

Red River

http://www.ccqe.org/resources/ivers_of_canada/red_river/default.asp

The Passageway to the prairies

Cree name: Miscousipi, meaning 'Red Water River.'

Current official name: Red, a translation from the Cree name.

Source: Lake Traverse, North Dakota

Mouth: Lake Winnipeg

Direction of flow: north

Length : 877 kilometres

Main Characteristic: witness to the struggle for control of the West.

Because of its muddy bottom, its lazy flow, and its suddenly changing moods, Manitoba's Red River has earned its old nickname, the 'Mississippi of the North'.

The Red River and the mighty Mississippi River are siblings, starting near each other as trickles in the midwest of the United States. They are slow, murky and lazy - usually. But both rivers can flash into a rage that devastates the towns and cities that are in the way of their periodic spring floods. Other times they can almost dry up.

Before railways and highways were built, steam-powered, paddle-wheeled riverboats plied both the Red and the Mississippi Rivers. Today, both rivers are prized by fishers for the huge catfish that lurk in their dark, turbid depths.

At the end of the last ice age, the Red River flowed south, just like the Mississippi. But, when the glaciers receded, the Red River changed direction, flowing north into the depression created by the tremendous weight of the departed glaciers.

The Red River's origin is in the United States, in Lake Traverse on the border between Minnesota and North Dakota. It flows north through North Dakota and enters Canada at Emerson, Manitoba.

The Forks, in the centre of Winnipeg, where the Red joins its major tributary, the Assiniboine, was the main arena of the struggles for control of the Canadian West. Here, at The Forks, Natives met and mingled with Europeans. Europeans battled each other for control of the trade with Native trappers and hunters. French-Canadians claimed a share of life on the Prairies. Finally, waves of European immigrants arrived to turn the wild grasslands into rich, sprawling grain farms that would help feed the world.

The waves of newcomers and the cultural clashes that resulted made the Red River valley one of Canada's most important theatres in struggles for political and economic rights. Natives, Métis, and French-Canadians battled for cultural and property rights. Manitoba women were the first in Canada to demand and win the right to vote. Winnipeg saw the country's biggest battle between union organizers, businesses, and governments.

Today, the downtown banks of the Red are the site the most successful urban renewal in Canada. Century-old railway yards have been converted into public spaces for recreation and commerce.

Throughout its history the Red River, particularly at The Forks, has retained its role as a place of meeting and remaking the culture of the Canadian West.



Red River: Bison Hunters

http://www.ccgq.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/bison_hunters.asp

How the Métis dominated the bison hunt

Before the European fur trade, life on the interior plains centred on the huge, roaming herds of bison, or buffalo. Native hunters culled the herds individually for meat, bones, and hides. The aboriginal hunters hunted the big animals on foot. This difficult style of hunting did not pose any threat to the survival or size of the vast herds.

The introduction of horses to the continent by Spanish explorers gave the Native hunters a big advantage, but still, only enough bison were hunted to satisfy the needs of survival and modest comfort.

The European fur trade led to marriages between French trader men and Native women. This mixing of Native and French cultures produced a new group called Métis. The Métis became skilled trappers, traders, and bison hunters.

As a centre of Métis settlement through the peak of the European fur trade, St. Norbert was an important focal point of the bison hunt. In their role as bison hunters, the Métis gained their sense of identity as a people, and as a political and economic unit.

The bison hunt was fueled by the demand of European fur traders for hides and pemmican, a staple food made of coarse dried bison meat powder, melted fat, and Saskatoon berries. The hunt had evolved from one based on the need to survive to one driven by profit.

There were an estimated 50 million bison on the Prairie in 1800. The gun and an eager market for buffalo hides would push the great herds to the edge of extinction in less than a century.

Métis bison hunts were military-style expeditions. A Red River bison expedition consisted of an eight-kilometre long caravan of a hundred or more wooden Red River carts, drawn by horses or oxen. The carts were piled high with ammunition, axes, tents, and blankets. The expedition meandered in staggered formation to reduce dust clouds. The Métis also had to watch for Native hunters from the South, their rivals for control of the bison ranges.

Although the herds were huge on the Prairies, their movements were often unpredictable. There were good years and bad years for the hunt and plains grizzlies and wolves competed with the human predators for the herd. Since bulls and cows grazed separately and the massiveness of the bulls made them less mobile, they were usually on the front lines of bison defence.

When a bison herd was spotted, the caravan positioned itself downwind to avoid detection by the animals. Then, in a thunder of hoofbeats, hunters on horseback descended upon the wild-eyed bison. When the dust finally settled, many exhausted horses had lost their riders. But the fray could net as many as 1,700 dead bison.

By 1885 the bison herds had been destroyed and were virtually extinct. By the turn of the century, traditional Native and Métis society based on the bison hunt was also gone.

Red River: Red River Colony

http://www.ccge.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/red_river_colony.asp

A brave experiment in westward expansion

In 1812, the Hudson's Bay Company's handed over a huge tract of land to the Earl of Selkirk. The Scottish nobleman wanted the 187,000 square kilometre area to become an agricultural colony for Scottish and Irish settlers.

The settlement, called the Red River Colony, was accepted by Chief Peguis of the Saulteaux. Chief Peguis was in favour of the settlement because it would strengthen his alliance with the Hudson Bay Company against the Métis hunters. The Métis were displacing the Saulteaux as suppliers of bison meat and hides to the European fur traders.

For the Hudson's Bay Company, it was an opportunity to increase its influence at the expense of its bitter rival, the North West Company. The Hudson's Bay Company believed that a permanent settlement, dependent on the company for supplies and jobs, would strengthen its control over the whole territory.

For Thomas Douglas, the Earl of Selkirk, it was a way to save Scottish and Irish peasants from poverty. The peasants were being pushed off their farms back home by landowners converting their hillsides from food production to sheep pasture. Lord Selkirk's motives were not entirely unselfish. He was a major shareholder in the Hudson's Bay Company and wanted it to prosper at the expense of the North West Company.

But the North West Company fought back. Raiding parties forced settlers to flee their land. Their houses were burned and their crops trampled. In one battle, 21 people were killed.

Lord Selkirk then hired a force of 100 Swiss mercenary soldiers to protect the settlers. Selkirk gave land to the soldiers who were veterans of the War of 1812 between Canada and the United States. Their permanent presence brought security to the colony.

However, crop failures, plagues of grasshoppers, and devastating floods continued to torment the Red River Colony.

The eventual takeover of the North West Company by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821 meant the loss of jobs for hundreds of Métis hunters, boatsmen and cart drivers. Many unemployed Métis workers and their families collected in the colony and became the majority, but a majority without political power.

Slightly fewer in number, but favoured by the Hudson's Bay Company, were the so-called "Country-born" who were descendants of the British, Protestant fur traders and aboriginals. The Country-born would continue to side with the Company and, later, the government of Canada in disputes with the Métis.

The Red River Colony was never an agricultural or social success. In 1836, the few remaining Selkirk settlers gave up and handed the huge land tract back to the Hudson's Bay Company.

The company had a legal monopoly over business granted by the British government. Only the company was allowed to buy furs and sell goods within a huge territory covering much of what is now the Canadian West. To survive, the Métis, who had been allied to the defunct North West Company, started their own businesses and transportation services in an illegal competition with the Hudson's Bay Company.

By 1850, the Métis had established their own business network, independent of the Hudson's Bay Company's legal monopoly. Métis trains of Red River carts bypassed company stores entirely, exchanging goods directly with merchants in the United States.

The Red River Colony became part of the new province of Manitoba in 1870. The town site itself was officially incorporated as the City of Winnipeg in 1873.

Red River: Dig at the Forks

http://www.ccqe.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/dig_forks.asp

Unearthing Winnipeg's Human Heritage

During recent construction in downtown Winnipeg, archeologists found evidence that the area was a traditional meeting and trading place for aboriginal groups as long as 6,000 years ago. The location is called "The Forks" because it is where the Assiniboine River flows into the Red River.

There has been periodic flooding here ever since the disappearance of a huge glacial lake about 10,000 years ago. With each successive flood, a layer of silt and clay was deposited. The result was a sequence of preserved floors, dotted with the remains of aboriginal camps.

Archaeologist, Sid Kroker, unearthed charred materials from two 6,000-year old fire places. The trenches at The Forks also yielded history of the fur trade, the advent of the railway, waves of immigration, and the Industrial Age.

Evidence shows that the earliest inhabitants were Native people from the northeastern Boreal Forest. They camped at The Forks long before Europeans arrived. They built a trading economy, networking with other groups from the Upper Assiniboine River and present-day North Dakota. This exchange brought forest products to Southerners and prairie products to Northerners. The two rivers were canoe routes for the traders.

Besides hunting bison and small mammals, Native peoples fished for catfish, drumfish and suckers — all of which still populate the river. Natives also gathered shellfish, berries, and nuts, and developed methods of food-processing and preservation of their food.

Highly nutritious pemmican, made of dried bison meat, fat, and berries, was a dietary staple, along with fish. Animal hides were prepared for use as garments, bedding, and as lodge or tipi coverings. Plants were used for dyes, medicines, and for the manufacture of birch-bark baskets and nettle-fibre bags. Maple sugar, berries, nuts, and roots, such as the prairie turnip, were abundant.

Much later, other groups occupied the site. A French trading post, Fort Rouge, existed there from 1738 until 1749. North West Company traders made regular use of the area from the beginning of the 19th century. By this time, Métis families settled at The Forks, establishing farms along the banks of both rivers and becoming bison hunters employed by the North West Company.

During the summer of 1810, Fort Gibraltar was built at The Forks for the North West Company. A description of Fort Gibraltar, written by a workman tells us:

"... a wooden picketing, made of oak trees split in two, formed its enclose. Within said enclosure were built the house of the partner, two houses for the men, two stores, a blacksmith's shop, and a stable; there was also an ice-house with a watch-house over it; these houses were good log houses, large and inhabited."

In 1816, during one of the last bitter disputes between the North West Company and the Hudson Bay Company, rival fur trading empires, Fort Gibraltar was looted and burned. Glass trade beads and musket pellets have been unearthed from beneath the floor of the trading room. One theory about these items is that they were swept through the cracks of the roughly-cut floorboards.

In 1817, a new Fort Gibraltar was built. After the merger of the two fur-trading rivals, the Fort was renamed Fort Garry and became the fur trade's main administrative centre. It continued in operation until 1835, when Upper Fort Garry was built. Today, the Upper Fort Garry North Gate still stands near Broadway and Main Street in Winnipeg as a monument to the fur trade.

One of the most intriguing archeological finds was a footprint preserved in clay, dating from just before a catastrophic flood in 1826. Floodwaters deposited a thick layer of sand over the frozen soil to preserve a clay "snapshot" of a moccasined foot and a series of cattle and horse prints.

Narrow buggy tracks were also found. The animal tracks and wheel ruts suggest that a cart trail existed between Fort Gibraltar and the Red River Settlement before the 1826 flood. Another theory is that the tracks and prints were made by settlers and traders leaving the area as the flood waters rose. Whichever theory is true, Sid Kroker sensed the reality of these remains so strongly while digging, that he expected someone to tap him on the shoulder and say, "Get out of the road!" The discovery of these prints is unique in Canadian archaeology.

During the mid-1800s, an experimental farm was established at the settlement by the Hudson's Bay Company. Barns and stables were built just north of the river junction. But the farm was a dismal failure. By 1838, only eight hectares were cultivated. Most buildings were destroyed by a powerful flood in 1852.

The years from 1870 to 1888 saw a major increase in immigration to the area and the development of industry.

In 1888, a charter was granted to the Northern Pacific and Manitoba Railroad. The Hudson's Bay Company sold 20 acres to the railway for \$10,000 and construction began on a large repair shop and a roundhouse. The repair shop still stands and has been recycled as the new home of the Manitoba Children's Museum.

The railway has been the dominant industry at The Forks during the last century. The area became a dumping ground for the by-products of railway activities - cinders from steam locomotives and a cornucopia of interesting junk. The dumping of cinders as landfill provided a thick, protective layer for the archeological remains.

Red River: Duff's Ditch

http://www.ccqe.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/duffs_ditch.asp

A Drain for the flood plain

Years before the great flood of 1950, city engineers had calculated that a huge ditch could be dug around Winnipeg to divert floodwater around the city. The idea was scoffed at as too costly and the Manitoba government resisted taking action, even after the 1950 catastrophe.

In a campaign won partly on the promise of building flood protection, Duff Roblin was elected premier of Manitoba in 1958. Finally, in 1962 construction of the Floodway began. It was nicknamed "Duff's Ditch," after the premier who had been its biggest promoter.

Officially-named the Greater Winnipeg Floodway, the trench diverts floodwater around the city and turns it back into the river near Lockport, north of Winnipeg.

To construct the Floodway, new highway and railroad bridges had to be built over the future trench so that traffic could continue uninterrupted when the old roads and rail lines were demolished.

Then, a growling bulldozer gouged out the first chunk of prairie soil on October 6, 1962. More earth was excavated and moved than was excavated during the construction of the Panama Canal. Hundreds of parcels of land, mostly farms, had to be taken over by the government where the Floodway was to be built.

The sides of the 48-kilometre-long channel were neatly sloped and grassed. While much land that previously had been used for growing grain was sacrificed, some of it was later used to grow hay.

Duff's Ditch was in service by spring of 1969. And just in time, too. The overflow of the Red River in 1969 was equal to that of 1950 in severity, but Duff's Ditch protected every basement in Winnipeg from a single drop of floodwater. The cost of construction was 63 million dollars — at the time, a lot of money, but a bargain compared to the flood damage it has prevented since.

Red River: First Farmers

http://www.ccqe.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/first_farmers.asp

Aboriginal people pioneered grain growing

In 1832, Anglican missionary William Cockran tried to convert Red River Natives to Christianity and a life of farming. The plan failed. Cockran concluded that Natives were ill-suited for farming. Today, archeological investigations have proved the Anglican missionary to have been wrong.

Several thousand years before the arrival of European immigrants, many Native nations in North America had developed sophisticated farming methods. Four centuries before Europeans settled beside the Red River, Native people were agricultural pioneers in the valley.

Recent archaeological digs reveal a thriving Native farming site on the river's east bank at Lockport, 15 kilometres north of present-day Winnipeg. The origin and identity of this farming people are unknown.

It made sense to locate farm gardens near the river. Water for crop irrigation and the presence of fish to balance the diet were two obvious advantages. An added benefit of the Lockport site was the nutrient-rich layer of new soil left behind by receding flood waters each spring.

Clearing the land of tall, prairie grasses, trees, and brush required the quarrying and fashioning of stone knives and axes. Wooden digging sticks were used to break up the soil. Hoes made of wood and the shoulder blade of the bison were used to till the soil.

Corn was planted in small hillocks and arranged in rows one metre apart. Beans, squash, and flowers may also have been grown. A meal comprised of corn and beans would have provided Native families with the same complete protein as one containing meat.

By 2,000 years ago, corn was being grown as far east as the Atlantic seaboard and as far west as the Rocky Mountains. The Native farmers at Lockport developed a strain of corn that could mature in the typical 100-day growing season near the present-day Canadian border with the United States Midwest. The adaptation of corn to the long-day, short-season environment of the Red River Valley - from the plant's original short-day, long-season climate in Central America - testifies to the selective plant breeding skills of these first farmers.

By 700 years ago, farming techniques had spread throughout the continent. The population grew, thanks to more stable food supplies. But a severe drought 600 years ago parched the mid-continent. Many farming communities were forced to relocate to major river valleys where there was a reliable water supply. Then, 500 years ago, during the so-called Little Ice Age, summers became much shorter and cooler. With this climatic change, the pendulum swung back to hunting, fishing and food-gathering as the primary ways to survive. The skills of agriculture fell into disuse and were virtually forgotten.

Adapted from First Farmers in the Red River Valley, Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, 1994.

Red River: Fish Tales

http://www.ccge.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/fish_tales.asp

Chasing catfish to track the river's health

Red River Salmon was listed on the 1880 menu of the Pacific Hotel in Winnipeg. Although the fresh fish made an excellent meal, it was in fact catfish, not salmon.

Years ago, when killing was the way sportfishers kept score of their performances, anglers from as far south as Alabama would come to Manitoba to fish in the Red River. They went home in their pickup trucks packed with crushed ice and dead catfish.

Today, most sportfishers prefer to release their catches alive, perhaps keeping a picture of their catch as proof for their friends back home. But the Red River has maintained its reputation as the home of channel catfish with the biggest average size in the world. The city of Selkirk calls itself the "Catfish Capital of World."

Fork-tailed and powerful, channel catfish feed on minnows in the faster flows of the river.

Dr. Ken Stewart, a zoologist of the University of Manitoba, captures the Red's channel catfish, but not with a worm on a hook hanging from a bamboo pole. Stewart and his researchers catch the fish in nets set under the winter ice. They weigh them, measure them, and fit them with small but powerful radio transmitters before setting them free.

From low-flying aircraft, Stewart tracks the released fish by picking up signals from the radio transmitters attached to their backs. Some of the big catfish would travel from the United States border all the way to Lake Winnipeg in only three days.

Analyzing the health and size of the catfish population is a way to measure the overall quality of the river as a habitat for fish.

There are more than 50 species of fish in the Red, most of them the same as the fish found in the upper reaches of the Mississippi which starts in the same area but flows south.

The Red flows north, starting in the state of South Dakota and ending in Lake Winnipeg, nearly 900 kilometres later. The water is clean all the way to Winnipeg. Unfortunately, Winnipeg's sewer system is inadequate and often dumps raw sewage directly into the flow.

Still, the water is healthy enough downstream from Winnipeg to keep prized fishing spots in operation. Lockport, where Dr. Stewart conducts much of his research, is one of these fishing spots.

Red River: Just Plains Folks

http://www.ccge.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/just_plains_folks.asp

Winnipeg welcomes the world

Completion of the railway in 1885 to Vancouver from the ports of the Atlantic Ocean made Winnipeg the immigration gateway to the Canadian West.

European immigrants arrived by shipload at ports on the St. Lawrence River. After weeks spent in quarantine camps to ensure they were not suffering from contagious diseases such as smallpox, the immigrants were allowed to board trains and head westward.

Cheap land was the lure that the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Canadian government used to attract immigrants to the West. The railways wanted the West to grow to increase its business of moving people and freight. The government wanted to populate the vast Prairie with new Canadians to establish Canadian control in an area many Americans argued should be absorbed into the United States.

Their eyes sore and red from tiny coal cinders spewed by smoking locomotives, the immigrants arrived in Winnipeg, tired and dirty but full of hope for a new and better life. Many found new hope further west, on the wide-open Prairie. Their gift to their children and grandchildren would be today's prosperous farms that export their wheat, soybeans, mustard, and other grains around the world.

Some immigrants stayed in Winnipeg to practise the trades they had mastered in Europe. They divided the city into neighbourhoods based on national origin and economic class.

It would be hard for any one group to claim the status of first permanent occupants of the junction of the Red and the Assiniboine Rivers. Winnipeg has always been a refuge for new groups seeking prosperity and who, in the process, sometimes pushed aside previous occupants.

Since the last ice age, the fork of the Red and the Assiniboine has been a stopping point for nomadic Native communities seeking fish and shelter from the wide-open Prairie.

The first known permanent settlement in Winnipeg was a community of Native peoples, European adventurers, and Métis brought together by the fur trade.

Cree and Assiniboine

When the European fur traders arrived with their trinkets, guns, and diseases, the most common visitors to the river fork were Cree and Assiniboine people. Both Native communities were virtually destroyed by their first contact with European viruses and bacteria against which they had developed no immunity. By 1790, the area was essentially uninhabited.

Saulteaux

The first group migration to what is now Winnipeg was an expedition of Ojibwa from Ontario in search of more abundant fish and game. Led by Chief Peguis at the end of the 1700s, they came to be known as the Saulteaux in their new territory. The few remaining Cree and Assiniboine welcomed the newcomers as potential allies against their enemies, the Lakota from the South, who fought them for control of the grasslands and bison herd.

Scottish and Irish

Chief Peguis, in turn, welcomed the next immigrant wave — the Scottish and Irish settlers of Lord Selkirk in 1812. The Saulteaux alliance with the settlers of the new Red River Colony, and the Hudson's Bay Company,

grew stronger over the years as they fought off attacks sponsored by the rival fur-trader, the North West Company.

French-speaking Canadians

In 1818, a French-speaking priest from Quebec opened a tiny Roman Catholic mission at the new Red River Colony. Encouraged by Lord Selkirk in vain hope of settling the Métis into lives of farmers, the priest's mission of St. Boniface was the nucleus of what would become Canada's largest French-speaking, Roman Catholic community outside of Quebec. Attracted by the presence of St. Boniface, thousands of French-speaking settlers from Quebec, the northeastern United States, and France would later join the rush to settle the Prairies.

Ever since early settlement in St. Boniface, the survival and health of St. Boniface as a French-speaking community has been a continuing test of whether Canada can accommodate French-speaking communities outside Quebec.

The decision in 1890 by the government of Manitoba to reverse the terms of Manitoba's 1870 entry into Canada by abolishing the right to publicly-funded Catholic schools remains a major grievance of French-speaking Canadians today. Only the Roman Catholic church could afford to run public schools in French. By cutting government funding to the church-run schools in 1890, the provincial government effectively killed the hopes of French-speaking Canadians for equal treatment in the settlement of the Canadian West.

Métis and Country-born

When the Hudson's Bay Company bought out the North West Company in 1821, hundreds of Métis hunters and laborers lost their jobs and collected around the Red River Colony to seek work.

The Métis were French-speaking, Roman Catholic descendants of Native women and French fur traders. The word "Métis" comes from the French métissage, which means mixing of races.

The descendants of the marriages of Native women and English-speaking, Protestant fur traders were called "Country-born". Together, the two communities of mixed Native and European parentage quickly became the majority group in the Red River Colony after 1821.

Chief Peguis and his Saulteaux quickly lost political and economic power to the Métis and Country-born when the conversion of the grasslands from wilderness to agriculture resulted in the Saulteaux no longer being able to feed themselves on game. Eventually, the Saulteaux were forced to give in to the urgings of the Anglican church that they give up their traditional ways to learn how to farm and send their children to white-run schools.

Today, band societies in the Red River basin are organized and usually located a significant distance from urban life. Indian institutions, designed to help protect the quality of life for Natives migrating to towns, still require further development. As a consequence, there is not a lot of successful urban adaptation on the part of Native band members.

Europeans

After Manitoba became part of Canada in 1870, and before the railway reached Winnipeg, European settlers arrived by paddle boats along the Red River. They had travelled by ship to the United States East Coast and then by train to the Midwest. There, they boarded the sternwheel paddle boats that plied the waterway from North Dakota to Winnipeg. Immigration sheds were built at the docks in Winnipeg to process the immigrants and send them on their way into the West.

Once the railway reached Winnipeg and beyond to the prairie grasslands, immigration changed from a trickle of individual adventurers to a mass rush for cheap land and a new life. As a result, the Métis and Country-born communities lost their jobs, businesses, and often their land to the newcomers.

Many of the immigrants, already poor in their homelands, arrived in Winnipeg without money to continue their journey westward. A large shanty town grew beside the railway station. Called "The Flats," it became home to an impoverished population of immigrants from Europe and Russia. Most of the shanty-town dwellers were from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Russia.

Other waves of immigrants passed through Winnipeg to take up their land purchases. Icelanders carried on north to settle near Lake Winnipeg. Ukrainians moved inland to farm the plains similar to those of their homeland.

The last big wave of immigration followed World War II when thousands of people fled their devastated countries.

Eventually, most of the European immigrants succeeded in building the base for healthy, educated, and prosperous lives for themselves and their children. In the process, they reaffirmed the role of the junction of the Red and the Assiniboine rivers as a mid-continent place of meeting.

Red River: Trails to Rails

http://www.ccge.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/trails_rails.asp

Railways replace wagon routes

Before the creation of Canada in 1867, riverboats and trains of creaking, ox-drawn Red River carts hauled freight between the United States and Winnipeg. Trade was developing from South to North, and many Americans were settling on Canadian territory.

It seemed likely that American trade and immigration would lead inevitably to the absorption of the Canadian West into the aggressively-expanding United States. To save the West from the threat of American takeover, the Canadian government promoted the laying of a railway from sea to sea.

Through grants of land and money, the government encouraged the privately-owned Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) company to lay track across the Prairie and over the Rocky Mountains to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

The tracks arrived in Winnipeg in 1879. Then, still a rough frontier town, Winnipeg became the transportation gateway to the West.

To create customers for its new railway, the Canadian Pacific promoted immigration from Europe and eastern Canada to the West. People and the goods they needed would be carried westward. Agricultural products and livestock would be freighted east, back to the markets of Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes.

The government in Ottawa promised the CPR a monopoly in the West and a guarantee that fares and freight rates would stay high. For many Westerners, the CPR became a symbol for exploitation of the West by eastern business and political powers.

In defiance of the national government and the CPR, the young government of Manitoba authorized construction of a competing railway, the Northern Pacific and Manitoba. This railway was taken over by the Canadian Northern which made downtown Winnipeg its main terminal.

The bankruptcy of several of the CPR's competitors in 1923 resulted in the federal government creating Canadian National Railways. The CNR was the first strong, national competitor to the CPR and this increased the importance of downtown Winnipeg as the railway hub of the West.

Red River: Prairie Sea

http://www.ccqe.org/resources/ivers_of_canada/red_river/trails_rails.asp

The Great Flood of 1950

The huge drainage basin of the Red River will always be an inland, prairie sea waiting to happen.

The shallow valley and broad expanse of flat land beyond the river's basin simply cannot contain much rising floodwater. The drop in elevation from where the river enters Canada to its discharge into Lake Winnipeg is a mere 60 metres — not enough to carve a deep valley channel. Agriculture has made the situation worse by eliminating natural prairie grasses that could hold back rainwater and snowmelt. The heavy clay soil itself absorbs very little runoff.

Finally, the Red flows northward, from the relatively warmer states of South and North Dakota into the colder climes of Manitoba. The consequence is that the early spring runoff — water from rain and melted snow in the South — is likely to bump against ice jams lingering in the late winter of Manitoba.

The worst flood of all in 1950 was not because the waters were any higher than they were in the big floods of earlier years. The original Red River Colony had been wiped out by a flood in 1826, and another flood in 1852 forced the evacuation of Winnipeg. The cause of the increased damage in 1950 was not the river itself. The damage was really the responsibility of property developers and governments that had spread the city across the river's natural floodplain, placing more buildings in the path of disaster. Before 1950, it had been almost 100 years since Winnipeg last had been submerged, and people, forgetting about the river's ability to flood, were more concerned by the prospect for financial gain.

There was not even a flood disaster plan in place that spring of 1950 when natural conditions conspired to swell the Red River over its modest banks in southern Manitoba.

Heavy rains had soaked the valley the previous fall. Snow was late in arriving, leaving the ground unprotected from the bitter cold. Thick layers of frozen muck would last until spring, leaving the meltwater no place to go except into southern Manitoba's rivers.

In mid-April a surge of warm air invaded the region. The sudden break up of ice in tributary creeks caused massive jams in the Red River. Fast-rising floods spread through farms and villages south of Winnipeg.

Fear hit Winnipeg when news that a wall of water one metre high had flashed through the town of Morris at 3 a.m., forcing evacuation of the entire population. The Canadian army deployed amphibious troop carriers to move people to safety. Farmers without routes of escape killed their livestock to save them from starvation or drowning.

Students joined adult volunteers in raising improvised dikes made of cloth sacks filled with sand.

When the waters finally subsided, people returned to homes, offices, and factories that were no longer safe to enter. The devastation finally convinced the population and its politicians that Winnipeg had to adjust to the reality of life in a floodplain.

Red River: Traders

http://www.ccqe.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/traders.asp

Economic exchanges among First Nations

Long before Europeans arrived, an extensive trade network already existed in North America. Native peoples of North America traded food supplies and special stones used to make weapons and tools. Obsidian from present-day British Columbia, for example, could be chipped to a cutting edge sharper than today's stainless-steel surgical tools.

The nomadic bison hunters of Manitoba traded their hides for the corn grown by more sedentary communities in the present-day Midwest of the United States. While such trades were not essential to survival, since each side could have easily have been self-sufficient, the contact enlarged the products available to them and developed relations between the communities.

Native peoples congregated periodically for trade fairs. Present-day Wyoming was the site of major continental trade gatherings which were as much social and political reunions as commercial events.

The arrival of fur buyers from Europe changed aboriginal trading. The fur trade no longer was a means of acquiring basic necessities and unavailable goods as well as a way of maintaining peaceful contact among different Native nations. The European traders gave the Natives guns, knives, trinkets, and alcohol in exchange for animal pelts and hides.

The French adventurer, Sieur de la Vérendrye, was the first European to arrive in the Red River valley in the 1730s. By the end of that century, the European fur traders were competing intensely, often violently, with each other for the pelts delivered by the Native trappers.

European traders also brought epidemics of disease that wiped out whole communities. The fur trade also destroyed the Native economies based on survival and self-sufficiency. Instead of killing only what they could consume themselves, Native trappers and hunters now killed as many animals as they could to deliver to the well-organized European fur companies.

The indigenous peoples became dependent on European goods. In exchange, they surrendered their freedom, their health, and their traditional skills for survival.

The Hudson's Bay Company, which shipped its pelts out through Hudson Bay, bitterly defended its territory against the arrival of the North West Company. Both were run by Scottish merchants who used the Native and Métis communities as providers of furs and hides, workers, soldiers and as customers for the company stores.

The North West Company built a trading post, Fort Gibraltar, in 1810, at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers — today the heart of downtown Winnipeg. The North West Company allied itself with the growing population of Métis hunters. The Métis eventually replaced the Plains Cree and Assiniboine peoples as suppliers of pemmican and labour to the North West Company.

The Native populations were more allied with the rival Hudson's Bay Company. Chief Peguis of the Saulteaux people signed a treaty with the Scottish Lord Selkirk allowing him to build a settlement in 1812, backed by the Hudson's Bay Company. Selkirk's settlement was just north of the North West Company's Fort Gibraltar.

The rivalry pitting the Hudson's Bay Company and its Saulteaux allies against the North West Company and the Métis led to the violent destruction of Fort Gibraltar in 1816. The North West Company rebuilt Fort Gibraltar but the fur-trade war ended in 1821 when the two companies were united in a merger ordered by the British government.

The new Hudson's Bay Company took over the North West Company post and renamed it Fort Garry. Later, in 1832, the company built Lower Fort Garry downstream in an attempt to distance its trade operations from the settlement growing up around the original fort. Ultimately, Lower Fort Garry was a failure, but it did move the focal point of the fur trade away from the pioneer town developing at the junction of the Red and the Assiniboine.

Today Winnipeg continues as a major world trading centre for prairie products. It is the headquarters for the Canadian Wheat Board, the government marketing agency that sells Canadian grain to buyers around the world.

Red River: Uprising

http://www.ccqe.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/uprising.asp

Louis Riel leads the Red River Rebellion

The British colonies of eastern North America united in 1867. They became provinces of the new country of Canada. The new country's leaders immediately prepared to take over the Hudson's Bay Company lands west of Ontario.

But when the Red River Métis learned that the government of Canada was not going to let the Métis keep their property, they organized to fight the Canadian takeover. A group of Métis met in their parish church in St. Norbert in 1869. They elected a national Métis committee, with Louis Riel as its leader.

The Métis descended from the marriages of French-speaking fur traders and First Nations women.

Riel led a band of 500 Métis militia soldiers to invade the Hudson Bay Company's Upper Fort Garry in Winnipeg. The Métis declared themselves to be a provisional government for the territory. While Riel held the fort, keeping non-Métis people prisoner there, St. Norbert's parish priest went to Ottawa to negotiate the entry of Manitoba into Confederation — with a guarantee of Métis property and language rights.

The negotiations ended with the passage of the Manitoba Act in 1870. The Manitoba Act recognized Métis rights. But, before the news could reach Manitoba, Riel ordered the execution of an unruly English-speaking prisoner from Ontario. This act would be Riel's fatal error.

Following Thomas Scott's execution, Ottawa sent soldiers to take control from Riel's militia. Public outrage in Ontario over the execution of the prisoner meant the government would not agree to the Métis request for an amnesty from prosecution. As the Canadian troops approached, Riel fled into exile in the United States.

Riel was elected to the new Canadian parliament by his Métis supporters three times. But, because he was wanted for Scott's murder, he did not return to Canada to take his seat. Without that killing, Riel might have become a respected statesman, able to defend the rights his people had won in the Manitoba Act.

Instead, those rights were ignored. Métis claims to land were denied. The official status of their French language was revoked. The Métis declined in power and many of them moved westward in search of greater freedom and prosperity.

Riel finally returned to Canada in 1884 to take charge of another Métis uprising in Saskatchewan. This time, he was captured and hanged. His execution increased his stature as a hero for many French-speaking Canadians across the country.

In 1992, the provincial government formally recognized Louis Riel as a founding father of Manitoba. But the controversy continued over the statue raised to honour him. His supporters protested that the statue of a partially-clothed Riel was an indignity. So, in 1996, a new statue of Louis Riel, fully-clothed, was put in place.

Red River: Wagons West

http://www.ccqe.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/red_river/uprising.asp

Red River carts tracked the grasslands

The Red River cart has become the historic symbol of the settlement of Manitoba. The cart, drawn by oxen, provided transportation to bison hunters, merchants, and settlers in the Red River Valley.

Based on carts commonly used in Scotland, the Red River cart was made entirely of wood and leather. Because it had no metal parts, it could easily be repaired and could be floated across streams.

The design was adopted from Lord Selkirk's settlers by their neighbors, the Métis hunters, who used the carts to carry bison meat and hides home from the interior plains.

When they lost their main market with the takeover of the North West Company by the Hudson's Bay Company, the Métis employed their Red River carts to set up a freight business between present-day Winnipeg and St. Paul, Minnesota.

The Métis cart trains operated in violation of the Hudson's Bay Company's business monopoly. The Métis called themselves "free-traders". The company treated them as smugglers. Ultimately, the Hudson's Bay Company gave up its attempts to enforce its monopoly.

The Red River cart trains were driven out of business by the steam-driven riverboats which linked St. Paul and Winnipeg in half the time the carts had taken.

In 1859, the first steamboat surprised the townsfolk at Winnipeg with a loud bellow from its steam whistle. This first riverboat on the Red River had actually come from the Mississippi River. It had been hauled over the snow from the Mississippi and then relaunched in the Red River, earning a \$2,000 prize offered by the merchants of St. Paul, Minnesota for the first riverboat service on the Canada-bound river.