

Like playing hockey with an invisible opponent, folks would set up villages all confident-like, only to be blindsided by the railroad. In the 1880s, before the rail lines chose their routes, many small communities were started – only to be body-checked out of the game.

Sourisford, for example, situated at a river crossing, was the natural place for the first store in the Melita-Pierson area. But the railway engineers chose to lay track through the river crossing to the north. So Sourisford died, and Manchester lived.

Manchester? You don't know of it? It's wrapped up with my story, so let me introduce myself. Robert Graham.

It was 1881 and tracks had just arrived in Brandon, but nothing had happened down here. I took a chance – and it paid off. A certain Doctor Sinclair had taken a quarter section on the west side of the Souris River. Being optimistic, he surveyed the quarter as a townsite and had it registered in Spring 1882.



From an ad in the Winnipeg Sun, Jan.31, 1882.

Investors from as far away as Winnipeg bought lots. So, I jumped into the game. Our team was finding its stride, so I even built a store in the village we were grandly calling it

'Manchester'. Soon another store was built, and then a blacksmith shop, an implement agency and a public school. This was looking promising!

Every village needs a post office. So, I obliged, petitioning the postal department to host the Manchester post office. That's when an unwanted referee hit the ice.

The postal department informed us that 'Manchester', was already taken by a settlement in Ontario. We didn't care! We liked our name! We were using it proudly! Who would confuse our village with a fancy-pants place in Ontario? To add insult to injury, they sent out a list of names to choose from! None, of course, were acceptable. Thankfully, the buzzer went, and we got off the ice for a rest.

Since we had only one meeting place, we met in the church after next Sunday's service - to settle the matter once and for all.

As it happened, the Bible reading had been from the Book of Acts, where Paul gets shipwrecked on Malta. Over time the island had become known as Melita – and depicted as a woman of war. The crowd cheered!

Manchester became Melita and blessings came our way. The postal department agreed with our name - and - the railroad came through a few years later. And me? I served as postmaster for 28 years, and Mayor for 4. But wasn't asked to be hockey coach once. Hmph. I'd have done well at that too.

Betty Sawatzky and David Neufeld adapted 'What Happened to Manchester?' from a story written for Vantage Points 2.