

A SESSIPPI TOWNSITE

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September 1973

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Proposal

Assissippi Townsite, the village founded by the Shell River Colonization Company which undertook to settle Ontario emigrants on the soil of Manitoba, should be reconstructed to its original condition in the 1880s and designated an historic site.

Historical Background

The Canadian North West was scientifically surveyed in earnest as early as 1857 when Captain John Palliser explored the area for the British government. The following year Henry Youle Hind entered the Dauphin country for the Canadians. Both reported that the soil was arid and infertile, not at all suited to agriculture.¹ In 1874 John Macoun, botanist, attested to the fertility of that same area.²

In 1871, after the Province of Manitoba had been created, and with an eye to settling pioneers in the vast western territory, the Dominion government began to subdivide lands, following the American example. Beginning from a specified meridian, lands were divided westward into ranges, and from the 49th parallel northerly into townships, to form a checkerboard pattern of townships six miles square, each containing thirty-six sections of six hundred forty acres each. Each section was quartered to make a more manageable area.³

By 1872 the Dominion Lands Act was passed, which permitted settlers to take up a quarter-section of specified Dominion land for payment of a \$10 registration fee, and, upon working the acreage for three years, erecting a home and putting the soil under cultivation, to file a claim of ownership. That same year the Immigration and Colonization Act set up diverse schemes for attracting settlers.⁴ Agents in Europe (mainly Great Britain) were armed with publicity pamphlets and the propaganda campaign was begun. Reservations of land

were granted to individuals and societies willing to settle pioneers.⁵

These optimistic beginnings met with little success during the ensuing years, for several reasons. The depression of the 1870s meant a shortage of capital and unemployment.

Drought afflicted the prairies for successive seasons and reports of grasshopper infestations dampened any enthusiasm of prospective immigrants.⁶ In addition to these factors were the perennial transportation problem and the attractive free lands south of the 49th parallel.

In the early 1880s, the Canadian Pacific Railway had been constructed westward to Brandon and across the prairies. In 1881 the provincial boundaries were redrawn to include an additional 120 miles to the west, up to the meridian dividing ranges 29 and 30. Winnipeg became an investment haven for that brief year of the land boom, the very character of the city changed from being "staid, steady sober minded ... to excitable, ambitious and speculative".⁷ This euphoria lasted until the boom ended in 1882 and cancellations of purchases outnumbered bona fide settlers.

The building of the C.P.R. had attracted immigrants from Eastern Canada, who hastened to settle along the proposed route which headed northwesterly to cross Birdtail Creek.⁸ By 1881 the surveyed lands had been classified as follows in anticipation of floods of settlers: Class A included lands within 24 miles of the main line or any branch of the C.P.R. on either side; Class B consisted of lands within 12 miles on either side of any proposed railway; Class C lands were those south of the main line of the C.P.R. not included in the other two categories; and Class D lands were all those other than A, B, or C.⁹ Those odd-numbered sections in Class D were made available for colonization.

Because the expected surge of immigration to the area did not materialize, the C.P.R. and the Dominion government encouraged any scheme which would promote land

settlement. Consequently, co-operative farms, philanthropic enterprises and commercial colonization companies¹⁰ received lands at half the price offered to individual homesteaders. In addition, the restrictions as to source of immigrants was removed. Critics of the government pointed out that federal policy had degenerated to such an extent that sale to corporations took precedence over sale to the enterprising individual.¹¹

In general, commercial colonization companies met with little success. They had the alternative of two plans of settlement: one was that the corporation purchase all odd-numbered sections in allotted townships, with the stipulation that two settlers had to be placed on every suitable section with the company receiving a final rebate at the end of five years; the other scheme was that the applicant purchase all available land in a particular tract, pay in cash and place one hundred twenty-eight settlers in each township. The Privy Council initially approved fifty from a deluge of applications (only nine of which were for the second scheme, and none of these were ever implemented), and accepted others as time went on. At final tally only twenty-six of the accepted plans were ever implemented, and these with varying degrees of success. A Saskatchewan Royal Commission on Immigration several years later evaluated most of these schemes as "poorly conceived, developed without reference to underlying economic realities and ... causing consequently, heavy losses of capital as well as waste of human material".¹²

One of the two colonization companies which settled in the west central region of Manitoba under the first scheme and which enjoyed a very brief success before succumbing was the Shell River Colonization Company.¹³ On May 3, 1882, Messrs. Jeffs, Fralech and Associates of Belleville, Ontario, by an Order in Council, were allotted T23, R28 and R29 and T24, R28, for the purposes of settlement. After placing settlers on the even-numbered

sections they could purchase the odd-numbered section at \$2 per acre, with the opportunity of reselling these lands at a profit.¹⁴

The area was well suited to agriculture, and the Shell River provided drainage and water power for local industries. The C.P.R. was reputed to be planning the "Assiniboine Branch", which would make the region accessible to Eastern markets. Already a few settlers from Huron and Bruce counties in Ontario had begun to homestead here in 1881, having come via the South Saskatchewan and Pelly trail to the proposed railway route.¹⁵ The Shell River Colonization Company had already settled fifty-one people here by November of 1883, when the Shell River agency manned by Henry Gill and James Richardson was established in the townsite of Asessippi. The village itself was located in the top quarter (north west) section 3 of T23, R28.¹⁶

During the first year the company invested large sums of money in building the townsite. Initially a dam was constructed by Gill and Richardson across the Shell River to supply water power for the roller-process grist mill, which was the first building erected in the village,¹⁷ at a cost of \$20,000. The waters of the Shell River, once dammed at Asessippi, provided power for the entire area. In addition, a sawmill which boasted a circular saw, shingle factory, hotel, storehouse and two private dwellings were erected that same year.¹⁸ Most of the settlers were quite contented with the agricultural conditions they found in the Shell River area. Many were novice farmers who had settled on land they had never seen before, and who had been led to believe that the soil required little human effort to reap bounteous crops.¹⁹ A few tired of farming, some were poorly situated on the steep Assiniboine Valley and forced to relocate in the village or move elsewhere. Various local industries were begun; one of these was a cheese factory, which was formed in 1889 by the

farmers of the area as a means of using up surplus milk for which they had no market. Even with a subsidy of \$100 from the municipal council, the factory closed. Another local enterprise was the manufacture of bricks for use as local building materials. During the early 1890s, but for only a brief period, this industry was a lucrative one. The Inspector of Colonization Companies, Rufus Stephenson, who reported annually on the progress of the Shell River colony, was impressed with the Company's apparent concern for the material well-being of its settlers.²⁰

The sawmill at Asessippi was erected immediately out of necessity and to take advantage of the Crown's agreement to provide timber for the use of settlers and the village. It was situated on the east bank of the Shell River opposite the dam. A timber berth on the east slope of the Duck Mountain was granted in 1883, but as drainage of the area flowed in an easterly direction and the berth was a fair distance from the colony, this was cancelled by 1887.²¹ The Company instead used local timber, largely poplar, and a portable sawmill for its lumber manufacture. By 1883 a turbine was installed to run the mill, and along with the planing mill and shingle factory, sufficient materials were produced for local use. In 1887 a new saw was installed.

Rufus Stephenson that same year gave a detailed description of the mill and an evaluation of its importance to the community:

The size of the sawmill is 38 by 55 feet, power water turbine wheel 62 inch saw. About 100,000 feet of excellent lumber suitable to the requirements of the settlement, have already been turned out here, by the old mill.

The prices per M. have been \$20 for first class and a much lower rate for inferior grades. Shingles are sold at \$2.50 and \$3 per M. It, therefore, is my opinion it would be a hardship to this section of Manitoba if this local industry were under almost any circumstances to be unnecessarily hampered in any way. To the progress of this district, it is without doubt a most important factor.²²

Even after the Company had pulled up its stakes in the area, individuals carried on the lumber business. In 1890 David Gilmour (and later John Worley), James Richardson and Henry Gill formed the Asessippi Milling and Manufacturing Company, which produced some 785,804 board feet of lumber. 1892 to 1894 were prosperous years for this company, but after 1894 the lumbering centred in Brandon.²³

The Asessippi or Shell River Roller Process Flour Mill, erected to accommodate the surrounding area as far away as Dauphin and Grandview, was in existence until 1911, when the dam harnessing the water power was damaged. The turbine-powered mill was situated on the channel cut on the west bank of the Shell River across the dam from the sawmill. Like other industries in the locality, it was restricted by the transportation problem and unable to compete with larger mills which could send flour to the area at a lower price. In addition, the dam across the Shell River was washed out or damaged on several occasions and monies had to be secured from the Municipality. Eventually business declined to such an extent that the mill, erected at such great cost, was assessed at \$2,500.²⁴ It was purchased by Thomas McLennan, the Reeve, and operated only until the dam was damaged. David McDowell, whose report on the Asessippi Townsite is in the possession of the Provincial Department of Tourism, Recreation and Cultural Affairs, did excavation work during the summer of 1969, uncovering the turbine which ran the mill. The mill itself was dismantled in 1913.

The Asessippi Store was a focal point of the community, for it housed the Shell River Post Office, served as the Town Hall for the Municipality, and was centrally located on both the Shell River and the Shell River crossing of the Pelly trail. It operated as a

trading centre for furs and fish which the Metis and Indians brought in, as well as a supply centre for the area. And it was reported by Stephenson to offer goods "at even lower prices than the same quality of goods ... at many of the points further south".²⁵ Henry Gill's two sons operated the store until 1903, when McLennan took over until 1914.

By the second year of its existence the colony was apparently encountering problems. Although many settlers had neglected to "improve", i.e., cultivate their lands, and others had ceased to keep up their residency, the Dominion government would now allow the Company's agent to process cancellations. In the course of one year the new additions to the Province of Manitoba had been divided into municipalities; the Shell River Colonization Company land grant was contained in the Municipality of Shell River. This development led to conflicts between the Company and the Municipality over taxation of odd-numbered sections, which did not actually belong to the Company until purchased by it.²⁶

Adding to the jurisdictional clash was the Company's problem in holding the settlers to the colony. Under section 32 of the Dominion Lands Act, the "Hamlet Clause", Shellmouth in T22, R29 had been formed, and many of the colony's homesteaders dwelt here. As non-residents of the colony they could not be credited to the Company who had brought them to the area. Shortly afterwards these settlers were to lose their homesteads through cancellation. Others were forced off their lands because they were unable to improve and expand. Several years of bad crops compelled the Company to appeal for a decrease in the cost of pre-emptions to \$1 per acre so as to allow settlers to acquire land, but this suggestion was refused.

The problem of lack of transportation facilities continued to plague the colony and in 1884 Company officials were negotiating with the Manitoba and North West Railway to have a

line built to Asessippi, which they felt was a suitable location for a valley crossing point. It was not, however, until 1886 that the railway came as far as Russell, and 1908 before it came as far as Shellmouth.

By 1886 it was apparent that the colony was not about to flourish, although the Shell River Colonization Company had succeeded in placing 50 bona fide settlers on the land and gained the Company a credit of \$8,000.²⁷ Few homesteaders had taken up pre-emption lands, although many already had or were in the process of receiving the patents for the half-sections they occupied. In 1886 the Municipality petitioned for a reduction in price of pre-emptions, but an extended time period was granted instead. Finally it became apparent that transportation in the area would not be what had been anticipated, and settlers began to abandon their homesteads. In October of 1888 by an Order in Council, the Shell River Colonization Company's accounts were closed. The village of Asessippi soon ceased to exist.

The land on which the pioneer village of Asessippi was situated is now owned by the Manitoba government as Asessippi Provincial Park. Remains of the earliest homes and local industries still exist, providing the authenticity which would make a fine historic site. The village of Asessippi is of historic significance to the Province of Manitoba because it is representative of the Dominion land settlement policy in this territory. It was one of the earliest settlements of whitemen in the west central part of the province, pre-dating the railway (in fact built in anticipation of it). Significant in this respect is the fact that the village was in existence for such a short time, vulnerable as it was the vital link with the rest of the province and country. David McDowell's aforementioned report is highly recommended for the suggestions it makes for acquisition of actual townsite buildings which

still remain, and for development of the site into an historic village. The reconstruction of Asessippi Townsite has great potential for a popular and informative historic site.

FOOTNOTES

¹Hind, H.Y., Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition, etc., Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, Ltd., 1971, p. 250.

²Macoun, J., Manitoba and the Great North West, Guelph: The World Publishing Company, 1882, pp. 483-484.

³Hill, D., The Opening of the Canadian West, New York: The John Day Company, 1967, p. 162.

⁴Ibid., p. 163.

⁵Tyman, J.L., Section, Township and Range: Studies in Prairie Settlement, Brandon: Assiniboine Historical Society, 1972, p. 40.

⁶MacDonald, K., Canada: Immigration and Colonization 1841-1903, Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1966, p. 258.

⁷Boulton, C.A., historical sketch of the county of Russell, C.A. Boulton Family Papers, P.A.M.

⁸Tyman, J.L., op. cit., p. 34, figure 18.

⁹Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰Hill, D., op. cit., p. 175.

¹¹Tyman, J.L., op. cit., p. 105.

¹²Hill, D., op. cit., p. 177.

¹³Tyman, J.L., op. cit., p. 111.

¹⁴McDowell, D., Preliminary Report on Asessippi and the Shell River Colonization Company 1882-1913, for the Manitoba Parks Branch Asessippi Park Project.

¹⁵Boulton, C.A., op. cit.

¹⁶Tyman, J.L., op. cit., p. 107.

¹⁷Reminiscences of the Rossburn Pioneers, privately published, 1932, p. 58.

¹⁸Petition from Company received by Secretary of State, April 15, 1884. Tyman, J.L., op. cit., p. 106.

¹⁹Letter, C.A. Boulton to H. Gill, December 22, 1883. Ibid., p. 108.

²⁰Report of November 1, 1883. Ibid., p. 106.

²¹McDowell, D., Historical Research of Asessippi Village, Department of Tourism, Recreation and Cultural Affairs file #P56.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Shell River Court of Revision, April 15, 1897. Ibid.

²⁵Report of November 1, 1883. Ibid.

²⁶Statement of Henry Gill, Agent, quoted by Rufus Stephenson in Report of December 10, 1884, Tyman, J.L., op. cit., p. 108.

²⁷McDowell, D., Preliminary Report.

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