

THE STORY  
OF  
**MISSISSIPPI, MANITOBA**

BY JOHN GOODES

Assissippi had a great influence on the Bucovinian immigrants' decision to settle in the community that later became known as Lennard. Most of this was due to the advice of one of Assissippi's prominent businessmen who alerted newly arrived Elie Burla of the existence of land for homesteading nearby. Burla was on his way from the Saltcoats district to Russell to find work on the more prosperous farms in the area. When he stopped at Thomas McLennan's store in Assissippi, McLennan offered him a job caring for his herd of about 100 cattle. Later he advised Burla of the existence of the land for homesteading north-east of Assissippi on the plateau above the Shell River valley. Sometime later, Burla and his fellow immigrants from Voloca, Bucovina - Ion and Gheorghe Paulencu and Nicolai Pentelicuic - received patents for section 24-23-28 that formed the core of the community which later became Lennard.

After their arrival in Canada in 1899, the first immigrants from Voloca, Bucovina spent their first winter in improvised shelters east of Saltcoats, where they had been directed by immigration officials in Winnipeg. Saltcoats was located at the temporary terminus of the railway running west through the prairies. At that time the community was located in the District of Assiniboia, Northwest Territories, an area that later

became part of Saskatchewan. The new arrivals were unable to find suitable available homesteads east of that community and some of them drifted southeastward to find work in the Russell area. The village of Asessippi was located on their trail across the Shell River valley and some of the weary foot travelers made temporary stops there.

Settlers from Eastern Ontario and Great Britain had arrived in the Asessippi area around 1880. Prior to the arrival of these settlers the area was known by the First Nations people as Asi Sippi, the Cree name for stony river. A semi-permanent encampment, consisting of log cabins and teepees was established by Cree and Metis trappers and hunters near the point where Bear Creek ran into the Shell River. The Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company had trading posts in the region dating back to the 1790s.

One of the first settlers in the Asessippi area was William Kirkpatrick. His father, who was a federal civil servant in Ottawa, advised him that the proposed railway line from Winnipeg to the west would run through the area east of the confluence of the Shell and the Assiniboine Rivers. Kirkpatrick took out a homestead in the area and became the first postmaster of the new community called Asessippi in 1883. He was overwhelmed by the scenery along the valleys of the two rivers

and was excited by the area's development potential. Unfortunately, the vision that Kirkpatrick had did not materialize in his lifetime, as he passed away from pneumonia while visiting his father in Ottawa a couple of years later.

However, others were caught up in the excitement of the area's potential. Henry Gill, who had earlier traveled by ox team from Brandon to the area became the second postmaster of the young community. Gill had arrived in the district earlier to oversee the operation of the Shell River Colonization Company, organized in 1882 by W. H. Biggar, D. Gilmore, J. Richardson and W. T. Baker of Trenton, ON. The company was formed to assemble land for a large development and to establish businesses in the community.

One of the first businesses to be established was a large store (for its time) operated by Henry Gill's sons John A. (Jack) and A. B. Gill. The store was located on the east bank of the Shell River. The building also contained a spacious room on the second floor where meetings, entertainment and church services were held. At the rear of the building was a boarding house operated by Thomas McLennan, and later by Mr. and Mrs. John Adams. These businesses were established to serve the needs of the people involved with the newly built lumber and shingle mill, and a water-powered flour mill.

The lumber and shingle sawmill was constructed on the east side of the Shell River by the Asessippi Milling Company. The principals in the company were D. Gilmore, W. F. Baker, J. Richardson and Henry Gill. The mill initially used local trees, mostly aspen and poplar. However, the supply of these was soon exhausted and spruce logs were floated down the Shell River to the mill from the Duck Mountain during the high water period in the spring.

Opposite to the saw mill, a flour mill was constructed on the west side of the river. Here grain from farmers living in a large surrounding area was ground using mill stones that were later supplemented by an advanced piece of equipment called a Roller Process. The mill stones and other machinery were transported by ox team from Moosomin, 90 miles away. Both mills were powered by turbines that were driven by water which was stored behind an upstream dam. Farmers from as far away as 40 miles brought their grain to the mill. Stories were told about wagons backed up almost to the edge of the valley waiting their turn to enter the mill. Because of the distance involved, many of these farmers spent the night in the nearby bunk house.

Spurred by the successes of these ventures, a cheese factory was established above the valley on the east side of the river. It was operated by Bill Adams and processed surplus milk produced

by the expanding farm operations.

Another entrepreneurial venture was undertaken by John A. Gill, who started a brick yard on the right bank of Bear Creek, near where it flowed into the Shell River. The chief brick maker was Jim Munroe. He assisted by Billie Hall and Cecil Harvey. Munroe was said to have been the son a U. S. Army Scout in North Dakota. A flamboyant personality, with many unusual talents, Munroe presented a striking contrast to Cecil Harvey, a dour character who wore a monocle. Several houses were constructed in Russell using bricks from Aessippi and some of them still survive, notably the one built for William Barrett-Lennard, after whom the community of Lennard was named.

In addition to these major enterprises, a blacksmith shop was operated by John Hall. He was kept busy shoeing horses that needed sturdy shoes to negotiate the steep hills and embankments in the area. A feed stable was operated by Percy Field.

Much of this commercial activity depended heavily on the water power generated by the flow of the Shell River. These were the first and only water-powered mills in Western Manitoba. A dam was constructed above the mill site to store water until needed. A short distance away, below the dam, a wooden bridge was constructed in the early 1880s. However, the bridge was washed away, along with the mill dam by a flood in 1893. This

did not appear to deter the business community and a new mill dam and a steel bridge across the Shell River were constructed. The future of the Asessippi community looked good, but unfortunately this prosperity was not to last.

The set-backs began with the closure of the cheese plant, due to the distance required to transport the milk and the lack of suitable refrigeration equipment. The brick factory burned down, and the logs that were sawn at the Asessippi mill were now floated down-stream to Brandon, after The Hanbury Company obtained the logging rights in the Duck Mountain. Tom McLennan took over the ownership of the flour mill and later the store and post-office.

Another blow was struck when the Manitoba Northwestern Railway (later the CNR) only came as far as Russell, and the Canadian Northern Railway chose a route from Winnipeg to Yorkton through Goose Lake, (later Roblin, MB).

One by one, the entrepreneurs and farmers moved away to other towns and farming communities, such as Rochedale, Dropmore, Roblin, Birtle and elsewhere in the country. The last remaining businessman was Tom McLennan who continued to operate the store and post-office, but eventually closed the flour mill. McLennan also started a cattle raising operation and this activity figured highly in the birth of the Lennard community

when he apprised his farm-hand Elie Burla of the availability of homesteads on the plateau above the valley on the northeast side of the Shell River. As settlers from Bucovina started to arrive, McLennan provided them with a source of provisions and tools. He also owned the only telephone in the area. With a team of fast carriage horses, he delivered messages to the settlers as new arrivals disembarked at Russell.

These new arrivals inadvertently contributed to the eventual demise of Asessippi by establishing a new social and commercial centre at Lennard. But the last devastating blow was struck when, in 1920, the Canadian Pacific Railway decided to run a local line north from Russell and establish its northern terminus on William Berrington's farm, three miles south of Lennard. The new community, called Inglis, soon had four grain elevators, a stock yard, a lumberyard and several stores. Thomas McLennan closed his store in Asessippi and the post-office was moved to Inglis, where he became the first post-master. Asessippi became a ghost town.

Today Asessippi is once again rising from the ashes. Its new lifeline is coming from the least expected places. Starting with the construction of the Shellmouth Dam in the 1960s, the focus in the area turned to the development of a tourism industry. This resulted in the establishment of the Asessippi Provincial

Park, the Asessippi Ski Resort, Inglis Elevators and a number of other tourist destinations in the area, including the St. Elijah Pioneer Museum. A large number of new lodging and dining facilities were established in the area, and a few housing subdivisions are under development along the shores of Lake of the Prairies. Tourists, skiers, fishers, campers, hunters and photographers converge on the area, almost year round.

Today, the Trans Canada Trail runs past what was once the thriving business community of Asessippi. The span of the old steel bridge sits on the bank of the Shell River. The old bunk house remains relatively intact, as do a couple of houses. In 2008, when John Goodes and son Don were visiting the Gilbert Plains community museum, they noticed a large granite mill stone at the rear of the museum. Engraved on its face was the name of the Asessippi Milling Company. This is the actual mill stone from the old town. Is old Asessippi crying out for someone to come along and restore it?

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