

The Fairford Channel

Catastrophic flooding around Lake Manitoba from late 1881 through early 1882 lead to calls for the federal government to do something to control the lake. The focus of attention fell logically on the only significant lake outlet, the Fairford River, and the possibility of “channel improvements” to increase its rate of flow during periods of high water. The shallowness of the original channel, which for thousands of years had restricted lake outflow, was such that flow ceased when the level fell below about 809 feet above sea level. The government undertook a survey in 1894 and again in 1897 before tendering the excavation of a supplementary channel at the river mouth in 1898.

Not everyone agreed that water level reductions were desirable. In late 1898, the commercial shipping interests on the lake, with Peter McArthur on the Whitemud River as the most active and vocal representative, opposed lowering the lake on the grounds that it would increase the difficulty of navigating the already shallow and treacherous lake. McArthur argued that any substantial reduction in lake level would impede movement of lumber, fish, and gypsum, because the lake would be rendered too shallow for barges. Despite McArthur’s objections, the government awarded a contract in late November 1898 to Francois Lemoine of Montreal, who had recently completed construction of the piers for a bridge over the Saskatchewan River in the fledgling city of Edmonton. The contract called for the excavation of a channel 200 feet wide, 1300 feet long, and five feet deep. Work commenced in July 1899 with the construction of a dredge, two scows and a tugboat on the Whitemud River.

These boats were used in late summer and early autumn to excavate an inlet channel through a sandbar near the outlet of the Fairford, to enable Lemoine to move the dredge to the site of the new channel. Very quickly, the fatal flaw of the dredge was revealed; the channel to be excavated was too shallow to float the dredge. When work resumed in April 1900, a coffer dam had been constructed to enable thirteen teams of horses pulling plows and scrapers to do the excavation work originally intended for the dredge. Work progressed slowly as the mixture of gravelly clay and boulders was moved under horse- and manpower. By the time the project was completed in September 1901, it had cost \$34,736 or 26% over the

original tender price. Lemoine would try unsuccessfully to recover the extra costs from the government.

Almost everyone agreed that the new channel was a failure at providing flood relief, although no one was quite sure why. There were rumors that the channel contractor had failed to remove a coffer dam or protection wall that impeded flow in the new channel, or that the Manitoba Gypsum Company had surreptitiously dumped rock in the outlet to raise the lake for its own navigation purposes. However, government engineers felt it was most likely that the channel simply provided too little additional capacity to cope with periods of extreme high water. No consensus was to emerge as debates and bureaucratic studies dragged on through the 1910s and ‘20s.

It is interesting that the debate about Lake Manitoba water levels continues into the 21st century, over one hundred years after the first attempt to bring the lake “under control.” Cottagers at Delta and Twin Lakes Beach continue to advocate for lower lake levels to prevent erosion of their properties, while those elsewhere want water levels high enough to give easier boat access to the lake. Will a solution be found that suits everyone, before another century goes by?

Delta Marsh History Initiative

You can help!

- provide photographs, reminiscences, family stories, or any other information pertaining to Delta
- let us know about people you know who have information about Delta
- contribute your time to help collect and organize information, contact people, and prepare a book on Delta history to be published in the upcoming year
- make a tax-deductible donation to help with costs of the project

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Gambling at Delta

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As a semi-secluded spot where gambling can be indulged in by the young men of our town, Delta is fast becoming notorious. During the past few weeks a number of young men of town, who belong to respectable families and in several instances who hold position of trust with our merchants and other business places, go out to Delta to spend Sunday and enjoy the fascinating sensation of crap shooting. For a time they worked "their little game" in secluded spots where they were unmolested by the campers, although it was well known what was going on. Later on, however, they became more bold, owing no doubt to the fact that no legal action was taken against them, until the climax was reached last Sunday, when crap shooting was indulged in by well known men in full view of almost everyone on the beach with impunity. Portagers were not the only offenders however, a couple of professional gamblers were also there and endeavored to throw out bait to our young innocents, and had it not been for the report of the theft of \$13, which will be referred to later on, no doubt they would have been more successful. These men had no doubt heard the way things were conducted out there and thought they could make a good thing. They came out on Saturday morning and tried to run the little game of being strangers and on Saturday evening started to throw dice for 25¢ a throw. This occurrence took place in Hy. Heyworth's boarding house, and was kept up until on the men had handed over \$60 to the other, part of which amount was contributed by a couple of unsophisticated Portage youths. Finally one of the two sharks stumped anyone in the room, which contained about ten Portagers, one Carberry man, and three Winnipeggers, to play for one dollar a throw until morning. This was done no doubt to find out who had money, as it is well known that considerable means would be required to go into such a game. No one took them up, however, and it was only a



The Cadham cottage at Delta is buffeted by fierce winds sweeping off Lake Manitoba, circa 1910. This photo is used courtesy of Mr. Fred J. Cadham.

short time until all were in bed, although it was not until after 2 o'clock in the morning before anyone could sleep, owing to the noise which was kept up by these men and several local youths who had partaken freely of the sowing bowl and were in an intoxicated condition.

When Sunday morning came Mr. Shannon, of the firm of Shannon & Co. of Carberry, found that he had been the victim of a daring robbery. Before retiring he had removed his money from his trousers and placed it in the inside pocket of his coat, placing the coat under his pillow in his bunk, which was just at the foot of the bunk occupied by the two strangers. On awakening in the morning he found that some one had slipped their hand into his pocket and taken about \$13. The coat having partially slipped from under the pillow, made it an easy matter for anyone to reach down and take the money.

No action could be taken in the matter, owing to the fact that filthy lucre is somewhat hard to identify, nevertheless there are grave suspicions as to the most probable thief.

All strangers were given a cool berth as soon as the news of the robbery became generally known, which no doubt resulted profitably to our young dead games, smart alecks.

This morning Mr. S. W. Woods evidently thought matters had gone far enough, and telegraphed chief Sturdy to meet the incoming train, but owing to the non-delivery of the message or some other cause he did not arrive at the depot in time to see the two men alight on the platform. Mr. Woods did not give up hope but went in search of Detective Cox, who later located the two strangers at the Bellevue and questioned them closely with the result that they handed over several pairs of dice and admitted being into a game. They were warned and allowed to proceed to Winnipeg on the Brandon local but it is not at all improbable that they will yet have to explain their movements yesterday.

This should be a warning to parents who permit their sons to go to Delta and spend Sunday in gambling and drunken revelry. It is enough that gambling should be carried on in town without its invading the beautiful resort on the lake shore. Nor will it be permitted there as several campers are justly indignant and assert that should anything of the kind occur again they will lay information against the guilty parties regardless of their families or their position. While anyone found selling liquor on the beach will be similarly dealt with.

With campers at Delta like Mr. Woods, who have the courage of their convictions, it will not be permitted to continue, for if it is continued, information will be laid, and some of scions will achieve an unenviable reputation in the police court. One good camper at Delta with the courage of his convictions is as good as a dozen policemen such as we have in town when it comes down to stamping out vice.