

AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA

TO 1899.

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FOREWORD.

The effect of climate and soil upon the people, who, from time to time throughout the past three centuries, have come to and inhabited the Southwestern Plains of Manitoba, has provided an interesting subject of study.

The task of gathering information for the pages which follow has been an interesting, even enjoyable one. The writer made many new friends during his search for material, and will always remember with gratitude the kindness with which they received him into their homes and the eager readiness with which they made available to him the old records and personal diaries they possessed.

It is possible to acknowledge the assistance of only a comparatively few of the many who contributed to the development of this study.

The writer wishes particularly to thank Professor W.L.Morton, of the University of Manitoba, for the suggestion that the history of Southwestern Manitoba would provide a proper topic for a thesis. Not only did he make the suggestion, but by his constant supervision and his patient encouragement, he lightened considerably the work involved in preparing this study.

Material for the pre-settlement period of the history was taken mostly from the journals and contemporary histories kept in the Provincial Library and in the Public Archives of Manitoba. To J.A.Jackson, Provincial Archivist, J.L.Johnston, Provincial Librarian, and Ray Wright, the Assistant Librarian, the writer

wishes to express his thanks for the cheerful way they assisted him to find his way through the maze of material contained in the Archives and in the files of the Library.

Among those in Southwestern Manitoba who assisted the writer, he is especially grateful to Mrs. Una Phillips, of the Boissevain Recorder. Mrs. Phillips very kindly allowed him to use "The Old Timer's Book," a collection of facts obtained directly from the first settlers in the Boissevain district by W.V.Udall, publisher of the Recorder.

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The generous hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Ramsey, of Waskada, made it possible for the writer to spend some weeks gathering information in the area. Fred supplied his car and his services as chauffeur, and drove many miles, refusing any remuneration for his time and trouble.

John Spence's Memorandum of Events from 1882 is a thorough record of the developments of the pioneer period. Often, when the writer was in doubt, he referred to this diary, and the matter was clarified. Everything is there, in matter-of-fact language, just as many excerpts from it appear in these pages. Crop conditions, grain prices, Patron meetings, election campaign

meetings, first arrivals of railway trains, prairie fires, land prices, wages, and other valuable informations, all appear in its pages. John Spence is now dead, and the diary is in the possession of Mr. H. Cheyne, of Waskada, to whom the writer is much indebted for allowing him access to it.

The work of typing this study was added to the many tasks involved in caring for a husband and a family of growing children. It entailed, more than once, the sacrifice of hours of well-earned sleep. For undertaking and completing it, the writer's wife deserves a reward far better than the writer, under his present financial circumstances, can offer her. If, however, continued love and devotion can repay her, not only for her typing, but for accepting for the past four years the sacrifices involved in being the wife of a student veteran, she may rest assured that she will have it.

"The buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and this became the traders 'trace'; the trails widened into roads and these in turn were transformed into railroads."

F.J.Turner, The Frontier in American History.
(Henry Holt & Co. N.Y. 1935.) p.14

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

"Probably no other section of the province is so rich in the romance of hope or so tragic in its disappointments as is Southwestern Manitoba."¹

The story of man's attempts to exploit the resources of the Southwestern plains of Manitoba can be divided into two fairly distinctive periods. The first period ends and the second begins with the disappearance of the buffalo, which coincides in time almost exactly with the arrival of the first agricultural immigrants. However, as in all history, a large part of the one period is taken up with developments which lead, almost inexorably, to the transformation which begins the next. Indeed, the supplanting of the hunting economy by an agricultural economy, which took place on the Souris plains in 1880, can be traced back, without too much difficulty, directly to Cartier's discovery in 1534 that "furs were to be had from the natives, and at the usual initial bargain prices, measured in trade goods."² The transfer of European civilization to the North American continent could, it seems, lead to only

1. J.H.Ellis and W.Shafer, Crop History and Crop Outlook in the Melita Area. p.3.

2. A.R.M.Lower, Colony to Nation, (Toronto, 1946.) p.8.

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one conclusion, namely, that every available piece of fertile ground would one day be cultivated, regardless of the obstacles which climate could, and did, place in the way.

This study of Southwestern Manitoba, therefore begins with an analysis of the climate and of the soil which was formed by the action of that climate upon the material left by the continental glacier, for the combination of the climate and the soil it produced has had a profound effect upon all the people who, in succession, came to the region to exploit its resources.

Little is known of the mound-builders, the first people to leave behind them concrete evidence of their stay in the vicinity of the Souris River.³ Fortunately, however, the way of life established by those who presumably replaced them, the Assiniboins, is fairly adequately portrayed in the journals of the fur-traders, who arrived in the Souris basin while it was still occupied by these Indians.⁴ La Verendrye, in 1738, was the first European known to cross the plains between Turtle Mountain and the Souris River. His observations of the Assiniboins make an important contribution to what is now known about them.⁵ David Thompson, who travelled in 1797 from the mouth of the Souris River, to locate the 49th parallel and the Missouri River, added his share to this knowledge,⁶ as did

³ see below, ch.3.pp.23, f.

⁴ see below, ch.3.pp.26, f.

⁵ see below, ch.3.pp.27, f.

⁶ see below, ch.3.p.31

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Alexander Henry, the younger, who followed Thompson's footsteps in 1806.⁷ Henry Kelsey, in 1690,⁸ came into contact with the Assiniboins in other localities. The journals of these, and of other traders, make it possible to include in this survey a fairly full account of the Assiniboins and the "buffalo economy" they established on the Souris and nearby plains.

The fur traders, besides leaving a clear account of the Assiniboins and their way of living, played an important part in paving the way for the agricultural economy which was to succeed them. David Thompson was sufficiently impressed with the region lying north of Turtle Mountain to make the prediction that some day it would be supporting an agricultural population.⁹ Alexander Henry the Younger, in a similar environment on the Saskatchewan River, could not resist the urge to try to make the fertile soil respond to cultivation.¹⁰ Henry also gave a clear warning of the hazard of periodic drought, a difficulty that agriculturalists would have to cope with in cultivating the Souris Plains, namely,

"It happens sometimes in this country in very dry seasons that water is only to be found in some particular creek or lake," he wrote. "When this is the case we provide ourselves with small kegs or bladders. But this often proves insufficient; some people have lost their lives on this account.... our thirst

⁷ see below, ch.4.p.44.

⁸ see below, ch.3.p. 26.

⁹ see below, ch.4.p. 46.

¹⁰ see below, ch.3.p. 45.

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is perpetual, and at every pool some of us stretch out on our bellies to drink."¹¹

The fur-traders did not experiment extensively with the soil, but they cultivated enough of it to draw the attention of the outside world ^{to} its fertility,¹² and in so doing they began a chain of reactions which made inevitable the agricultural exploitation of the Western Canadian Plains, including those of Southwestern Manitoba.

The immediate result of the fur-trader's gardening was the arrival, at Red River, of the first agricultural colonists to come to Manitoba, Lord Selkirk's settlers.¹³ Although they never came closer to Turtle Mountain than within at least 150 miles of it, they take their place in the history of the Southwestern Plains, for they created a British vested interest in Western Canada which led to its inclusion, in 1870, in the new Dominion of Canada.

Palliser from England, in 1857,¹⁴ and Hind, from Canada, in 1858,¹⁵ made the first organized investigations of the possibilities of the Souris Plains, and their conclusions, while not optimistic, form links in the chain of events which lead to their settlement. Then, in 1874, sixty years after Selkirk's settlers began to break the soil at Red River, the Mennonites arrived in Manitoba

11. Elliott Coues, New Light on the Early History of the Greater North West, (New York, 1897)p.307

12. see below, ch.4.pp. 47 f.

13 see below, ch.4.pp47 f.

14 see below, ch.4.pp. 52 f.

15 see below, ch.4.pp.54 f.

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and demonstrated to all that the soil of the open plains was just as fertile as that in the river valleys and on the wooded hills.¹⁶

About this time John Macoun came to the North-West, and his reports directed settlement to the Souris and Regina plains, regions which, he insisted, had been formerly mistakenly regarded as "sandy sterile wastes."¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, in 1880, homesteaders followed the Boundary Commission Trail to Turtle Mountain and chose land for their homes on its slopes and in the Souris River Valley.¹⁸

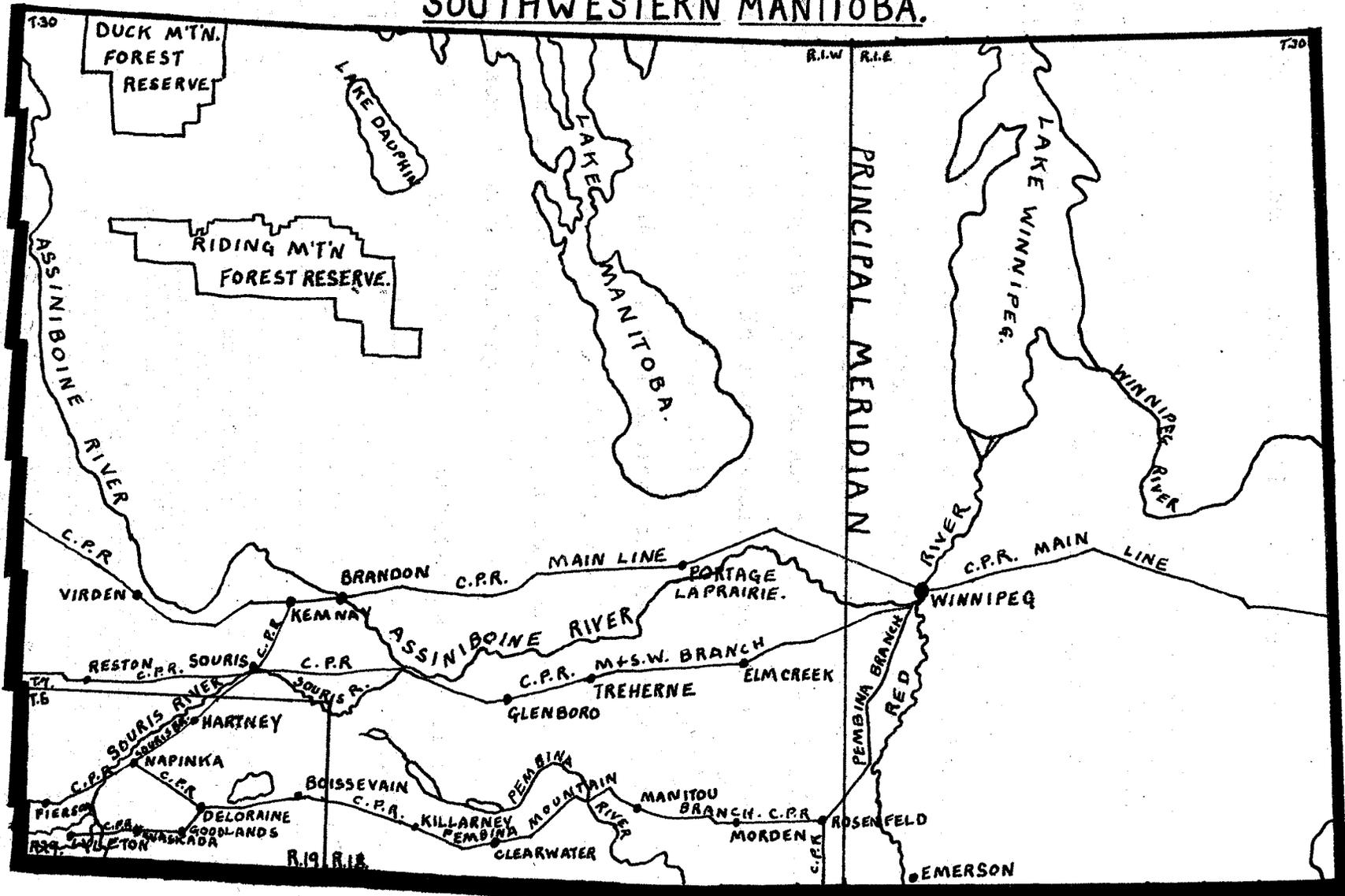
The experiences of the settlers from Ontario and the British Isles, during the period 1883 to 1900, and, indeed, of those farmers who reside there to-day, corroborated the fact that first the gardening fur-traders, and then the Selkirk settlers had demonstrated. Climate, and not soil fertility is the determinant in successful exploitation of the soil of Southwestern Manitoba as well as of other parts of the Canadian and American plains. Every phase of the way of life^f the pioneers succeeded in establishing in the area by 1900 was affected by this fact. How they were brought to realize it, and how, after some years of seemingly fruitless effort they established a wheat-exporting community, complete with its supporting institutions based on the ideas of social organization they had brought with them, fills the pages of a large part of this History of Southwestern Manitoba to 1900.

¹⁶ see below, ch.4. pp. 67 f.

¹⁷ John Macoun, Manitoba and the Great North West,
(Guelph, Ont., 1882)p.473

¹⁸ see below, ch.6.

SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL MANITOBA, SHOWING RAILWAY APPROACHES, AS AT 1900 A.D., TO SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA.



Chapter two

bank deposits. On the other hand, a succession of years of scanty rainfall, when hot winds prevail for weeks and swarms of grasshoppers infest the land, will wipe^{away} these cash reserves and reduce the people to a condition of acute distress and require them to accept government funds or private charity for survival.⁵

Southwestern Manitoba is not the only section of the province to experience the rigors of drought. The Red River Valley, the Assiniboine Delta, and even the mixed farming country east of the Red River and between the lakes have had seasons in which crop returns have been disappointingly low because of insufficient rain.

The agricultural portion of Manitoba is a marginal region lying between two contrasting zones of rainfall and vegetation. The eastern and northern fringes of this portion blend into the forests covering the boundaries of the Laurentian Shield, while the southwestern part merges into the treeless^{plains} of the Canadian prairies and the Dakotas. The 20-inch rainfall line, sometimes referred to as the 'critical' line for agriculture, enters Manitoba at the 98th meridian of longitude and then curves to the north-west.⁶ This meridian exactly bisects the southern boundary of the province. South-west of this line, trees become less and less

⁵ Ellis, Crop History, p.3

⁶ Webb, The Great Plains, p.18.

* 'critical' because rain-fall below 20 inches is not sufficient for the type of agriculture practised in Ontario and the more eastern states.

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plentiful, except in the river valleys and on Turtle Mountain, and soil cultivation requires the application of special ~~dry~~ ^{irrigation} farming techniques. There are some years, however, when rainfall is abundant over all of Southern and Central Manitoba, while there are others in which Southwestern Manitoba can properly be called part of the 'Great American Desert'. The swing of the climatic pendulum about the 'critical' line more profoundly affects this area because of its proximity to Palliser's 'Triangle', and, on account of the nature of its soils.

On the average, there is less rainfall in the southwestern section than elsewhere in Manitoba. In the 36 townships of Crop Reporting District #1, (Melita) the average annual rainfall (Aug. - Oct. plus Apr. - July) , for the period 1884 to 1942, inclusive, is approximately 13.46 inches.⁷ The average at Winnipeg for the same period is 20.4 inches.⁸ The average wheat yield in the district was 15.1 bushels to the acre as against the provincial average of 17.2 bushels.⁹

If average conditions prevailed most of the time, then agricultural operations in Southwestern Manitoba could be undertaken with a reasonable degree of security. Unfortunately for the farmers in the area, less than average rainfall has been the experience for 35 years of the period recorded, and better than average in only 23 years of the total of 58.¹⁰

⁷ Ellis, Manitoba Agriculture, p.42.

⁸ A.S.Morton, History of Prairie Settlement, (Toronto, 1938)

⁹ Ellis, Manitoba Agriculture, p.40. p.

¹⁰ Ellis, loc.cit.

The most serious consequences for the area arise, not from the fact that rainfall is usually below the long term average, but from the frequent wide deviations from the average. Deviations have ranged from plus 12.9 inches to minus 6.86 inches, during the period.¹¹ For example, the rainfall recorded in 1891 amounted to 26.36 inches, giving a wheat yield averaging 27.8 bushels to the acre. Only two years previous to this, rainfall and wheat yield were 6.6 inches and 8.7 bushels.¹² The all-time low yield was that of 1934, when with 8.38 inches of rain, an average of only 0.6 bushels of wheat was harvested.¹³ What was not destroyed in that year by drought and hot winds was devoured by grasshoppers.¹⁴

Of equal importance to the district as the total rainfall received in any year is the seasonal distribution of it. A good crop yield is the result of a combination of favorable circumstances. Good fall rains supply the moisture needed to germinate the seed sown in the following spring. Dry weather in April and early May allows farmers to work on the land. If late April and May are warm, the seeds germinates rapidly, and if, at the same time, these weeks experience dry weather, the young wheat plants are forced to send their roots deep into the soil. If rain showers appear after the second week in May, and increase in frequency and in intensity during June and early July, the growing plants

¹¹ loc. cit.

¹² loc. cit.

¹³ loc. cit.

¹⁴ According to residents of the region.

receive moisture to meet their increasing needs. A few good rains are needed in the first part of July to counter-act the excessive heat. A good heavy shower when the wheat is "in the milk" will ensure a well-filled kernel. Good harvesting weather is enjoyed when rainfall is reduced during August and September.¹⁵

With an ideal distribution of even scanty rainfall, some good yields of wheat have been produced in the Melita area. In 1903, for example, a yield of 17.8 bushels to the acre was produced with only 8.02 inches of rain,¹⁶ i.e., a crop of almost four bushels better than average resulted from a rainfall of 5.44 inches below the long-term average. This phenomenal result can only be explained by the fact that the rains received were very timely. In 1915 one of the best crops ever harvested in this section of Manitoba, (25 bushels per acre), was produced with only 10.24 in. of rain.¹⁷

Meagre rainfall, combined with its poor distribution, will produce a discouraging crop, but of particular concern to farmers in Southwestern Manitoba is the fact that often these conditions will prevail for several years in succession. As a result, "the wealth produced in the good years melts away,"¹⁸ the farmer is unable to meet the expense of properly cultivating his fields, so his land deteriorates and becomes infested with weeds.

¹⁵ Morton, Prairie Settlement, p.xvii.

¹⁶ Ellis, Manitoba Agriculture, p.40.

¹⁷ Loc. cit.

¹⁸ Ellis, Crop History, p.3.