

Mapping Our Province

Surveyors have a stake in the history of Manitoba

Association members re-enact July, 1872 staking

By Bill Redekop

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TENBY - Few professions combined skill and adventure like early surveyors, whose staking launched the 1870s land rush of settlers into Western Canada.

Yet their role is rarely recognized.

Yesterday, the Association of Manitoba Land Surveyors gave themselves a pat on the back, re-enacting the July 4, 1872 staking of the northwest corner of Manitoba, when Manitoba was known as the "the postage stamp province" because of its small size.

"They couldn't have settled these lands without range wars if it wasn't for surveyors," said Gordon Kitchen, a recently retired surveyor and an organizer of yesterday's event.

And it was typical of the Canadian government to order that land be surveyed first, before opening the floodgates to European homesteaders. In the United States, people settled first and surveyors tried to sort it out after.

The surveyors' association, with some financial assistance from Heritage Manitoba, erected a plaque yesterday on the northwest corner of the former postage stamp province, about 180 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg. The original boundaries made up about six per cent of the area that's now called Manitoba, which underwent expansions in 1881 and 1912 to its current size.

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"It's decisive" The system was borrowed from the U.S., and differs from Ontario, where land is split into counties, and the Maritimes, which used another system altogether.

"It's the best system in the world. It's decisive. It's clear. There's no misunderstanding," said Kitchen.

Survey teams were composed of about 14 men: surveyors, chain men, bushcutters, and a cook. They would remain in the field from spring to fall. Most surveyors were civil engineers from England, Scotland, Ontario and

Quebec. The bushcutters felled trees all down the provincial boundary lines, burying a survey stake every half-mile, said surveying historian Al Hayward.

Surveyors provided critical intelligence to homesteaders beside boundaries.

They would list the type of soil (whether it was arable), the quality of the timber, the fish and wildlife, and the grade of the land, said Hayward. Settlers used the information to settle land sight unseen.

Some survey association members dressed in period costume yesterday, and erected a cross-poled canvas tent on the site, like one that used to house survey teams.

The surveyors' association has had some talks with provincial educators about having the role of surveyors included in the public school curriculum. "That's something we're hoping to correct," Kitchen said.

Incorporated in 1881, the Association of Manitoba Land Surveyors is the oldest such organization in Canada. It celebrates its 125th anniversary this year.

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From left, Gary Fraser, Samuel Doyle and Dewey Hoplock re-enact the 1872 staking of the northwest corner of Manitoba.

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