

The Lena District

Adapted from, "Pioneer History of the Lena District", by Mrs. W. Lyons

Many are the stories told of the nights spent with Mennonites on the drive from Emerson to the Lena district. At that time (in the early 80's) Emerson was the end of the railway. The balance of the journey had to be made by ox team or horses, if the new settler was fortunate enough to possess that luxury.

Having to pass through the Mennonite settlement, many spent the night in their homes, where they always found a kind welcome, plenty to eat and a warm feather bed to keep the weary travellers warm.

I think we who at that time were children, will always remember the night spent on the way.

The new home was sighted with joy, even if it was only a sod shack. Some houses in this district were built from lumber drawn from Emerson, others were log built from logs cut in Turtle Mountain. We also depended on wood from these mountains to keep our fires burning.

In the spring of 1882, a young couple drove from the Emerson district by ox team, settling on a farm near the boundary. Their home was a sod shack with mother earth for floor. It was built from one-ply boards banked up on the outside with sods. As sod shack building was new to this young man, he did not build them properly; with the result the sods spread away from the lumber leaving a space between for the cold winter winds to get in and penetrate through the one ply walls.

Their bed and table were made from boards and nailed to the wall. The boards had previously been drawn from Emerson by ox team. In this shack, their first child was born.

Among the earliest settlers in this south district near the boundary line, were Mr. and Mrs. Henry Rowsom. Mr. Rowsom was a carpenter by trade and besides helping out in building, he made the coffins that held the early dead.

Mrs. Rowsom held the first private school in her home in 1886. The next summer, Mr. J. W. Magwood taught school in the old Barber house west of where Victoria Lake school now stands. Children drove for 5 miles to attend the classes.

In 1889 the Plum Hollow School was built. It was named after a district by that name in Leeds County, Ontario, where one of the first trustees attended school.



A display in Killarney's J.A.V. David Museum

Mr. W. Smallicombe was a tailor and drove over the whole district with his pony and buckboard, making suits and coats for the homesteaders. Many of the pioneers will remember his jolly laugh.

When Colin and Robert Finlayson came to Emerson, they had nothing but a trunk with their belongings in. They bought a team of young unbroken oxen, put a yoke on them, cut a plank in two, made a stone boat by nailing them together, hooked the oxen up to it, put their trunk on the planks and drove up to their homesteads, walking beside the team to urge them along.

The Finlayson family were the very first settlers in the Victoria Lake district, coming in 1881. Mrs. Finlayson was doctor and nurse combined for a number of years. We have many happy memories of the kind old lady coming to our homes to help relieve the sufferings of our dear ones. Her sons, Colin and William still live on their homesteads. Robert resides here in town.

T. S. Menarey of Cartwright was the first storekeeper. William Barber was a plasterer and bricklayer. He built chimneys and plastered houses over the whole district. Many of the pioneers will remember his buckskin ponies and greyhounds. He did a great deal to keep the wolves from getting troublesome. When a wolf was sighted word was, sent to “Bill” as he was then known. He lost no time in getting on the scene with his fleet ponies. Soon the wolf would be run down and killed.

Wat Nichol was a noted violinist in these days and whenever a dance was held, Wat would be invited to come along and bring his “fiddle”. Many are the pleasant evenings spent dancing to his music. His sons today furnish music for our old time dances, which the middle aged people still enjoy.

Fred Burrows opened a post office in his house one mile south of Lena in 1892. Up to that time the settlers had to drive to either Killarney, or St. John, N. D. for their mail. For 13 years, Mr. Burrow’s home was a community centre, where friends and neighbors met once or twice a week to get their mail and to talk of crops and weather. In 1935 the post office was moved to Langerfield's store, Lena.

The R. N. W. M. Police played a very important part in that south district in the early days. They patrolled the boundary every day, giving us a feeling of protection. Their red coat was a welcome sight to the lonely settler. While the early settler admired and honored the Mountie, the Indians were terrified of them and kept out of their way. They also did good work in stopping smuggling and horse stealing.



Police stations along the boundary.

In 1885, the time of the N. W. Rebellion, a “home guard” was formed, It consisted of farmers in the south district, and the object was to enable each man to protect his home and property from the prowling Indian, who was out to steal anything he could carry away. The government supplied to each man an Enfield rifle, bayonets and ammunition. Once a week they met in Wakopa for drill. It was a

good idea, as it furnished firearms for each home and taught the people the necessity of protecting their homes and property. When the Indian knew the white man was armed, he kept away from the homesteads. Those of us who were children in 1885, still fear and hate the Indian.

In the early 80's, religious services were held occasionally in farm homes, but after the Plum Hollow School was built, it became the church centre.



The Church

In 1904, the Lena branch Railway was built from Greenway through Lena and Wakopa and on to Deloraine, giving the farmers a market within 3 or 4 miles, making a vast difference to them.

A, B. Langenfield built the first general store. He handled all kinds of merchandise, in fact everything the farmer needed, saving them the long drive to town. Today this district is considered one of the most prosperous districts in Manitoba.



Lena – after the railway was abandoned.

What is Rattlesnake Pork?

The Watson family explained it this way....

People lived by the gun, off their gardens, and on salt pork fro Brandon. It was called Rattlesnake Pork, the reason being that pigs can kill rattlesnakes because poison can't get through fat.

Pancake Lake



Pancake Lake is situated along what used to be the Boundary Commission Trail east of Killarney. In the late 1870's the trail had become the main "highway" for settlers departing from Emerson for homesteads to the west. The spot was named by pioneer Harry Coulter, as he ate his dinner on its shoreline. In 1880, the federal government put up four portable shelters here for the convenience of travellers through the area, the RCMP, settlers, and Indigenous people.

Robert Finlayson squatted near Pancake Lake before he took his homestead, put up a shack, 18 by 22 feet, and operated a stopping house. Charles Bate recalled a time when thirty-four people were storm-stayed there for four days in 1882. One traveller insisted it was twenty below...in the shanty.

Apparently Pancakes were on the menu (or perhaps they were the menu). He had no stove so he cooked them over a fire, on top a stone.

Still, it was much appreciated by weary travellers and often mentioned in their accounts of travelling that route. One such traveller was C.W. Gordon, known to many by his pen name Ralph Connor. Long before he was a best selling author, Mr. Gordon was very well known Minister in southwestern Manitoba.

"Early April," wrote Dr. Gordon, "found me in my mission field in Southern Manitoba, rounding up the scattered settlers into congregations and Sunday Schools, organizing Bible classes, baseball teams, and singing classes. It was a glorious summer."

"The first Sabbath's work," he wrote in Knox College Monthly of February, 1886, "began at Chesterville, three miles from the boundary at 10 o'clock with Sabbath School and Bible class, immediately followed by service at 11, at which the attendance varied from twenty to fifty. After crossing a couple of streams and riding seven miles north, we reach Cartwright where, at five, Sabbath School, Bible class and services were held.



"The next Sabbath's work began with a ride of about sixteen miles straight west to Pancake Lake, where service was held at 10:30. After a hasty lunch and crossing two streams we reach Killarney - one of the prettiest spots in Southern Manitoba.

Sources

Personal Reminiscence: The Finlayson Family, The Harrison Family Garland, Aileen, Trails and Crossroads to Killarney

A Stranger Calls

As we have mentioned elsewhere, rural Manitoba was relatively crime free in pioneer times. That could be partly because the first farm families were not exactly flush with cash — in short, there might not have been a lot of valuables to attract thieves. At the same time the isolation that farm families experienced left them vulnerable and they felt it. And as with the episode of horse stealing recounted elsewhere, proximity to the US border was a factor.

Submitted by Anne Burrow

In those early days strangers often appeared at a farmer's door and asked for a night's lodging. No one was refused but sometimes a sleepless night would be the result if it happened to us. One late afternoon a man's request for food and shelter was granted, but as the evening advanced it became increasingly clear from his furtive movements and restless watchful eyes that all was not well. This uneasiness worried my parents so that when it was time for the evening chores my father requested to him that he might help. Outside the stranger walked around the house, the woodpile, granaries and stables., then carefully examined each horse. Finally, pointing to one he remarked that that one should be able to run. A negative reply was given.

During their absence Mother had put the children to bed in her room, also taking the gun and a box of ammunition. The stranger's bed was made up on the couch in the kitchen. Soon the light from the coal oil lamp was extinguished and all was quiet - but not for long as the uneasy man began his wanderings. Knocking on my parents' bedroom door he called, "Boss, Boss". No reply was made although both were awake and fully dressed. Then he walked to the foot of the stairs and said, "Come down. I know you're up there". When no reply was forthcoming the worried man opened the door and went outside. Returning to the house he'd lie down for a short time, then rise and follow the same procedure as before.

At last the long night came to an end. After breakfast the stranger removed two revolvers from his holster. These revolvers were unloaded, cleaned, reloaded and replaced. Then to the great relief of two anxious, weary persons the man continued on his way.

Later that day two American policemen came by. They were searching for a man who had killed a little boy in Virginia and had escaped custody. The description proved that it was the man we had befriended. The Americans kept out of sight when they arrived in Killarney, but suggested to some townsmen that if a man answering to the description should appear at the hotel he should be treated at the bar. This was done and soon the inebriated man was relieved of his weapons and handcuffed. The following day the three Americans returned to the U.S.A.

Church's Brickyard

In most Manitoba towns the first commercial buildings were of frame construction, erected quickly to meet immediate needs. Once the town was established, merchants often turned to brick construction or at least brick facing. It seemed more permanent, more substantial. Killarney's main street was once lined with such brick storefronts, and today quite few of them remain, sometimes with the bricks hidden under "modern" renovations.



Brick buildings line Broadway in the early days.

What really came in handy was a nearby supply of bricks, or more importantly, a good supply of suitable clay and a person who knew what to do with it.

In Killarney, that person was Robert Church.

Robert Church came with his parents to North America in 1858, first settling in New Jersey, where Robert, who had learned the brick-making trade at home in England.

After the death of two siblings, a doctor advised the family to move further inland where the climate was not so damp. They selected Toronto, where after twelve years and more tragedy (three young children died during a diphtheria epidemic) they came west. Arriving in Emerson, where they homesteaded, but more misfortune awaited them. Robert was assisting a sick neighbour when a doctor arrived and diagnosed smallpox. Robert had to be quarantined for three months.

That taken care of, Robert left his parents in Emerson and took a homestead in Fort Garry, but the very first year the Red River flooded his land and he decided that this was no place to try farming.

A bit of good luck seemed to make its appearance in the form of a stranger who offered to trade the flooded homestead for one 70 miles further west – ten miles south of the where Killarney would soon be located.

Little did he know that the flooded farm he left behind would one day be part of Pembina Highway. That might appear to be a rather noteworthy lost opportunity, but in any case the move to the Killarney area was the beginning of a reversal of fortune that was long overdue. Winnipeg's loss was Killarney's gain.

As he was beginning to establish his farming operation his brick-making experience came in handy when he noticed that the texture of the clay on his land was ideal for making bricks.

Lacking capital, It took some pioneer ingenuity and a lot of hard work to get things started.

The necessary equipment had to be made by hand, and the wood for firing had to be hauled from Turtle Mountain with a home-made sleigh. He had to creat his own lime kiln to made the necessary mortar for building.

Within a year he had made 20,000 bricks. By 1884 as settlers began building "real" houses, and each one needed a brick chimney or two. From that time until 1903 his bricks were used in most of the brick buildings in Killarney and area.

Robert and his family's place in the community was now well established. He served on the local school board, Mrs. Church served as a midwife. They supported the Methodist Church.

Sources: Personal Reminiscence: Church Family