Margaret McBeth's 1946 Sketch of Early Settler Life and Families on the Red

Editorial Note (November 2026): When McBeth House (31 McBeth Avenue, Winnipeg) was created in 1987, all the McBeth family archives, including the following memoir, were placed in a room on the third floor. For several years, people who knew the McBeths worked on organizing the material. They passed on before the work was completed. The following text is based on a handwritten account written in 1946 by Margaret Elliott McBeth (1883-1960). Its pages were photographed by museum worker John Whiteway and transcribed by Gordon Goldsborough.

Samuel Robert Henderson. Within the memory of many of us who knew him well is "Sam Bob" Henderson. His grandparents came from Sutherlandshire, Scotland with the Selkirk settlers in 1815 and settled in East Kildonan. A little stone in Old Kildonan cemetery tells how his grandfather (also Samuel) wandered away from his home and failed to return nor was anything ever discovered that would give any clue to his disappearance. His parents were Angus Henderson and Catherine MacBeth.

"Sam Bob" was born in 1864. He was "Samuel" because every Henderson family boasted the name and "Robert" because every MacBeth had a "Bob". The little old home in East Kildonan with all its old furnishings and additions gave him a love for the past and a look backward; and the coming of a new world, new ideas and new people with the advent of Confederation in 1870, gave him the look forward, the longing for progress and the opening up of his loved country. He was one of the most worthy sons of the transition period. He was educated in the schools of Kildonan and in St. John's College – no mean training at that time. He worked on the farm with his father in the days when farming was primitive and money scarce. He was brought up in the Old Presbyterian church at Kildonan, baptized by Dr. John Black, its first minister and later became superintendent for years of his boyhood Sunday School and a member of session in the old church. Later when the parish divided he became an ardent member of the John Black church in East Kildonan.

His early training was a good preparation for his busy and useful life. In these days of good roads in many parts of Manitoba it is interesting to know that he was one of the founders and the first President of the "Manitoba Good Roads Association". He held this position for 19 years until his death in 1928. Good roads occupied his keenest attention and he looked forward to the day when Manitoba country roads would be high and dry and easy of travel both summer and winter.

The cairn on the Henderson Highway and the name "Henderson Highway" are fitting memorials. The first experiment in hand surfaced roads was a few miles of gravel road built in the municipality of East Kildonan. "The Wanderer" writing in the Tribune in 1922 says "I recall drawing the attention of an Ottawa cabinet minister — this was ten years ago — to the permanent road improvements in East Kildonan. He smiled at the idea of making Manitoba

country roads high and dry and easy of travel in the spring and fall. He did not think it possible, but Mr. Henderson was one of the men who had faith and from the experiences on Kildonan, other sections have profited.

In 1916 three hundred men from various parts of Manitoba met to celebrate the 7th anniversary of the "Good Roads" movement. Prizes were given for the best sections of road in the gravel class and also earth roads.

Mayor Waugh presented President "Sam Bob" Henderson with a handsome gold watch in appreciation of his services as "chief executive officer of the association".

Rev. W. J. Hindley speaking on the social benefits of good roads said "Good roads have averted a real public crisis in the community use of the country. The automobile, rural mail delivery, parcel post and the mail order business have followed the good roads movement, and have helped to mitigate the misery of the isolation of the country.

"Sam Bob's" life was a full one and 33 years as President and Secretary of the Kildonan and St. Paul Agricultural society, 12 years on the council and 11 more years as reeve of Old Kildonan and East Kildonan municipalities, many years on the boards of Old Kildonan and John Black church and superintendent of Sunday Schools, and many lesser positions.

He had a great capacity for friendship and sociability. His name appears in "The Critique", one of Manitoba's earliest local papers in connection with "The Kildonan Mutual Improvement Society". We also remember that the appearance of "Sam Bob" on the floor for a Red River Jig always brought a round of applause. He never lost the simplicity of the little old home, nor the warm smile and genial greeting, by name always given to every child and every grown-up.

In these days when we hope to pioneer in rural electrification in Manitoba, we may well have faith that it is quite as desirable and much simpler because of the work of the pioneers in Good Roads.

One of the foremost American magazines in 1856 described the Red River colony in these words: "There is a spot on this continent which travellers do not visit and from which civilization seems in a measure shut out. Deserts almost trackless, divide it on all sides from the habitation of cultivated men; no railroads or steamers, or telegraph wires or lines or stages make their way thither. To reach it, or, once there to escape from it, is an exploit of which one may almost boast. It sends forth neither newspapers nor books, nor correspondent's letters; no paragraph in any newspaper records its weal or woe; it is not even marked in the maps or mentioned in the gazetteers.

Yet Red River Settlement, for that is the name of this unknown spot, contains a population of 6000 souls, eleven places of public worship, profusely supplied with clergy, including two

bishops, a citadel of formidable strength, several large two storey houses, a dozen mills, ever so many model farms stocked with fine cattle, one or two manufacturing establishments, a court house, a governor, a staff, and an imposing body of mounted police. A man may dine there in luxurious style, drive a two-forty in a dashing cariole over the crisp snow, dance the latest polka, discuss the principles of human society, and the theory of popular governments as learnedly at Washington."

No writer has, in one paragraph, more vividly described the Red River Settlement. With Confederation, indeed for some years before, the spell was broken and the "Island Colony" made its contacts with and received its impressions from the outside world.

For many years, however, the Selkirk settlers on both sides of the Red River through the old parish of Kildonan, retained their identity and lived in the old homes retaining the old customs of the first generation of Selkirk settlers. It is sad to think how little remains, that will remain, of the old buildings. The old stone church and Nisbet Hall, built in 1864, we hope will be a lasting monument but of the houses the little old Fraser house in West Kildonan, the old Henderson house in North Kildonan, [sentence ends]

Lest we should forget the old settlement entirely let us journey along the "front" road on the west side of the river; the "front" road was a pleasant winding road along the second ridge. It was near the river in a few places but the old settlers had learned to build back on the second rising for fear of floods. Every home faced on the "front" road and had a gentle slope from the house to the road. Every farm opened also by its own road or "lane" to the "back" road, now the Selkirk Highway or "The Main Road".

Journeying from the north boundary of the old parish we pass the little old home of the Murrays, James Murray, son of Donald Murray. James Murray was one of the teachers in the old Kildonan school. He was married to a MacBeth. Two of his sons, "Jimmy" and "Johnny", still live in the old parish (1946). Travelling south we come to the old Gunn home. We remember old Mrs. Gunn, sister of Mrs. Senator Sutherland, one of the MacBeths also. She was of the second generation, a dainty little old lady, who for many years was totally blind. We can see her yet making her way from chair to chair and from cupboard to cook stove carefully but surely. Every one loved her. In the old home lived John Hugh her son and his family. Everyone had a nickname and John Hugh was known to everyone as "Java Gunn".

Java was married to Mrs. Sedley (sic?) Blanchard, daughter of Senator Sutherland and in their home grew up her little family of boys Bert, Jack, Cyril and Stanley and the Gunn boys Gordon, Alan and Sedley, Alex Gunn, Java's brother, built on the outside part of the Gunn farm — on the "back road".

Java was a live old timer, interested in church, municipality and politics, a rabid "Grit". In those days you knew what you were, only two parties to choose from, "Grits" and "Tories".

The next farm was owned by the McDonalds. The old people lived and died there and the farm belonged to Jeremiah Robert. He married Hettie Brigham, one of a new family from the East who moved into the parish of St. Paul. "Bob" was one of "nature's gentlemen", quiet, courteous and kind but afflicted with deafness which often shut him off from the world around.

In the old home their little family was born, Ruby, Sadie, Muriel, Florence and the boys, Milton and Clifford.

The Sutherlands came next, John Sutherland, one of the old family who lived near the church. We knew him as "Bandon". Children of a third generation rarely knew the real names. As a child, John's favorite hymn was "Lord, a little band and lowly, we are come to sing to Thee." As he went for the cows, John was heard to sing "Lord, a little bandon lowly" and so the name clung to him.

Coming on south we pass one of the oldest houses in Kildonan. The property at one time belonged to a MacBeth but was sold to a family who came from Guelph, Ontario in 1873. Thomas Anderson, his wife Margaret Elliot and their family. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson moved to Stonewall later but part of their family remained an integral part of the old settlement. Janet married Thomas Murray, Helen was married to Robert McBeth and Margaret to Peter Harper.

The next ten chains was MacBeth property, the original property of the Robert McBeth family who came out in 1815. We can remember Grandpa McBeth who came out as a boy of fifteen. He was a member of the Council of Assiniboia, a Justice of the Peace with credentials from the old land 1832. His wife was Mary Maclean (first white child born in a new land), beautiful we are told and with "the auburn hair". On the old farm there grew up three who later went out with the mission to the Indians and were the founders of Prince Albert. These were Mary, wife of Rev. James Nisbet, the ordained missionary; Christina, wife of Rev. John McKay, his assistant and Adam married to Georgina Matheson, a teacher.

There were also Dr. Rev. R. G. MacBeth, Presbyterian minister, John MacBeth, a lawyer, Annie who married Captain Mills, one who came with the Wolseley expedition, Catherine, and Robert who remained on the farm in Kildonan and married Helen Anderson, a daughter of Thomas Anderson who brought his family to Red River in 1873.

The next farm south belonged to the Pritchards. They were of English birth and connected with the Hudson's Bay Company. From early times they were a real part of the Scotch colony. We remember old Auntie Janet. Every home had a Grandpa or Grandma or both. She never let a child out of the house without a piece of bread with sugar. She was a great old "Grit" and at

election times refused even to speak to her "Tory" neighbors. Matthew, William, Angus (known as Clint), Archie and two daughters grew up there.

Connected with this family were Archbishop Matheson and Rev. Samuel Pritchard. A beautiful story is told of the Rev. S. Pritchard. He was lost on the prairies and at last fell on the ground utterly exhausted from hunger. As he lay there a partridge slew into his breast thus saving his life. He said that it was an answer to prayer. We, in this age, would say it was "a lucky chance".

Coming on south we find the … [no further text in paragraph]

The Harpers occupied the next ten chains. Three stalwart sons of the second generation played a large part in the life of old Kildonan — James, Magnus and Peter.

This family came from the Orkney Islands with the 1815 Selkirk settlers. We can scarcely remember old "Grannie Harper" but have vivid recollections of her pipe, a comfort which all of the old men and some of the old women enjoyed. Magnus and James and Peter were active in church and municipal life. Magnus was the barber for the community and barbering was often an excuse for the boys and men to gather in the large, cheery old kitchen to talk and joke the evening away. This was one of the favorite gathering places.

James an older brother was married to Christie Sutherland — "Aunty Kirsty" we all knew and every child knew her "Johnny Cake" and syrup. There (sic) daughter Gertrude, Mrs. H. H. Seymour lives with her boys and the old homestead.

A little stone house next south was the home of Donald Murray, a fine old gentleman. Here the first classes in Manitoba College were held. The sons of the second generation lived and farmed the land. David, Donald, Charles, two daughters, married Anglican clergymen. Mrs. Bruce and Mrs. Cook. Ray and Lilian, of the third generation, live on the old place yet and Lilian's children David and Marlene Edwards.

We have now come to the church land.

Nisbet Hall was built in 1864 by James Nisbet who came out as assistant to Dr. Black with the purpose of extending the work of the church. A whole history surrounds this building. It was not the first school. The first one was a log building near the Murray corner. I have heard old timers tell of the march from the old to the new building and the opening celebration. The school faced the river and college classes were held in the back part. The chief aim of education was preparation for the ministry and from these old classes there went forth men who played an important part in extending the church.

A more pretentious Manitoba College was then built on the adjoining church lot. This was the college in which Dr. Bruce and Dr. Hart held classes. It was a great grief to the people of Kildonan when the college was moved to Winnipeg. The old college building was given over to Dr. Black's

family after the death of Dr. Black in 1883 and a new minister came to the manse. The Black family lived, and were loved, by everyone for many years in the old college building. We well remember dear old Mrs. Black, Dr. Black's second wife, a Bannatyne and her sister Miss Bannatyne. The sons and daughters were all children of his first wife Henrietta Ross, daughter of Alexender Ross.

The manse site adjoined the old college. The present building was built during the pastorate of Dr. John Pringle of Yukon fame. It stands on the exact place of Dr. Black's old home, prepared for his coming in 1851 by the settlers and used for services.

The church between the front and back road stands since 1854 when it was completed. The material gathered on that site in 1851 was swept away by the flood and the building seriously delayed. The beautiful stone quarried and brought over the prairies by volunteer workers has unfortunately been spoiled by a modern stucco coating. The little porch at the front was not on the original building. The interior is completely changed. The pulpit was on the north wall and a number of steps led to it. There was no platform below as the old kirk did not tolerate either choir or organ. A precentor with a tuning fork gave the key and led the psalms. This was a performance called "lining", a line being read and then sung. The organ was not introduced until Dr. Pringle's pastorate in 1883. Even then the feeling was so great that the minister left his charge. One old lady was known to turn her back to the "instrument of the devil" every time that it was played. The pews were straight backed and had doors, and a few square pews with tables in the centre occupied prominent places. The present stair led to the gallery but no partition made a vestibule, choir room or vestry room. The pews went back to the wall. Much ill feeling was occasioned when the partition was erected, those who had back seats claiming the back seats, those opposite the window claiming the back seat now opposite the window. Families from generation to generation had their own pews and occupied them regularly. The present vacant centre is the result of the moving and passing away of families from the east side of the river, three families of Munroe, McIvor, Sutherland (Senator). During the Riel rebellion the church was used to store ammunition. Old timers still point to a bullet hole in the ceiling, a relic of the rebellion.

The little cemetery surrounding the church was the last resting place of the pioneers. The plots are somewhat irregular and no survey of the early part is in existence. As the years went on and the cemetery showed signs of growing out of bounds, a plot was given to every family in the church who had not one already with the intention of closing on any further extensions.

The ferry road, now John Black avenue, was an important highway in the old days. It was the connection between the east and west sides of the old municipality of Kildonan. A ferry, suitable for vehicles and a row boat for small groups of foot passengers made the passage over to the other side quite possible. A road on the east side led to the main road. The ferryman's house in

the trees on the east bank was quite picturesque and within call from the west side. Sometimes the ferryman happened to be a resident on the west side.

The ferry road was the favorite watering place for the cattle coming in from the prairies. The farms all were fenced at the back road and the cattle grazed freely on the prairies beyond. Those that were not brought in by their own gates at the proper time would wander in the ferry road often shrouded by clouds of mosquitoes from the swamps to the west.

We pass from this district which seemed a centre in the early days — a centre for the Scottish settlers in their church life, a highway connecting the east with the west by means of two ferry lanes and the old ferry.

The Sutherland home and property occupied the part where now six homes and Sunset Lodge and also the new Old Kildonan Municipal Hall. We remember dear old "Auntie Henny" who brought many wee babies into the world and around whose immaculate kitchen stood rows of large Bannocks a treat for the fortunate family or visitor. The family, George, for many years caretaker of the church and cemetery, "Jerry Bob" who married ___ and built a home on the property adjoining Ferry Lane. It is interesting to many who read about the passing away of the "Village Blacksmith" from our life today to know that this site later became a real "Smithy" occupied by the Irish Corry family whose son "Sam" carried on in Winnipeg, the last of his trade.

We come to the golf course area where lived Sutherlands, Fletts, Bannermans, Templetons. This property was bought by the City of Winnipeg which at that time visioned beautiful exhibition grounds. The beautiful lots 17, 18 and 19 were added to the city's property for the present Kildonan Park.

But coming back to the original owners we remember John Sutherland, known to everyone as "Scotchman, an Elder of the Kirk and worthy to be, one who could lead the parishioners right into the presence of God in Prayer. He stood out for the old Scottish traditions in church and the sanctity of the Sabbath. The organ in the time of Dr. Pringle was a sad blow but the instrument was at last a grateful help to the singing but no organ selections and no anthems were tolerated altho a choir took the place of a Precentor.

The writer can remember as a child how Scotchman strode across the church after a morning service to stop the organist who dared to play a little voluntary as the congregation retired quietly and with dignity. "Stop that Tom foolery", rang out and it stopped. Scotchman was a member of the first Parl. Of Manitoba and a "dyed in the wool" "Grit".

His family were Alex Hugh and John William and daughters Anne Jane (Mrs Sibbald) and Janet (Mrs Mason) and a little niece Katee Stalker who grew up with them and is now Mrs. McKissock of Victoria.

Travelling south we find on Lots 22 and 23 Donald and David Flett. This home in the second generation was occupied by Mrs. Flett old George Bannerman, known as Stuggie" Macduff" also a Bannerman Donald and Daly (?) and Jimmie Bannerman. We remember old "Stuggie", short, white-haired and always in the end of the pew in the old Kildonan church. This was near the front and centre.

We remember how the minister, wishing to add dignity to the service requested the congregation to sit down for a few minutes of silent prayer before leaving. But old Mr. George Bannerman to the end of his life remained firm in his old way of turning round quickly and stumping down the isle would be out the doorway before others else raised their heads after the moment of prayer.

Following south we come to another Bannerman home. A large white house with beautiful grounds sloping down to the front road. Here were other Bannermans and we can remember Miss Janet Bannerman, gracious and beautiful, the last owner of the old home where now is the 16th hole of Kildonan golf course. In "Women of Red River" we have a long interview given by her to the Provincial Librarian Mr. Healey who recorded the stories for the Women's Canadian Club.

Next came the McKay property and the brothers William, George and James Nisbet lived in the old log homes and built again on the property — beautiful Kildonan Park. Wm McKay in a few words described as one of his happy recollections the "old swimming hole where the boys gathered and swam in the bathing suits that God gave them [end of document]