# Chapter 1: The Assiniboine River

The Assiniboine rises in east-central Saskatchewan. For much of its length in Manitoba it flows though well-populated farmland. Many fur trading posts, ferries, crossings, and landings have been located on its banks.



The "City of Winnipeg" at Grand Valley  (Photo - Archives of Manitoba)



For centuries it was the primary water route westward from Winnipeg. It is noteworthy for being navigable by shallow draft steamboats. Such vessels were introduced on the Red River in 1857 and started regular service on the Assiniboine in 1878. Their use coincided with the first wave of European agricultural settlement in Manitoba. A survey of local history volumes produced in Southwest Manitoba will uncover numerous accounts of settlers taking the steamer from Winnipeg on the way to their new homes.

Steamboat travel flourished for only a few years before the railway took over, but between 1879 and 1885 traffic was constant during the spring and early summer. One can only speculate at the amount of profit these journeys generated. The cost of a ticket from Winnipeg to Brandon at $10 seems reasonable enough by today's standards, but it was quite high in relation to the dollar's purchasing power at the time. Surely the owners and operators could see that the coming of the railway would effectively kill their business. The profits must have been large enough to justify the expense of purchasing these boats?



**North-West Navigation Line.**

**FOR FORT ELLICE.**

THE STEAMER

**MARQUETTE**

Will be put on the ASSINIBOINE as soon as the ice goes out, and she will run as long as navigation continues, to

**FORT ELLICE,**

Calling at

Portage la Prairie,
Cypress River,
Souris River,
Grand Valley,
Oak River,
Arrow River, and
Bird Tail Creek.

Immigrants for Rock Lake vicinity will save time and money by taking this route to Cypress River.

Freight for all points on Little Saskatchewan will be warehoused at Grand Valley.

For Freight and Passenger rates apply at office, Merchant's Bank Block.
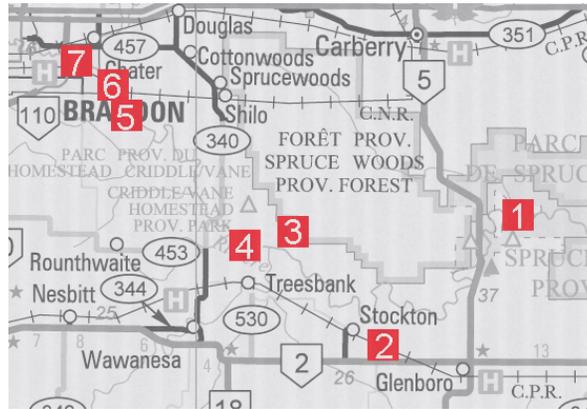
**A. McARTHUR,**
Agent.

april 7

This ad was in the Winnipeg Times on April 27,1880
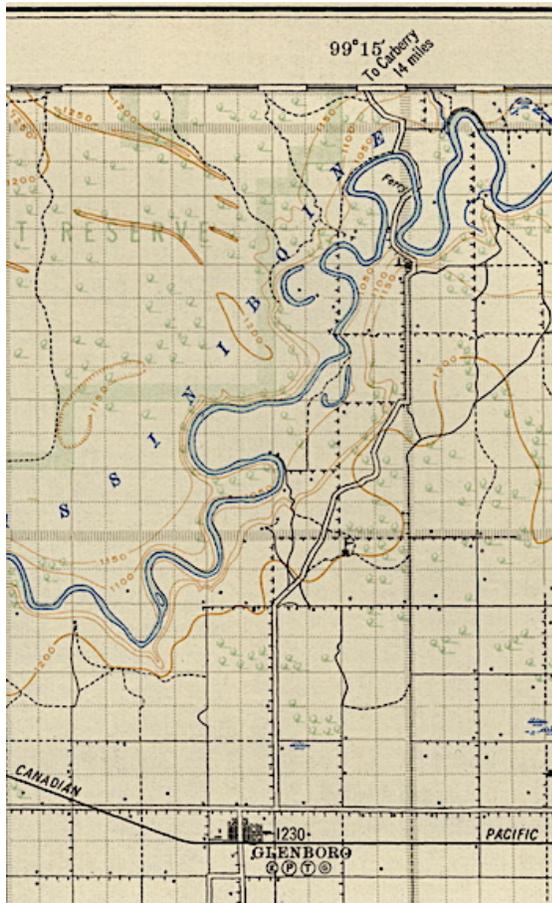
# The Assiniboine River

## Part 1: East of Brandon



1. Steel's Ferry - N49.69538, W99.20630

2. Stockton Ferry - N49.60605, W99.44181
3. Souris Mouth Ferry - N49.66643
NW99.569585W\
4. Treesbank Ferry - N49.66386, W99.60142

5. Currie's Landing Ferry - N49.80390,  W99.79460

6. The Brandon Rapids Crossing - N49.818202N 99.808192W

7. The Grand Valley (McVicar's) Ferry - 49.84879, W 99.89484

# Assiniboine River:  **Steel's Ferry**
N49.69538, W99.20630

Before 1965, if you were heading from Glenboro to Carberry by car, you would start by heading straight north for five kilometres. Then the road angled to the east, twisting a bit until it straightened and headed due north again.







*Steel's Ferry Road - A great place for a hike.*

*The site is now in Spruce Woods Provincial Park. A branch of the Great Trail passes nearby. Alex Steel's house and barn were still standing when I last visited. The road was passable, but we prefer to walk.*

Three kilometres later the road takes a steep dip into the Assiniboine Valley, and after another kilometre or so, there you are at the Assiniboine River, ready to cross on Steel's Ferry.

The road and ferry are clearly marked on this map from 1922. On the next clip, notice that another trail crosses the river about 8 km directly east of Steel's Ferry. As no mention of a ferry at this location appears in Local Histories we assume it was a convenient spot for a ford. There are many shallow spots on the Assiniboine from mid summer on.



*Steel's Ferry served as the main link for travellers heading north for over seventy years.*

When it was established, in 1892, it was called Johnson's Ferry. That was before Alex Steel, who had farmed in the region for some years, built a house nearby and moved in. For a time it was known as Nairn Crossing and was located a few 100 metres south of the Steel Farm.

*The view from the Steel's Ferry Overlook - the ferry would have been in about the centre of this shot.*

Bill Snart worked on the family farm nearby and also was in charge of the ferry for nineteen years beginning in 1923. It was a busy crossing on a well-travelled route.



*Bill Snart and Jack Abernethy at the cabin at Steel's Ferry in 1928*



*Chevrolet Coupe driven by Bill Snart on the ferry in 1928.*

## Lyall's Ferry

For a short time another ferry operated in the same vicinity.



Around 1910 William Lyall bought the SE Quarter of 14-8-14 for pasture. We have no information as to the dates Lyall's Ferry operated, but as it wasn't on the main road northwards from Glenboro, it likely served a local need.

## The First Bridge

By 1942 a bridge replaced the ferry but that effort was short lived, as a flood washed it away in 1943.



*The short-lived bridge at Steel's Crossing. Quite a few bridges had short life spans!*

In 1965 the "Ernest Thompson Seton Bridge" spanning the Assiniboine River was officially opened. With the opening of the bridge, Steel's Ferry was taken off and demolished.

# Assiniboine River: **Stockton Ferry**
N49.60605, W99.44181



The Municipality of South Cypress opened a ferry on the Assiniboine River in 1887, a year after the Manitoba South Western Colonization Railway reached Glenboro. It consisted of a wooden scow attached to a movable cable, which was angled across the river, allowing the current to pull the scow across. From mid-April to mid-November, it provided everyday transport for local residents and allowed grain to be hauled to the railway. An ice bridge replaced the ferry during the winter.

At that time the crossing, near where Stockton would soon be located, was on the most direct route to Brandon.
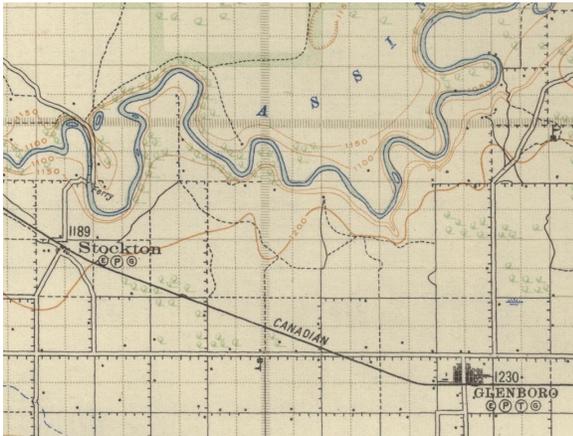


The crossing might well have been upgraded to a bridge if not for the fact that the Sunshine Highway, established in 1921, avoided a river crossing by taking a route through Wawanesa. It became the more popular route. When the time came to build a bridge north from Glenboro, a direct route to Carberry and Highway #1 was chosen.

In the spring of 1966 the Municipality purchased an electrically operated steel ferry, from the R.M. of Morris and had it moved to Stockton where it replaced the wooden ferry then in use

When the Treesbank Ferry upstream ceased operating that vessel was moved in to replace the older vessel. As of 2025 it is the only Municipal Ferry in southern Manitoba.

In 1989, the Manitoba Heritage Council placed a monument at the site



*The site viewed from the west side.*



*The ferry crossing to the NE side to pick up a passenger.*

*Operator Henry Hutlet at the controls in 2021.*

A Personal Note...

In 2021 the Stockton Ferry was the subject of a feature article in the Winnipeg Free Press. I had been to the site several times over the years - it is starting point for a great paddling expedition through beautiful country to Spruce Woods Provincial Park.

What I learned from the article was that the man currently in charge of the ferry was a person I knew from my school days. That prompted another visit, and I had a chat with a guy I hadn't seen in 50 years. We crossed on the ferry and explored the back roads that took us home to Brandon.

Although much of the traffic today comes from the farms north of the river, grid roads do lead all the way to Road 340, where a paved highway leads south to Wawanesa and north to Shilo. It a beautiful drive taking one past a number of Historic Sites - including Souris Mouth, the Criddle-Vane Park, and the original site of HBC Brandon House.

# Assiniboine River: **Souris Mouth**,
N49.66643, W99.56959

Near the junction of Road 43N and 93W a "Wildlife Management Area" sign alerts you to a trail through the woods heading south. That will take you to an overlook with a view of the mouth of the Souris River.



It is an iconic spot. Henry Youle Hind passed that way in his epic fact-finding mission in 1858.

His diary records this observation:

*"June 24. - Directed course towards the Assiniboine and Souris Forks, reaching the Assiniboine opposite the mouth of the Little Souris, 146 miles from Fort Garry at 5:40 a.m. Halted to make observations, graze the animals, and breakfast. Warned this morning to prepare for an attack by the Sioux. The smoke of two fires in the valley of the river indicating their presence. Grasshoppers very numerous and destructive to baggage and harness. Effected the crossing of the Assiniboine, after completing observations; swimming the horses, ferrying the baggage in canoes, and towing the carts and wagon over. Proceeded up the left bank of the Souris, camping four miles from its mouth. Mounted guard during the night to avoid a surprise by the Sioux."*



*The confluence of the Souris River with the Assiniboine. H. Hime, 1858*

His party included a photographer and a sketch artist. A person familiar with this image, who happened upon the spot by chance today, would know it instantly.

According to Hind's map they crossed the Assiniboine just upstream from the mouth of the Souris.

This was an important intersection for those travelling to homesteads in Southwest Manitoba. Whether on foot, by oxcart, or on the riverboats, they would often need to stop at the Land Titles Office located just to the southwest of the mouth of the Souris. A ferry was soon established near the Land Titles Office.
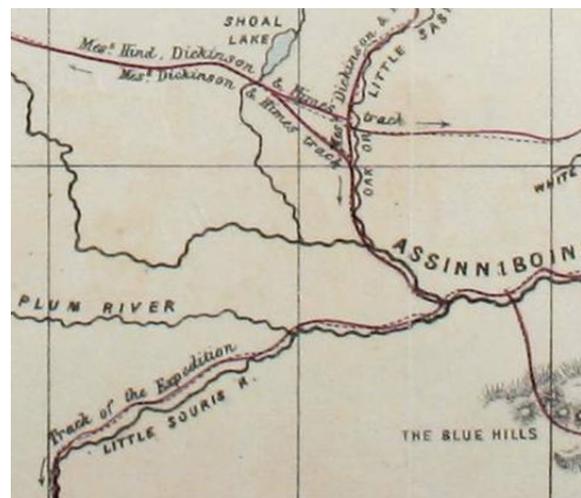


*Hind's map, 1858*

The crossing is mentioned in most of the region's Local Histories.

An example:

*"This anxious and impatient party's appreciation of natural beauty had worn thin by the time they reached the Land Office. The ferry across the river was a rickety, insecure affair; and during the shuttle service which it provided for the crossing one yoke of oxen found that being hauled across the swift stream on an few wobbly planks was more than their wavering bovine morale could endure, so they plunged into the water, almost overturning the ferry. Tom Leith was thrown into the stream but he was able to catch one of the oxen by the horns and throw himself across its back, as the frantic beast struck out for the shore, which they reached safely, cold, wet and thoroughly shaken but otherwise quite unharmed." (The People of Souris and Glenwood, p33)*



*The Land Titles Office site was home to the first Post Office south of the Assiniboine, called "Souris Mouth", and later changed to "Two Rivers."*



*A view from the north side of the Assiniboine. Photo by Dave August, 2001*

The banks across from the mouth of the Souris are steep, but a more gentle approach is available to the right where the ferry took one across to the Land Titles Office - somewhere on that cultivated field.

Travel patterns changed quickly. By 1882 settlers could take the train to Brandon and the Land Titles Office soon moved there. The riverboat service ended in 1885, and the route was then even much less travelled. In 1887 the building was moved to a nearby farm. The ferry remained for a few more years as the only crossing in the region, before being moved just a short distance upstream directly north of Treesbank.

# Assiniboine River: **Treesbank Ferry**
N49.66388, W99.60192

People on the south side of the Assiniboine in settlements such as Millford, Souris City and Glenboro used the ferry at Souris Mouth for the first decade until the railway created the town of Treesbank in 1891. Now mail was delivered to Treesbank, instead of Two Rivers. The ferry was moved upstream to NE17-8-16W and known as Clark's Crossing. In 1898-1899, the Municipality of South Cypress constructed a road, built a new ferry, and took over its operation.
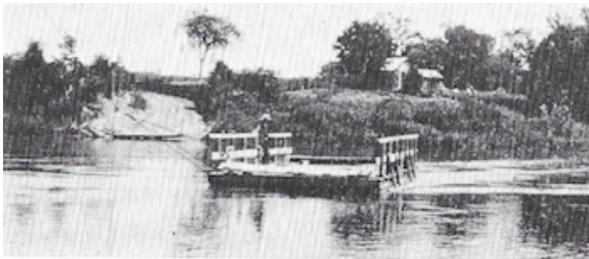


*The Treesbank Bank Ferry (Palmer's Ferry), 1913*

Before the ferry was established "crossing on the cable" was the only possible way, a method not advised for the faint-hearted or weak-muscled types.

An alternate, crossing on the ice, was equally precarious - perhaps more so, and required good judgment and agility, as the person crossing while the river broke up had to jump from one ice cake to another. Landing too near one edge could tip the person into the icy water. As the ice was constantly on the move, changing position in the river while also moving downstream, this method proved a challenging sport for the daring.

The ferry, or "scow" as it was usually termed then, provided its own share of hazards. On one occasion, a farmer taking a load of cattle across on it, met with an unexpected problem when the cattle moved suddenly over to one side, thereby unbalancing the ferry and throwing cattle and men into the river. All got ashore safely..
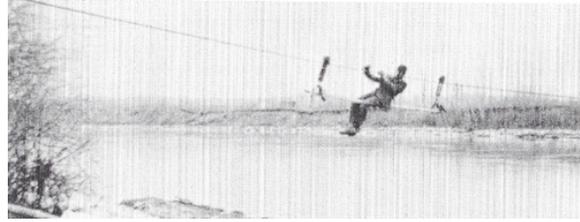


*"Crossing on the cable" at Treesbank Ferry, 1917.  Photo by Norman Criddle*

Percy Criddle who lived a few kilometres north of the river (Now the site of the Criddle - Vane Provincial Heritage Park.) urged the Municipality to build a bridge at the site.  He felt the bridge would benefit the communities on both sides of the river. The ferry approaches had to be constantly repaired and improved. Flooding spoiled them annually. Someone was needed to operate the ferry.

One new "scow", built and put in during the year of 1899, received the nickname of "Ferguson's Folly", as it was apparently urged on by a man of that name. It was built too short for its purpose, and caused much trouble before it could be corrected, and the ferry made operational again. Such measures, and the constant upkeep made Percy Criddle even more convinced that a bridge would have been the better answer.  But it wasn't to be.



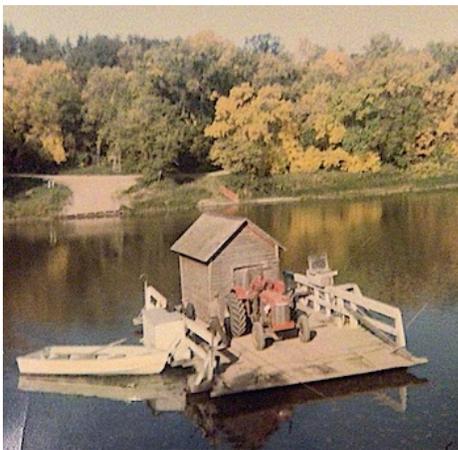Soon a serviceable, reliable, ferry was in operation.
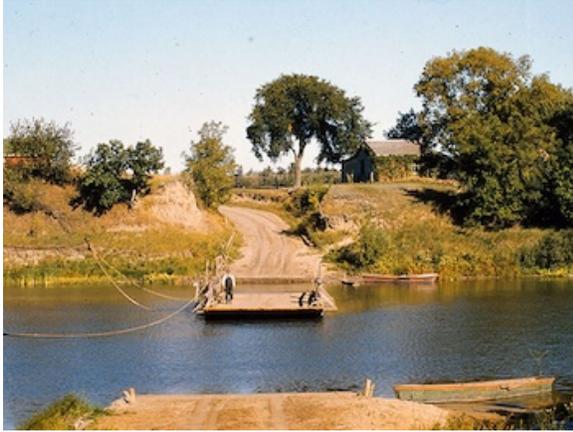
*In 1971 a new wooden ferry was built and electrically operated to replace the old Treesbank Ferry.*



*The site today.*

When the bridge opened 2½ miles upstream, in September 1989, this long-established crossing closed after 109 years of service.

**Treesbank Ferry - Through the years.**





*Indeed you could move almost anything on the ferry!*



*This last version of the Treesbank Ferry was moved to become the Stockton Ferry*

## Assiniboine River: **Curries Landing**

N49.80390, W99.79460 / SE 1-10-18

About ten kilometres east of Brandon on the Trans-Canada Highway, an alert traveler might see a sign noting "Currie's Landing Rd." marking a gravel road heading south. That trail has a bit of a story to tell.

In 1880 William Currie, who had come to Rapid City from St. Mary's Ontario in the previous year, bought a quarter section straddling the river east of Brandon, just below a well-known set of rapids.



*These islands mark the end of the Brandon Rapids. Mr. Currie's property was to the top left. (2001)*

Mr. Currie, initially for his own convenience, decided to establish a ferry. Two "dead men," consisting of two logs, were buried deeply in each bank. To these were attached wires for a pulley and a scow.

The area was soon to see a rush of settlers and his ferry became a vital spot on the trail west.  His location at the foot of the most lengthy and challenging rapids on the Assiniboine also presented another opportunity. Here, the Assiniboine, which gently twists and turns for most of its 1070 kilometres, makes a steep decline of over three metres in about a kilometre. For the first steamboats to ascend the Assiniboine it was the end of the line. And although enterprising captains did find ways to force their craft through those rapids, in lower water it remained the head of navigation.

That meant that it became the entranceway to the new land.



*Winnipeg Times, August 18, 1880*



*Taken from near the site of the NE landing of Currie's Ferry (2018)*

The family remained on this farm and operated the ferry until 1893 when Mr. Currie sold farm and ferry to Mr. Bill Coxe and moved his family to Brandon.

**Ferry:**
In 1884, the Municipality of Cornwallis subsidized Wm. Currie (1-10-18) to the amount of $40.00 for maintaining and operation of the Ferry; providing he kept the fees at the following:

Team of horses and one man    - one way - .25¢
   - return - .35¢
Buggy    - one way - .15¢
   - return - .25¢
Foot passengers    - each way - .10¢
Animals — all kinds — running loose - each way - .10¢ for one
each additional animal - .05¢

*(A clip from the Cornwallis History)*
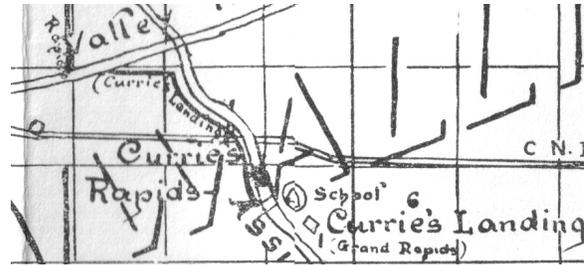


This clip shows a section of old trail from Brandon that ran along the southwest side of the river and crossed at the ferry. Such trails were never built up with a road bed. It would have been used until the ferry closed in 1893. I've walked along there a few times without ever seeing a sign.

*Brandon School Principal, Martin Kavanaugh created some excellent maps for his book, "The Assiniboine Basin".*
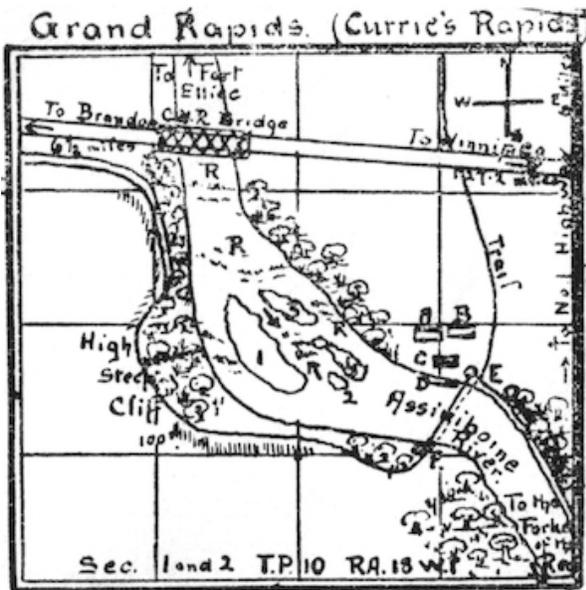


*This overview of the rapids shows the trail to and from Currie's Ferry. The islands in the middle of the rapids are depicted, likely as Mr. Kavanaugh would have seen them in the 1940's.*

# Assiniboine River: **Brandon Rapids Crossing**
N49.81820, W99.80819

In the later 1700's as the competing fur trade companies established a series of trading posts across the prairies, a network of trails naturally developed. Substantial traffic moved the fur eastward and the necessary supplies westward. As with the building of the railways that was to come later, selecting places to ford streams and/or establish ferries was done carefully.
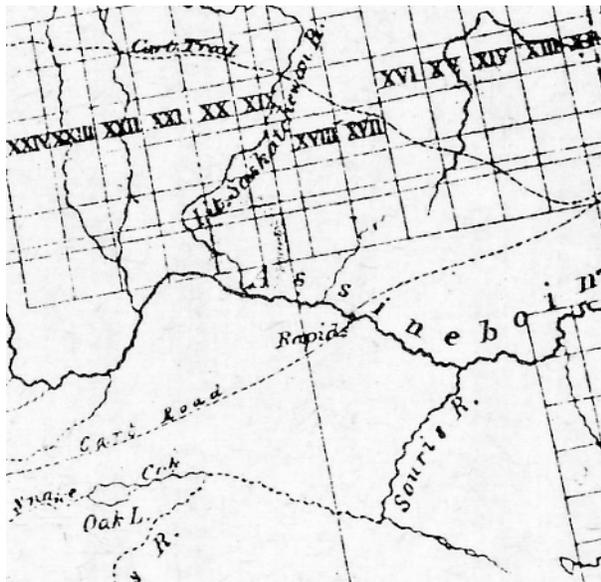


*In the Pre-Railroad days a network of cart trails served as the highway system.*



*The beginning of the Brandon Rapids.*

There is often a shallow point with a solid bottom just before rapids slip downward to the next river level. It is at points such as this that rivers can

be readily crossed.



*The old trail crossed just below the railway bridge.*

The Brandon Rapids, formerly called the" Grand Rapids" don't appear on modern maps but they are identified on virtually every map of southern Manitoba published in the nineteenth century. They were important then. They were a beginning point for Aboriginal and European traders heading south to trade at Mandan villages on the Missouri River. For Hudson's Bay men and Nor'Westers, the mile long rock bed and intermittent sand bars that composed the Rapids had to be negotiated by batteau crews as more traffic developed between the Forks and points further up the Assiniboine like Fort Ellice.



*The boundary between Treaty 1 and 2 Territories.*