Oak Ridge

Adapted from, “The Oak Ridge District“ by Mrs. Harriet David

The school district of Oak Ridge was formed and a school built during the year 1888. Mr. John Rigby known for many years as Captain Rigby called the first meeting for organization and afterwards built the school. All the neighbors turned out to draw lumber, some of which came from Brandon and some from a sawmill at old Wakopa. Miss Bate, still resident in Killarney, was our first teacher.

From a display in the J.A.V. David Museum.

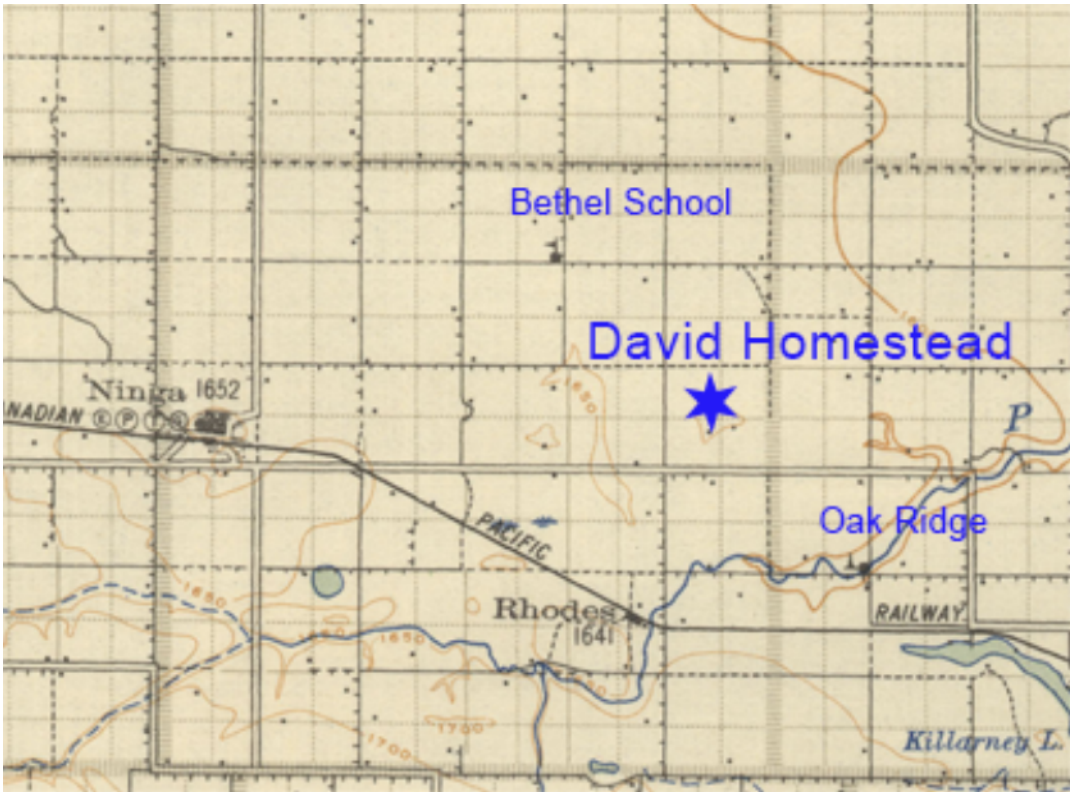
The David homestead

Though we had not a church in those early days, service was held in different homes.

The hardships of those early days, before the railroad came were many, the closest market was Brandon and the home store was Wakopa, where all goods had to be freighted in. The doctors were few and far between, and the nearest neighbor had often to fill in as best they could with kindness, perhaps instead of knowledge. However, the joy and fun of roaming the wide prairie, hunting geese and ducks, that were here in thousands or gathering fruit or even hunting up the latest homesteader to see where he came from or possibly if he needed a helping hand, all helped to make the days go past, and still makes many an old “pioneer” speak of the days as “the good old days." The good old ox, many an hour did he help pass away, if only trying to get him on a few miles for a load of wood, or to draw the family to Church.

The first year, one would break as many acres as they could, some planted potatoes on the pit they managed to break. Little by little, by hard work and patience we had enough land ready to put into crop. Hay was plentiful, so cattle and pigs were brought in. The houses around were built of logs, cut from oak or poplar trees, on the bank of the Pembina River. Most of the furniture was homemade and lucky for the wife if her husband had the ability to make what was needed. The stables were built of anything available, some straw, some sod and a few logs.

The following are a few experiences of the writer: We left Brandon with all our earthly possessions drawn by a team of horses with a pair of oxen tied on behind. After three days on the road we arrived at Section 24-3-18, unloaded the wagon, tied the horses and oxen to it and called it HOME. During the three days drive we had lots of time to look over the country. The sun was bright and warm, but the world looked lonely. While on the road I was given the lines and told to keep on the road, and drive for a change, while my brother and husband rode on the oxen, suddenly we came to water, it looked a lot but I had been told not to leave the road, so kept on. It got deeper and deeper, the horses lost their footing, but found it again, and got safely through, right on the road. 0n looking back, found that the boys on the oxen had been nearly drowned as the oxen had to swim. But such were the roads in those days, and we were all very optimistic for the future.



John Rigby

John Rigby, known as Captain Rigby came from Montreal where he had been captain of the steamers Princess and Dagmar, on the Ottawa River. He arrived in Emerson, on March 1882.

In a letter to his sister in England, dated July 23, ‘82, Mr. Rigby says: “While in Emerson we looked up our old friend Mr. McQueen, and found he had gone to church, so we made ourselves at home until his return. When he opened the door and saw the four of us sitting there he gave us a great hand shake and a royal welcome.

We were delayed in Emerson eight days, waiting for our baggage, which had been snowed up at St. Vincent, two miles south of Emerson, roads and trains were blocked in every direction, the storm being the most severe they had had all winter. When the storm cleared up we left for the Turtle Mountains, having bought our outfits. Mr. Vipond buying a team of oxen. But before we got to the night stopping place the wind got up and we had to travel the last mile through another blizzard. The oxen nearly played out. Next morning the wind had gone down and we continued on our way.

When we arrived in Wakopa, we learned the land guide had taken up land in the Oak Lake (Killarney) district, so we decided to go there and see him. We fortunately met him on the way and he told us the land around Oak Lake was not opened up for homesteading yet, but we could locate what suited us and squat on it. He also gave us the numbers of the vacant lots and showed us where to erect a tent in the woods near the lake, as there was no house where we could stay,

We found a place in the bush where the long grass was not covered with snow and with the oats we had the oxen got enough to eat. Between the wind, snow and sun, our faces were tanned and chapped so badly, that afterwards the skin peeled off. This condition continued until the end of April.

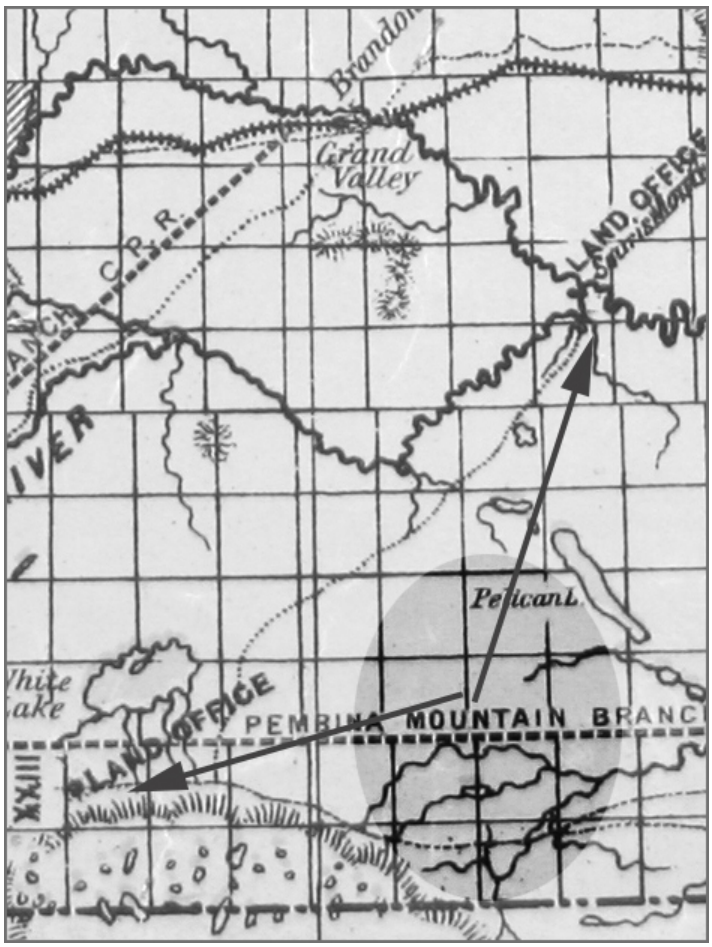
Two routes. The bottom maps shows the Boundary Commission Trail and a proposed railway. The top map shoes where the actual rail line went.

The next day we took compass and field glass and started out to l locate our homesteads. There was nothing to be seen but snow, not a tree, except on the banks of the small river that we crossed, and to‘ the east, 10 miles away, we could see a dark line that belted Pelican Lake. We found lots that suited us and decided to squat. We had a very tiresome walk back to our tent six miles through deep snow, which the sun had started to melt, sometimes going knee deep in the soft snow. Next morning we started back for our land, and had only got to the end of Oak Lake, going up on the ice, when it began to blow and snow from the north east. When Vipond and I reached our destination we could not see the others, so we turned back and found, them stuck in a hollow, They were digging a hole in the snow to make shelter for themselves and oxen for the night. We decided to go to the river and camp in the bush leaving the load where it was.

When we got to the valley, I looked around and saw smoke on the opposite slope about a mile east coming from a house, so we made for that and to our astonishment, found it the home of an Englishman and his family, Mr. C. Richards, where we found shelter for both ourselves and oxen for which we were very thankful, as we were drenched to the skin. We were made very welcome.

Next day we got to our land, and Vipond returned to Wakopa for a load of lumber and the balance of our things we had left when we came on to Oak Lake. I put up a tent and a shelter for the oxen. You can imagine what it was like to sleep in a tent with only, a small stove (16 in long) in the winter. We laid down like a trooper’s horse, boots and all went to sleep wet and got up wet, this taking place for weeks. When the spring floods came, it was almost as bad.

We got word on June 20th that the land was open for homesteads, and were at the land office, a distance of 45 miles, the next day at 2 p.m., entering for the land, paid our money and got back 10 miles, on our way that night, where we camped by the roadside as happy as kings. It removed quite a load from our minds as now we can go away for six months at a time without fear of losing the title to our land.



For most settlers, the Deloraine Land Office was closest, but still quite a trip.

We are now having the finest weather since spring came. The country all around assumes the richest garb. No one can form any idea of the beauty of these prairies in the summer unless they have seen them. Each month seems to bring forth its own peculiar flowers and the season its game. At times the country is swarmed with wild fowl of various kinds.

About the latter part of April, a kind of purple flower, in shape something like a snow drop. I do not know the names, but there are scores of varieties that I have never seen before. Now the prairies are covered with the wild rose, red and white, orange lilies, bluebells, marigolds and morning glories and in other places the grass is as high as my waist.

Entertainment & Culture

Reminiscence by the Priestley family

Lot has been written about how folks in the good old days "made their own fun." It's certainly a cliché, but that element of the pioneer experience is perhaps just as telling a point of contrast with today's world as are the stories of privation, hard work and loneliness.

Here Beth Priestly describes one aspect of the experience and offers some pertinent details….

Their (the Lillews) home was "open house", and their help prompt and generous, to all that needed it. Mother told of parties held there with all the neighborhood invited, and each contributed his "bit" to the entertainment. Our people all loved to sing, and my father's most popular number was "Clementine". Mr. Lillew, with his round rosy face, and large red moustache, was a true comedian. His favorite songs, in a rich Cockney accent, were "My Patent Hair-Brushin' Machine" and Put on Your Old Grey Bonnet" – which he later used to sing to me.

The Boyds got a harmonium – a small folding organ with foot pedals and a short keyboard. It produced a reedy tone, but they both played well, and made good use of it. It was often folded down and taken about with them to sing-songs. Later on we got a "Karn" organ with a bracket at each side of the music rack on which rested fancy coal-oil lamps filled with red coal oil for effect. Mother played well, and now the sing-songs and Sunday evening hymn session were often at our home.

English Roots

As a child Beth Priestley was particularly aware of her English roots. (She had a pony named "Punch".) Her memories remind us that the settler came from widely varied backgrounds and arrived with widely varying resources, both social and financial. They were, at first, predominately British in origin, but we must make a clear distinction between the British (English, Scottish & Irish) and the Canadians. The Canadians, were, of course from the same stock, but they had either been born in Canada (Upper Canada primarily) or had been well-established there. Both sides were well aware of the differences and there is no doubt that they were aware of those differences. Her memories bring that out clearly.
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The Boyds and ourselves made up a little colony of England, transplanted. Conversations usually turned to "home" and events all had shared there. We

children felt we knew all out English kin very well. Letters and papers were exchanged regularly, and huge, exciting boxes always arrived from Aunts and Uncles at Christmas. Though most of the plain shopping was done in Killarney, Mother sent to England for our "best things", and for our shoes, measuring our feet by standing us on sheets of paper and drawing round them. Neighbors visiting England often brought things back for us.

There was always a warm welcome in our home for anyone from the "old country" – the only requisite for admission that they be English and lonely. In those days a number of well-educated young men from good homes in England were often sent to Canada because of indiscreet behavior at home. Most did not take to farming well, and soon looked for more congenial work. Our house entertained its share of these young men, and when they moved on, sometimes left belongings with us for safekeeping. So it was we kept a violin for a young man who never returned for it; a revolver for one who did; and once a trunk of clothing and books, with the key, for Mother to send articles to him as called for. The clothing consisted of things he considered right for farming in Canada- heavy tailored whipcord breeches, leather leggings, boots and tweed jackets! Mother fed, washed and mended for them all. Father gave good advice, liberally sprinkled with sound religion.

Across the road from Lillew's farm lived Mr. Constantine and his son Walter, then a middle-aged man. They owned a cotton mill in Lancashire, had a fine home and good education. They suffered a business failure, and unable to face the humiliation, had come to Canada. Both were totally unfit for farming and did not succeed at it. They were among the lonely Englishmen who visited our home. Old Mr. Constantine died in poverty and distress. Walter went back to England, helped by Mr. Lillew, but returned after several years, and made his home with Camerons till his death.

Wildlife

The Jordan's were settlers from England. One of Alfred Jordan's chores was to haul water with a horse and stoneboat. As he was getting the water one day, he saw an attractive little animal, so he killed it and brought it back to the house. He stopped in front of the door, and Mrs. Widford rushed out crying, "Oh Alfred, you have killed a skunk." So Alfred was hurriedly banished to the granary with bath water and a change of clothing and had his dinner sitting out on the doorstep.

At first I was a bit taken aback at the line…"he saw an attractive little animal, so he killed it", but we have to remember that it was a different time, and killing animals was just a way of life.

Aside from that, this little episode does prompt some questions….

What is a stoneboat?

Do they not have skunks in England?

The answers:

Stoneboats, as I remember them, were heavy sleighs that were also used in the summer for heavy loads that a wheeled vehicle couldn't handle. We used ours to clean out the barn and haul things in the winter, but I think the name implies the original purpose.

Settlers from Ontario were pretty excited about the fact that the open prairie, unlike much of eastern farmland, was treeless. Starting a farm there involved clearing the land first. They soon found out that, although we didn't have many trees to impede the plow, some areas had plenty of rocks.

In the old days there were some farm tasks that were just a little bit less fun than the others. Picking stones was one of those tasks. It was like a new crop of stones grew each year.

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Skunks are not native to Europe. They do have polecats that although not closely related do also excrete a foul smelling liquid.