

The Legend of Wakopa

A VANTAGE POINTS FLASHBACK

I arrived on the scene a couple years later, so some stories had already become legend. This place, Wakopa, was unbroken prairie in 1877. Now, 1882, it's a booming place. Amazing what a few stalwart souls can accomplish - a paradise for the business minded. I'm Mary Reeves – living in our one room log home at the northeast foot of Turtle Mountain. SW 14-2-18.

The pattern was set by Mr Barnard LaRiviere. He had been here on a hunting trip in '76. The US border had just been surveyed. Free land was on offer to folks in Ontario. He noticed a few trails intersecting and saw signs of a Nakota camp site on the creek. Perfect, he thought, for a store and a village. A good camp site 50 years ago - is still good today.

Timing? Check. Location? Check. Wood and Water? Check. Women? Hmm. He needed both women and men to make this happen.

Mrs. LaRiviere came first and opened a stopping place. Then menfolk, like my husband, brought their families from Ontario. Soon the village boasted a flour mill, sawmill, blacksmith, church and school.



The Boundary Commission Trail

We came because it was tough back in Ontario. The good land was taken, and my husband wanted adventure – to find a place of our own. I wasn't so sure but set out when he

sent for us. At first the men were squatting. None of us, not even the LaRivieres, had title to land. Rumor had it a land commissioner would set up office just west a half day's ride. But that first year everyone had to stay put lest someone else claimed their piece. There was, and still is, no police or government official of any kind near Wakopa. We have each other, the land – and a whole lot of faith.

Where did the name Wakopa come from? Mr LaRiviere knows everybody. He says he was given the name by an elder – that it means 'white haired father'. He alone speaks Nakota. So, we take his word for it. Yep. Legends grow quickly.



A cairn marks the general location.

Did I tell you we have the first school in Southwest Manitoba? I'm the most literate in the community so I was chosen to be the teacher. Other than raising our family, it's something I can contribute.

Mr. "Wakopa" boasts he speaks 9 languages – including 7 Indigenous ones. But doesn't read or write a lick. He has great gifts alright, but even he can't do it all. It takes a village to make a village. In these early days, we create legends out of what we have – and wonder - what will become of our efforts?

Betty Sawatzky and David Neufeld adapted "The Legend of Wakopa" from a story in Vantage Points 3.