

# The Souris River

Spanning boundaries and centuries, the Souris River meanders through a landscape rich in history...

The Souris River: a whole chapter could very easily be written on the subject. The river's valley is scattered with evidence of geological events and human habitation, telling a story that crosses boundary lines and goes back thousands of years.

Here in Manitoba we see only about a quarter of the Souris River's length. The headwaters of this historic river begin in the Yellow Marshes of Saskatchewan, north of Weyburn. It then travels through southeastern Saskatchewan and northern North Dakota where it makes a giant U-turn (known as the Souris Loop) before entering Manitoba south of Melita. The Souris drops 480 meters in elevation by the time it empties into the Assiniboine River. The Assiniboine in turn meets

up with the Red River, whose waters eventually empty into Hudson Bay.

The Souris River is just under 700km long and drains an area of 60,400 square kilometres – most of the river's flow is a result of snow melt and spring rains.

Evidence of human occupation of the Souris River Valley dates back 12,500 years – any activity that existed before then was wiped out by the formation of the valley itself. At this time the glaciers were melting and leaving large bodies of meltwater in their wake. The Souris River acted as a spillway for Glacial Lake Souris as it drained to the northeast, creating the Souris

River Valley. The river valley is in some places a mile wide.

The river and its valley abound in resources that both animals and humans have taken full advantage of. It offers a reliable source of fresh water, shelter, game, wood and wild fruit. The river was witness to the activities of the large-game hunting societies of the Clovis and Folsom

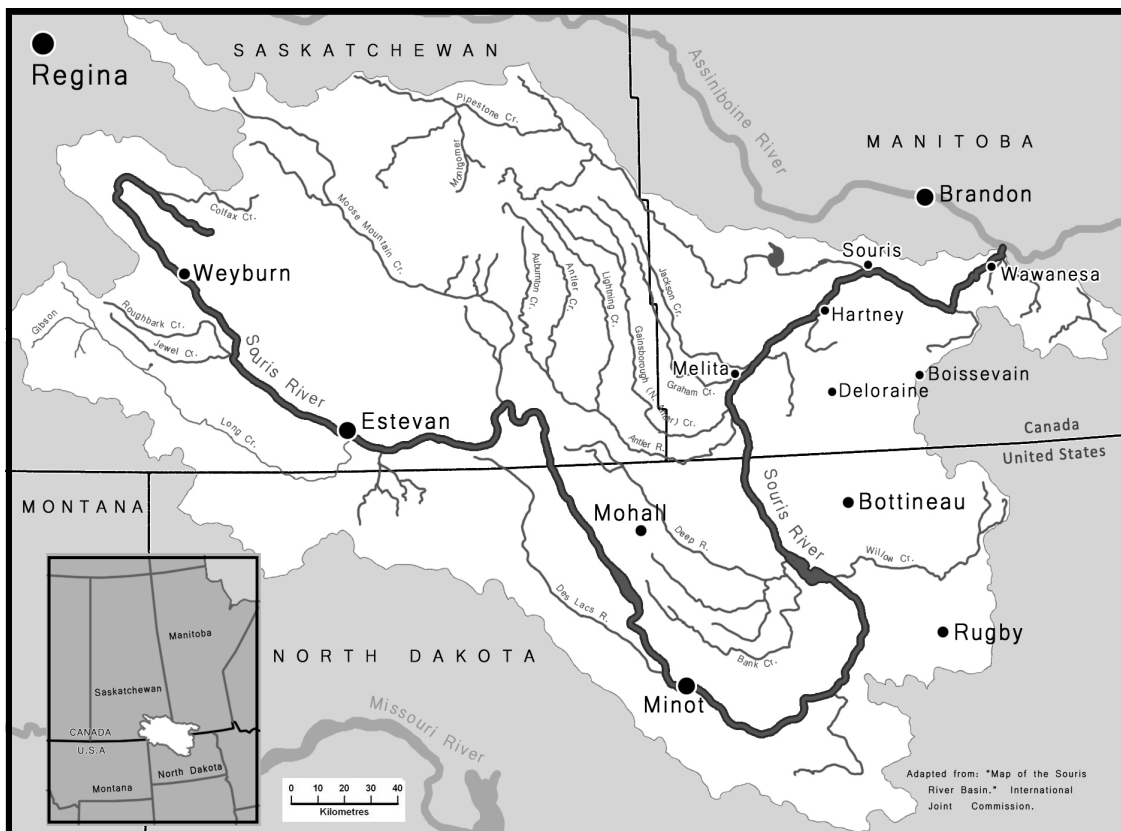
## Evidence of human occupation of the Souris River Valley dates back 12,500 years

people who closely following the receding glaciers. These and later peoples left evidence of their travels and habitations in the area – tipi rings, fireplaces, medicine wheels, surface graves

and stone circles are only some of the impressions that remain. Not only do these impressions reflect a diversity of cultural affiliations and time periods, they also occur with incredible frequency – a density of several sites per mile in some places.

The first European that is given credit for seeing the Souris River is

Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Verendrye. The explorer was working for French interests, trying to find a water route that would lead him to the western ocean. He established a fur trading fort at present-day Portage la Prairie (Fort la Reine) and travelled from there to Mandan villages on the Missouri River when he crossed the plains east of the Souris River and almost cer-



◀ The Souris River Watershed drains 60,400 km of land from Saskatchewan, Manitoba and North Dakota.



◀ A postcard from 1914 showing the Glen Ewen Bridge spanning the Souris River in Saskatchewan.

tainly laid eyes on the river itself.

On maps of the area drawn by La Verendrye, the Souris River is labelled as *La Riviere de l'Ouest* or "The River of the West." The river was later called Mouse River in the United States and Souris (pronounced soo-REE, French for "mouse") by French fur traders in Canada.

European fur traders began visiting the river in the late 1770s to take advantage of the fur bearing creatures that lived along its banks. The first fur post established on the river was Ash Fort in 1795 by the X.Y. Fur Trading Company. This fort was followed by some 18 other known forts operated by established fur companies (such as the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company) and many independent traders. The

## Antler Creeks

North and South Antler Creeks, running from the west, wind through deep valleys and empty little more than two miles apart into the Souris south of Melita. Dakota named these creeks He-ka-pa-wa-kpa "Head and Horns Creek," and they certainly have the appearance of the antlers of a deer. The South Antler Creek has been renamed in recent times to Gainsborough Creek.

river was also valued as a transportation route.

The fur trade thrived along the Souris River up until the 1860s. Around this time the young Dominion of Canada was turning its attention away from the industry of the fur trade and towards the agenda of settlement. During 1872, 1873 and 1874 the international boundary between Canada and the United States was marked and both countries began surveying the land, judging its suitability for agriculture and dividing it into the section-township-range system.

Settlement boomed in southwest Manitoba in 1882—a year which also saw the Souris River flood to highly inconvenient levels. This was the year in which the railway reached Brandon, providing an easy route of access for settlers. From Brandon, families and individuals found their way along one of many trails towards quarter sections of land they hoped to call their own.

For many, the flooded waters of the Souris River provided a daunting obstacle. There are numerous stories—anecdotes and tragedies alike—in early community histories

of the adventures pioneers had crossing the mighty river. It was not an easy task to get horses and a cart full of supplies across the raging torrent. Early settlers operated small ferries to help settlers coming after them get across. Well-known crossings in southwest Manitoba were at Sourisford, Melita and Lang's Crossing (northwest of Dunrae). For a short time in the early 1900s "Captain" Large operated a steam ship on the Souris River between Scotia, North Dakota and Napinka Manitoba.

In relatively recent years, several dams have been built in an attempt to control the flooding tendencies of the Souris River: Boundary, Rafferty and Alameda dams in Saskatchewan and Lake Darling dam in North Dakota. However, the Souris River has proven to defy human attempts to control it, as was demonstrated during the disastrous flood in the spring of 2011

which flooded many communities along the river's length and took out many bridges.

The Souris River is a commanding feature of southwest Manitoba. Whether flowing mildly between its banks or rising to threaten land and livelihood, it continues to be a central feature in the lives of those who live alongside it.

### Sources:

- International Joint Commission. "Map Fact Sheet: International Souris River Board." Retrieved 26 May 2011. <[http://www.ijc.org/re/pdf/fact\\_sheets/map.pdf](http://www.ijc.org/re/pdf/fact_sheets/map.pdf)>
- Paul R. Picha and Michael L. Gregg. "The Souris River Study Unit" (1990). *Historic Preservation in North Dakota, II: A Statewide Comprehensive Plan*. Retrieved 9 May 2011. <[http://history.nd.gov/hp/PDFInfo/11\\_Souris\\_River\\_Study\\_Unit.pdf](http://history.nd.gov/hp/PDFInfo/11_Souris_River_Study_Unit.pdf)>
- Persinger, Richard. "A Class III Cultural Resource Inventory of a Portion of the Upper Souris River Valley, North Dakota." Bismark: Cultural Research & Management Inc., 1989.