Manchester to Melita

The most successful of the Sourisford communities

Today Melita is the largest town in the Rural Municipality of Arthur. However, this was not always the case and in the early days of settlement it was not clear which service centres would thrive and flourish into important centers and which ones would not.

Sourisford was the first economic centre for settlers in the area. Situated beside the Boundary Commission Trail where it crossed the Souris River, Sourisford was not much more than a stopping place with a few services. As settlement spread northward from Sourisford, entrepreneurial homesteaders tried to establish and promote their own towns and villages, every one of which seemed "destined for success" and would become a "major centre" in the coming years of increased activity and settlement.

Manchester was the only one of these villages to survive to the present. Souris City (or Sourisapolis) on the east bank of the river, was promoted and subdivided, but nothing was ever built there. Dobbyn City, established by John Dobbyn, got as far as establishing a post office nearby but was drowned by flood waters from the Souris River the following spring.

In 1881, homesteader Dr. Sinclair had a quarter section of his land on the west side of the Souris River surveyed as a townsite. The plan of subdivision was registered with the Souris River Registry office in March of 1882 and lots were sold to buyers as far away as Winnipeg. In 1883 R. M. Graham started a store, which was quickly followed by another one, a blacksmith shop, an implement agency and a public school.

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The kink in the story came in 1884 when the townsfolk put together a petition to open a post office, and as the town was already known as Manchester, they proposed that name for their title of their post office. The postal depart-ment wrote back and informed them that Manchester, the name of a city in England, had already been adopted by a settlement in Ontario. They sent out a list of names for the townsfolk to choose from, none of which were to their liking.

Local citizens decided to meet after church the next Sunday to settle on a name. It just so happened that the Sunday School reading that day had been chapters 26 to 28 of Acts which describes the account of the apostle Paul's shipwreck on the island of Melita (now called Malta). Everyone agreed that the post office (and consequently the town itself) should be called Melita after this Bible story. The postal department agreed and the name was made official.

The Canadian Pacific Railway, heading southwest from Brandon, laid tracks through the area and arrived to serve Melita in 1891. A station was placed half a mile from Melita and named after the town. It didn't take long for the buildings and businesses to move the short distance to be alongside the railway for convenience and the increased traffic.

▼ *The Main Street of Melita, just after the town moved to be beside the railway.*