

Rural folks generally know their directions. We're raised, after all, on squared off prairie land. When driving, every grid road heads directly north, east, south or west. We speak in directions. "Oh! That family lives west and a bit south"; frustrating visitors who don't know where to look. We don't point. We just know.

In contrast, at Grasslands National Park in SE Saskatchewan you can visualize the pre-surveyed prairie; home to bison and their hunters. No straight lines. To indicate direction, the land needs to be described, using features: trails, trees, creeks and ridges.

In another contrast, Manitoba began with a river lot system. In the mid 1800s the French Metis used rivers as their survey base. Every land owner needed access to the river for water, fishing and transportation. Homes and gardens were near the water. Most lots had trees for firewood with more land further back for hay and animals. Each waterfront was about 300 feet wide. But because the Red and Assiniboine Rivers twist and turn, the lots differed in shape and size.

By 1868 Canada made it clear, they wanted the Prairies covered with farmers who'd grow food for export. In order for the farms to be relatively equal, they decided to survey the entire, vast landscape into square miles, using compasses, metal chains, and a lot of lonely men with camping gear.

The survey chain we speak of, is actually a metal chain. Each link is 8 inches long. 100 links, equal 66'. (Take my word for it.) 80 chains equal 1 mile. Unfortunately, with vigorous use, the links would stretch. The surveyors had a massive area to cover, though. And, they were being paid by the mile. So speed was their friend.

The entire prairie grid started with two lines. The Baseline goes due west, alongside the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. The Principal Meridian goes due north from Emerson. As the survey crew was marking the principal meridian in the summer of 1869, they crossed over Metis owned river lots at St Norbert. Due to the urgency Canada felt in completing the survey, and, truth be told, their lack of respect for the Metis Nation, the Metis river lot titles were not respected. Thus was born the First National Metis Resistance.

Louis Riel led an armed delegation to literally step on the survey chains. If Canada was to

exert control over the land, the Metis were going to negotiate for land title and French language rights. It was through this resistance, that the Province of Manitoba was created. But, Canada sent in the army. The Metis Nation was cheated. And, the resistance goes on. We'll return to this in a future story.

Back to the chains. The prairie survey proceeded in 1872. Since the Americans had used chains for their westward expansion, Canada simply copied their measurements. 160 acres, or a ¼ section, was considered a reasonable farm for one family. Each ¼ section, half mile by half mile, gave 4 farms per square mile. By 1880 the crews got to Southwest Manitoba. The next two years saw thousands of immigrants from Ontario, USA and Britain claim their quarters. This wide open, rolling land, was squared off and repopulated.



*Manitoba - Before the boundaries were extended in 1881.*

**Land Survey** was adapted from a story in Vantage Points 1.

### **Sources:**

The Northwest Is Our Mother. The story of Louis Riel's People, The Metis Nation. By Jean Teillet.

Book. By Section, Township and Range. Studies in Prairie Settlement. By John Langton Tyman.

*Vantage Points Flashbacks were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s.*