

Railway builders avoid hills and valleys – for good reason - it is much cheaper and easier to build on level prairie land. When possible, railway companies avoided deep ravines and mountainous terrain by winding their way around, upon finding an alternate route.

The Great Northern Railway began in 1879 as the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway Company. The Great Northern ran its first train from Devils Lake (North Dakota) to the burgeoning city of Brandon from 1905 to 1936.

But to connect the line to Brandon, there was an obstacle that couldn't be avoided.... the Souris River Valley!

A traveler new to the area, and on a trek from Boissevain northwards to Brandon, whether on the rutted ox-cart path known as the Heaslip Trail, or on the smoothly paved Highway #10, might be surprised when, out of nowhere, there appears the valley of the Souris, a deep wide channel cut through the Souris Plains where the last of the glacial lakes once drained.



Scenic, it is – in every season – but to the railroad builder, it holds no romantic charm. It is an obstacle to cross ... a challenge? Perhaps. A nuisance? Definitely!

You see, trains don't do well on hills, and keeping the grade or slope of the track as gentle as possible is a priority.

The surveyors for the Great Northern Railroad had rejected a crossing straight north of Minto where the valley is both deep and wide.

Instead, they selected a site near the hamlet of Bunclody, where the southern lip of the valley brushed right up against the stream, where the

gentle slope on the north side could be crossed with a modest embankment.

To get there, the line bends westward at Heaslip, following the curve of the river.

Unfortunately, for the railway builders, between Heaslip and Bunclody there are two small streams running into the Souris from the west.

They're small streams now, but back in the day when Lake Souris was rapidly draining, the water had cut deep ravines as they approached the river.

The railway engineers crossed these steep narrow gorges by building temporary trestle bridges and then dumping fill to create a road-level earthen dam, complete with huge pipes designed to let the run-off through.

One can only imagine the engineers crossing these trestle bridges with trepidation of being so high up ... knowing full well the weight of their train on these structures, all the while watching the rushing river below them... holding their breath until the train, in its entirety, reached the other side.

Concrete tunnels, two meters square, replaced the huge pipes – and still quite visible today, although somewhat clogged with rubble.

Area residents have shared their boyhood adventures that included a 'dare to go through the tunnel' challenge, unbeknownst to their mothers who would be none too pleased!

Today a marked trail beginning at a dead-end road north of Heaslip, follows the abandoned railway bed and a short walk ... takes you right there.

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