

A Manitoba ghost town

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The cairn, eight miles northwest of Morden, is an imposing rock, weighing several tons, erected on the original townsite of Nelson, Manitoba. Unveiled June 29, 1958, in memory of the district's pioneers, its bronze plaque bears the following inscription:

TOWNSITE OF NELSON (1877-1885)

In 1877, Adam Nelson built a Grist Mill on Silver Creek marking the beginning of Nelson. 1882 saw Nelson as an Incorporated Town of over 1,000 people. It had a Land Titles Office, was Judicial County Seat of North Dufferin. A newspaper was published from 1880-1885. Nelson was on a regular stage-coach route. The railway by-passed Nelson in 1883, and the people gradually moved their business places and homes to other locations, the majority going to Morden. The last building was moved in 1905. The community was later named Dunston. In 1958 the cairn was erected in memory of the pioneers, under the auspices of the Dunston community.

Now the cairn is the only reminder that, in the 1800s, there used to be a metropolis, by prairie standards, there. The hand of time has gradually erased any signs of the once thriving town. Through the years basements that hinted of a former urban community have become obscured by shrubs and trees.

From 1877 to 1882 the town was called Nelsonville, named for the Adam Nelson family, pioneers who had come west from Ontario. A grist and sawmill built by the Nelsons on Silver Creek made it possible to have wheat ground into flour and lumber made from local timber.

In 1882 the town incorporated under the name Nelson. By 1885 this town of more than 1,000 people was dying. The Pembina branch line of the Canadian railway, in 1883, had bypassed it. The migration began the next year. It happened quickly. By 1886 it was a ghost town. The southerly route chosen for the CPR sealed its destiny.

Ironically, Thomas Duncan, Nelson's mayor, had previously lead a delegation to Ottawa. They received assurances from the prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, and the CPR's manager, Sir William Van Horne, that by 1884 the railroad would reach their town. Nelson died; Morden, a new town on the new rail line, was born.

It was a group of disillusioned people who moved established businesses and homes. The majority relocated in Morden. Some sold their buildings and had them dismantled on the site. A few chose other locations. In 1886 the site of Nelson had been abandoned. The last

structure was gone by 1906. In 1879 Jim Sanderson walked cross-country 70 miles from Portage la Prairie to Nelsonville to file a claim on two half sections northwest of Holland, Manitoba, for his father and to file another claim for himself.

The Nelsonville he saw was not only prospering but expanding. Real estate prices were sky-rocketing. A lot in Nelsonville was selling for as much as \$1000. The future of the town not only seemed bright but assured.

The town eventually had three doctors, three lawyers and three ministers – Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist. Three or four grocery stores, one with a liquor outlet, had opened. Two private banks, hardware stores, hotels, a real estate office, jewelry store, bake shop, and furniture outlet were in operation. As well, there were two blacksmith shops, two livery stables and a harness repair shop serving the area.

Following incorporation in 1882, the new Nelson town hall was built. It housed the judicial county seat for northern Dufferin, council chambers, a registry office and on the second floor was an assembly hall.

A weekly newspaper, the Nelsonville Mountaineer, was published from 1880 to 1885. A December 1880 issue advertised pork at eight cents a pound. In the summer of 1881 hay was selling for \$6 a ton. In one of its last editions, the editor included the market price for wheat – 70 cents a bushel.

A resident of Baldur, Manitoba, Alice McTavish, recalls her parents went to Stevenson's Pine Grove Nursery at Nelson at each harvest to buy apples for the threshing gang. Mr. Stevenson, a horticulturist, experimented with imported seedlings and fruits. Apples were his favorite – at one time he grew 100 varieties. It was from some of the stock that the Morden Experimental Farm, in 1916, had its beginning.

Mail came in to Nelson by stage coach – and later by riders on horseback. From there it was distributed to post offices in the surrounding small communities. Nelson seemed to have every amenity. It was a town with a band, an Orange Lodge, and a squash club. The first cheese factory in southern Manitoba was built there.

As Nelson disappeared the community was re-named Dunston, and is still known as Dunston today. The Dunston United Church north of the cairn is still used for special services.

With farm land on all sides, the former site of Nelson has reverted to a quiet countryside. Only the words on a wayside cairn remind the traveller that for eight short years Nelson was an impressive settlement.