itself an Indigenous camping site two generations prior – during the 1940s and 1950s in both the spring and fall.⁸² “I remember Native people coming with horse and buggy into the yard...then for the night they would go to that ‘Fausting,’” remembered Martha Martens of her childhood. “Yeah, that I remember – them going there and camping, and they would light their fires, and you would see the smoke twirl up.”⁸³

Along the Marais River near Halbstadt, Bill Schroeder remembered Indigenous men hunting for foxes in the late 1940s. His family’s farm was the site of other interactions as well, like the sharing of leftover food from a family wedding with men hunting along the river and hosting an Indigenous man as an overnight guest.⁸⁴ Such encounters also occurred into the 1960s

⁸⁰ “Pembina Mountain Murmurs,” *Altona Echo*, January 9, 1959.

⁸¹ Lawrence Giesbrecht, “Personal Interview.”

⁸² Martha Martens, “Personal Interview.”

⁸³ Martha Martens, “Personal Interview.”

⁸⁴ Bill Schroeder, “Personal Interview.”

and 1970s. In those years “it was not uncommon to see vehicles parked or see people out” along Buffalo Creek, often in winter when it was easier to see “the movement of dark-clothed figures against the snow, working.”⁸⁵ As a young boy, Gary Klassen remembered walking up to two “First Nation guys” on the creekbank in winter. “I walk out there...and they were trapping a mink,” he recalled. “I said, ‘well, how do you know it’s there?’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘there’s the hole,’ and he kind of explained the process,” whereby traps were set up near different burrow holes in the snowbank. With “twigs and bullrushes and what have you” from the bush, the men lit a fire and “would whip the flames” with “a rag or a gunnysack” and “pour the smoke throughout this maze of underground tunnels. And sure enough, a trap snapped, and they got this mink.”⁸⁶

The fact that such stories still exist at all within Mennonite memory is important, given their relative absence within the formal written histories of the West Reserve. They deepen our understanding of this region’s history, demonstrating that not only were Mennonites of the 1870s and 1880s aware of Indigenous presence in the land to which they migrated,⁸⁷ but that awareness continued through their ongoing interactions with Indigenous people. Further, the use and importance of waterways within many of these stories reminds us that “‘water’ is never simply H₂O” but is also socially “*produced* as a particular ‘water,’ within particular “moments, contexts and relations.”⁸⁸ In West Reserve history, water has often been described or discursively produced as problematic, and therefore in need of being drained quickly in order to improve the land. The region’s creeks, however, speak to other meanings, as “hydrosocial”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Gary Klassen, “Personal Interview.”

⁸⁶ Gary Klassen, “Personal Interview.”

⁸⁷ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 114-120.

⁸⁸ Jessica Budds, Jamie Linton, and Rachel McDonnell, “The Hydrosocial Cycle,” *Geoforum* 57 (2014): 168.

⁸⁹ Budds, Linton, and McDonnell, “The Hydrosocial Cycle,” 167-168.

microenvironments in which Mennonites encountered Indigenous people continuing to utilize and occupy the land in which they had been so marginalized by state-enabled settler agriculture. As such, these hydrosocial stories are perhaps one way in which the fixed and “rigid banks” of established settler historical narratives might be “eroded,” broadened, and deepened.⁹⁰

Though waterways evidently retained importance for Indigenous people in the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century, not all cross-cultural interactions were hydrosocial in nature. In the village of Neubergthal, for example, people from Roseau River First Nation, on the east side of the Red River, were known to camp in the village, or were sometimes hosted overnight in houses or barns. “There was kind of a grassy area [near] the graveyard,” remembered one resident, and “that’s where they would park their camp – tents” during the 1940s, sometimes staying for “up to three days...”⁹¹ Often these visits were made in order to ask for things like food or clothing, or selling crafts,⁹² a cruel irony given that the autonomy with which Indigenous Peoples had been using and residing on this land decades earlier (and surely not what Ka-chii-nika had in mind when he first met and established relationships with Mennonites on the West Reserve). But, throughout the 1930s to 1970s, these were often the circumstances in which Neubergthalers met Indigenous people, who would come via horse and wagon in earlier years, and then later in cars.⁹³ As one former village area resident stated, “My recollection of being at my grandma’s place would be a knock on the door, and there would be a Native lady, with maybe even two children, with a bag...and my grandma...would get containers of [food], and put it in the bag, and give it to her. That happened quite regularly...”⁹⁴ Another

⁹⁰ Stevenson, “Decolonizing Hydrosocial Relations,” 109.

⁹¹ Rose Hildebrand, “Personal Interview,” December 2, 2022, Neubergthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

⁹² Ray Hamm, “Personal Interview.”

⁹³ “Personal Interview,” Leona Rempel, March 1, 2023, Neubergthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

⁹⁴ Jolanda Friesen, “Personal Interview,” December 12, 2022, Neubergthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

former resident remembered her father allowing people to sleep in their hayloft overnight during the 1930s, likely “when the weather wasn’t good. Other than that, they would always camp at the cemetery.”⁹⁵ Additionally, another Mennonite story from the village holds that there was one family whose house was known as an overnight stopping place for Indigenous people passing through the village sometime around the late nineteenth century or early 1900s.⁹⁶

Though rooted in the intertwined histories of settlement and dispossession, these interactions are now also remembered occasionally in the context of the present-day relationships that have been built over time between the two communities.⁹⁷ Such stories were not unique to Neubergthal, as similar encounters occurred during this period throughout the Mennonite-settled area.⁹⁸ Various instances of interaction between Roseau River First Nation and the former Mennonite reserve occurred in other small ways during the twentieth century. Altona baseball teams, for example, played in tournaments at Roseau River at different points during the 1940s,⁹⁹ and the two communities’ hockey teams also played against each other occasionally. In January of 1941, the Roseau River team travelled to Altona for two hockey games, both of which were won by the visitors,¹⁰⁰ and the following year “the Indian hockey team from the reserve at Letellier” again visited Altona, this time losing to the home team.¹⁰¹

Sugar Beet Labour in the West Reserve

Perhaps the most significant context in which Mennonite and Indigenous people interacted during this period, though, was sugar-beet farming. “Indian” labourers were a frequent and

⁹⁵ Olga Hamm, “Personal Interview,” January 30, 2023, Neubergthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project.

⁹⁶ Lawrence Giesbrecht, “Personal Interview.”

⁹⁷ Ray Hamm, “Personal Interview.”

⁹⁸ Richard Warkentin, “Personal Interview;” Martha Martens, “Personal Interview;” Marilyn Elias, “Personal Interview;” Bill Schroeder, “Personal Interview.”

⁹⁹ “What’s Happening Around Town,” *Altona Echo*, July 21, 1943; “Altona Captures Roseau Ball Tourney,” *Altona Echo*, September 4, 1946.

¹⁰⁰ *Altona Echo* 1941, January 29, “Redskins Invade Altona.”

¹⁰¹ *Altona Echo*, 1942 March 4, “What’s Happening Around Town.”

prominent labour force on Mennonite farms during the period when the intensive work of planting and weeding beets was done by hand. Ronald Laliberte has researched the large extent to which First Nations labourers were employed during the postwar period in Alberta and Saskatchewan, as well as the “paternalistic and coercive measures” utilized by both Provincial and Federal governments “to help farmers in southern Alberta recruit and retain Native workers.”¹⁰²

In Manitoba, labour shortages due to the Second World War resulted in aggressive recruitment of field workers, including ‘Indians’ from reserve communities. In the summer of 1942, the *Echo* printed a statement from the Provincial Minister of Agriculture addressing the issue. As in Alberta and Saskatchewan, interned Japanese Canadians were being recruited, and Manitoba’s Department of Agriculture was at this time also “canvassing the outlying Indian Reserves for farm workers,” with “both the Indian Affairs Branch” and the Agriculture Department “urging all men to make a special effort to put in as many days as possible at farm work this year in a contribution to the war effort.”¹⁰³

According to newspaper reports of the time, by the early 1940s “half of the sugar beet acreage for Manitoba” was being grown by Mennonites, with that estimate rising to sixty-five percent by 1945.¹⁰⁴ A similar estimate was given in 1957, which specified that it was largely West Reserve Mennonites contributing to this output, with “two thirds” of sugar beets being “raised in that region bounded by the international boundary on the south, the Pembina Hills on the West, Highway 14 on the north, and the Red River on the east.”¹⁰⁵ In 1971, the Fieldman for

¹⁰² Ron Laliberte and Vic Satzewich, “Native Migrant Labour in the Southern Alberta Sugar-been Industry: Coercion and Paternalism in the Recruitment of Labour,” *Canadian Review of Sociology* 36, no. 1 (1999): 65.

¹⁰³ “Farm Help,” *Altona Echo*, August 19, 1942.

¹⁰⁴ “Spring Seeding Nearly Completed, Half of the Sugar Beet Acreage for Manitoba in Mennonite District,” *Altona Echo*, May 19, 1943; “Sugar Company Appoints New Fieldman for this District,” *Altona Echo*, February 21, 1945.

¹⁰⁵ “Beet Acreage Stable Says Superintendent,” *Red River Valley Echo*, March 27, 1957. The demographics of sugar-beet labour were diverse, on both sides of the border. In North Dakota, “Mexican-American migrants...accounted

Beet District #4 in the south-central portion of the West Reserve along the border, estimated that the Indigenous workforce in that area alone had increased from eighteen workers in 1957 to 150 in 1964. In terms of the “total incoming population” of family members, “including women and children,” the entire collection of districts – “Winkler, Rosenfeld, Altona, Halbstadt, Letellier” – saw an increase from 108 people in 1957 to 900 in 1964.”¹⁰⁶ This was reflective of sugar beet farming in the province overall, where one report estimated that, by 1961, “the number of workers of Indian ancestry employed by Manitoba sugar beet growers to thin their beets has increased to 1,200 – four times the number employed four years ago.”¹⁰⁷ By that time, this report continued, the majority of labourers and their families were coming from “reserves in the Dominion City and Portage areas” of Treaty 1 territory – in other words, likely the Roseau River, Long Plain, and Swan Lake First Nations – as well as the areas further to the north around Peguis, Pine Creek, Berens River, and Shoal River.¹⁰⁸

Working conditions for these labourers and their families throughout the province overall were mixed at best. A highly publicized investigation of a work camp in the rural fringe of south Winnipeg by the *Winnipeg Tribune* in 1975 revealed deplorable conditions in which “Indians

for three-fourths” of sugar-beet workers in that state’s portion of the Red River Valley, though “Native Americans” were also employed “from nearby reservations.” Jim Norris, “Bargaining for Beets: Migrants and Growers in the Red River Valley,” *Minnesota History* 58, no. 4 (2003): 200. Thousands of Japanese Canadians, displaced under the Federal Government’s Sugar Beet Program, were relocated to Manitoba and Alberta sugar-beet that functioned as sites of “virtual incarceration,” as Shelly Ikebuchi Ketchell has outlined in “Carceral Ambivalence: Japanese Canadian ‘Internment’ and the Sugar Beet Programme,” *Surveillance and Society* 7, no. 1 (2009): 21-35. Indeed, West Reserve resident Martha Martens recalled, as a child in the 1940s, “three Japanese men, with their big, long, rifles” – possibly having been hunting along the adjacent Buffalo Creek – came to their door asking “if they could spend the night at our house.” She recalled her father stating that, “if God has sent them here, we keep them,” and so they stayed overnight, keeping their rifles outside at Martha’s mother’s request. Further east near the Marais River, Bill Schroeder remembered German Prisoners of War working in the beet fields: “Yeah, there was a prison camp in St. Jean. And they would come out hoe beets in the Halbstadt area.” Martha Martens, “Personal Interview;” Bill Schroeder, “Personal Interview.”

¹⁰⁶ “Study Commission Report, Re Dominion City,” Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference Fonds, CA MHC EMMC-6-2, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁰⁷ “Indian Labor in Beet Field Increases,” *Red River Valley Echo*, February 15, 1961.

¹⁰⁸ “Indian Labor in Beet Field Increases,” *Red River Valley Echo*.

from reserves...are living in crumbling shacks and old milk trucks” while they worked the fields in rural areas adjacent to the city.¹⁰⁹ Some of the workers at the camp stated that they were hoping to leave for Altona, where “they have heard the pay is higher.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, the Mennonite-settled area along the border may have been better in some respects than what workers were experiencing in the Winnipeg-area location, though experiences there were also mixed. Some Mennonite farm families developed ongoing relationships with Indigenous families, having them stay in their homes during the summer labour season and staying in contact with them for several years,¹¹¹ with other seasonal workers returning to the same farms for several seasons.¹¹²

Others, though, stayed in cleaned-out granaries, sheds, and tidied-up chicken coops.¹¹³ In one instance, an Indigenous family living in an old house with no electricity – “not a good facility” – would come to the neighbouring family’s farmyard for firewood, eggs, and water.¹¹⁴ An Indigenous woman whose family worked in the Altona area in the late 1970s and early 1980s, recalled the experience of racism “in town,” where “people called us savages,” and “once they chased us with bats.”¹¹⁵ The deep racism of settlers, including Mennonites, was evident in the experience of Sixties Scoop adoptee Marcel French, who recalled being picked up with his brother by a police cruiser in Altona while walking home from church in the wintertime. They were driven “four or five miles west of Altona” and told to get out. After walking home in the cold, they found their adoptive parents perplexed that the officer would do such a thing. “They

¹⁰⁹ “Beet Workers Living in Squalor,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, July 10, 1975.

¹¹⁰ “From Page One,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, July 10, 1975.

¹¹¹ Mary and Benno Loewen, “Personal Interview.”

¹¹² Jolanda Friesen, “Personal Interview;” “Manitoba Beet Growers Meeting in Winnipeg,” *Red River Valley Echo*, January 27, 1960.

¹¹³ Jolanda Friesen, “Personal Interview;” Janis Nikkel, “Personal Interview,” Neuberghthal Heritage Foundation Oral History Project; Leona Rempel, “Personal Interview.”

¹¹⁴ Mary and Benno Loewen, “Personal Interview.”

¹¹⁵ “You had no choice:” Indigenous Manitobans Shed Light on Exploitative Farm Labour Program that Ran for Decades,” CBC Manitoba, June 18, 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/indigenous-forced-labour-sugar-beet-farms-1.4165272>.

said, ‘why would he do that?’ They didn’t believe us.”¹¹⁶ Such stories were not uncommon, and, in Mennonite memory, sit uncomfortably beside stories of friendship and hospitality.

“Neighbours,” Place, and Missions

Though by the late twentieth century the former West Reserve area was well-known as a Mennonite enclave and as settler space, factors such as hunting and trapping activities, as well as the sugar-beet industry, meant that cross-cultural interactions were occurring in this period to a much greater extent than the written historical accounts of the region indicate. Importantly, this was also an era in which evangelicalism, and its attendant emphasis on missionary work, was impacting Manitoba Mennonites in new ways. Throughout North America, certain Mennonite groups were, into the 1930s, placing greater emphasis on “personal assurance of future bliss in heaven, and orderly engagement with the broader society, and scripture that spoke of ‘joy,’ the ‘joy of salvation,’ and the ‘joy of the redeemed’...Faith was personal, it emphasized social integration, and it was oriented to the future.”¹¹⁷ Similar trends were occurring between the 1930s and 1970s in southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan,¹¹⁸ with churches splitting and new ones being created over differing views on things like “the necessity of a personal conversion experience and participation in evangelism and missions.”¹¹⁹

For some Mennonites in the Altona-Winkler-Morden area, an influx of Indigenous seasonal labourers during sugar-beet season brought a mission field right to their doorstep, and

¹¹⁶ “Mennonites Have Yet to Reckon with their Role in ‘Sixties Scoop,’” *Canadian Mennonite* no. 19 issue 18, September 9, 2015.

¹¹⁷ Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth Century Rural Disjuncture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006): 82-83.

¹¹⁸ Bruce L. Guenther, “‘In the World But Not Of It’: Old Colony Mennonites, Evangelicalism and Contemporary Canadian Culture - A Case Study of the Osler Mission Chapel (1974-1994),” Presented at the University of Calgary, June 1994.

¹¹⁹ Bruce Guenther, “Living With the Virus: The Enigma of Evangelicalism Among Mennonites in Canada,” in *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience* ed. George Rawlyk (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 236.

was an opportunity to enact this evangelistic emphasis. In the fall of 1964, a “Mennonite-Indian Relations Meeting” between various local church denominations, farmers, and other participants reflected the extent to which Christian evangelicalism and racialized agricultural labour interacted during this very particular and local time and place. Area pastors and church members from the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, and the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba,¹²⁰ along with local farmers were in attendance, with varied approaches to missions and racialized others on display.

Attendees were imbued with a sense of “special responsibility” to “our Indian neighbours,” given that “we recruit Indians for our agricultural economy, and since Indian adults and children, for periods of time, are residents of our communities.”¹²¹ Others pointed out the often racist context into which such “recruits” were being invited, as in a statement by a local Mennonite religious instructor who challenged those in attendance by situating the issues at hand within a broader race-relations context. He cautioned people that, though White Mennonites may not be “as physically violent in our actions” as in the American South, “we are similar in our attitudes.”¹²²

The meeting saw several items discussed regarding “specific opportunities to help our Indian neighbours...with regard to the summer labor force,” related to possible “need[s] for better

¹²⁰ As this listing of conference organizations implies, “Mennonite” does not connote a single religious denomination or church. There were, and are, many different Mennonite church denominations, each with varying emphases and priorities, which sometimes resulted in different approaches to proselytization, as discussed further below.

¹²¹ “Minutes: Boards and Committees of Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference, Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba, Conference of Mennonites in Canada - Mennonite-Indian Relations Meeting, Altona, Manitoba,” October 21, 1964, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference Fonds, Series 5, Subseries 9, 42. Mennonite Indian Relations, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹²² “Minutes: Boards and Committees of Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference, Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba, Conference of Mennonites in Canada - Mennonite-Indian Relations Meeting, Altona, Manitoba.” The speaker’s reference to the United States is of note, as white American Mennonites were considering, engaging with, and being challenged by questions of segregation and race relations in various ways from the 1930s to 1960s. See Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

housing, for baby-sitting, for weekend social fellowship,” “opportunities for Christian services,” opportunities for “weekend hosting of Indian families,” and more generally for “such recreational, social, and religious activities as may be desirable and possible.”¹²³ The extent to which these ideas or discussions were pursued over time is unclear, though ideas around social supports for labourers made their way to a joint meeting of the RM of Rhineland and the Town of Altona several years later, when a delegate presented to the two councils on the topic of “summer care of Indian children, especially those Indians who are employed as Beet laborers in this area during the summer months.” This discussion does not seem to have progressed very far, however, as “R.M. Council was not receptive to this idea, at least not until [receiving] more concrete information on this program.” Additionally, a Councillor stated that the Manitoba Beet Growers District Association “was not in favour of this type of program.”¹²⁴

Although a child-care initiative did not get off the ground, various informal attempts at religious outreach occurred here and there in different ways, as in June 1972, when a large event was held for beet weeders at a farm west of Altona – “15-18 natives from the interlake area and about 7 whites.”¹²⁵ Henry Neufeld, a well-known and respected Mennonite teacher and missionary who, along with his wife Elna, began working with the communities of Little Grand Rapids and Pauingassi in the 1950s,¹²⁶ was in attendance. Neufeld was invited to “speak in Soto [sic]” to the attendees, alongside an “Indian pastor” from Waterhen, Saskatchewan, and a pastor

¹²³ “Minutes: Boards and Committees of Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference, Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba, Conference of Mennonites in Canada - Mennonite-Indian Relations Meeting, Altona, Manitoba,” Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹²⁴ “Records of Rural Municipality of Rhineland, and of Douglas: Minutes of Council Meetings (1965-75), By-laws (1-699), and (1-41),” January 21, 1972, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹²⁵ “Beet Weeders Report,” June 21, 1972, Isaac “Ike” Froese Fonds (1927-2010), Volume 5679, File 4: “N.M. - 1972.” Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹²⁶ Alvina Block, “Mennonite Missionary Henry Neufeld and Syncretism among the Pauingassi Ojibwa, 1955-1970,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 53.

from the local Evangelical Mennonite Mission church.¹²⁷ Reflecting on the event, Neufeld expressed some befuddlement at the remarks of an American evangelist who had also been invited as a speaker – “he really had nothing to say...All in all I found his function there a very difficult one to figure out” – and relayed his experience of introducing himself, singing a song, and giving his “testimony...in Soto [sic],” in addition to the reaction of, and conversations with, the attendees afterward.¹²⁸

Neufeld’s participation in this event reflects the broader context of Mennonite missionary work with Manitoba Indigenous communities from the 1940s onward. Though the event above took place near the West Reserve town of Altona, Neufeld’s longtime involvement with Indigenous communities much further north speaks to the longstanding presence of southern Manitoba Mennonite churches Interlake and northern communities, notably through the work of the Mennonite Pioneer Mission (MPM). This organization, initiated by the Altona Berghaler Church in 1944 and amalgamated into the broader Conference of Mennonites in Canada in 1957 (with a name change to ‘Native Ministries’ in 1974), began working with the Indigenous community at Matheson Island on Lake Winnipeg in 1948. MPM later expanded their work to other communities in northern-and-Interlake Manitoba, such as Loon Straits, Manigotagan, Hollow Water, Cross Lake, Bloodvein, Paungassi, Pine Dock, and Riverton.¹²⁹

Early MPM literature provides an idea of the tenor of this outreach work in its initial years, as the inclusion of “Pioneer” in the organization’s name indicated its “mission...to bring the Glad Tidings to new and untouched friends where as [sic] yet the name of Jesus is not known.” Reflecting some of the pioneer improvement narratives that would soon populate local

¹²⁷ “Beet Weeders Report,” Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹²⁸ “Beet Weeders Report,” Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹²⁹ Alvina Block, “Changing Attitudes: Relations of Mennonite Missionaries with Native North Americans” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2006).

histories and commemorations, “Pioneers” were described as “a fearless, courageous, persevering and a progressive, advancing people.”¹³⁰ An early missionary report from the Cree community of Grand Rapids (Misipawistik) implored readers to consider that “missions” was not only about “dark Africa, the neglected South America, the millions in China or the many islands in the far seas.”¹³¹ Rather, stated the report, “sinful practices such as idol worship, immorality, witchcraft, etc.,” – often assumed to “come from Africa or India” – were also “a daily matter in northern Canada, our so-called Christian country, or civilization,” and “unless every effort is made now, the blood of these souls shall be forever on our hands.”¹³²

Though such dramatic language was, as Alvina Block has remarked, “a way to appeal for workers and money” from the MPM constituency,¹³³ it was also not far off from language and attitudes employed by Mennonite commentators of an earlier era. Writing in the Mennonite Church’s *Herald of Truth* seven decades earlier in 1872, John F. Funk (who accompanied Mennonite delegates to Manitoba and the United States in 1873), wrote from Dakota Territory that:

We pity the poor Indian; we wish he could see and feel as the white man sees and feels; we wish we could see him follow the arts of peace and forever bury the bloody war knife; we wish he could learn the song of peace and good will to man, and forget the wild war-whoop; we wish he could be brought to learn of Jesus and his love, and become a true child of God, and perhaps if we pray more earnestly, God may open up a way by which all this may be accomplished.¹³⁴

Though the evangelistic impulses that increasingly influenced North American Mennonites from the 1870s into the postwar period were surely a driving factor in “home

¹³⁰ “The Mennonite Pioneer Mission: What Does the M.P.M. Stand For?,” *Mennonite Pioneer Mission* 3rd. Quarter, 1945, Volume 1, Periodicals and Indexes, Mennonite Heritage Archives, <https://www.mharchives.ca/publications/periodicals-and-indexes/>.

¹³¹ “Grand Rapids,” *Mennonite Pioneer Mission* Vol. 5, April 1949, 4, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹³² “Grand Rapids,” *Mennonite Pioneer Mission* Vol. 5, April 1949, 4-5, 6, Mennonite Heritage Archives

¹³³ Block, “Changing Attitudes,” 170.

¹³⁴ John F. Funk, “Our Trip West,” *Herald of Truth*, December 1872, 187.

missions”¹³⁵ initiatives to Indigenous communities in the twentieth century, they were not the only factor. Though early MPM efforts and missionizing tended not to “sufficiently consult with local people,” favouring “unilateral” decision-making,¹³⁶ this changed in the 1960s and 1970s, when the visibility of Indigenous activism and efforts at reclamation of traditional spiritualities “challenged the churches,”¹³⁷ giving cause for reflection. As one worker put it in 1976, such challenges “may...provide the church with an opportunity to evaluate past performance and to rethink its responsibility to the great commission.”¹³⁸ Certainly efforts to this end were underway by the 1970s, as evidenced in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada’s 1970 “Litany of Confession.” This was described and summarized by MPM executive secretary Menno Wiebe as responding to “the historic and current injustice done to Indian peoples,” and had to do “not only with the attitudes and actions toward Indians by the [MPM], or the Mennonite people as a whole,” but “could even be interpreted to include the European peoples as a whole.”¹³⁹

This period, then, was one of profound change and complication for Manitoba Mennonites’ work with Indigenous communities, as some Mennonite groups shifted from more fundamentalist interpretations of mission work to a greater emphasis on cross-cultural relationship-building and listening to community concerns.¹⁴⁰ An Indigenous leader, after years of work with and alongside Mennonite groups, remarked on some of the ramifications of this shift in 1979. Mennonite service workers for Native Ministries (the new name given to MPM in 1974) would often come back from northern and Interlake communities “as different

¹³⁵ See Block, “Changing Attitudes, viii, Footnote 10 for a brief discussion of “home” and “foreign” missions.

¹³⁶ Block, “Changing Attitudes,” 253.

¹³⁷ Block “Changing Attitudes,” 255.

¹³⁸ “Summer Report 1976 - John Funk,” Isaac “Ike” Froese Fonds (1927-2010), Volume 5678, File 2, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹³⁹ Conference of Mennonites in Canada, “A Litany of Confession,” July 1970 in *Be It Resolved: Anabaptist & Partner Coalitions Advocate for Indigenous Justice*, ed. Steve Heinrichs and Esther Epp-Tiessen (Winnipeg: Mennonite Central Committee & Mennonite Church Canada, 2020), 16.

¹⁴⁰ Block, “Changing Attitudes,” 7, 151, 275-276.

people...with real questions about society but especially about the Mennonite Faith practiced in their communities.”¹⁴¹ In many cases, workers were returning to Mennonite communities and congregations that still “generally seemed quite isolated” and “certainly extremely unaware of the native persons near them.”¹⁴² There was a difference – or perhaps a disconnect – in other words, between southern Manitoba Mennonite communities sending mission and outreach workers to more distant northern and Interlake areas on one hand, and those same communities recognizing, or being cognizant of, Indigenous communities and people in closer proximity to them in southern Manitoba.

Yet, as we have seen, from the time Mennonites first arrived to Manitoba, Indigenous people never fully stopped utilizing, and moving within, their homelands in which the West Reserve became established. Increasingly, though, just as early cross-cultural interactions were coloured by settler colonialism, later twentieth-century interactions were coloured by settler ideas of missions, outreach, and ideas of separate Mennonite homelands and distant Indigenous mission fields.

Certainly the sugar-beet industry brought increasing numbers of Indigenous people into closer contact with Mennonite families, and in ways that have yet to be fully examined and studied, but missionary work also brought Mennonites into contact with First Nations communities closer to the prairies of the West Reserve. For example, in 1941 Henry Schellenberg was appointed as a teacher – or “Missionary Teacher” in the *Altona Echo*’s characterization – at the United Church-run Swan Lake or Indian Springs day school.¹⁴³ Though

¹⁴¹ “Native Ministries Evaluation,” June 1979, Isaac “Ike” Froese Fonds (1927-2010): Volume 5678, File 2, “N.M. - 1979,” Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁴² “Native Ministries Evaluation,” June 1979, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁴³ “Local Teacher Appointed Missionary,” *Altona Echo*, July 1, 1941; Leonard Doell, “Mennonite COs and the United Church in Northern Aboriginal Communities,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 25 (2007): 128.

hired as a teacher, he apparently also ran a church service, with a United Church official writing in 1942 that “the attendance from the reserve at [Schellenberg’s] church service is also being maintained.”¹⁴⁴

This Mennonite presence in the hybrid missionary-education work of the Swan Lake day school also created links between Schellenberg’s home in the Altona area, and the Swan Lake reserve. Throughout the 1940s, the Schellenberg family regularly returned to the Altona area to visit friends and family, and additionally they hosted many guests from the West Reserve region, some who stayed for a weekend, or even for several weeks.¹⁴⁵ Though the content of these visits are unknown, they nevertheless brought Mennonites into the sphere of a First Nation community much closer to the West Reserve, and surely contributed to an awareness, among some Mennonites, of Indigenous communities and realities – though, still, coloured by the lens of missionary outreach.¹⁴⁶

Even closer to the West Reserve, some Mennonite groups initiated a missionary undertaking just to the east across the River, at the Roseau River First Nation’s reserve. In the summer of 1944, members of the Altona Evangelical Mennonite Mission (EMMC) church “had a Sunday School picnic where the Red and Roseau Rivers meet” with “amplifiers set up for the preaching and music.”¹⁴⁷ Upon noticing people from the Roseau River reserve listening on the

¹⁴⁴ R.A. Huey to H.S. Schellenberg, December 24, 1942, RG 10, Vol. 6248, File 544-1, Part 2, Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁴⁵ “What’s Happening Around Town,” *Altona Echo*: July 8, 1942; April 28, 1943; November 24, 1943; August 2, 1944; September 13, 1944; July 1, 1946; August 28, 1946.

¹⁴⁶ For a fuller account of Canadian Mennonite involvement in facilities like Day Schools, Residential Schools, and Indian Hospitals, see: Doell, “Mennonite COs;” Kampen, “The Mennonite Peacemaker Myth: Reconciliation without Truth-Telling?,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 1 (2019): 42-61; Anthony G. Siegrist, “‘Part of the Authority Structure’: An Organizational History of Mennonite Indian Residential Schools in Ontario,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 93 (2019): 5-38; Mary Jane Logan McCallum, “The MCC Summer Service Program and Clearwater Lake Indian Hospital,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 40, no. 2 (2022): 9-36; Block, “‘Mennonite Missionary Henry Neufeld.’”

¹⁴⁷ Leonard Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 1978, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference Fonds, Volume 5807, Vertical Files (Pacifism - Social Problems) File No. 62, 1.

opposite bank, people from the church group crossed via the nearby ferry to “bring [them] a program” consisting of “singing and preaching the Gospel.”¹⁴⁸ Feeling that “the Lord laid the mission burden of Roseau River on their hearts,” members of the group went to the reserve the following week and asked the Chief if they could “have services on the reserve.”¹⁴⁹ The group received an affirmative answer and were pointed to the on-reserve Catholic church building as a possible location for services. However, finding it locked upon their next visit, the Mennonite group “began to hold services outdoors on the street,” returning weekly for roughly the next ten years.¹⁵⁰

In the 1950s, the Altona group began interacting with workers from Western Gospel Mission (WGM), who were also involved in missionary work there. WGM was a combined initiative of Evangelical Mennonite (EMC) churches from the Steinbach area, and both WGM and the Altona EMMC worked together on their Roseau River initiatives throughout the 1950s, before “divid[ing] up the work of the mission” in 1960, with the Altona group taking over the work at Roseau River.¹⁵¹

This work had a strong evangelical emphasis which, as some former EMMC workers at Roseau River saw it, was a departure from other religious groups working on the reserve, such as the Roman Catholic and United Churches. As some Mennonite workers at Roseau River saw it, the Catholic and United Church groups had a more “social approach” that included “set[ting] up swings and work[ing] at sports,” whereas the “task as an EMMC group was to bring Christ to these people.”¹⁵² Although EMMC efforts did include things like gardening and sewing groups

¹⁴⁸ Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 1, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁴⁹ Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 1, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁵⁰ Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 2, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁵¹ Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 3, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁵² Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 3, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

there was a marked “focus on the spiritual.”¹⁵³ Indigenous cultures and spiritualities did not seem to figure as important in such endeavours, with the “native...culture” insufficient and the “need [for] Christ” being of utmost importance.¹⁵⁴ As the EMMC Missions Committee commented in 1967 when one worker expressed interest in taking a course at the University of Manitoba “concerning race relations to the Indian more in particular,” “maybe this is not what we ultimately look for but we trust a means to an end.”¹⁵⁵ Realizing that “end” of successful missions work entailed a range of methods, including hearing ideas from the Department of Indian Affairs on methods and options for mission work. Indian Affairs’ representative for the Roseau River area – himself of Mennonite background – spoke at a meeting of the EMMC mission board in 1969, highlighting the importance of meeting and communicating with the Band Council to “seek approval” from them for a possible missionary residence on reserve. The representative also emphasized the “study of the Indian language, culture and history etc. to gain entrance.”¹⁵⁶

EMMC work at Roseau River included a variety of different initiatives, with some community members responding positively to Mennonite presence. However, it was not uncommon for the work to be met with resistance, with the church building being vandalized on occasion, the front door being “tied with wire,” and workers occasionally being asked, “why do you always come and disturb us?”¹⁵⁷ By the early 1970s, the EMMC voiced that it had “come to a stalemate in [its] work” at Roseau River, with “Hostility, failure to sustain results and inability to really communicate” all cited as general reasons for discontinuing its Roseau River presence.

¹⁵³ Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 11, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁵⁴ Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 20, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁵⁵ “E.M.M.C. Quarterly Missions Committee Meeting Held on June 22 at 8 p.m.,” Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference Fonds, Volume 6350, File 2, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁵⁶ “EMMC Missionboard Minutes March 8/69,” Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference Fonds, Volume 6350, File 2, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁵⁷ Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 5, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

The idea of approaching Mennonite Pioneer Mission (itself under the umbrella of a different Mennonite conference) was broached at one point by the Mission Board. This idea was initially met with some concern, given “reports that people were questioning [MPM’s] methods”¹⁵⁸ in their northern Manitoba work, perhaps illustrating some of the differences between MPM and EMMC approaches to cross-cultural and missions initiatives at this time. Neither group became involved with Roseau River in any official manner, with the EMMC ceasing its work there in 1972.¹⁵⁹ For a period during the early 1980s, the Mennonite Central Committee, through consultation with Roseau River, had two people – based in Altona – working as service workers with the community. Projects undertaken included working on land claims research, helping with economic development proposals, teaching, and developing relationships between Roseau River and the nearby Mennonite communities – relationships that were still often characterized by “fear, prejudice, and some well-intentioned paternalism.”¹⁶⁰

As the examples here show, twentieth-century missions efforts associated with Manitoba Mennonites generally, but in particular those based in the former West Reserve, were focused both on the more distant ‘field’ of northern and Interlake Manitoba, and also on more proximal communities like Swan Lake and Roseau River. As well, seasonal influxes of Indigenous labourers in the region – now hired workers in lands previously used by Indigenous Peoples for generations and generations – spurred Mennonite missionary efforts to these people as well. All of these initiatives comprised a mix of paternalistic racism along with increasing efforts to find new ways of approaching Indigenous-settler relations.

¹⁵⁸ “Study Commission Report Re Dominion City,” February 23, 1971, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference Fonds, Volume 6350, File 2, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁵⁹ Doell, “EMMC Mission at Roseau River,” 22, Mennonite Heritage Archives.

¹⁶⁰ Letter, September 24, 1980, MCC Canada Indigenous Neighbours Program Series, Volume 3037, “MCC - Roseau River 1980,” Mennonite Central Committee Archives.

These complex, almost discordant, shifts and themes are reflective also of how West Reserve Mennonites were approaching their own history during this period. As earlier chapters demonstrate, the Mennonite histories being written and commemorated during this period were steeped in settler-colonial narratives of empty land, Mennonite ascendancy, and disappearing, nearly invisible, Indigenous people. At the same time as these *historical* narratives were being established and entrenched, Mennonites were *contemporarily* interacting with Indigenous people in both their sugar-beet fields and their adjacent mission fields. However, this was also the same time in which some Mennonites were beginning to interrogate settlement histories and Indigenous-Mennonite relations. While events like the 1974 centennial of Manitoba Mennonite arrival were opportunities to commemorate settlement and land colonization, they were also moments when some Mennonite writers and local historians began to question the histories of their presence in Manitoba. This was an era in which settler-colonial historical narratives, paternalistic missionary work, and emerging self-critique were all functioning among West Reserve Mennonites simultaneously.

Conclusion

A closer reading of various historical sources with a particular eye to the geographic area of the West Reserve reveals the extent to which Indigenous Peoples (and Anishinaabeg in particular) used, lived in, and were familiar with, that specific region long before Mennonite arrival. Such historical examples also give a deeper context for histories of Mennonite migration to the West Reserve prairies. Further, just as Joseph Wiebe has argued that Manitoba Mennonites were migrating to land with notable Indigenous “presence and authority,”¹⁶¹ so too did that awareness

¹⁶¹ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 114. Here Wiebe is speaking specifically about Metis presence and authority in southern Manitoba.

continue – at varying levels – after Mennonite settlement, as interactions from the 1870s and 1880s all the way up to the 1970s demonstrate.

It is worthwhile to consider the ongoing nature of Anishinaabe presence in and around the West Reserve as exemplifying Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor's concept of Indigenous "survivance" in the region. In particular, the continual presence of Anishinaabeg in spite of Mennonite colonization and in contradiction to Mennonite historical narratives of Indigenous disappearance, brings to mind the idea of survivance as "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion..."¹⁶² This survivance occurred in the face of, as Wiebe has put it, "a settler colonialism that preconditions Mennonite identity as a peaceful agricultural people on the Canadian prairies," and also the "underlying political and social structure" that makes such a settler identity possible.¹⁶³

For Mennonites, whether they encountered Indigenous people as racialized, distant others, visiting hunters and trappers, field labourers, or objects of missionization, all of these encounters were coloured and preconditioned by "Political violence, uneven distribution of risks and benefits, and inequitable power,"¹⁶⁴ manifested within a very small and local geographic context. Over time, some Mennonite groups, through historical reflection and ongoing cross-cultural relationships, began to reexamine their presence in Manitoba in light of these historical inequities, interestingly during a period in which settler historical narratives of Indigenous people were being written and solidified. As the next chapter demonstrates, similar processes were at play in the specific case of Metis people in the West Reserve and surrounding region.

¹⁶² Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1-23.

¹⁶³ Wiebe, "On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland," 112.

¹⁶⁴ Wiebe, "On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland," 112.

CHAPTER 5

Squatters or Homesteaders?: Metis Landowners and the West Reserve in an Indigenous Borderlands Context

As discussed in Chapter 2, Mennonite commemoration and history-making communicated certain narratives of Indigenous presence in the West Reserve region on the eve of Mennonite settlement. These narratives – of First Nations and Metis Peoples as fringe, disappearing, and peripheral characters in the region’s ensuing Mennonite story – dovetailed with the idea of barren prairie land to paint a picture of a region conveniently empty and waiting for Mennonites to arrive. Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated how the region’s dynamic surface water environments and continued settler-Indigenous interactions add a depth to our understanding of the region’s history that conventional narratives have not always shown.

These dynamics were also at play in the specific example of Metis in the region, but in distinct ways. Many Mennonite West Reserve histories referred to Metis people in the southwest corner of the reserve, but in ways that delegitimized and deemphasized their presence. However, a closer examination of archival sources including homestead files, surveyor notes, scrip documents, and census records, along with an analysis of the extensive body of Metis genealogical scholarship, illuminates the West Reserve’s position within the broader borderlands context of the Metis homeland, as well as the ongoing presence of Metis families both in and around the West Reserve well past its colonization by Mennonite settlers.

Post-1870 Manitoba saw the heightened dispersal of the Metis from Red River due to economic factors,¹ the ‘reign of terror’ perpetuated against the Metis by Canadian troops arriving in Red River in 1870,² and the delayed, problematic, and ultimately dispossessive process of land

¹ Gerhard J. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland*.

² Shore, “The Canadians and the Métis,” 230, 235; Lawrence J. Barkwell, “The Reign of Terror.”

allocation through scrip.³ This period also saw the arrival of Mennonite settlers to Manitoba, and led into later eras of Metis history sometimes referred to as “the forgotten years” from roughly 1885 to 1900 and the “road allowance” years from about 1900 to 1950.⁴ These latter eras saw Metis across the prairies – dispossessed of their land base – persistently struggle to remain in their homelands, often living in unofficial communities on land they did not legally own. Many of these settlements were located on the public rights-of-way, or road allowances, originally surveyed between and around townships for the construction of future roads – in other words, the ‘grid’ of the Dominion Land Survey. Other Metis communities formed in similar marginal spaces on undeveloped land near larger settlements, such as Rooster Town near Winnipeg.⁵

In the West Reserve, the arrival of Mennonites in the late nineteenth century did not signal a clean break between Metis occupation of the land on one hand and subsequent Mennonite settlement on the other. Rather, these histories overlapped, as the Metis continued to occupy land near Mennonite settlements despite their continued marginalization within an ascendant settler colonial context.

Metis and Mennonites in Manitoba: The Historiographical and Historical Terrain

Metis history, particularly in Red River and the province of Manitoba, has drawn more attention from scholars of Mennonites in recent decades, especially regarding the relationship between Mennonite settlement and Metis dispersal within the 1870s and 1880s. Some of the earliest scholarship on this topic was initiated in the early 1970s, with sociologist Leo Driedger’s

³ Tough and McGregor, “‘The Rights to the Land May Be Transferred,’” 43-57; Jean Teillet, *The North-West Is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel’s People, the Métis Nation* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2019), 381-396.

⁴ Lawrence J. Barkwell et al., *Metis Legacy: A Metis Historiography and Annotated Bibliography*, I (Pemmican Publications, 2001), 14-15; Ina Arens, “(Un)Heard, (Un)Voiced, (Un)Searched: Decolonization in Métis Literature” (M.A. Thesis, Universität Greifswald, 2006), 18.

⁵ Peters et al., *Rooster Town*. Cheryl Troupe has argued that referring to these communities as ‘marginal’ – while accurate in some ways – also discounts the ways in which road allowance settlements were “sites of opportunity where Métis remained tied to the land in distinct ways, where they resisted outside pressures and intrusions into their everyday lives, and where Métis women’s work in food production was central.” Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 2.

characterization of Mennonite migration to Manitoba as an “invasion” made possible by government “conquest and control” of the Metis.⁶ In 1974, Lawrence Klippenstein examined the extent to which Mennonite settlers would have been aware of the Metis. His discussion of the 1873 land inspection delegation pointed to that group’s interactions with many Metis people, arguing that it would have been “impossible” for the Mennonites not to notice them in the region.⁷ Donovan Giesbrecht’s research on Metis efforts to validate staked claims of land that came to be occupied by East Reserve Mennonites has taken this argument further, arguing that such instances disrupt common Mennonite perceptions of their peaceful presence in Manitoba, showing that they “played a part in oppressing Manitoba’s Native people.”⁸ Joseph Wiebe’s pointed analysis argues against the idea of Metis and Mennonite histories as “worlds apart,” demonstrating through an analysis of various historical sources that Mennonites were well aware of Metis presence in Manitoba. He further argues that the Mennonite “relations to place” that developed over the ensuing decades “are implicated in the legacy of Canadian settler colonialism.”⁹

Both academic scholarship and local historical writing on Mennonite-Metis relations have typically centred on the East Reserve, likely as a result of its closer and clearer proximity to more well-known existing Metis settlements, as outlined in Chapter 1. Within these bodies of writing and research, certain historical instances illustrating the interface between Mennonites and the Metis appear frequently and repeatedly. One of these is the East Reserve settlers’

⁶ Driedger, “Native Rebellion and Mennonite Invasion,” 290, 300.

⁷ Lawrence Klippenstein, “Manitoba Metis and Mennonite Immigrants: First Contacts,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 48, no. 4 (1974): 488.

⁸ Giesbrecht, “Metis, Mennonites, and the ‘Unsettled Prairie,’” 109.

⁹ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 111–26. In this way, Wiebe counters a subtly different argument of Gerhard Ens, who has written that the Metis and Mennonite land reserves in 1870s Manitoba “were two solitudes or two separate stories both tied to the Federal Government, even when they intersected.” Gerhard J. Ens, “The Manitoba Act, the Metis, and the Mennonites,” 4.

references to the ‘brittensteppe,’ a Low German word meaning “land of the half breeds.”¹⁰ This referred to the “half breed lands” reserve selected by Lieutenant Governor Adams George Archibald north of the East Reserve, from the larger area of land initially requested by the Metis of Pointe-des-Chênes (Ste. Anne).¹¹ The brittensteppe was occasionally recalled in commemorative events, as in John C. Reimer’s description of the East Reserve for the seventy-fifth anniversary celebration of settlement in 1949, which mentioned an early road through the reserve that led to the “Brittiwajch” area where the “haulfbritti” resided.¹²

Mennonite-Metis historiography has also referenced the scattered mentions of assistance Mennonites received from the Metis (or ‘Indians’) who guided and transported them to their reserves,¹³ or from whom Mennonites would purchase items such as firewood, fish, berries, horses, or cattle.¹⁴ Outside of the East Reserve, most Manitoba Mennonite historiography also typically mentions the so-called ‘Dominion Day Brawl’ of 1873 as a standout example of Metis-Mennonite interactions. This event saw Mennonite land-scouting delegates to Manitoba have their wagon and escort overtaken by a Metis man on horseback at White Horse Plains, retreating to a hotel that was soon surrounded by a larger group of Metis men before a detachment of soldiers from Winnipeg were called in to intervene.¹⁵

‘Indian Squatters’ and West Reserve Settlement

¹⁰ Royden Loewen, *Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition, 1874-1982* (Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society, 1983), 248.

¹¹ Loewen, *Blumenort*, 248; Alan B. McCullough, “The Confrontations at Rivière Aux Ilets-de-Bois,” *Manitoba History*, no. 67 (2012): 8.

¹² Mennonite Heritage Archives, CA MHC EMC VI, “Gedenkfeier Der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Manitoba, Canada,” 1949.

¹³ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 115; Neufeldt, “Settler Colonial Conscripts,” 513; Urry, *On Stony Ground*, 6.

¹⁴ Neufeldt, “Settler Colonial Conscripts,” 513.

¹⁵ E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 42; Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 191-192; Klassen, “Land, Sovereignty, and Migration,” 300-304.

While some documented historical instances of Mennonite-Metis interactions are linked to the West Reserve area, such stories are few, and the sense of this region as empty, vacated by Indigenous people, and bypassed by prior European settlers still permeates our understanding of the West Reserve. Of course, this was the era of the Red River Metis' broad dispersal, as mentioned above, and their presence in southern Manitoba became less and less pronounced as the nineteenth century turned over to the twentieth. Yet, as we have already seen in Chapter 1, the repetition and accumulation of Mennonite stories of the West Reserve – including characterizations of the region as vacant and awaiting Mennonite arrival – enhanced and encoded this historical reality, with a resultant obfuscation of Indigenous presence around the West Reserve area by the time Mennonites arrived.

In the case of Metis presence specifically, Mennonite history-making – particularly from the 1950s onward – began referring to the historical presence of Indigenous groups living in the southwest corner of the West Reserve, with E.K. Francis first mentioning this “band of semi-nomad Indians in the extreme southwest corner” in his foundational and influential 1955 study of Manitoba Mennonites.¹⁶ In a footnote to this reference, Francis goes on to state:

These Indians came for only part of each year from the old French parish of St. Joseph (now Walhalla, North Dakota). At the turn of the century, about 25 Indian families were still found squatting on sections 4, 5, 8, 9, and 17 in township 1-5 West, but they soon left afterward and never returned.¹⁷

Francis further indicates the presence of “Indian Squatters” in some of the book’s maps.¹⁸

Although his footnote does not indicate where this information came from, the fact that he lived

¹⁶ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 69.

¹⁷ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 69.

¹⁸ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 143, 151.

among the Manitoba Mennonites for his field research from 1945 to 1947¹⁹ suggests that it may have come from Mennonite oral histories, remembrances, and conversations with area residents.

Several years after Francis' book was published, John H. Warkentin's doctoral dissertation, "The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba" – later published as a popular and widely-used book – similarly referred to "a few *Metis* in the shelter of the Pembina Mountains at Walhalla" across the border, with one of that book's maps also indicating a "Squatter" location in Township 1, Range 5 West.²⁰ In 1978, an unpublished paper by Leonard Doell, examining *Metis* presence in the West Reserve, also mentioned these "Metis squatters in the Haskett area," citing Francis as the source of this information.²¹ In turn, several years later, a 1984 history commemorating the centennial anniversary of the Rural Municipality of Rhineland referred to Doell's citation of Francis in its statement that "Metis squatters could be found on the western fringes of the Reserve for part of the year up until 1900."²² People diving into Mennonite history with a curiosity about Indigenous-Mennonite interactions in the West Reserve, then, soon encounter the idea of the reserve's southwest fringe as the location of a nomadic and disappearing – even 'ghostly'²³ *Metis* presence.

The West Reserve as Borderland and Metis Land

The existence of these "squatters" near the forty-ninth parallel speaks to the West Reserve's proximity to the *Metis* hub of St. Joseph (which was renamed Walhalla in 1871) though by the 1870s and 1880s, it was no longer the hub of *Metis* life and trade that it once was. Though the sources listed above allude to this proximity, the more recent insights of borderlands scholarship

¹⁹ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, ix; Leo Driedger, "E.K. Francis' Search for Utopia: A Tribute," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995): 91.

²⁰ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 44, 23.

²¹ Doell, "Walhalla Trail," 3.

²² Ens, *Volost and Municipality*, 2.

²³ Susan Hiebert, "Indians, *Metis* and the Mennonites," in *Manitoba Mennonite Memories* (Manitoba Mennonite Centennial Committee, 1974), 51.

elucidates it further. Scholars like Sheila McManus and Michel Hogue, for example, show how the forty-ninth parallel and its demarcation of two nation-states over top of complex and heterogeneous Indigenous territories enforced rigidities that often ran counter to the Indigenous realities of the region.²⁴ Yet those rigidities were not absolute, and if we take Brenda Macdougall and Nicole St. Onge's advice to "erase the border" in order to better see the Metis as historical actors,²⁵ we may also be able to understand the West Reserve not only as the Mennonite agricultural *heartland* it became, but also as part of a broader Metis border/homeland that was made, unmade, contested, and negotiated in the context of a *borderland*.²⁶

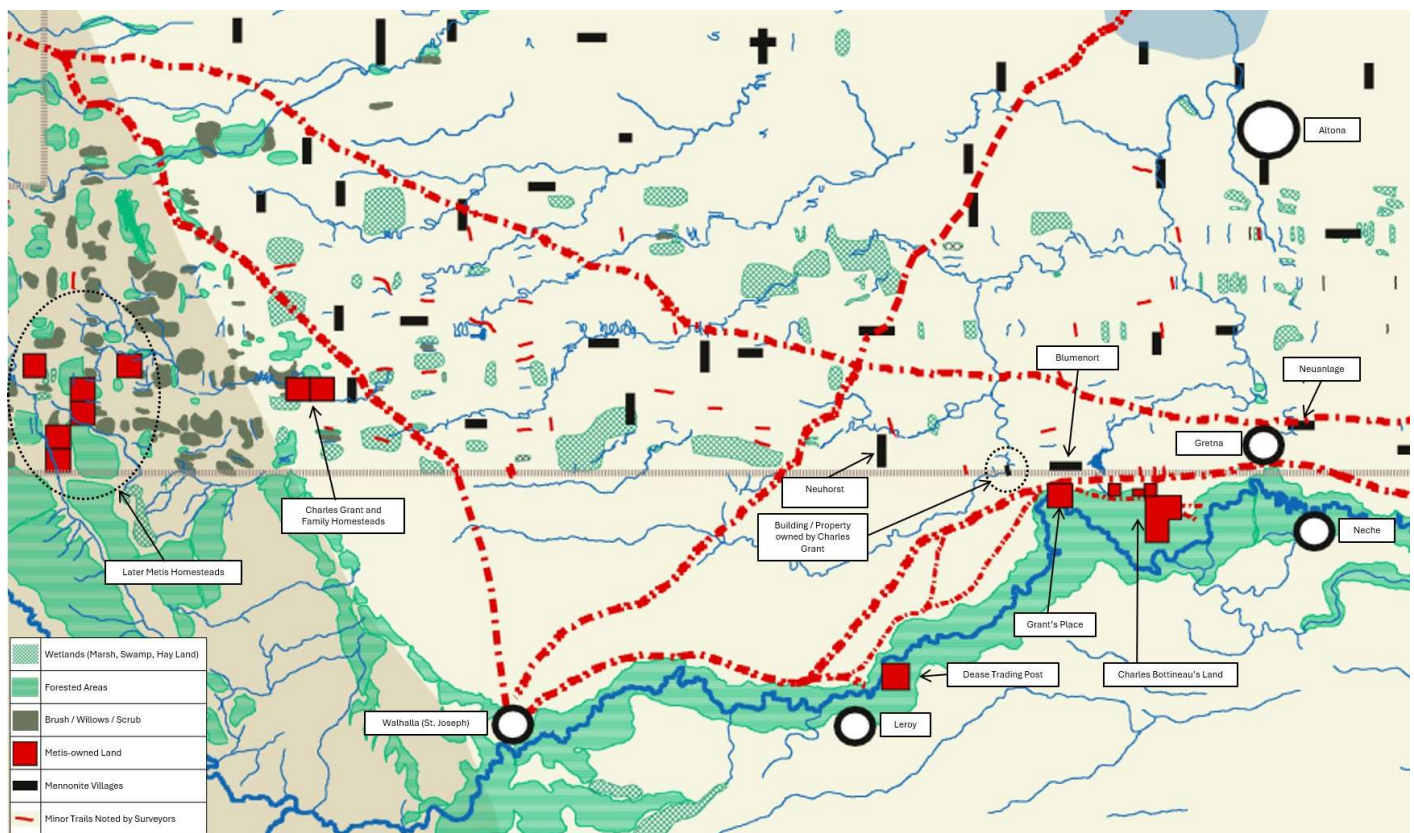


Figure 14: West Reserve borderlands: Mennonite villages and Metis settlements, late 19th / early 20th centuries

²⁴ McManus, *The Line Which Separates*, xi-xiv, 179; Michel Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People* (University of Regina Press, 2015), 4.

²⁵ Macdougall St-Onge, "Metis in the Borderlands," 260.

²⁶ Here I transpose McManus' astute argument that supposed "heartlands" (where national identity is fostered and defined) can only become such if "if the edges around them" do the bordering work of defining one nation from another, which was the case in the example of the forty-ninth parallel – "the key site" of Canadian and American "nation-making efforts." McManus, *The Line Which Separates*, xi-xii.

The transborder nature of the West Reserve is little touched-upon in Mennonite historiography, somewhat puzzlingly so given its location along the forty-ninth parallel. A notable exception is Bruce Wiebe's examination of the many plots of land purchased by West Reserve colonists south of the border along the Pembina River, as Mennonite timber source.²⁷ Along with periodic mentions of the St. Joe trail through the reserve, this represents a useful jumping-off point for a deeper examination of the West Reserve's borderland context in light of Metis presence there, given the importance of the Pembina River area in this region's Metis history.

At its closest point to Mennonite settlements, the Pembina flows roughly a mile southwest from the West Reserve village of Blumenort.²⁸ It was near this bend in the river where a building known as "Grant's Place" or "Grant's House" was constructed around 1859 as part of a fur-trading partnership between two prominent Metis figures in the region, Charles Grant and Charles 'Sharlo' Bottineau.²⁹ Grant, a son of famous Metis leader Cuthbert Grant and Marie McGillis, was married to Euphrosine Gladu, daughter of Charles Gladu and Madeleine Ross.³⁰ Both Grant and Gladu had deep roots in the West Reserve's broader borderlands region – some of their children were born in St. Francois Xavier, others to the south in Pembina, Dakota Territory.³¹ In 1855, Grant was appointed the first Postmaster in St. Joseph.³² He was also a member of the legislature for Dakota Territory from 1855 to 1857, and in 1867 Grant, Bottineau,

²⁷ Wiebe, "The Timberlots," 47–52.

²⁸ This village is officially named "Blumenort South" to differentiate it from another community named Blumenort near Steinbach, Manitoba.

²⁹ Neche/Bathgate History Book Committee, *Proudly We Speak: A History of Neche, Bathgate, Bruce and Hyde Park* (Altona: D.W. Friesen & Sons, Ltd., 1976), 6.

³⁰ Gail Morin, *Métis Families: A Genealogical Compendium*, I (Quintin Publications, 1996), 464; Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Grant, Charles," Winnipeg, 2013, Louis Riel Institute.

³¹ Morin, *Métis Families* I, 464.

³² Barkwell, "Grant, Charles," Neche/Bathgate History Book Committee, *Proudly We Speak*, 5.

and Charles Cavalier were appointed the first Commissioners of Pembina County.³³ Grant and Bottineau began farming wheat in the early 1870s, with Bottineau apparently raising fifty bushels on a plot of ten acres, “four miles above Neche on the north side of Pembina River,” just south of the area where Blumenort would be located.³⁴ Grant apparently raised around forty bushels per acre of wheat two years later, west of Pembina,³⁵ and both men shipped these crops north “to the Selkirk settlement” to have it ground.³⁶

The Grant-Bottineau partnership began in 1859 when the two men purchased the well-established Kittson trading post, located in the St. Joseph area, from Charles Cavalier.³⁷ They built the structure south of Blumenort around the same time, which, in addition to being near the Pembina River, was also on the cart trail connecting Pembina and St. Joseph.³⁸ When their partnership dissolved after five years, Bottineau maintained the Kittson post, while Grant took charge of the newer outpost several miles to the east.³⁹ Grant’s property was less than a mile from Blumenort, and evolved into a farmyard with several buildings and livestock, including an overnight facility to accommodate new settlers arriving to the region.⁴⁰ Local knowledge of this

³³ Neche/Bathgate History Book Committee, *Proudly We Speak*, 5.

³⁴ George N. Lamphere, “History of Wheat Raising in the Red River Valley: An Address to the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, January 8, 1900,” 1905, Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. v. 10, pt. 1, p. 1-33, F601 .M66 vol. 10, pt. 1, Library of Congress, 12.

³⁵ Given the “west of Pembina” description, it is possible that this piece of land was the southeastern quarter of Section 1 in Township 163 N, Range 52 W. Grant officially received patent to this land in 1875 under the stipulations of the 1863 Treaty of Old Crossing between the United States and the “Red Lake and Pembina Bands of Chippewa Indians.” Under this treaty, 160 acres could be granted “to each male half-breed or mixed-blood who is related by blood to said Chippewas of the said Red Lake or Pembina Bands”: “Patent Certificate No. 171, Charles Grant,” April 10, 1875, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records. CT-0379-148.

³⁶ Lamphere, “History of Wheat Raising,” 12.

³⁷ Neche/Bathgate History Book Committee, *Proudly We Speak*, 6.

³⁸ Neche/Bathgate History Book Committee, *Proudly We Speak*; Kenneth L. Brown, Marie E. Brown, and Karen P. Zimmerman, “Archaeological and Historical Reconnaissance and Literature Search of Cultural Resources Within the Pembina River Project: Pembina and Cavalier Counties, North Dakota, Volume I” (U.S. Army Engineer District, St. Paul, 1982), 81.

³⁹ Neche/Bathgate History Book Committee, *Proudly We Speak*, 6.

⁴⁰ Neche/Bathgate History Book Committee, *Proudly We Speak*. Grant’s land here consisted of four contiguous quarters of Sections 29, 30, 31, and 32 in Township 164 N, Range 54 W: “Patent Certificate No. 39, Charles Grant,”

outpost as “Grant’s Place” persisted during and beyond the time of Mennonite arrival: in 1880, the *Southern Manitoba Times*’ Blumenort correspondent reported that the Commissioners of Pembina County had “caused quite a stir among the settlers above Grant’s place,” due to the Commissioners’ decision to grant a “petition to open up the old cart trail.” The settlers claimed that a re-opened trail would “cut up their farms badly,” and subsequently circulated a petition against the proposed re-opening.⁴¹

Although it is not apparent which trail was to be re-opened, it could have either been the north-south “St. Joe Trail” that passed to the west of Blumenort toward Walhalla, or more likely the east-west trail along the Pembina River linking Walhalla and Pembina.⁴² English settlers on the south side of the border recalled that Indigenous people “were often seen travelling back and forth” on the Walhalla-Pembina trail, with the squeaking wheels of the Red River carts used by “half-breeds and Indians” heard “almost any time of day or night” in the vicinity of Grant’s Place.⁴³ North of the border, surveyor notes indicate some of the first Mennonite camps and subsequent villages were located near the St. Joe trail (see Figure 5). Also just north of the border, Grant appears to have maintained another building and property next to a small creek in the West Reserve, just west of where Blumenort would be established. As a surveyor wrote in

April 10, 1875, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records. ND0310_.045.

⁴¹ “Correspondence: Bluemont,” *West Lynne Southern Manitoba Times*, October 30, 1880.

⁴² W.J. Twining, “Map of a Portion of Northern Dakota Reconnaissance of Brt. Major W.J. Twining,” Bvt. Brig. Gen. S.B. Holabird, Chief Q.M., Department of Dakota, 1869, [⁴³ Neche/Bathgate History Book Committee, *Proudly We Speak*, 20; “Pioneer Women’s Histories: Walhalla,” 1949 1940, Pembina County Historical Society. North Dakota Histories \(ND State Library\), \[222\]\(https://digitalhorizonsonline.org/digital/collection/ndsl-books/id/95933/rec/17, 6.</p>
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1875 (shortly after the first Mennonite colonists arrived), there was, in Township 1, Range 2 West, “one dwelling near the South Boundary, on Section No 4, owned by one Grant” (see Figure 15).

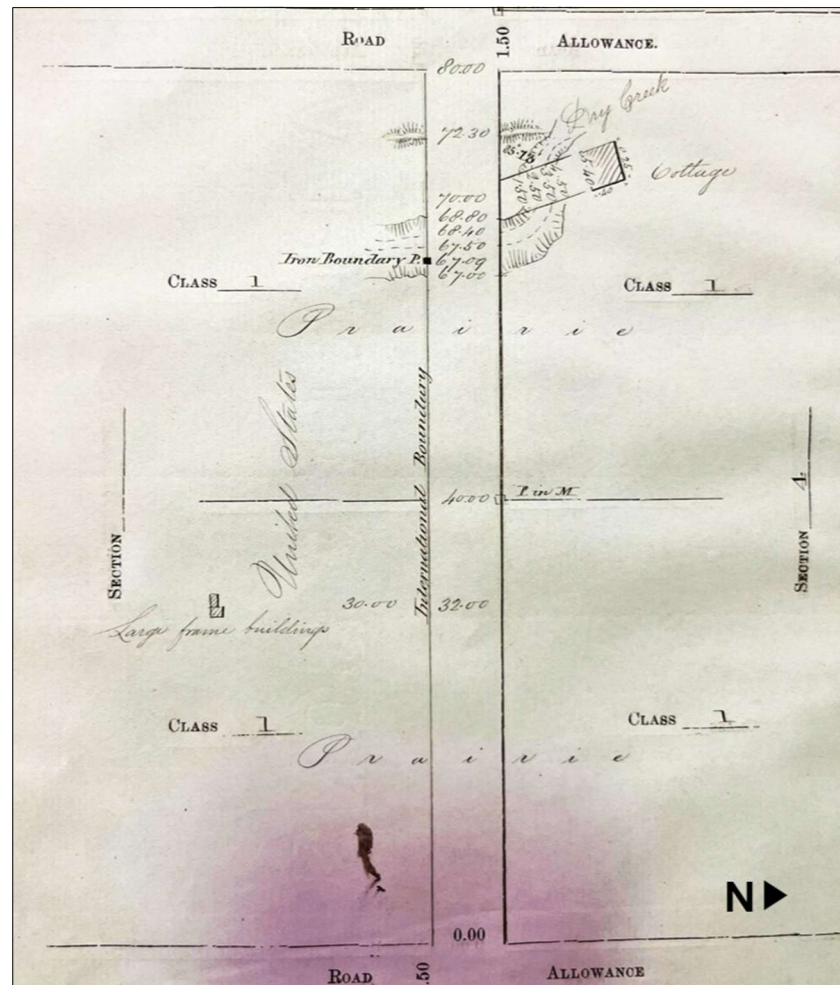


Figure 15: Surveyor field book showing Charles Grant’s structure – noted as “Cottage” – along the international boundary near a “Dry Creek” in Section 4, Township 1, Range 2 West (North Arrow added).⁴⁴

Another Metis landowner in the area was Charles Bottineau, husband to Francoise Louise Parenteau, and brother to famed scout, trader, and leader, Pierre Bottineau.⁴⁵ Although by the

⁴⁴ “Survey Notebook #583: Township 1 Range 2W,” 1875, Surveyors Field Books, NR 0157, GR1601, G 14349, Archives of Manitoba.

⁴⁵ Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Charles ‘Sharlo’ Bottineau Jr. (b.c. 1815),” Winnipeg, Louis Riel Institute, 2013; Gail Morin, *Country Wives: Marguerite Ahdik Songab Wife of Pe-Wah-Ah-Kum (O-Kit-Chi-Ta) a Chippewa, Peter Grant, and Charles Bottineau, III* (Printed by the Author, 2018), 2-3.

1870s Bottineau had taken over the former Kittson trading post at Walhalla, he also kept a significant property near Grant's Place. It was here that Mennonite delegates visited on their 1873 land inspection trip to North America.⁴⁶ This delegation consisted of twelve members of various Mennonite groups – eleven from imperial Russia and one – John F. Funk, a minister from Elkhart, Indiana – who travelled with them.⁴⁷ The delegation was taken – sometimes in smaller groups, sometimes all together – to several locations in Manitoba, Dakota Territory, Texas, Kansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska.⁴⁸

The eventual West Reserve land was not inspected at this time, as lands east of the Red River (later the location of the East Reserve) and west of Winnipeg were of more interest (in addition to locations in the United States, where many of the migrating communities would locate). A formal inspection of the West Reserve area would not occur until the spring of 1875, when Jacob Shantz examined that land, accompanied by a Metis driver, a Metis surveyor, and three Mennonites from the East Reserve.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the 1873 trip was the first time Mennonites from Imperial Russia encountered the general grassland region in which the West Reserve would eventually be granted.

The delegates' time in Dakota Territory – in particular around Walhalla, Pembina, and the Pembina River – placed them immediately adjacent to the Canadian prairie region where the West Reserve would later be granted. It was also here where they encountered the Bottineau-Parenteau family. According to delegate Paul Tschetter, members of the group set out to inspect land along the Pembina River on June 11, 1873, staying “for the night at the home of a half-

⁴⁶ Klippenstein, “Manitoba Metis and Mennonite Immigrants,” 481.

⁴⁷ Hans Werner, ““Something...We Had Not Seen nor Heard of”: The 1873 Mennonite Delegation to Find Land in ‘America,’” *Preservings* 34 (2014): 11.

⁴⁸ Werner, ““Something...We Had Not Seen nor Heard Of.””

⁴⁹ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 61; Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements*, 32.

breed Indian.” While Bottineau himself was not there at the time, it appears his wife was, and Tschetter wrote that she and the family’s “servants treated us very nicely.” Tschetter also remarked on the “beautiful house” with floors covered in rugs, the forty head of cattle on the property, and the extensive forest along the river nearby.⁵⁰ Later that month, members of the group again stayed at the property while exploring the land “about 18 miles” west of Pembina.⁵¹ Tobias Unruh wrote that they overnighted “with an Indian farmer,” identified in John F. Funk’s diary and letters as “Charles Botteneau.” Both Unruh and Funk commented on the 320-acre property’s timber, livestock, well-furnished house, and hospitality of the hosts. On their return trip to Pembina on June 25, they stopped there again, enjoying a large dinner prepared by their hosts.⁵²

Though the Bottineau property was a haven for travellers and incoming settlers, it was also apparently a meeting place for other Metis figures to congregate on occasion, with Pembina’s *The Pioneer Express* reporting in May of 1889 that “Gabriel Dumont was the guest of Mr. Charles Bottineau yesterday, where several of the French half-breed friends of Mr. Dumont spent the evening.”⁵³ Along with Grant’s Place, then, the Bottineau-Parenteau river property was a hub of activity on the Walhalla-to-Pembina trail, demonstrating the presence and proximity of Metis families to Mennonites and other settlers around the turn of the century.

⁵⁰ J.M. Hofer, trans., “The Diary of Paul Tschetter, 1873, II,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 5 (1931): 204-205.

⁵¹ Tobias Unruh, *Great-Grandfather’s Diary*, trans. Abe J. Unruh (Montezuma, Kansas, 1970), <https://smithkoehn.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/tobiasunruhdiaries11.pdf>.

⁵² Unruh, *Great-Grandfather’s Diary*; Melvin Gingerich, “John F. Funk’s Trip to Manitoba in 1873,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 34 (1960): 150.

⁵³ “Neché,” *The Pioneer Express*, March 1, 1889.

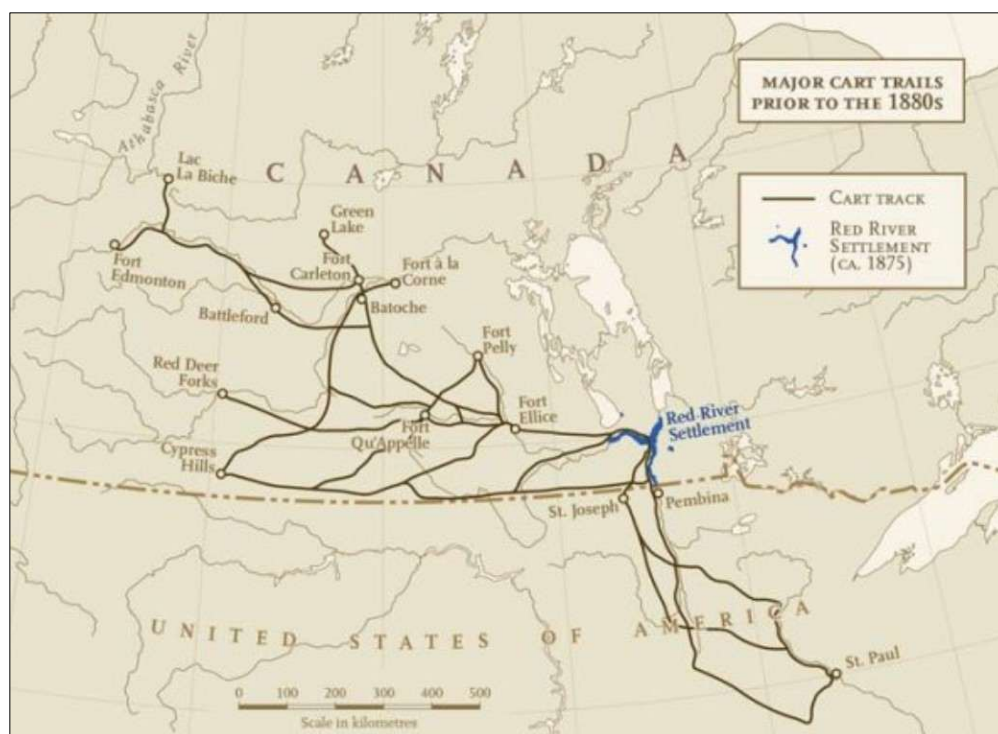


Figure 16: Major Metis cart trails in the North-West (“Red River Carts,” Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada, *Canadian Geographic*, <https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/red-river-carts/>).

The Walhalla-Pembina and St. Joe trails were part of a network connecting communities from what is now northern Alberta to St. Paul, Minnesota and beyond (see Figure 16).⁵⁴ By the late 1860s, there were large Metis populations in Pembina and St. Joseph, and the booming buffalo economy saw “approximately 1,500” ox carts operating between St. Paul’s, Minnesota and Fort Garry (later Winnipeg).⁵⁵ While the Manitoba-Dakota portion of this network had declined in importance by the 1870s, the trails remained, as did some Metis people on both sides of the border. And, just as the Pembina River was a space of notable Metis presence, so too were some of the smaller waterways to the north, in the area that would become West Reserve.

⁵⁴ James McKillip, “A Metis Metier: Transportation in Rupert’s Land” (M.A. Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2005), 73.

⁵⁵ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 51, 60.

The 1885 scrip affidavit for Michel (Michael) Dease, for example, stated that from 1866 to 1871, he “lived at Buffalo Lake eight miles west of Marais River” before moving west and eventually returning to St. Joseph.⁵⁶ Given the distance noted from the Marais River area, this “Buffalo Lake” appears to refer not to the well-known Alberta Metis community, but to the wide bend in Buffalo Creek known locally as Buffalo Lake well into the 20th century,⁵⁷ given how it often flooded into an even larger marshy lake. Buffalo Lake was also situated along the St. Joe trail, which skirted its north and west sides (see Figure 17). The Marais River (or Rivière aux Marais) mentioned by Dease was, in addition to a waterway, also understood as an area or district of settlement, including for several Metis families who relocated there from St. Norbert in the late 1860s and early 1870s.⁵⁸ Though most had moved west by 1870,⁵⁹ the parish priest of Ste. Agathe, in a letter to Bishop Taché in 1874, recounted performing Mass in the home of a Metis man – Francois Rainville – who “lived at Rivière aux Marais.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ “Statutory Declaration Re His Claim to Participate in Supplementary HB Grant. Application on File,” 1885, RG15-D-II-3, Volume number: 194, Microfilm reel number: T-12033, File number: HB 4366, Library and Archives Canada.

⁵⁷ It is probable, though not conclusive, that this Buffalo Lake was the one located in the West Reserve. Although there is a well-known Metis Community called Buffalo Lake in Alberta, the absence of any Marais River there, combined with the distance noted in Dease’s affidavit, along with his noted connections to St. Joseph and the Manitoba-Dakota boundary region, make it probable that the Buffalo Lake mentioned here was indeed located in the West Reserve.

⁵⁸ Société Historique de Saint-Boniface, “Letellier,” Centre Du Patrimoine, 2000, <https://shsb.mb.ca/letellier/>; The History Book Committee, Rural Municipality of Montcalm, *Reapers of the Valley, 1882-1982* (Letellier: Montcalm History Group, 1982), 3, 63.

⁵⁹ Société Historique de Saint-Boniface, “Letellier.”

⁶⁰ Marie Paul Cesaree, “Essai Historique de La Paroisse de La Saint-Pie de Letellier” (M.A. Thesis, University of Ottawa, 1950), 14; The History Book Committee, Rural Municipality of Montcalm, *Reapers of the Valley*, 63.

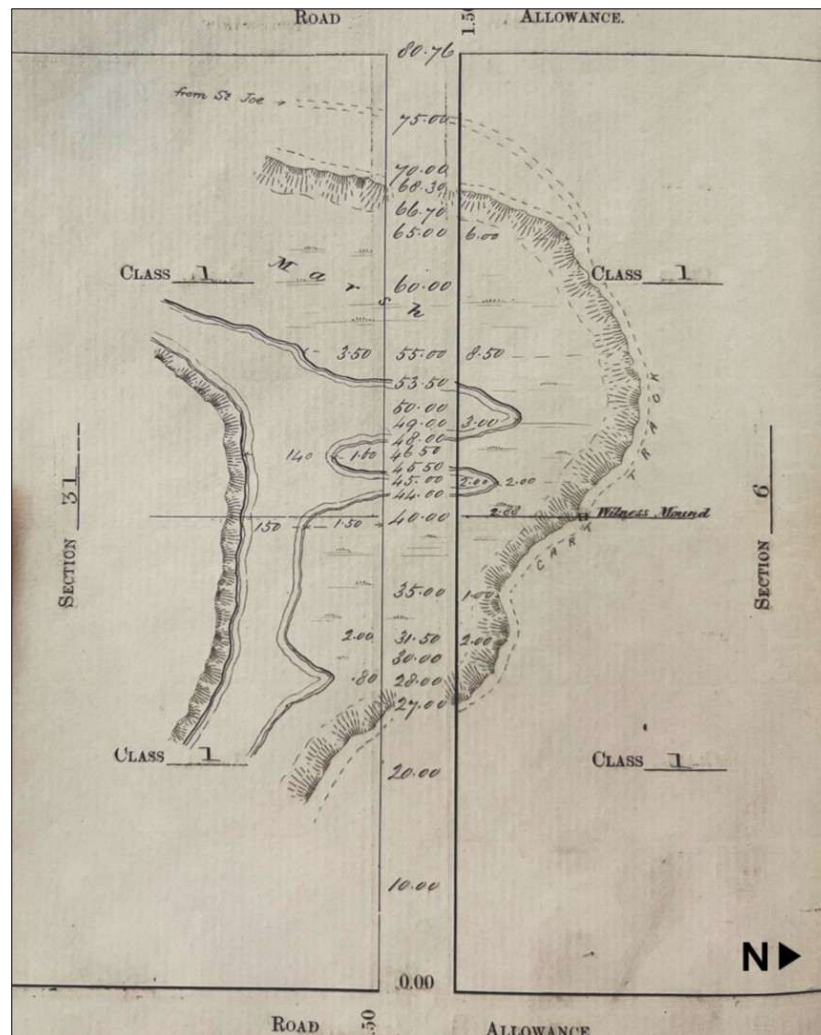


Figure 17: Surveyor field book showing the St. Joe trail on the northern edge of Buffalo Lake (North Arrow added).⁶¹

Though the Buffalo Lake area has often been understood in Mennonite history as a marshy portion of the West Reserve's treeless plains, the examples above point to its significance for Indigenous people, including Dease. Dease was married to Lucie (Louise) Gladu and was a son of John Warren Dease and Emilie (Angelique) McMillan.⁶² The elder Dease was the proprietor of a trading post on the south side of the Pembina River near Leroy, North

⁶¹ "Survey Notebook #225: Township 3 Range 1 W," 1872, Archives of Manitoba.

⁶² "Statutory Declaration," Library and Archives Canada.

Dakota,⁶³ a Metis settlement roughly halfway between St. Joseph and Grant's Place.⁶⁴ In 1874 a Michael Dease also purchased three parcels of land along the Pembina River near Bottineau's property, receiving patent for it in 1879,⁶⁵ immediately near lots purchased by West Reserve Mennonites for timber use in the late nineteenth century.⁶⁶ While it is not apparent how or when Dease ceased owning this land, what is clear is that Metis presence persisted (even if in small ways) in and around the West Reserve area, alongside Mennonite settlers, with the Pembina River, Buffalo Lake, and cart trails all revealing that presence most strongly.

In terms of the actual interactions Mennonite settlers had with First Nations and Metis people in the West Reserve area, there are very few documented occurrences in Mennonite sources, though there are enough – such as those mentioned earlier – to assume that such instances would have been more common than the written historical record might indicate. The frequent references in local historical writings to West Reserve settlers harvesting wood from the Pembina River take on an enhanced meaning when paired with a deeper understanding of Metis presence in that area. Late-twentieth-century Mennonite recollections of West Reserve settlement reveal additional insights relative to Metis proximity and interactions. Memories shared at the seventieth-anniversary celebration of the village of Neuanlage in 1948, for example, included the recollection that the “first cow was bought from the Metis, who lived to the south” of the village.⁶⁷ Similarly, a woman whose family arrived to Manitoba in 1878 and

⁶³ Steve C. Martens, “National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Dease-Martineau House, Trading Post, and Oxcart Trail Historic District,” Pembina County Historic Preservation Commission, 2017, 20-22.

⁶⁴ Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of North Dakota, *North Dakota: A Guide to the Northern Prairie State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 237; Mary Ann Barnes Williams, *Origins of North Dakota Place Names* (Bismarck: Bismarck Tribune, 1966), 225.

⁶⁵ “Dakota Territory, United States Records, Image 148 of 992,” United States, Bureau of Land Management Tract Books, 1874, FamilySearch, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QSQ-G9WS-TQY6?view=index>. Though it is unclear whether this “Michael” Dease was the same “Michel” Dease who lived for a time at Buffalo Lake, the location of these land holdings suggests that it is possible.

⁶⁶ Wiebe, “The Timberlots.”

⁶⁷ “70th Anniversary, Founding of Neuanlage Celebrated,” *Altona Echo*, September 1, 1948.

ended up settling in Blumenort, remembered “hauling logs from the woods and hir[ing] a man who knew how to put up a log hut,” and also that “the Klassen family...bought a cow from the Indians living in the woods.”⁶⁸

Understanding that the St. Joe trail passed roughly a mile west from Neuhorst also further clarifies the recollections of Helen Ewert Penner, whose family migrated from the East Reserve⁶⁹ and settled at the north end of that village near a creek and minor cart trail. There, customers for her father’s blacksmith business included “farmers across the international border and Indians,” who “had hooks and spears made for hunting big game.”⁷⁰ Such recollections are rare among Mennonite sources and often belie a racializing lens through which the Metis were viewed as a distant and almost ephemeral presence at the edges of Mennonite settlements. Conversely, though, they also reveal Mennonite awareness of the Metis in and around the West Reserve.

“Squatters” Reconsidered: Metis Families in Ranges 5 and 6, Township 1 West

In addition to Mennonite encounters with Metis people near the Pembina River, the southwest corner of the reserve – identified in some sources as the location of Metis squatters – was the location of several Metis landowners and their families, who lived there from roughly the late 1870s to the early 1900s. Broadly speaking, this was a period in which the Metis in the Northwest were now living in homelands bifurcated by an international border and impacted by the imposition of rigid racial categories and hierarchies,⁷¹ and where they found that “the environmental and economic conditions that had sustained borderland communities unravelled and the social relations within them became increasingly difficult to sustain.”⁷²

⁶⁸ “Pioneer Relates Early Experiences After Arrival From Russia,” *Red River Valley Echo*, November 25, 1970.

⁶⁹ “Times Were Hard in Neuhorst,” *Red River Valley Echo*, November 1, 1978.

⁷⁰ “Times Were Hard in Neuhorst,” *Red River Valley Echo*.

⁷¹ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 224-225; Macdougall et al., “Metis in the Borderlands,” 261.

⁷² Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 230.

Such constrictions, along with the flawed, delayed, and ultimately dispossessive scrip process, the federal government's "denial of Metis demands for group settlements, and an emphasis on individualized land title,"⁷³ meant that, in some cases, Metis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attempted to secure their places within their homeland through the Dominion Lands homesteading process. Under the stipulations of Canada's *Dominion Lands Act*, this meant first putting an entry in on a quarter section of land (160 acres), and then undertaking the duties required to receive legal title to that land. Though the specifics of these regulations changed over the years, homesteading duties included, for example, residing on the property for a prescribed continuous amount of time, clearing land, cultivating crops, and constructing buildings and dwellings. Finally the homesteader could receive the patent to the land after three years, upon demonstrating their fulfillment of the requirements.⁷⁴ In undergoing this process, explains Cheryl Troupe, some Metis were adapting "to the new system of land holding by occupying their lands as settlers and securing land title in a way recognized by the Canadian government."⁷⁵

⁷³ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 230.

⁷⁴ John L. Tyman, "Patterns of Western Land Settlement," *Manitoba History* 28, no. 3 (1971): 117–21.

⁷⁵ Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 127.

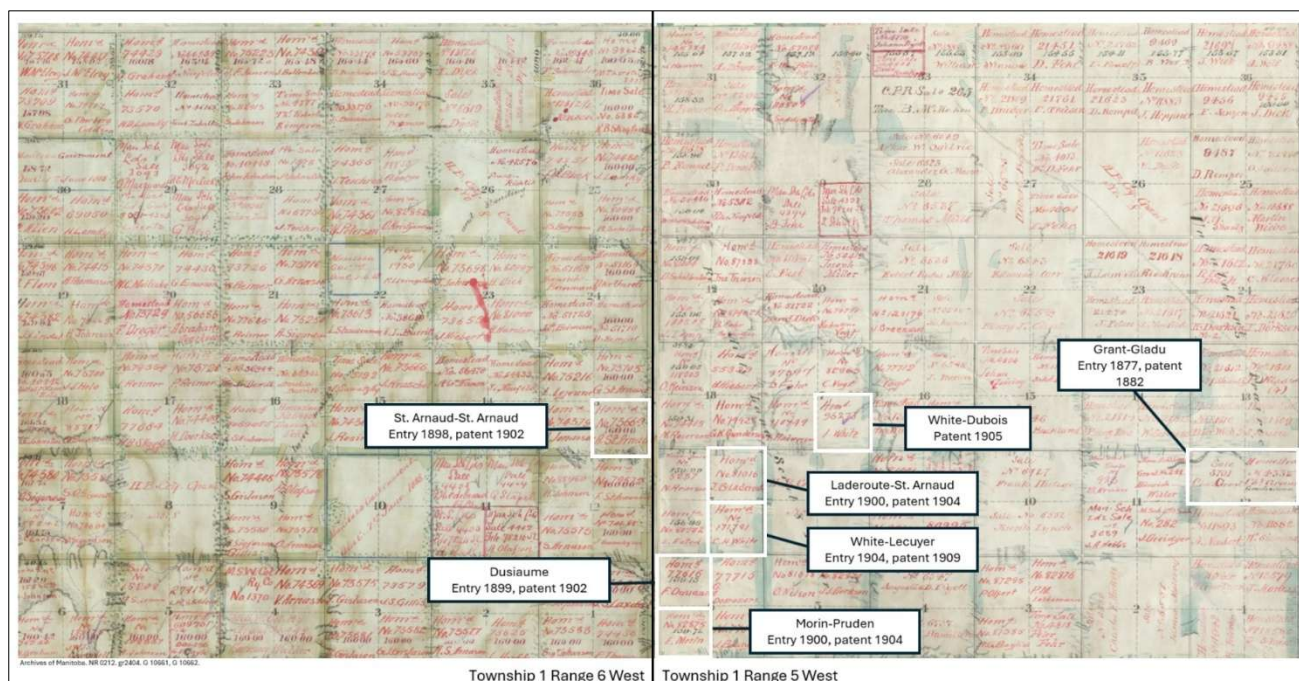


Figure 18: Metis Landowners in Ranges 5 and 6 West.

This appears to have been the case in the fifth and sixth ranges of Township 1, within the land reserved for Mennonites along the border at the foot of the Pembina Hills. This region was traversed by numerous creeks and ravines and often covered with bushes, forest, and marshes. Its location to the west of the major areas of Mennonite settlement meant that the closest Mennonite villages were anywhere from one to eight miles away, though individual Mennonites did own individual plots of land in this forested fringe area as well. The Pembina Hills had been a wintering site for Metis and First Nations Peoples, meaning that the Metis families living in this corner of the reserve were on land well-known by them and their ancestors.

One of the earliest Metis homesteaders in this area was Charles Grant. Grant's first entry on land there was submitted in in 1877,⁷⁶ though he had apparently been living there prior to the establishment of the Mennonite reserve, and prior to any "improvements" being made on his

⁷⁶ "Township 1 - Range 5W to Township 38 - Range 5W," Land Registers Fonds, c.1870-1930, NR 0211, GR2133, G 7161, Archives of Manitoba.

land.⁷⁷ Grant received patent for the two northern quarter sections of Section 12, Township 1, Range 5 West in 1882 and 1883.⁷⁸ This land was adjacent to the village of Kronsfield. In fact, the Kronsfield school, which opened in 1905, was located for a short time on the land where the family's house had been previously located (by then, the land was owned by Jacob J. Warkentin).⁷⁹ Other villages near to the Grant family's land were Eichenfeld, roughly one mile to the north, and Blumenfeld, around one to two miles to the northeast.

By 1882, the Grant family had a twelve-by-nineteen-foot "log stable" and twelve-by-twelve-foot "house 4 or 6 logs high," and were harvesting hay annually, up to "100 tons" in some years.⁸⁰ The 1881 Canadian census listed Charles and Euphrosine in this property's census district, living in two houses along with their son Charles Albert, his wife Louise Marion, and their young daughter Mary.⁸¹ In addition to their land's proximity to forest and a small creek, it was also adjacent to a cart trail leading to Walhalla, likely an important feature given their transborder connections. Underscoring the socially dynamic nature of Grant's and Charles Bottineau's properties in the area, the *Bismarck Tribune* ran a story from the *Emerson International* in 1879 that Louis Riel – then in exile from Canada – had apparently crossed the

⁷⁷ "Schedule of Non-Mennonite Settlers on Dufferin Reserve who Have Squatted on Lands for which Mennonites have Obtained Entries," Rauscher to Surveyor General, October 22, 1881, "Mennonites, Sale of Lands in Mennonite Reserve, Red River Lots and School Lands (Lists, Map)," RG15-D-II-1, Volume Number: 233, Microfilm Reel Number: T-12181, File Number: 3129, File part: 2A, Library and Archives Canada; "Declaration Re Claim of Heirs of Bernard Grant to Participate in Supplementary HB Grant. Application on File," 1887 1885, RG15-D-II-3, Volume number: 187, Microfilm Reel Number: T-12028, File Number: HB 2462, Library and Archives Canada.

⁷⁸ "Dominion Lands Homestead, Charles Grant, NE12-1-5W," July 20, 1882, Township 1 Range 5W to Township 11 Range 5W. Federal Department of the Interior Files Authorizing Creation of Letters Patent. NR0213. G20128. D-2-6-14., Archives of Manitoba; "Dominion Lands Sale, Charles Grant, NW12-1-5W," February 8, 1883, Township 1 Range 5W to Township 11 Range 5W. Federal Department of the Interior Files Authorizing Creation of Letters Patent. NR0213. G20128. D-2-6-14., Archives of Manitoba.

⁷⁹ Peter Dyck and Peter Letkemen, *Haskett Centennial History* (Brandon, 2007), 49, 230.

⁸⁰ "J.M Grover to Minister of the Interior," June 5, 1882, RG15-D-II-1, Volume number: 233, Microfilm Reel Number: T-12181, File Number: 3129, File part: 2A, Library and Archives Canada.

⁸¹ "Census of Canada, 1881, Manitoba: Marquette, Dufferin South," 1881, RG31 - Statistics Canada, C-13283, Page 18., Library and Archives Canada; Glen Campbell and Tom Flanagan, "Louis Riel's Romantic Interests," *Manitoba History*, no. 90 (2019): 6-8.

border north to Manitoba, “to the place of Charles Grant, said to be on the Canadian side, near the Mennonite settlement, on New Year’s day.”⁸²

The Grants were not the only Metis family with homesteads in this portion of the West Reserve. To the west of them was Jean-Baptiste Laderoute, who had received the patent for his land in 1904, having made an entry for it in 1900.⁸³ Laderoute’s parents were Josephthe Larocque and Jean Baptiste Laderoute, Sr., and he was married to Marguerite St. Arnaud.⁸⁴ Laderoute was close to some of the events leading up to the Red River Resistance as outlined in his memoir, *Des Troubles du Manitoba, 1869-1870*. According to that book, Jean-Baptiste’s brother Chrysostôme was among the Metis who stopped Lieutenant-Governor William McDougall from crossing the border and entering Red River in 1869,⁸⁵ and soon after also helped set up a barricade near the La Salle River to stop subsequent advances of Canadian officials.⁸⁶ Jean-Baptiste and Marguerite moved to Olga, North Dakota in 1885 with their family. They had twelve children together, born between 1863 and 1887, and in 1903 he was living on his piece of land in the West Reserve with Marguerite and three of their children.⁸⁷ By that time, the property contained a house, three stables, thirteen head of cattle, seven pigs, six horses, and six acres of cleared land.⁸⁸ Laderoute also did some work for the Rural Municipality of Stanley, as municipal

⁸² “Louis Riel: More Particulars of the Ex-President’s Visit at the Boundary,” *Bismarck Tribune*, January 27, 1879.

⁸³ “Township 1 - Range 5W to Township 38 - Range 5W,” Archives of Manitoba.

⁸⁴ Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Jean-Baptiste Laderoute (1837-1915),” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2013; Morin, *Metis Families*, I, 587.

⁸⁵ Barkwell, “Jean-Baptiste Laderoute (1837-1915).”

⁸⁶ Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Riel’s Supporters, 1869-70,” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2015.

⁸⁷ “Statement Made and Sworn to by Jean B. Laderoute...,” October 20, 1903, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

⁸⁸ “Homestead Inspector’s Report,” October 20, 1903, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

council minutes show him being paid for road grading, bridge and culvert work, and timber hauling in 1903.⁸⁹

Laderoute's application for a homestead here was supported in writing by Etienne Morin, who owned land just to the south in Section 6, Township 1, Range 5 West. Morin sometimes went by the anglicized name, 'John Moran,'⁹⁰ and was a son of Jean Baptiste Comtois Morin and Marie Lafournaise.⁹¹ He was married to Anne Pruden, daughter of Arthur Pruden and Archange Guiboche.⁹² Morin submitted his entry on the land in 1900, receiving the patent for it in 1904,⁹³ by which time he was living there with his wife and seven children.⁹⁴ According to the 1901 census, it appears that one of those children – Sarah – was also working as a domestic labourer in the nearby town of Morden.⁹⁵ According to a 1903 Homestead Inspector's Report, the Morin-Pruden property had a log house and two stables along with some six horses, four cows, and two pigs, with eight acres of cleared land.⁹⁶ Similarly to Jean Baptiste Laderoute, Morin also engaged in occasional work for the municipality, being paid for wolf bounty hunting in 1897, and road grading in 1902 and 1904.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ "Minute Book, Aug 1900 - Dec 1907," August 3, 1903; October 31, 1903; November 28, 1903; Rural Municipality of Stanley.

⁹⁰ "The Patent of SW ¼ 6-1-5W," April 28, 1904, Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

⁹¹ Morin, *Métis Families*, II, 837.

⁹² Morin, *Metis Families*, II, 837.

⁹³ "Township 1 - Range 5W to Township 38 - Range 5W," Land Registers Fonds, c.1870-1930, NR 0211, GR2133, G 7161, Archives of Manitoba.

⁹⁴ "Statement Made and Sworn to by Etienne Morin...," Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

⁹⁵ "Census of Canada, 1901," Manitoba, Lisgar, Stanley, Morden (Village), RG31 - Statistics Canada, T-6432, 9, Library and Archives Canada.

⁹⁶ "Homestead Inspector's Report," October 20, 1903, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba. These reports were made by inspectors after visiting a given property to assess the occupants' progress in fulfilling the requirements of homesteaders as laid out in the Dominion Lands Act.

⁹⁷ "Municipality of Stanley Minute Book, Jan. 1891 - July 1900," May 15, 1897; November 8, 1902; July 30, 1904, Rural Municipality of Stanley.

Adjacent to Etienne Morin's quarter section was a quarter section owned by Francois (or Frank) – Dusiaume, a "French Half Breed" from North Dakota⁹⁸ who made an entry for this land in 1899, receiving the patent for it in 1902.⁹⁹ Apparently the land had previously been occupied by Mennonites, with a Jacob M. Peters having entered a quit claim deed in March of 1895 in order to transfer the patent to a Jacob Guenther.¹⁰⁰ How Guenther came to vacate the land is unclear, but in May of 1899 Dusiaume paid his entry fee on the land¹⁰¹ and was living there, according to a Homestead Inspector's Report of August 1899.¹⁰² By then, Dusiaume had dug a well and built a house fourteen by twenty-four feet in size.¹⁰³ His August 1902 application for patent stated that he was now living on the land with his wife and ten children, and that the land had a stable, forty acres of fencing, two horses, two pigs, and thirty-eight acres of broken land for cultivation.¹⁰⁴ The 1901 census lists those children, along with Francois (listed as "Frank"), and his wife, listed as "Jeanet."¹⁰⁵

On the southeast quarter of Section 7, Township 1 Range 5 West (to the northeast of Francois and Jeanet, and adjacent to the Laderoute - St. Arnaud family), was Charles Henry

⁹⁸ "Questions to be Answered...", May 8, 1899, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

⁹⁹ "Township 1 - Range 5W to Township 38 - Range 5W," Land Registers Fonds, c.1870-1930, NR 0211, GR2133, G 7161, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁰⁰ Lemon to Secretary Department of the Interior, April 13, 1895; "Quit Claim Deed," March [?], 1895, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁰¹ R.C. Bayliss to Dominion Lands Agent, May 8, 1899, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁰² Foley to Dominion Lands Agent, August 12, 1899, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁰³ Foley to Dominion Lands Agent, August 12, 1899.

¹⁰⁴ "Statement Made and Sworn to by Francois Dusiaume...", August 30, 1902, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁰⁵ "Census of Canada, 1901," Manitoba, Lisgar, Stanley, Morden (Village), RG31 - Statistics Canada, T-6432, 7, Library and Archives Canada.

White, who was married to Josephte (alternately written as Susan, Marie, or Suzette) Lecuyer, who was a daughter to Xavier Lecuyer and Josephte Vivier.¹⁰⁶ Also referred to as “LeBlanc” in scrip records,¹⁰⁷ Charles Henry first inquired about this piece of land in December 1903, when he submitted a form requesting an inspection of the southeast quarter of Section 7, Township 1, Range 5 West.¹⁰⁸ Around this time, according to the 1901 census, Charles and Josephte were living in the town of Morden with their children, including two of their son’s wives and one grandchild.¹⁰⁹ Evidently, Charles was looking to move out of town to a quarter-section, following a Homestead Inspector’s report indicating the previous homesteader at Section 7 had vacated the property,¹¹⁰

White applied for entry on the land in August 1904.¹¹¹ A Homestead Inspector’s Report of November 1908 revealed that White’s property now had a one-storey frame house, a stable, thirty acres of fencing, a well, seven cattle and three horses, with eighteen acres of land cleared (twelve of which were seeded with crops).¹¹² White’s written statement the following month

¹⁰⁶ Eglise Catholique. St. François Xavier de la Prairie du Cheval Blanc, “Registres Paroissiaux, 1834-1900,” Canada, Manitoba Church Records, 1800-1959, FamilySearch, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-L994-W2T2?view=explore: Dec 15, 2025>).

¹⁰⁷ “White, Josephte; for her deceased son, Samuel White; address: Morden; born: 1 March, 1872 at Duck Lake; died: June, 1872 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Leblanc) (Métis); mother: Josephte Lecuyer (Métis); claim no. 1902,” RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1371, Microfilm Reel Number: C-15009, Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁰⁸ “Application for Inspection,” December 1, 1903, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁰⁹ “Census of Canada, 1901,” Manitoba, Lisgar, Stanley, Morden (Village), RG31 - Statistics Canada, T-6432, 13, Library and Archives Canada.

¹¹⁰ W. McMillan to Assistant Dominion Lands Agent, March 14, 1904, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹¹¹ “Questions to be Answered...,” August 29, 1904, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹¹² “Homestead Inspector’s Report,” November [?], 1908, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

indicated that he had been living there with his wife and children since 1904.¹¹³ The land apparently also had some timber on it, and the Department of the Interior received complaints in 1906 that he had been cutting and selling it for profit without a permit. This issue was resolved when it was confirmed that White had been cutting the timber for the purpose of clearing land for cultivation, and had been selling it to nearby settlers for fuel purposes, which did not require a timber permit.¹¹⁴

One of Charles Henry's sons, Elzear (also written as Ezaer or Isiar), had already been living on a quarter section in Range 5, receiving the patent for the southeast quarter of Section 17 in 1905.¹¹⁵ Elzear was married to Pauline Dubois, a daughter of Eugene Martial Dubois and Betsy (Elizabeth) George.¹¹⁶ Interestingly, it appears he attempted in early 1900 to apply for entry on the land that his father Charles Henry ended up receiving patent for in 1909.¹¹⁷ Soon after, though, Elzear applied for the southeast quarter of Section 17, and received confirmation of his entry in November 1901.¹¹⁸ Prior to Elzear occupying this land, though, a J. J. Derksen had been living there. Derksen had written to the Dominion Lands Office in June of 1899, stating that

¹¹³ "Sworn Statement of Charles Henry White...," December 2, 1908, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹¹⁴ W. McMillan to Assistant Crown Timber Agent, December 19, 1906; [?] to Crown Timber Agent, July 5, 1907, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹¹⁵ "Township 1 - Range 5W to Township 38 - Range 5W," Land Registers Fonds, c.1870-1930, NR 0211, GR2133, G 7161, Archives of Manitoba.

¹¹⁶ "White, Pauline; address: Morden, Manitoba; born: 1 February, 1876 at St. Boniface; father: Eugene Martial Dubois (Métis); mother: Betsy George (Métis); married: 1894 at Duck Lake to Elzear White; file ref. 965364; claim no. 1890," RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1371, Microfilm Reel Number: C-15009, Library and Archives Canada.

¹¹⁷ Arnold Bowen to Dominion Lands Agent, May 7, 1900, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹¹⁸ "Township 1 - Range 5W to Township 38 - Range 5W," Land Registers Fonds, c.1870-1930, NR 0211, GR2133, G 7161, Archives of Manitoba.

he had cleared some land there and had built a log house and stable.¹¹⁹ The response from the Dominion Lands Agent, though, seems to indicate that Derksen had yet to pay for this land.¹²⁰ There is no indication in the Homestead Files whether Derksen formally applied to purchase the land, and it is unclear how Derksen came to vacate this property prior to Elzear White submitting his entry on it.

Four miles to the west of Elzear and Pauline was Alexandre St. Arnaud, who owned the southeast quarter of Section 13, Township 1, Range 6 West. Alexandre's parents were Alexandre St. Arnaud, Sr. and Philomene Ladoceur,¹²¹ and he was married to Elise (also Eliza or Elizabeth), whose maiden name was also St. Arnaud.¹²² She was a daughter to Genevieve Octavia Renville (or Rainville) and Charles St. Arnaud.¹²³ The 1901 census listed "Alex" and "Elizabeth" St. Arnaud in the census district, with two children.¹²⁴ They were still listed at Section 13, Township 1, Range 6 West in 1906, this time with three children (though Alexandre's last name was written as "Santino").¹²⁵ By then their livestock was listed at three horses, six milk cows, eleven other types of cattle, and three pigs.¹²⁶ Along with farm work, Alexandre did some work for the Municipality of Stanley, including some grading in the fall of 1904.¹²⁷

¹¹⁹ J.J. Derksen to Dominion Lands Agent, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹²⁰ Dominion Lands Agent to J.J. Derksen, June 21, 1899, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹²¹ Morin, *Metis Families*, II, 1123.

¹²² "St. Arnauld, Elise; address: Morden (near Sec. 13, Tp. 1; Rge. 6 W.); born: 25 May, 1876 at Pelly; father: Charles St. Arnauld (Métis); mother: Geneviève Rainville (Métis); married: 1896 to Alexis St. Arnauld at Morden; file ref. 805415; claim no. 1982," RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume number: 1366, Microfilm reel number: C-15000, Library and Archives Canada.

¹²³ Morin, *Metis Families*, II, 1123.

¹²⁴ "Census of Canada, 1901," Manitoba, Lisgar, Stanley, Morden (Village), RG31 - Statistics Canada, T-6432, 12, Library and Archives Canada.

¹²⁵ "Census of Northwest Provinces, 1906," Manitoba, Lisgar, Townships 1, 2 in Range 6 West, RG31 - Statistics Canada, T-18354, 13, Library and Archives Canada.

¹²⁶ "Census of Northwest Provinces, 1906," Manitoba, Lisgar, Townships 1, 2 in Range 6 West, RG31 - Statistics Canada, T-18354, 13, Library and Archives Canada.

¹²⁷ "Minute Book, Aug 1900 - Dec 1907," October 29, 1904, Rural Municipality of Stanley.

In light of the presence and dynamics of these landowning families, it is striking that the term “squatters” became a main identifier for the Metis in this area within Mennonite local and academic history. It is unclear why this was the case, though the possibility of it coming from local Mennonite knowledge utilized in E.K. Francis’ work – as mentioned previously – seems likely. There were, in fact, some Indigenous people living in southwest corner at the turn of the century who did not own their land according to the regulations of the Dominion Lands Act. Indeed, one example, Jean Baptiste Charette, is discussed briefly further below.¹²⁸ However, the function of “squatters” rhetoric, alongside the idea of empty and featureless prairie land, enforced the idea of West Reserve land as inconsequential and unimportant for Indigenous Peoples by the time Mennonites arrived on the scene.

Adding to this, West Reserve local histories often outlined the mechanics of land ownership and title acquisition via the Dominion Lands Act when describing, for example, “the first Altona settlers,” “Blumenfeld’s first families,” the “Original Homestead” where the village of Gretna would later be located, or the legal titles that enabled communal street-village settlement.¹²⁹ In light of these settler claims of legal legitimacy, the term “squatters” – referring to people occupying land outside of the government’s regulations of private ownership – carries an even stronger sense of illegitimacy, especially when used in reference to Indigenous peoples, who, as those same histories communicated, were supposedly marginal and disappearing historical actors in the region by that point. The “Indians” and “Metis” living in the southwest

¹²⁸ Additionally, the Archives of Manitoba’s Homestead Files contain more examples of people who undertook the homesteading process in Township 1, Ranges 5 and 6 West, who may have been Metis, though due to this project’s timeline, I was not able to verify this or research them in more detail. Names include Joseph Morin, Joseph Bourgeois, W.W. Turcotte, and Gilbert Desrosiers.

¹²⁹ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 22; Friesen Petkau and Petkau, *Blumenfeld*, 26-27; Enns, *Gretna*, 19-20; Zacharias, *Reinland*, 149.

portion of the reserve, by extension, became discursively correlated with illegitimacy and marginality.

Furthermore, focusing only on Indigenous “squatters” in the reserve’s southwest portion reproduces “firsting”¹³⁰ and implicitly discounts the reality – as outlined by Troupe – that land ownership through homesteading was, for some Metis, a way to maintain their place within their broader homeland.¹³¹ As such, it also exemplifies what Luby refers to as Indigenous “adaptation,” that is, “family strategies” that ensured a degree of survivance.¹³² The repeated reference to squatters is not the only example of the rhetorical and discursive erasure of Metis presence in this region. In more recent years, some research has referred to Charles Grant as “the first European homesteader” in the southwest portion of the reserve,¹³³ and to both Grant and Bottineau as “the first permanent white settlers” in the area.¹³⁴ This type of inadvertent misidentification is a small example of the archival and historiographical “silent zones” in which historical Metis presence “disappears from the researcher’s gaze.”¹³⁵ In this particular example, the disappearance occurs through assumptive settler assignment of white identity to Metis people, reflecting Hogue’s assertion that the sense of Metis “hiddenness” in history is due to “both the archival records and the work derived from them.”¹³⁶

It is worth noting, too, that the land on which the Metis families were living, while within the reserve formally granted to Mennonites, was not within the main “core”¹³⁷ of Mennonite settlement where most villages were established. While more forested, it was much less

¹³⁰ O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting*, 53.

¹³¹ Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 127.

¹³² Luby, *Dammed*, 13.

¹³³ Alan Warkentin, “Haskett - A Manitoba Border Town,” *Preservings* 28, no. 28 (2008): 32.

¹³⁴ Boundary Trail National Heritage Region, “A Guide to the Principal Historic Sites on and in the Vicinity of The Trail.”

¹³⁵ Macdougall and St-Onge, “Rooted in Mobility,” 25.

¹³⁶ Hogue, “Still Hiding in Plain Sight?,” 2.

¹³⁷ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 143.

amenable to the large-scale crop farming undertaken by Mennonites in the reserve's flat prairie locales. This is evident in the land records associated with the Metis homesteads. Upon examining Jean-Baptiste Laderoute's development of his quarter section, one Inspector was complimentary of Laderoute's efforts, stating that "breaking 6 acres of this land is more than equivalent to breaking 20 of prairie," due to "an assortment of stumps and scrub."¹³⁸ An Inspector made similar comments on Etienne Morin's efforts, stating that while only eight acres of land had been prepared for cultivation, those acres "were very hard to break on account of the large amounts of stumps and scrub on it."¹³⁹ Although the land was in some ways not ideal for farming, this criteria was not, generally speaking, the only consideration Metis people made when selecting land to live on during this period. As Troupe points out, land was often chosen "based on proximity to family," and not necessarily "for its agricultural potential,"¹⁴⁰ something that is illustrated by diving further into the familial connections among and between the Metis West Reserve homesteaders.

Kinship and Geographic Connections within West Reserve Metis Families

The centrality of kinship to Metis social, cultural, and political histories has been well established by scholars like Heather Devine, Brenda Macdougall, and others. Their work examines both the key role of Metis kinship networks, and the mobility of those networks across time and space, in establishing Metis cultural, political, and community identities.¹⁴¹ It is notable

¹³⁸ "Homestead Inspector's Report," October 20, 1903, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹³⁹ "Homestead Inspector's Report," October 20, 1903, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 1W - Township 1 - Section 1 to 36 (No Files for Following Section 8 SW17 & SW19 on Reel 1222), NR 0215 GR2060, Reel 2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁴⁰ Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 5.

¹⁴¹ Heather Devine, *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660-1900* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); Macdougall, *One of the Family*. See also Kim Anderson, *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011); Allyson Stevenson, *Intimate Integration: A History of the Sixties Scoop and the Colonization of Indigenous Kinship*

that the Metis in the West Reserve were located so closely together. The insights of kinship-based scholarship help us understand the even deeper significance within the layered familial connections that existed between many of these homesteaders and their extended families.

The importance of these kinship ties were evident in several ways. Firstly, some families made demonstrable efforts to acquire land near to each other. Charles Grant, for example, stated in 1882 that he had “obtained entry” for the southern half of Section 12, Township 1, Range 5 West in Emerson,¹⁴² possibly in the 1870s. This land was adjacent to the northern half of the section, where Charles and Euphrosine lived, and was intended for Grant and Euphrosine’s son – likely Charles Albert – “who was too young to obtain entry” at the time.¹⁴³ This actually resulted in a dispute between Charles Grant and a Mennonite, Wilhelm or William Siemens from Kronsfeld, who had obtained entry on the southeast quarter of the section in December of 1880,¹⁴⁴ in spite of Grant’s claim to have also done so.

In the autumn of 1881, Siemens was apparently living in Kronsfeld where he had eleven acres of land cultivated, in addition to ten acres cultivated on the disputed southeast quarter of Section 12.¹⁴⁵ According to an October 1881 letter from Dominion Land Surveyor R. Rauscher to the Surveyor General, Charles Albert was living with his parents on the northern half of the section while occupying and claiming the southern half.¹⁴⁶ The case went before Justice J.M. Grover in Mountain City in May of 1882, with Charles Grant claiming he had made “improvements on said lands prior to the Mennonites obtaining a reserve to these lands and prior

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021); Derrick M. Nault, “Louis Riel, Wahkohtowin, and the First Act of Resistance at Red River,” *Prairie History* 8 (2022): 5–16; Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*.

¹⁴² “J.M Grover to Minister of the Interior,” Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁴³ Leonard Doell, “Walhalla Trail,” 1978; “J.M Grover to Minister of the Interior,” Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁴⁴ “Township 1 - Range 5W to Township 38 - Range 5W,” Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁴⁵ “Schedule of Non-Mennonite Settlers on Dufferin Reserve who Have Squatted on Lands for which Mennonites have Obtained Entries,” Rauscher to Surveyor General, October 22, 1881, Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁴⁶ “Schedule of Non-Mennonite Settlers on Dufferin Reserve who Have Squatted on Lands for which Mennonites have Obtained Entries,” Library and Archives Canada.

to any improvements.”¹⁴⁷ Grover wrote to the Minister of the Interior (at that time John A. Macdonald) for advice on how to deal with the case.¹⁴⁸ Though it is unclear whether a response was given, or how the dispute was settled, Siemens retained the southeast quarter, with an “Anna Neudorf” owning the southwest quarter.¹⁴⁹

Having Charles Albert and Louise nearby may have been particularly important for Charles and Euphrosine, given that at least five of Charles’ and Euphrosine’s ten children died in infancy or childhood, and one son, Bernard, died at nineteen or twenty years old.¹⁵⁰ By 1881, Charles and Euphrosine also had three men living there listed as farm labourers – one may have been Martial La Baptiste (twenty-one years old), though that name is not clearly legible in the census documents, and the others were Joseph Poitras (eighteen years old) and Charles Poitras (fourteen years old).¹⁵¹ Euphrosine also had familial connections in the region, as Michel Dease’s wife Lucie was a Gladu from the same family as Euphrosine’s. In fact, Euphrosine was Lucie’s aunt, as her brother Charles Gladu, Jr. was Lucie’s father.¹⁵²

The White family also attempted to acquire land close to each other. By 1901 Charles Henry, his wife Josephite (listed as “Mary” in the 1901 census), and their children were living in the town of Morden.¹⁵³ Their son Elzear had already applied for a quarter section of land in 1900, subsequently relocating there. Then, when Charles Henry started inquiring about available

¹⁴⁷ “J.M Grover to Minister of the Interior.” Leonard Doell first noted this incident in his unpublished paper, “Walhalla Trail,” which was cited by Redekop. Leonard Doell, “Walhalla Trail,” 1978, Mennonite Heritage Archives; Calvin Redekop, “Mennonite Displacement of Indigenous Peoples,” 71–90.

¹⁴⁸ “J.M Grover to Minister of the Interior,” Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁴⁹ “Township 1 - Range 5W to Township 38 - Range 5W,” 1, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁵⁰ Barkwell, “Grant, Charles”; Morin, *Métis Families*, I, 464; “Declaration Re Claim of Heirs of Bernard Grant to Participate in Supplementary HB Grant. Application on File,” Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁵¹ “Census of Canada, 1881,” Manitoba, Marquette, Dufferin South, RG31 - Statistics Canada, C-13283, 18, Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁵² Gail Morin, *Métis Families, Volume 5: Garipey-Houle* 3rd edition (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform), 78-79, and *Volume 3: Champagne-Desjarlais*, 191.

¹⁵³ “Census of Canada, 1901,” Manitoba, Lisgar, Stanley, Morden (Village), RG31 - Statistics Canada, T-6432, 13, Library and Archives Canada.

land in the area, a representative wrote on his behalf to the Dominion Lands Agent in December of 1901, stating that White “wants to know if he can get any part of Sec 17-1-5 W of 1st M as a homestead,” as “his son Isiar has the SE 1/4 and the family want to get as close together as possible.”¹⁵⁴

At the time, an entry on that land had already previously been submitted by a Mennonite by the name of John Sawatzky. However, in early 1902, Sawatzky had indicated to people in the area that he did not intend to continue homesteading duties on the land¹⁵⁵ and even submitted a statement to the Dominion Lands Office in June 1902 stating that he was abandoning the land “in favor of Charles White.”¹⁵⁶ Sawatzky’s declaration was irrelevant to the Dominion Lands Office, however, as there were already eleven applicants for the land registered ahead of White, and as a result, White did not end up getting the land.¹⁵⁷ Eventually, he received patent on his quarter section roughly three miles southwest of Elzear and his family. The bonds between the White and Dubois family are further evident in the fact that Elzear’s brother William married Pauline’s sister, Eliza Dubois, in 1898 at Langdon, North Dakota. William and Eliza were living in Morden at this time, and had been married at Langdon because, according to William, “there was no priest in Morden.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Foley to Dominion Lands Agent, December 16, 1901, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 4W - Township 26 - Section NW15 and NE16 - No Files for Other Sections, NR 0215 GR2060, Reel M2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁵⁵ Pigott to Dominion Lands Agent, April 10, 1902, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 4W - Township 26 - Section NW15 and NE16 - No Files for Other Sections, NR 0215 GR2060, Reel M2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁵⁶ “I, John Sawatzky...,” June 2, 1902, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 4W - Township 26 - Section NW15 and NE16 - No Files for Other Sections, NR 0215 GR2060, Reel M2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁵⁷ Assistant Dominion Lands Agent to Pigott, October 21, 1902, Federal Department of the Interior Homestead Files, Range 4W - Township 26 - Section NW15 and NE16 - No Files for Other Sections, NR 0215 GR2060, Reel M2255, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁵⁸ “White, William; address: Morden; born: 5 August, 1876 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Métis); mother: Josephine Lecuyer (Métis); married: 1898 at Langdon, North Dakota. to Eliza Dubois; claim no. 1860,” RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1371, Microfilm Reel Number: C-15009, Library and Archives Canada; Lawrence J. Barkwell, “North Dakota Metis Who Took Scrip,” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, n.d., https://www.academia.edu/39248704/North_Dakota_Metis_who_Took_Scrip.

Further, Marguerite St. Arnaud and Jean Baptiste Laderoute lived just two miles east of Marguerite's nephew Alexandre St. Arnaud and his wife Elise. Alexandre and Elise themselves appear to have been cousins, as both were born to children of Bonaventure St. Arnaud and Genevieve Conrit (or Contre):¹⁵⁹ Alexandre to Alexandre St. Arnaud and his wife Philomene Ladoceur, and Elise to Charles St. Arnaud and his wife Genevieve Octavia Renville (or Rainville).¹⁶⁰ Charles and Octavia had many children in addition to Elise, three of whom were brothers Charles, George, and Frederick St. Arnaud.¹⁶¹ The names of these three brothers correspond to those of three St. Arnaud men who had land at one point or another right beside Elise and Alexandre. According to Manitoba land registers, Charles submitted a homestead entry on the northeast quarter of Section 12, Township 1 Range 6 West in 1898, immediately to the south of Elise and Alexandre, but cancelled it soon after. Frederick then made entry on the same land, receiving the patent for it in 1903.¹⁶²

Immediately to the north of Elise and Alexandre, George St. Arnaud made entry on the northeast quarter of Section 13, Township 1 Range 6 West in 1898, receiving the patent for it in 1902.¹⁶³ Council minutes for the Rural Municipality of Stanley show that he too received income from municipal work, including grading and culvert work in June of 1903.¹⁶⁴ The 1901 census lists the families of Alexandre and Elise ("Elizabeth"), George and his wife "Vergine," and Frederick and his wife "Eliza F." all living in the area, with Alexandre and Elise also hosting a

¹⁵⁹ Morin, *Métis Families*, II, 1123; "St. Arnauld, Elise; address: Morden (near Sec. 13, Tp. 1; Rge. 6 W.); born: 25 May, 1876 at Pelly; father: Charles St. Arnauld (Métis); mother: Geneviève Rainville (Métis); married: 1896 to Alexis St. Arnauld at Morden; file ref. 805415; claim no. 1982," RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1366, Microfilm Reel Number: C-15000, Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁶⁰ Morin, *Métis Families*, II, 1123.

¹⁶¹ Morin, *Métis Families*, II, 1123.

¹⁶² "Township 1 - Range 6W to Township 38 - Range 6W," Land Registers Fonds, c.1870-1930, NR 0211, GR2133, G 7163, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁶³ "Township 1 - Range 6W to Township 38 - Range 6W," Land Registers Fonds, c.1870-1930, NR 0211, GR2133, G 7163, Archives of Manitoba.

¹⁶⁴ "Minute Book, Aug 1900 - Dec 1907," June 27, 1903, October 31, 1903, Rural Municipality of Stanley.

fourteen-year-old “Lodger” by the name of “Joseph St. Arnaud.” The St. Arnauds were also engaged with the municipal government on other matters – in May of 1905 Alexandre submitted a petition, along with several others, to the Stanley municipal council, “asking that a road be opened up” between Sections 12 and 13 in Range 6, and Sections 7 and 18 in Range 5.¹⁶⁵ The precise intent of these requested roads is not clear in the minutes, though a road in Range 6 would have better connected the properties of George, Alexandre, and Frederick. Regardless, it appears that the St. Arnauds, along with the Grant and White families, made some notable efforts to acquire land close to one another, demonstrating the persistence of Metis kinship in maintaining connections to place even beyond 1885, the year so often bookending many Metis histories.¹⁶⁶

As these examples show, the Metis in Ranges 5 and 6 of the West Reserve were not an unfamiliar assortment of families randomly finding themselves in the same location. Rather, many of them were related and actively sought to maintain family ties through geographic proximity. Additionally, we can also get a (very) small sense of the ways in which culture was kept, preserved, and maintained within these families, particularly through the knowledge and expertise of the women. Doing so requires looking beyond the male heads-of-household surnames that dot the township map as legal landholders, to the families of the women they were married to. As Sarah Carter has remarked, the names on these maps plainly reveal “how ideas of proper gender roles were embedded in the landscape.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ “Minute Book, Aug 1900 - Dec 1907,” May 6, 1905, Rural Municipality of Stanley.

¹⁶⁶ Hogue, “Still Hiding in Plain Sight?,” 1.

¹⁶⁷ Carter, *Imperial Plots*, 4. This phenomenon might also account for some of the erasure of landowning Metis within Mennonite sources. Very likely, Mennonite narrators over the years may have noticed names like White, Grant, Morin, and Laderoute in historical sources and assumed White – Anglo-Saxon or French – identities.

A significant mode of both cultural expression and economic survival engaged in by Metis women was work related to material culture, such as sewing, clothing, beadwork, and other similar production. Such skills and labour, along with the many other tasks undertaken by Metis women, were valued and crucial during the fur trade.¹⁶⁸ These were “sophisticated skills...passed down from generation to generation,”¹⁶⁹ and elderly women “carried a vast body of knowledge, skills, and expertise for which they garnered respect and were considered family matriarchs.”¹⁷⁰ Small slivers of this can be found here and there in relation to the women of West Reserve Metis families. Etienne Morin’s wife Annie Pruden, for example, likely grew up in a household surrounded by such expertise: Sherry Farrell Racette’s analysis of Annie’s father’s personal accounts, from his time as Chief Trader at Fort Carlton during the early 1860s, reveals that “someone – probably his wife [Annie’s mother] Archange Guiboche” – made several notable purchases for various sewing-and-beadwork-related supplies on husband Arthur’s account. Regardless of who made the purchase, writes Farrell Racette, “One way or another, significant artistic production was occurring in the Pruden household.”¹⁷¹

The Grant-Gladu household appears to have been a site of similar work: at the Morris Agricultural Society’s inaugural exhibition in 1880 (held at West Lynne, just east of the West Reserve), “Chas Grant” was listed as a prizewinner for “Indian bead work.”¹⁷² That same year, at the South Dufferin Agricultural Society’s 1880 exhibition (the Municipality of South Dufferin

¹⁶⁸ Cheryl Troupe and Doris Jeanne MacKinnon, eds., *Métis Matriarchs: Agents of Transition* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2024), xx.

¹⁶⁹ Leah Dorion et al., “Celebrating the Wisdom of Our Métis Matriarchs: Sewing Our Wellness All Together - Kood Toot Aansamb,” in *Around the Kitchen Table: Métis Aunties’ Scholarship*, ed. Laura Forsythe and Jennifer Markides (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2024), 213.

¹⁷⁰ Troupe, *Métis Matriarchs*, xx.

¹⁷¹ Sherry Farrell Racette, “Sewing Ourselves Together: Clothing, Decorative Arts and the Expression of Metis and Half Breed Identity” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2004), 256-257.

¹⁷² *Report of the Minister of Agriculture of the Province of Manitoba for the Year 1880* (Montreal: Gazette Printing Company, 1881), 75.

encompassed the western edge of the West Reserve at the time), “Charles Grant” won prizes for a pair of “men’s moccasins” and two “bead work” entries. These financial prizes, along with Grant’s winnings for a “Stallion” and a “span heavy draught horses” at the South Dufferin event, and a “general purpose stallion” at the West Lynne event, would likely have been important financial contributions to the family’s household economy.¹⁷³

Kinship and Geographic Connections to, and Beyond, the West Reserve

Beyond the micro-geographical context of the West Reserve, the extended-family networks of the Metis living in that area stretched broadly to many locations across the Northwest and south into the United States. One such location was the Turtle Mountain region, bisected by the forty-ninth parallel. Turtle Mountain was a traditional wintering site, and the confluence of Anishinaabe and Metis Peoples there around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eventually resulted in them becoming known as the Turtle Mountain Band.¹⁷⁴ The interwoven kinship ties of the Turtle Mountain Band are exemplified at least in some part by Charles Bottineau’s family. Charles’ mother, Margaret Adhik Songab (‘Clear Sky Woman’), was a sister to Pembina Chippewa chief Muskomaquah (or Red Bear), a significant Pembina Chippewa leader.¹⁷⁵ Songab became known as “the mother of Pierre Bottineau and the matriarch of a large extended family of mixed-blood children who became ‘Metis,’ both Grants and Bottineaus.”¹⁷⁶

Charles Bottineau himself became involved in advocating for the Turtle Mountain Band to the United States Government, acting as a counselor for Turtle Mountain Chiefs Little Shell II and Little Shell III,¹⁷⁷ and evidently passing this fervour on to subsequent generations. His

¹⁷³ *Report of the Minister of Agriculture of the Province of Manitoba*, 64, 73, 75.

¹⁷⁴ Keith Richotte, Jr., “We the Indians of the Turtle Mountain Reservation...,” 51-52.

¹⁷⁵ Morin, *Country Wives*, III, 1; Ramaker, “Gichi Bizhiki,” 241.

¹⁷⁶ Ruth Swan, “The Crucible: Pembina and the Origins of the Red River Valley Metis” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2003), 184.

¹⁷⁷ Barkwell, “Charles ‘Sharlo’ Bottineau Jr.,” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2013; North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, *The History and Culture of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa*, 55.

nephew, Jean Baptiste Bottineau, reported that Charles' last words to him were, "I leave you, my nephew, to prosecute our undertaking for our own kinsmen's sake, Anhwah-mezin."¹⁷⁸ Jean Baptiste's daughter, Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin, "became Washington College of Law's first Native American (Metis) student to graduate."¹⁷⁹ Further thickening the familial ties among the Metis families living in the West Reserve, Marie Louise's mother (and Jean Baptiste's wife) Marie Rainville/Renville, was a sister to Genevieve Octavia Rainville, whose children – Eliza/Elise (Alexandre St. Arnaud's wife), George, Frederick, and Charles – all appeared to live in Township 1 Range 6 West by the turn of the century.

Beyond Turtle Mountain, an analysis of the birthplaces, baptism locations, and various movements associated with the Metis families of the West Reserve further illuminates the reserve's place and position as land that was part of a broader Indigenous homeland. The most common locales associated with these families were Pembina, St. Joseph, and St. Francois Xavier, but others included parishes in Red River, the eventual province of Saskatchewan, and the Mackenzie River region further north. Although such locations are important in understanding the West Reserve Metis families, so too is the frequent movement between them. Indeed, the danger in overemphasizing geographic space and locality in Metis history is that the crucial feature of kinship networks can be lost.¹⁸⁰ As Ste-Onge and Carolyn Podruchny argue, such mobility reflects the fact that the Metis likely "had a distinct view of the world as a vast, mobile and interconnected territory," and were "rooted to a mode of life that happened to be

¹⁷⁸ John B. Bottineau, *Revised Letter of November 4, 1910 from John B. Bottineau, Solicitor, 212 A Street Northeast, Washington, D.C., to Mr. Kanick, Chief, et al, Members of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians in the State of North Dakota* (Minneapolis: The Leader Printing Company, 1910), 4.

¹⁷⁹ Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin (1863-1952)," Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2014.

¹⁸⁰ Brenda Macdougall and Nicole St-Onge, "Rooted in Mobility: Metis Buffalo-Hunting Brigades," *Manitoba History* 71 (2013): 21–32.

mobile.”¹⁸¹ Nodal settlements then, while significant as fixed geographic economic and social centres, are also even more crucially important to consider for the mobility-based “webs of kinship that ran through them.”¹⁸²

In the case of the Grant-Gladu family, Charles Grant was born in St. Francois Xavier and all of their children were born in either St. Francois Xavier or Pembina.¹⁸³ The family was enumerated in Pembina County, Dakota Territory in the 1870 United States census¹⁸⁴ and seem to have engaged in a fair amount of cross-border travel, as Charles’ scrip application for their deceased son Bernard stated in 1885 that they moved “back” to Manitoba (to Township 1, Range 5 West) in 1860, where they were living as of 1870, and up to at least 1885.¹⁸⁵

Euphrosine’s niece Louise Gladu was also connected to St. Francois Xavier – her own scrip declaration states that she was born there, though her mother’s scrip declaration states that Louise was born “at the end of Souris River” and baptised at St. Francois Xavier.¹⁸⁶ After Louise and Michel Dease (who was born in St. Boniface) were married, their family moved to several different locations, including St. Joseph for one year, the “Buffalo Lake” area in Manitoba for five or six years, Cypress Hills for seven years, Wood Mountain for two years, Turtle Mountain for one year, and then back to St. Joseph.¹⁸⁷ Louise’ mother, Madeleine Poitras, was also

¹⁸¹ Nicole St-Onge and Carolyn Podruchny, “Scuttling Along a Spider’s Web: Mobility and Kinship in Metis Ethnogenesis,” in *Contours of a People: Metis Family, Mobility, and History*, ed. Nicole St-Onge et al. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 62.

¹⁸² St-Onge and Podruchny, “Scuttling Along,” 82.

¹⁸³ Morin, *Métis Families I*, 464; Barkwell, “Grant, Charles.”

¹⁸⁴ “Dakota Territory, 1870 Federal Census: Population Schedules,” “Dakota, Nebraska, United States Records,” Images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-DRZ3-6W2?view=explore>), Image 159 of 395; United States. National Archives and Records Administration, Image Group Number: 004263342.

¹⁸⁵ “Declaration Re Claim of Heirs of Bernard Grant to Participate in Supplementary HB Grant. Application on File,” Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁸⁶ “Madeline Gladu, nee Poitras, Oak Lake, Asks for Issue of Scrip,” RG15-D-II-1, Volume Number: 517, 1886-1895, Microfilm Reel Number: T-13193, File Number: 147454, Library and Archives Canada, https://www.metisnationdatabase.ca/show.php?seq_no=19266&rec_type=01&source=Northwest%20Scrip.

¹⁸⁷ “Statutory Declaration Re His Claim to Participate in Supplementary HB Grant. Application on File,” Library and Archives Canada.

baptized at St. Francois Xavier, having been born at the confluence of the Souris and Assiniboine Rivers in 1815. From there she moved to several places with her parents, Antoine Gladu and Marguerite Grant (Marguerite was Cuthbert's sister and Charles' aunt). According to Madeleine, her family was first at St. Francois Xavier, after which she left "for the plains" with her husband after marrying. From there they returned to St. Francois Xavier with Madeleine spending some time at Wood Mountain before eventually moving to Griswold, Manitoba where she was living in 1886. Her husband had died around two decades earlier.¹⁸⁸

Some other families were connected both to St. Francois Xavier and places further west. Etienne Morin, for example, was born in St. Boniface while his wife, Annie Pruden, was born at Fort Carlton, Saskatchewan in 1866¹⁸⁹ (though by 1870 she and her family were listed in the Red River census in the parish of St. James).¹⁹⁰ All of Etienne and Annie's children were born at St. Francois Xavier.¹⁹¹ Similarly, Jean-Baptiste Laderoute was born in Red River at St. Vital while his wife, Marguerite St. Arnaud, was born even further north in the Mackenzie River area.¹⁹² Most of their children were born in St. Boniface¹⁹³ but the family's move to Olga in 1885 – with some subsequent time living at their property in the West Reserve – meant that several of their children and their families settled in North Dakota, with others later moving to locations in Canada, including Saskatchewan.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁸ "Madeline Gladu, nee Poitras, Oak Lake, Asks for Issue of Scrip," Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁸⁹ Morin, *Métis Families*, II, 837.

¹⁹⁰ "Census of Manitoba, 1870," St. James, 303, MG 9 E3 Manitoba Census Returns, Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁹¹ Morin, *Métis Families*, II, 837.

¹⁹² Perron, Marie-Louise, "Les familles Perron, Ladèroute et Marion: La période 1827-1927" in *L'Ouest canadien et l'Amérique française: Les actes du huitième colloque du Centre d'études franco-canadiennes de l'Ouest tenu au Centre d'études bilingues, Université de Regina, les 21 et 22 octobre 1988* (Regina, 1990), 169-197; Sherry Farrell Racette, "The Little Traveller," *Remai Modern*, November 9, 2022, <https://remainmodern.org/art-artists/art-artists-all/sherry-farrell-racette-the-little-traveller/>; Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Jean-Baptiste Laderoute (1837-1915)."

¹⁹³ Morin, *Métis Families*, I, 587.

¹⁹⁴ Olga Centennial Book Committee, *History of Olga, North Dakota and Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church, 1882-1982* (Grafton: Associated Printers, 1981), 154-155.

As for Alexandre and Elise St. Arnaud, Alexandre's father Alexandre was born in the Mackenzie River area, while his mother Philomene Ladoceur was born in St. Vital.¹⁹⁵ Both of Elise's parents were born in Red River – her father Charles St. Arnaud at St. Boniface, and her mother Genevieve Octavia Renville at St. Norbert – while both Alexandre and Elise were baptized at Pembina.¹⁹⁶ Elise's childhood apparently included a fair amount of movement through the Northwest, as her 1902 scrip document states that she was born at Fort Pelly, with Alex L'Esperance's affidavit of support stating that the family “went to Edmonton before the transfer to trade,” staying there “to my knowledge about eight years.”¹⁹⁷ L'Esperance remarked that he also saw the St. Arnaud family at Duck Lake between 1875 and 1877.¹⁹⁸

Along with Elise's St. Arnaud family, the family of Charles Henry White and Josephte Lecuyer spent considerable time in various places throughout the Northwest. In 1902 Charles stated that he was born in the United States between Winnipeg and Minneapolis, and was married to Josephte at Pembina,¹⁹⁹ after which they left for the “Canadian west,” where Charles “traded and freighted,” including “freight[ing] for the Indian treaties.”²⁰⁰ Charles also recalled that, “During the rebellion,” he was “in the vicinity of the South Branch of the Saskatchewan” River, and wintered at Round Prairie for three years, all of which corresponds to his memory of

¹⁹⁵ Morin, *Métis Families*, II, 1123.

¹⁹⁶ Morin, *Métis Families*, II, 1123.

¹⁹⁷ “St. Arnaud, Elise; address: Morden (near Sec. 13, Tp. 1; Rge. 6 W.); born: 25 May, 1876 at Pelly; father: Charles St. Arnaud (Métis); mother: Geneviève Rainville (Métis); married: 1896 to Alexis St. Arnaud at Morden; file ref. 805415; claim no. 1982,” Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁹⁸ “St. Arnaud, Elise; address: Morden (near Sec. 13, Tp. 1; Rge. 6 W.); born: 25 May, 1876 at Pelly; father: Charles St. Arnaud (Métis); mother: Geneviève Rainville (Métis); married: 1896 to Alexis St. Arnaud at Morden; file ref. 805415; claim no. 1982,” Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁹⁹ “White, Josephte; for her deceased son, Samuel White; address: Morden; born: 1 March, 1872 at Duck Lake; died: June, 1872 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Leblanc) (Métis); mother: Josephte Lecuyer (Métis); claim no. 1902,” 1885-1906, RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1371, Microfilm Reel Number: C-15009, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁰⁰ “White, Josephte; for her deceased son, Samuel White; address: Morden; born: 1 March, 1872 at Duck Lake; died: June, 1872 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Leblanc) (Métis); mother: Josephte Lecuyer (Métis); claim no. 1902,” Library and Archives Canada.

several of their children's birthplaces: while their first child, Samuel, was born at Pembina, Elzear was born at Duck Lake, William "on the trail to Battleford," Philomene "between Duck Lake and Carlton," Johnny also "on the trail to Battleford," Amos "near Lake Qu'Appelle," and Mary Jane "north of Duck Lake,"²⁰¹ though both the 1891 and 1901 Canadian census listed the children as having been born in the United States.²⁰² Writing in support of White's scrip application, E.P Blondin recalled seeing the family in 1884 "at Rock Lake," west of Duck Lake, where they were "among a lot of Halfbreeds who had taken up land and put up shacks there."²⁰³ According to Josephte's scrip documents, they arrived in the Morden area around 1890, having been at Mountain City for two years prior to that, after returning to Manitoba from the Duck Lake area.²⁰⁴ One of their daughters, Philomene, remembered also living in Langdon, North Dakota, during the late 1880s, during which time she was married to Andrew Vivier at St Eustache, and later living at High Bluff before moving to Winnipeg as of 1902.²⁰⁵

Another one of Charles Henry and Josephte's sons, Elzear, stated that he was married to Pauline Dubois at Duck Lake²⁰⁶ and that they were in the Morden area by the 1890s²⁰⁷ before

²⁰¹ "White, Josephte; for her deceased son, Samuel White; address: Morden; born: 1 March, 1872 at Duck Lake; died: June, 1872 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Leblanc) (Métis); mother: Josephte Lecuyer (Métis); claim no. 1902," Library and Archives Canada.

²⁰² "Census of Canada, 1891," Selkirk, Dufferin South, 2-13, RG31 - Statistics Canada, 2-3, Microfilm Reel Number T-6295, Library and Archives Canada; "Census of Canada, 1901," Manitoba, Lisgar, Stanley, Morden (Village), 13, RG31 - Statistics Canada, Microfilm Reel Number T-6432, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁰³ "White, Josephte; for her deceased son, Samuel White; address: Morden; born: 1 March, 1872 at Duck Lake; died: June, 1872 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Leblanc) (Métis); mother: Josephte Lecuyer (Métis); claim no. 1902," Library and Archives Canada.

²⁰⁴ "White, Josephte; for her deceased son, Samuel White; address: Morden; born: 1 March, 1872 at Duck Lake; died: June, 1872 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Leblanc) (Métis); mother: Josephte Lecuyer (Métis); claim no. 1902," Library and Archives Canada.

²⁰⁵ "Vivier, Philoméne May; address: Winnipeg; born: 15 August, 1881 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Métis); mother: Josephte or Suzette Lecuyer; (Métis); married: 1896 at St. Eustache to Andrew Vivie; claim no. 1794," 1885-1906, RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1370, Microfilm Reel Number: C-15009, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁰⁶ "White, Elzear; address: Morden; born: 15 July, 1874 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Métis); mother: Josephte Lecuyer (Métis); married: 1896 at Duck Lake to Pauline Dubois; claim no. 1862," 1885-1906, RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1371, Microfilm Reel Number: C-15009, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁰⁷ "White, Elzear; address: Morden; born: 15 July, 1874 at Duck Lake; father: Charles White (Métis); mother: Josephte Lecuyer (Métis); married: 1896 at Duck Lake to Pauline Dubois; claim no. 1862."

Elzear put an entry in on his quarter section in the West Reserve. Piecing together the information in the Dubois families' scrip documents shows that Pauline was a daughter of Eugene Martial Dubois and Betsy (Elizabeth) George. Eugene and Betsy were married at St. Boniface around 1869-1870,²⁰⁸ departing west the following year, where they lived for seven years,²⁰⁹ and where several of their children were born (Pauline's scrip document indicates she was born at Qu'Appelle and baptized at St. Boniface).²¹⁰ Upon their return, Eugene stated that the family lived at St. Vital and then the Carman area, before returning west to Qu'Appelle and finally journeying back to St. Claude, Manitoba.²¹¹ In 1902, Pauline – then married to Elzear White – recalled living at St. Claude and St. Daniel,²¹² before moving to the Morden area where she and Elzear eventually lived on their quarter section in the West Reserve.

Another way to understand the West Reserve Metis' connection to the land they homesteaded on is further illuminated by the fact that several members of these homesteaders' extended families were signatories to the 1878 petition for a Metis land reserve initiated by the "Half-Breeds living in the Vicinity of Cypress Hills." Addressed to the Privy Council of the Northwest Territories, the petition contained two key requests. The first was the re-opening of the bison hunt to allow Metis hunting from November 15 to February 14, as the hunt had been

²⁰⁸ "Dubois, William; address: St. Claud, Manitoba; claim no. 1945; born: May, 1880 at Qu'Appelle; father: Eugene Martial Dubois (Métis); mother: Elizabeth George (Métis)," 1885-1906, RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1345, Microfilm Reel Number: C-14966, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁰⁹ "Dubois, William; address: St. Claud, Manitoba; claim no. 1945; born: May, 1880 at Qu'Appelle; father: Eugene Martial Dubois (Métis); mother: Elizabeth George (Métis)," Library and Archives Canada.

²¹⁰ White, Pauline; address: Morden, Manitoba; born: 1 February, 1876 at St. Boniface; father: Eugene Martial Dubois (Métis); mother: Betsy George (Métis); married: 1894 at Duck Lake to Elzear White; file ref. 965364; claim no. 1890," 1885, 1906, RG15-D-II-8-c, Volume Number: 1371, Microfilm Reel Number: C-15009, Library and Archives Canada.

²¹¹ White, Pauline; address: Morden, Manitoba; born: 1 February, 1876 at St. Boniface; father: Eugene Martial Dubois (Métis); mother: Betsy George (Métis); married: 1894 at Duck Lake to Elzear White; file ref. 965364; claim no. 1890," Library and Archives Canada.

²¹² White, Pauline; address: Morden, Manitoba; born: 1 February, 1876 at St. Boniface; father: Eugene Martial Dubois (Métis); mother: Betsy George (Métis); married: 1894 at Duck Lake to Elzear White; file ref. 965364; claim no. 1890," Library and Archives Canada.

regulated and closed to the Metis for this time by the Council's 1877 "Ordinance for the Protection of the Buffalo."²¹³ The second request was for "a section of land for a special reserve, perpetual and inalienable, upon which they can establish themselves and their families in a permanent manner."²¹⁴ The requested parcel was approximately 150 miles long and fifty miles wide along the international border beginning where the Pembina River crossed into the United States, and as Joseph Wiebe has pointed out, the block of land included a portion of the West Reserve. Indeed, its eastern extent near the Pembina River encompassed a small piece of the reserve's southwest portion, not far from where Charles and Euphrosine Grant's homestead was, and where the other West Reserve Metis families would homestead.

The petition's list of signatories included people with ties to St. Francois Xavier, St. Joseph, and the Qu'Appelle Valley, and from other communities including those on the Saskatchewan River and St. Albert.²¹⁵ It also included family members of those Metis who lived near the West Reserve around the time of Mennonite arrival, and also some of those who owned land in its southwest corner. For example, three of Charles Bottineau's granddaughters – Josephite, Angelique, and Marie, born to Joseph Bottineau and Angelique Cardinal – married three Ouellette brothers, Francois, Antoine, and Isadore,²¹⁶ of whom Antoine signed the 1878 petition.²¹⁷ A similar connection is evident in Michel Dease's family, as Michel's sister, Helene Dease, married Patrice Breland, another petitioner (Patrice was born to Pascal Breland and Maria

²¹³ Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 103.

²¹⁴ "Petition from Half-Breeds Living in the Vicinity of Cypress Hills, Received through the North-West Council, Not Dated, Covering Letter from the Lieut-Governor of the North-West Territories, Dated 30th Sept., 1878," *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada: Volume 12, Fourth Session of the Fifth Parliament, Session 1886*, No. 45, 10-12; Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Cypress Hills Métis Hunting Brigade Petition of 1878 for a Metis Reserve," Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2015, 12.

²¹⁵ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 104.

²¹⁶ Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 49.

²¹⁷ Barkwell, "Cypress Hills Métis," 68.

Grant at St. Francois Xavier in 1861).²¹⁸ Maria was a daughter of Cuthbert and Cuthbert's second wife, Marie Desmarais, and Pascal was a prominent Metis trader, leader, and eventual member of Manitoba's Legislative Assembly.²¹⁹ Further, Michel's wife, Lucie Gladu, had two brothers (Antoine, Jr. and Charles) who were also signatories.²²⁰ Euphrosine Gladu also had a brother, Antoine Gladu, Sr., who signed the petition.²²¹ Additionally, Pauline Dubois had two uncles who were signatories: Francois and Ambroise Dubois.²²²

As scholars of the Metis have argued, the Cypress Hills petition was a claim to land, sovereignty, identity, Indigenous rights, and "an ever-increasing sense of nationhood."²²³ As such, Mennonites arriving to the West Reserve in 1875 were arriving in lands to which the Metis were still asserting claims of sovereignty. And although the Metis families who homesteaded in Ranges 5 and 6 were doing so on land seen as marginal to Mennonite settlers (and to subsequent Mennonite histories of the West Reserve), this land was not marginal to those families. Rather it was still part of a broader homeland to which the Metis continually asserted their connection. And, as Wiebe notes, the government's refusal to grant the 1878 Cypress Hills petition comprised part of a "colonial context" in which "Mennonites were given land in the same place and time that Métis petitions and spontaneous demands for land were denied."²²⁴

The Cypress Hills petition was not the only instance in which the reality of the West Reserve as Metis land was made clear. Roughly six years earlier, the Metis of several Red River

²¹⁸ Barkwell, "Cypress Hills Métis," 23.

²¹⁹ Morin, *Métis Families*, I, 464; Lorraine Freeman and Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Pascal Breland," Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, n.d.

²²⁰ Barkwell, "Cypress Hills Métis," 47.

²²¹ Barkwell, "Cypress Hills Métis," 46.

²²² Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Dubois Family and the Cypress Hills Métis Hunting Band," Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2013, 1.

²²³ Racette, "Sewing Ourselves Together," 58; Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line*, 101; Troupe, *Putting Down Roots*, 102-103

²²⁴ Wiebe, "On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland," 113.

parishes held meetings to determine which lands they wished to have granted to them under the provisions of the 1870 *Manitoba Act*. These meetings, spurred by increasing immigration to Manitoba despite the yet-unresolved issue of lands for the Metis,²²⁵ resulted in the Metis publishing descriptions of the requested lands in the newspaper *Le Métis* in June 1871. Scholars have noted the relationship between these land demands and the eventual location of the East Reserve, with Gerhard Ens and Joe Sawchuk noting their geographic overlap, and Wiebe citing this in his description of the “colonial context” mentioned above.²²⁶

In the case of the area where the West Reserve would be located, however, no Metis reserve land was confirmed, with the region appearing as blank and unaccounted for in the maps showing the Metis land requests of 1871.²²⁷ This does not mean that the Metis did not *request* land in that area, but rather that the land requested there was not *included* in the final selection of lands made by Lieutenant Governor Adams George Archibald, who selected the Metis reserve lands with consideration to their requests published in *Le Métis*.²²⁸ In fact, when the French Metis of St. Francois Xavier, along with others living along the Assiniboine River west of St. Charles, met in May of 1871 under the leadership of Pascal Breland to determine their land request, their selection comprised an expansive swath of land extending from their two parishes along the Assiniboine River south to the international boundary. This included a narrow strip through what would become the western portion of the West Reserve, encompassing the approximate area where the homesteading Metis families would locate over the coming years.²²⁹

²²⁵ Ens, “The Manitoba Act, the Métis, and the Mennonites,” 5.

²²⁶ Gerhard Ens and Joe Sawchuk, *From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Metis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 144; Ens, “The Manitoba Act, the Métis, and the Mennonites,” 6; Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 113.

²²⁷ Ens and Sawchuk, *From New Peoples to New Nations*, 140; Ens, “The Manitoba Act, the Métis, and the Mennonites,” 6.

²²⁸ Ens, “The Manitoba Act, the Métis, and the Mennonites,” 5.

²²⁹ McCullough, “The Confrontations,” 8; see also Figure 19.

Not all of this land was included in Archibald's final selection as, in Ens and Sawchuk's words, "most parishes requested far more land than their populations warranted or the Manitoba Act provided for," although Wiebe notes that this must be read in light of the government's "preference for non-Indigenous settlers."²³⁰ Regardless, the size and location of their selected land made sense given how it spanned an area between the Assiniboine River and the international boundary, accounting for the longstanding border-crossing kinship ties that connected St. Francois Xavier, Pembina, and St. Joseph. The land also encompassed a cart-trail connection between St. Joseph (by then renamed Walhalla) and the parishes, in addition to communities like Ilet de Bois / Carman, St. Claude, and High Bluff.

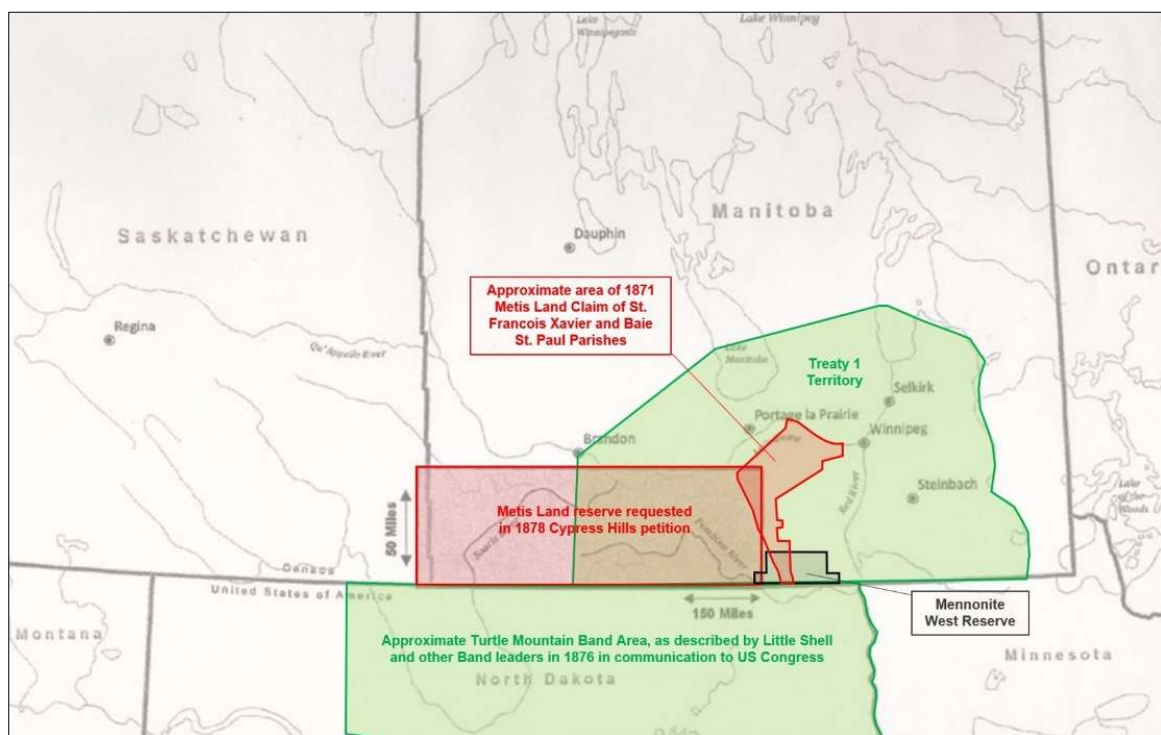


Figure 19: The West Reserve in an Indigenous-Land Context²³¹

²³⁰ Ens and Sawchuk, "From New Peoples to New Nations," 142; Wiebe, "On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland," 113.

²³¹ Base map created by Cameron Stewart and Jim Jerome and used in Lawrence Barkwell, "Cypress Hills Metis Hunting Brigade Petition of 1878 for a Metis Reserve," Louis Riel Institute, 2015; 1871 Metis land-claim area based on map by Alan B. McCullough, "The Confrontations at Rivière aux Îlets-de-Bois," *Manitoba History* 67 (2012): 8; Turtle Mountain Band's memorial to congress: *Chippewa Indians of Turtle Mountain, Dakota Territory, Praying for Segregation and Confirmation of Tract of their Land to them, and that Certain Provisions be made for their Protection*. 44th Congress, 1st Session, February 23, 1875. Senate Miscellaneous Document 63. Cited in Shaw, "In

At a more granular level, the metes-and-bounds description of the requested land published in *Le Métis* points to non-Mennonite socio-geographic understandings of the West Reserve region, through its use of placenames that, over decades of Mennonite occupation, largely fell out of local parlance. The use of these placenames potentially points to pre-Mennonite understandings of the region's creeks, their locations, and their social significance:

Une ligne parant d'un point sur rive sud de la rivière Assiniboine, correspondant à la limite est de la 4^{ème} division électorale, courant vers l'ouest jusqu'à l'endroit où la rivière aux Ormes sort de la Montagne de Pembina, puis longeant cette Motagne vers le sud jusqu'à la frontier Americaine, puis suivant cette frontier jusques vers l'extrémité hoisée de la coulee de la Point à Allard, de là se dirigeant irrégulièrement vers le nord, touchant à l'extrémité boisée de la rivière du Petit Pont; de la rivière Tabac, la reserve des métis de St. Charles, sur la rivière aux Islets de Bois, sur la rivière Sale, et suivant ensuite le chemin qui conduit de là à la rivière Assiniboine.²³²

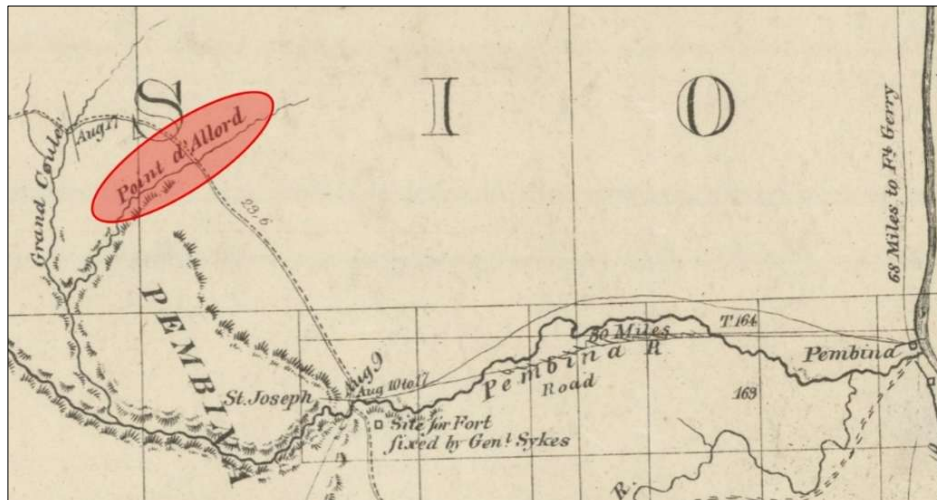


Figure 20: Excerpt from “Map of a Portion of Northern Dakota Reconnaissance of Brt Major W.J. Twining” 1869, with “Point d’Allard” highlighted.²³³

In particular, the “coulee de la Point à Allard,” or “D’Allard’s point” as one local history called it,²³⁴ appears to refer to a small, wooded coulee flowing down from the Pembina Hills through

Order that Justice May be Done,” 252-253. Though the boundaries shown are based on historical records, they do not fully or definitively represent the complex and longstanding ways in which various First Nations and Metis Peoples lived on, used, and moved within, the land of this region. They are shown here to illustrate, in a limited way, the fuller context of the West Reserve within, and as part of, Indigenous lands.

²³² “Reserves des Metis Francais Situés sur la Rivière-Rouge et Autres,” *Le Métis*, June 8, 1871.

²³³ Map of a Portion of Northern Dakota Reconnaissance of Brt. Major W.J. Twining.”

²³⁴ Brown, *The Brauns of Osterwick*, 110.

the plains toward the Red River. Though it is difficult to pinpoint where this feature would have been, one contemporary source places it in Township 1, Range 5 West,²³⁵ which roughly corresponds to an 1869 map showing “Point d’Allard” crossed by a cart trail to St. Joseph (Figure 20).²³⁶ “Allard’s Point” was also noted by John Palliser as a “clump of woods” along a creek that flowed northeast, which was “said to lose itself in an extensive marsh...”²³⁷

It is possible that this coulee may have been what is now known as the Plum River, as that waterbody today follows a similar course as the coulee noted in historical maps. Historically, though, the watercourses in this area may have been so multifarious and closely related that the Plum River could also have been understood by some people as a different (though geographically close) tributary. For example, less than a mile to the southeast from the Point d’Allard - cart-trail junction, along the same trail, was Charles Grant’s land where in 1885 he described himself and his family as living “in peace at Plum Creek Manitoba” in Township 1, Range 5 West.²³⁸ Similarly, Jean Baptiste Charette (husband of Angelique Petit and later Josephte Monet dite Belhumeur)²³⁹ stated that, as of 1885, he was “living on Plum River, about three miles across the line.”²⁴⁰ The 1885 scrip declaration of Charette’s daughter Adelaide (married to Cyrille Frederick) stated that she was also living at “Plum Creek in Manitoba” at this

²³⁵ Boundary Trail National Heritage Region, “A Guide.”

²³⁶ See Figure 20.

²³⁷ John Palliser, *The Journals, Detailed Reports, and Observations Relative to the Exploration, by Captain Palliser, of That Portion of British North America, Which in Latitude Lies Between the British Boundary Line and the Height of Land or Watershed of the Northern or Frozen Ocean Respectively, and in Longitude Between the Western Shore of Lake Superior and the Pacific Ocean During the Years 1857, 1858, 1859, and 1860* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1863), 41.

²³⁸ “Declaration Re Claim of Heirs of Bernard Grant to Participate in Supplementary HB Grant. Application on File,” Library and Archives Canada.

²³⁹ Lawrence J. Barkwell, “Charette, Jean-Baptiste,” Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2019, <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/149560.Charette,%20Jean%20Baptiste%20b.c.%201810.pdf>.

²⁴⁰ “Declaration in support of his claim to participate in NWHB grant. Application on File,” RG15-D-II-3, Volume Number: 181, Microfilm Reel Number: T-12024, File Number: HB 1512, Library and Archives Canada. The short distance noted from the boundary, paired with Charles Grant’s Plum Creek location in Township 1, Range 5 West, differentiates this Plum Creek from Souris, Manitoba, which is much farther northwest.

time, with a Walhalla post office address.²⁴¹ This would have placed the Charettes-Fredericks roughly in the same vicinity as the Grant-Gladu family, though it does not appear they ever owned land here.²⁴² Elsewhere, local research has identified the Plum River as existing “near the hills” around this time.²⁴³

Over subsequent decades, the Plum River has undergone various drainage projects altering its meandering route between the Pembina Hills and the Red River and speeding up water flow through the region (indeed, today it is also known as the Hespeler Drain).²⁴⁴ And although it was historically a relatively small watercourse within the expansive context of the low grasslands, it was not insignificant. Its mouth, flowing into the Red River where St. Jean Baptiste now sits, was the location of the short-lived Riviere Aux Prunes Metis settlement, where several families relocated from Red River parishes like St. Norbert during the early 1870s.²⁴⁵ Alexander Henry described the Plum River as beginning “in the Hair Hills in a marsh” just south of Calf Mountain (also called “Tête de Boeuf”), and running “down the hills and through the level meadows; there it has no wood on its banks, excepting at one place where a few stunted willows and chance elms grow. This spot is called [Loge des Boeufs or] Buffaloes’ Tent; it is situated halfway between the hills and Red River.”²⁴⁶ The noted location of “Loge des Boeufs” would not have been far from the important Buffalo Lake area discussed previously. Both of

²⁴¹ “Charette, Adélaide - Concerning her claim as a head of family - Address, Walhalla, Dakota Territory - Born, 1849 at Cypress Hills - Father, Baptiste Charette, (Métis) - Mother, Angélique Petit, (Métis) - Married, 1865 on Plains to Cyrille Frédéric - Children living, six (names on declaration) - Children deceased, one - Scrip for \$160 - Claim 1675,” RG15-D-II-8-b, Volume Number: 1326, Microfilm Reel Number: C-14937, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁴² According to Lawrence J. Barkwell’s research, two of Charette and Angelique Petit’s sons – Joseph and Jean – were signatories to the 1878 Cypress Hills petition. Barkwell, “Cypress Hills Métis,” 30-31.

²⁴³ Edwin D. Hoepfner, “The Early History of Burwalde,” *Heritage Posting* 45 (2004): 6.

²⁴⁴ Manitoba Provincial Waterways, “Provincial Waterways Lines,”

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?layers=236a9c5c7cdc43b6af93d92d4d7e3724>.

²⁴⁵ Diane Payment, *Native Society and Economy in Transition at The Forks, 1850-1900* (Ottawa: Environment Canada, Parks Service, 1988), 78; Centre du Patrimoine, “Saint-Jean-Baptiste,” 2000 (revised 2022), shsb.mb.ca/saint-jean-baptiste/.

²⁴⁶ Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, 68.

these locations – within the low central grasslands of the eventual West Reserve away from the wooded Pembina Hills – point to the ways in which the region’s small creeks produced a degree of social and geographic dynamism and activity, not only on the ‘fringes’ of Mennonite settlement to the west and east, but also in what would become its central heart of village settlement.

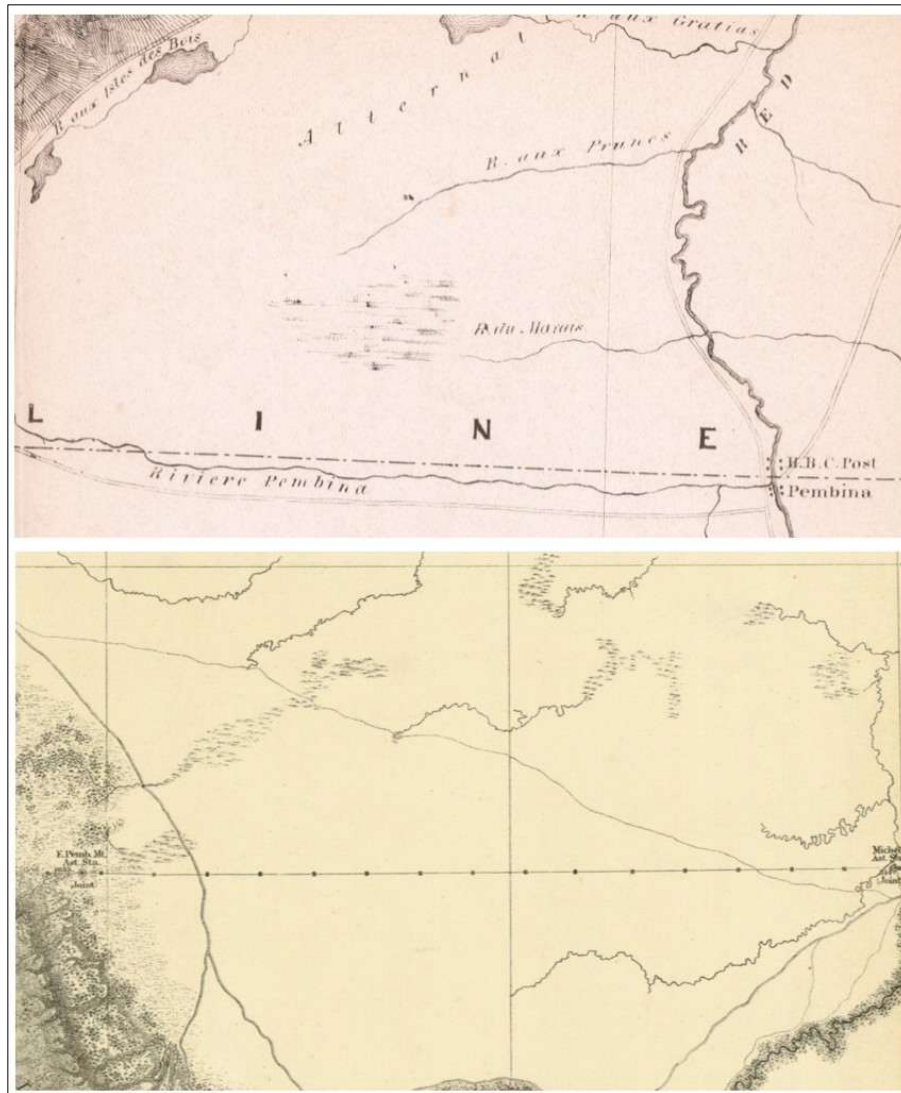


Figure 21: Plum River and other creeks. The top map excerpt (1859) shows an approximate path of “R. aux Prunes” as it empties into the Red River, beginning much further west than today. The bottom map excerpt (1873) shows the Point d’Allard - cart trail intersection to the west, showing it continue as a marshy seam toward several other creeks.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Top image from S.J. Dawson, “Plan Shewing The Region Explored By S.J. Dawson and His Party Between Fort William, Lake Superior and the Great Saskatchewan River From 1st of August 1857 to 1st November 1858 [and]

Conclusion

One thing not readily apparent in the sources I consulted is a sense of how the homesteading Metis families felt about the settlers, Mennonite and otherwise, around them. Likewise, it is difficult to discern how they might have felt about their place within a settler reserve, or their interactions with local government – in this case, the Rural Municipality of Stanley. Certainly the employment of some Metis men in municipal infrastructure work speaks to some interaction and familiarity with local government, as does the St. Arnauds' petition for a road-opening. Along similar lines, some families occasionally received financial relief from the R.M. In May of 1903, for example, Council granted fifty dollars to Alexandre St. Arnaud "to partially cover losses sustained by him from fire."²⁴⁸

It is possible, as David Parent has argued relative to the Manitoba Metis community of Minnewaken, that this turn-of-the-century period was a brief "settler-colonial moment" in which West Reserve Metis homesteaders lived side-by-side with Euro-Canadian settlers and experienced municipal government as a "benign" or occasionally beneficial presence.²⁴⁹ But as Allyson Stevenson argues, the brevity of this moment, halted as it was by the ascendancy of municipal governance, is a "little-known period in Métis history" that "requires additional research to account for the historically specific ways Métis re-established communities and then

Route by Road & Navigation for Connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans," in *Papers Relative to the Exploration of the Country Between Lake Superior and the Red River Settlement* (London: G.E. Eyre and W. Spottiswoode, 1859); bottom image from Twining, W.J. "Joint Map, United States Northern Boundary Commission," United States Northern Boundary Commission, 1878. University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Libraries: American Geographical Society Digital Map Collection, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agdm/id/32718>, based on survey work conducted in 1873 as described in Archibald Campbell and W.J. Twining, *Reports Upon the Survey of the Boundary Between the Territory of the Territory of the United States and the Possessions of Great Britain from the Lake of the Woods to the Summit of the Rocky Mountains, Authorized by an Act of Congress Approved March 19, 1872* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1878), 332-334.

²⁴⁸ Minute Book, Aug 1900 - Dec 1907," May 16, 1903, Rural Municipality of Stanley.

²⁴⁹ David Parent, "Governing Metis Indigeneity: The Settler-Colonial Dispossession and Regulation of the Metis in Mid-Twentieth Century Manitoba" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2021), 207.

faced further waves of dispossession throughout the twentieth century.”²⁵⁰ This is certainly the case for the homesteading Metis families of the West Reserve.

In terms of Metis feelings toward the Mennonites around them, this is even more foggy. Historical documents do indicate the existence of Mennonite-Metis interactions. The tenor and character of these interactions, however, is difficult to ascertain, though the Grant-Siemens land dispute may point to some dissatisfaction and “passive resistance:”²⁵¹ in December of 1880, “C.A. Grant” of Township 1, Range 5 West – likely Charles Albert – signed a petition to the Minister of the Interior from “settlers upon the Mennonite Reserve” who had been led to believe that they could settle there but could “not get entries for the land they have settled upon.” The petitioners asked that the land “be thrown open to settlement,” presumably meaning general settlement beyond its status as Mennonite reserve.²⁵² Although the document was otherwise signed by English settlers, Grant’s name indicates one possible instance of dissatisfaction with Mennonite settlement in the area, and an example of how “Mennonites received land Métis communities wanted.”²⁵³

This is of course one small example. In light of the overall sparsely documented interactions between Mennonites and Metis people in southern Manitoba, what does all of this Metis history matter to Mennonite West Reserve settlement? Firstly, it demonstrates how the rhetoric of impermanent squatting in West Reserve historiography has obscured the ways in which Metis families attempted to utilize homesteading as a way of remaining in the portion of their homeland near the reserve. Indeed, the repetition of this terminology over decades

²⁵⁰ Allyson Stevenson, “Writing Our People Back into History: A Year in the Life of John James Fidler,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (2024): 38.

²⁵¹ Luby, *Dammed*, 13.

²⁵² R.R. Mills to Minister of the Interior, December 14, 1880, RG15-D-II-1, Volume Number: 232, Microfilm Reel Number: T-12180, File Number: 3129, File Part: 1, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁵³ Wiebe, “On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland,” 113-114.

sanctioned and normalized this idea of impermanence. The temporal overlap between Mennonite and Metis presence within this micro-region complicates the common idea of settler arrival as instituting a new historical chapter or era, and thus a clean break from an earlier, less advanced Indigenous era. Secondly, the deep roots of these Metis families to West Reserve and West-Reserve adjacent land, in the context of their broader connections throughout the northern plains, throws into even sharper relief the extent to which Mennonite history-making has obscured and de-emphasized such connections. Finally, these “other histories”²⁵⁴ of the region reorient and recontextualize the West Reserve as not just a successful settler agricultural settlement block, but within the broader dispossession of a Metis homeland. In doing so, they show us, in finer-grained detail, how normalized settler agricultural space is also actually Indigenous space.

²⁵⁴ katherena vermette’s poem, “An Other Story” states, “this country has an other story...it is written in water, carved on earth...” katherena vermette, *River Woman* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Revisiting Jacob Toews' drainage-ditch discovery mentioned in the introductory chapter, it would be very easy to characterize the bison skull he found as providing a sort of mute testimony to a long-passed era, an era that had tragically yet necessarily given way to the arrival a new period of settlement and prosperity – or, as Jean M. O'Brien's has remarked, a "set[ting] in motion" of modernity that necessitated, however tragically, profound changes and even extinction.¹ Indeed, as I have demonstrated in the preceding pages, such narratives were present, both implicitly and sometimes more overtly, in Mennonite tellings of the West Reserve region's history. These tellings – themselves discursive, rhetorical, and yet meaningful acts – combined with the more materially tangible changes brought to the land through drainage and industrialized agriculture, rendering its status as Indigenous land almost illegible to settlers. However, as the previous chapters have also shown, these depictions did not reflect the full reality of the West Reserve as Indigenous land, nor the reality that Indigenous Peoples continued to be present therein various ways even long after the initial days of colonization and settlement.

As Mennonites in southern Manitoba, and the West Reserve specifically, began commemorating and contemplating their presence in the province by the 1920s, they did so in ways that considered their migration and historical ties to European Reformation and Anabaptist history, as well as the land and people of the prairie region of North America in which the West Reserve was situated. These narrations did not ignore the realities of the West Reserve as varied wet prairie or as an Indigenous homeland. Indeed, written accounts noted the early flooding experienced by some villages, and the existence of First Nations and Metis people there. But these accounts often described and depicted these historical instances and actors in ways that

¹ O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting*, 135.

emphasized the land's perceived deficiencies, and foregrounded the historical efforts undertaken by settlers to overcome, combat, and conquer those deficiencies. Often, these efforts were also tied to ideas of Canadian nation building and improvement, and highlighted Mennonite contributions to national progress.

However, the narrative of always-increasing national progress, uplift, and prosperity was an uneven experience, to put in mildly, for First Nations and Metis Peoples. The political, legal, social, and economic factors that resulted in the availability of a seemingly empty and unsettled block of land for Mennonites in the West Reserve were actually experiences of profound struggle for Indigenous Peoples of the region. Mennonite accounts of these historical factors were not unique among settler historical narrations in characterizing these factors as benign and unproblematic. Further, it was impossible for Mennonite settlers and later commemorators to ignore the reality of Indigenous presence in and around the West Reserve, though that reality was depicted in ways which emphasized the inevitability of Mennonite ascendancy and Indigenous marginalization.

Though certain narratives of the West Reserve's environmental characteristics and longstanding status as a homeland for many Indigenous Peoples were privileged in Mennonite histories and commemorations of the region, a closer reading of settler and archival sources reveals new insights, both in terms of Mennonite experiences of land and water, and of Mennonite-Indigenous interactions across time in the region. As Chapter 3 illustrates, for example, many of these other historical insights come from looking more closely at the region's creeks and wetlands – how they have been mapped and narrated, but also how they have been experienced at a more intimate day-to-day level by West Reserve residents. In a region often typified by flat, expansive, and monotonous fields of crops, these dynamic and hydrosocial creek

environments open up new ways of understanding Mennonite history in the region, beyond the settler narratives described above.

Importantly, these creeks were also well-known to First Nations and Metis people stretching back far before Mennonite arrival. Metis people in particular lived in the area alongside the expanding Mennonite farms and villages, even making efforts to homestead and farm as a way of remaining close to family and within their homeland, which encompassed the West Reserve. Though not mentioned in commemorative accounts, Indigenous hunting and trapping, and ongoing Indigenous-Mennonite interactions, continued throughout the twentieth century. Such interactions occurred not only informally along waterways, but also within Mennonite realms of beet farming and mission work, both understudied historical processes. Attending to the reserve's borderland context, its transborder hydrology, and to its history within a broader homeland for many Indigenous Peoples helps clarify later Indigenous presence and cross-cultural interactions in the region.

Though "Land, Water, and Memory" has demonstrated the continued use of and presence in the West Reserve and surrounding area beyond the arrival of Mennonites and in spite of historical narratives that obscure that presence, this dissertation necessarily also carries certain limits, and points to further possibilities for research. Chapter 5's discussion of Metis landowners in the West Reserve stands as one example. On one hand it points to elements of the region's history, and to historical actors, that have not typically appeared in settler accounts of the region (from both local amateur historians, and professional academic ones). As such, we might say that it contributes to an analysis of the past that "is more cognizant of complex, on-the-ground realities that marked historical interrelations between settler and indigenous societies," and

fosters historical interpretations “less celebratory of the nation-state and its past.”² Further, the relatively scant literature on Metis families who homesteaded in the early twentieth century indicates that there is still much work to be done on the topic. Indeed, scholars of Metis history such as Hogue have argued for studies that expand beyond a “truncated view of Métis history that ends abruptly in the late 19th century.”³ I have attempted to contribute to such an expansion.

However, in addition to research that complicates “the historical eras emphasized in official commemorative contexts,” Andersen argues that what are also needed are “histories that do not presuppose the legitimacy of the contexts which official histories commemorate.” My analysis of the West Reserve Metis’ geographic and familial connections aims to destabilize and problematize such presuppositions. As a settler scholar researching the racialized and colonial perspectives of written state and settler records, however, I recognize that this can only contribute so much, and will necessarily not provide the deeper, kin-based “vernacular social history of Métis life” that Andersen calls for.⁴ Further following Andersen, there is a “density” to interdisciplinary Indigenous scholarship that can encompass both Indigenous and Western epistemologies, something that I, as a settler scholar not centrally located in the field of Indigenous Studies, am unable to address within the scope of this dissertation.

Another avenue for potential further research is one that could deepen and provide more localized understandings of settler colonialism, namely a more comprehensive analysis of local histories and commemoration on the prairies. Scholars such as Swyripa and more recently Rozum have both engaged with these types of sources, but the sheer overwhelming number of locally-produced-and-published historical and commemorative materials across the prairies – in

² Chris Andersen, “More than the Sum of Our Rebellions: Métis Histories beyond Batoche,” *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 4 (2014): 620.

³ Hogue, “Still Hiding in Plain Sight?,” 1.

⁴ Andersen, “More than the Sum of Our Rebellions,” 627.

addition to their varying degrees of accessibility and quality – means that they remain an understudied element of prairie settler colonialism. However complicated and complex such an undertaking might be, it would continue the effort which I have tried to further here, namely the ways in which local-level, everyday occurrences, processes, and commemoration comprise strands in the wider fabric of settler colonialism at a broader national level in Canada.

This connection between seemingly small, local historical phenomena on one hand and seemingly larger, more significant national-level issues on the other, speaks to the contemporary urgency of historical study generally, and particularly historical study in Canada that is engaged in questions of colonialism and Indigenous-settler relations. Given this connection, it is somewhat curious that, anecdotally at least, much (though not all) of the Mennonite research and writing on settler colonialism and Mennonites in Manitoba is being done in fields other than history, for example in peace and conflict studies, theology, and ethics. Though this speaks to the benefits and richness of interdisciplinary views of history, it also indicates that there is still plenty of work to be done by Mennonite scholars working more directly within the field of History. As Mennonite writer, farmer, and activist Will Braun remarked in introducing Swan Lake First Nation Elder David Scott at a 2024 event on the early Mennonite-Ojibwe interactions mentioned in Chapter 4, “David Scott knows things about Mennonite history that no Mennonite historians do.”⁵ Further, given Mennonite history’s proximity to and relationship with immigration history, there remains room to broaden Canadian and Mennonite historical interpretations that have positioned “ethnic ‘pioneers’” – themselves having “often occupied

⁵ Will Braun, “Introduction to Keynote Speaker,” Presentation, Subjects, Settlers, Citizens: The 1870s Mennonites in Historical Context, University of Winnipeg, October 5, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZM3BZTQoKeA&list=PLI9kssXGKUUnSVyrMAH_-UPaYuaJXuGyJ_&index=5.

marginal positions in Canadian society” – as “latecomers or innocent bystanders in Indigenous displacement.”⁶

The contemporary urgency of these historical issues is further reflected in the many local initiatives and relationship-building projects between Mennonite and Indigenous communities on the prairies occurring far outside the walls of postsecondary institutions. Close to my hometown, one recent initiative has been the “Secret Treaty” project, which resulted in several informal tours of significant Indigenous sites in the former Mennonite reserve, the collaborative publication of a short comic book based on this story, and numerous subsequent speaking and sharing events in the region.⁷ Such community-based projects are also historical undertakings – they describe, narrate, even commemorate the region’s history in deeper and more complex ways than did the settler commemorations of decades past. Projects like this also demonstrate the potential of cross-cultural and relationally based historical work that is embedded in local settler and Indigenous communities, and throws into stark relief the limits of, say, doctoral postsecondary work based largely on archival research (important though such research may be).

However, both academic and community work aimed at engaging these historical issues are important in their focus on the lands and places today occupied by settlers, which are still part of overlapping and complex Indigenous homelands. In today’s Canadian context, the nation’s colonial past and present have become increasingly prominent in the public eye, especially in discussions around the Indian Residential School system,⁸ the abuses and legacies of the child apprehension in the Sixties Scoop,⁹ and the finding of soil anomalies and potential

⁶ Bertram, “‘Eskimo’ Immigrants and Colonial Soldiers,” 66-67.

⁷ Scott and Dyck, *The Secret Treaty*; Abby Wall, “Bringing Oral History to Life: The Secret Treaty Tour and Book Launch,” *Pembina Valley Online*, June 29, 2024, <https://www.pembinavalleyonline.com/articles/bringing-oral-history-to-life-the-secret-treaty-tour-and-book-launch>; Greg Vandermeulen, “Ojibwa Oral Tradition Explores Mennonite History,” *The Carillon*, November 27, 2024.

⁸ Milloy, “*A National Crime*.”

⁹ Stevenson, *Intimate Integration*.

unmarked graves at former residential school sites.¹⁰ All of these represent some of the most pressing issues in Canada, connected as they are to the nation's history, and as such, they require the careful attention of both scholars, community members, and the wider public.

Additionally, though, as "Land, Water, and Memory" argues, historical questions of land and place – in other words, who lives where, and why¹¹ – are of crucial importance, and indeed are also related to the many issues described above. Though the research presented in this dissertation is in many ways a microhistory of a small geographic region, it hopefully sheds some light on the connections between the small, rural, local places occupied by settler populations across the Canadian prairies, and larger-scale questions of Canadian history. This is not to discount the particularities of land and of place. Indeed, "place matters and place is always specific,"¹² an assertion that is particularly true in the West Reserve's particular environmental context of flat prairie and numerous creeks. Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize how large-scale sweeping histories of colonialism in Canada are connected to the very landscapes, villages, towns, and municipalities that settlers have lived in for generations. Interrogating the ways in which settler logics of land are discursively justified remains a crucial historical task.

¹⁰ Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair and Sean Carleton, "Residential School Denialism Is on the Rise: What to Know," *The Tyee*, June 20, 2023, <https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2023/06/20/Residential-School-Denialism-On-Rise/>; Sean Carleton and Adina Williams, "Taking Care of the Truth: A Call for Collaborative, Community-Engaged Residential School Research," *Active History*, July 30, 2025, <https://activehistory.ca/blog/2025/07/30/taking-care-of-the-truth-a-call-for-collaborative-community-engaged-residential-school-research/>.

¹¹ Joseph R. Wiebe, "Posture, Privilege, and Place: Mennonite Settlers and Métis in Manitoba," *Intotemak*, Spring 2017: 83.

¹² Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, "Relational Validity and the 'Where' of Inquiry: Place and Land in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 21, no. 7 (2015): 637.

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APPENDIX I

Sources Used in the Creation of Figure 5 and Figure 14 Maps

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APPENDIX II

Sample Interview Participant Consent Form



403 Fletcher Argue Building
15 Chancellor Circle
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T: 204 474 8401
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history@umanitoba.ca

Land, Water, and Memory: Mennonite Settlement and Indigenous Presence in Manitoba

Principal Investigator: Jonathan Hildebrand, PhD Student

Co-Advisors:

Dr. Adele Perry, Distinguished Professor, Department of History University of Manitoba
Dr. Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Winnipeg

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Description and Purpose of the Research

You have been invited to participate in a research study about the history of Mennonite relationships to water, land, settlement, and Indigenous cultures in southern Manitoba. With this project, I am particularly interested in how Mennonites related to the creeks and small waterways in the 'West Reserve' area, a region that is sometimes thought of as flat and dry, but which has always had waterways present. I also hope to investigate how the unique environmental qualities of West Reserve waterways, and the land around them, have shaped Mennonite settlement and identity. This includes questions around the experiences of living near water within a flat prairie region, farming within these environments, finding artifacts along creeks, and any interactions with Indigenous people that may have occurred near these waterways over the years.

Procedures Involved in the Research

The process will consist of an open-ended interview, at a mutually agreed-upon location that is familiar and comfortable for you. I will ask questions about your family background, history, and memories of growing up and living in the region, your experiences of living near creeks or water, and any stories or memories of collecting archaeological artifacts. I anticipate that the interview will take one to two hours, depending on your availability. It may also be the case that further meetings will need to be scheduled, depending on your availability and willingness. With your

permission, I will digitally record the audio of our interview using a smartphone, or take notes. Immediately after the interview is completed, we will debrief so you can know the next steps in the process, and how the information will be used and put into the final report.

Interviews will be transcribed manually by myself. If you wish to review a copy of the transcript to review, I will provide you with a copy, and any comments or feedback can be sent to me within two weeks of receiving the transcript. If you do not respond by the deadline, I will assume that there are no comments.

Potential Benefits

Participation in the study will help broaden our understanding of both Mennonite history and the history of settlement on the prairies. I believe the project's focus on water, the environment, and cross-cultural interactions will shed different light on these topics, particularly in the West Reserve region where creeks and waterways have not typically been a focus of historical study.

Potential Risks

It is unlikely that any harm or discomfort will result from this study. There are no anticipated risks to this study beyond normal everyday risk. Should you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions posed during the interview, you may skip over the question, or stop the interview. If you wish, I can provide you with a list of local counselors or mental health professionals, for your convenience.

Confidentiality

I can ensure that written and recorded information from the interview will be kept private, available only to my advisors and me. All recorded interviews will be stored on my password-protected computer and backup hard drive, and on OneDrive, the University of Manitoba's secure cloud storage system.

Your interview responses and demographic information will be used only for research purposes. If you wish, you can have any identifying information removed from the interview transcripts. Also, if you wish, I will use pseudonyms, or a general descriptor (e.g. "a local resident"), in my report, to protect your identity.

All the information you provide as part of this study will be kept strictly confidential and stored on a UM approved platform. The identification key and contact information of those involved in the study will be kept in a separate password-protected file from the research data unless you have agreed to have your identity be associated with your research data. Members of the research team will have access to the information that will be collected. The research data may be kept indefinitely, however your identifiable information (i.e., name, email) will be destroyed by 2028 if you have not consented to your research data being associated with your name.

Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time, without negative consequences. Should you choose, simply contact me in person, by email,

or telephone, by September 2024 and all related information will be destroyed or deleted, and alternative participants recruited. While your participation will provide welcome information, this study is not dependant on your particular participation. You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

Information About the Research Results

A short summary of the study's results will be emailed to you approximately around September 2024. At that time, we can schedule a follow-up meeting, if you wish, to discuss the summary and answer any questions you may have. If you would like, I can also send you a PDF copy of the full final report of the study's results upon completion of the dissertation document (approximately September 2025). Results of my research will be disseminated through my doctoral dissertation, and possibly academic articles, conference presentations, and a book. All confidential data will be destroyed (either electronically deleted or shredded) three years after the oral defense of my dissertation (approximately September 2028).

Questions About this Study

If you have any questions or require more information about the study, please contact me, Jonathan Hildebrand, by telephone or email. All research conducted over the course of my PhD program is in affiliation with the University of Manitoba.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Officer at 204-474-7122 or HumanEthics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

1. I agree that the interview can be documented by way of digital recording or by note-taking.

_____ YES

_____ NO

2. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview and understand that I can always decline the request.

_____ YES

_____ NO

3. Would you like anyone else, such as a relative, to be present for the interview?

_____ YES

_____ NO

4. Would you like to review a transcript of your interview?

_____ YES

_____ NO

If yes, please indicated preference:

Email a PDF to this email address:

Mail a hard copy to this address:

5. Would you like to receive a summary of the study's findings?

_____ YES

_____ NO

If yes, please indicated preference:

Email a PDF to this email address:

Mail a hard copy to this address:

6. Would you like to schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss the summary of the findings?

_____ YES

_____ NO

7. Would you like to receive a PDF copy of the final dissertation document, once completed?

_____ YES

_____ NO

If yes, please send to this email address: _____.

8. Please use a pseudonym when referring to me in your report.

_____ YES. Please refer to me as _____.

_____ NO, I prefer to be identified. Please refer to me as _____.

9. Please use a general descriptor (e.g. “one resident,” or “one local farmer”) when referring to me in your report.

_____ YES

_____ NO

Participant’s signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher: _____ Date: _____