

# The Cowan Trail

What is currently referred to locally as The Cowan Trail, is actually the northwestern-most remnant of a much longer and, for a short time, quite a significant regional trail known as the Dauphin to Swan River Valley Colonist Trail. From the time it was blazed in 1897 to the arrival of the Canadian Northern Railway in Swan River three years later, it was the main settlers and supply route into the Swan River Valley and was witness to a great deal of traffic and activity.

When the original route for the CPR Transcontinental Railway was surveyed during the 1870s, it was intended that it pass through the Lake Winnipeg Narrows, then northwest past Lake Dauphin and into the Swan River Valley. Much speculation occurred and word of the potential for agricultural settlement within the valley was intense. When a more southerly route was finally chosen for the CPR mainline, access to, and therefore settlement of, the Swan River Valley was delayed for some 20 years.

In 1897 the fledgling Lake Manitoba Railway and Canal Company built a line from Gladstone to the newly opened Dauphin region, and stated its intention to extend this line to Winnipegosis and the Swan River Valley. In anticipation of the railway and accompanying influx of land seekers, the Dominion Government Survey had 20 townships surveyed in the valley during the summer of 1897. Also that summer, Mr. William Sifton (cousin to Sir Clifford Sifton, Minister of Immigration) was hired to cut a colonization trail from Dauphin to the valley. Most of the route followed the high ground of a major former beach ridge to a point near the present community of Cowan. North of Cowan, however, the ridge gave way to a large area of low marshy ground, so the trail veered to the west and crossed the height of land at the northernmost tip of the Duck Mountain plateau. The trail followed the course of the Duck River and emerged on the eastern slopes of the Swan River Valley just north of the Favel River. The camp site at the terminus of the colonization trail developed into a short-lived village known as "Tent Town" and contained a Land office and a number of tents and log structures, providing services and shelter to the incoming settlers.

By February 1899 the railway had reached Cowan, where construction stopped temporarily, due to the difficulty in laying track through the low swampy ground beyond Cowan. During the spring and summer of 1899 freighting from Cowan to the Swan River Valley was extensive with a dozen teamsters in business. In addition to individual families and settlers groups, a large contingent of Doukhobors were teamed into Tent Town requiring 15 vehicles and apparently slowing traffic on the trail considerably. Railway supplies were also freighted over the trail to stock a construction depot and camp located near present day Minitonas, to in turn supply the various railroad contractors during the upcoming summer construction operations. Supplies for the many newly opened business places were also freighted in over the Cowan Trail. The trail traversed hilly rough ground, and stories of the hardships endured by travellers were passed on to succeeding generations. Bridges and crossings were frequently washed out, holes and ruts became quagmires, and loads often had to be divided and left beside the trail to be retrieved later.

October 10, 1899 saw the official arrival of the now renamed, Canadian Northern Railway, at the newly surveyed town site of Swan River, some ten miles northwest of Tent Town. The exodus from Tent Town began immediately, and within two weeks everything that was Tent Town had all but disappeared. The Cowan Trail, also known at the time as the Tent Town Trail, remained in use sporadically as a timber access trail for settlers cutting and hauling cordwood, and for the many sawmill operations which were established in the area. In more recent years, portions of the trail have been used as a recreational trail by snowmobile groups and the local community is currently building support to retrace, restore, and protect the route as a historic trail and recreational route for general public use.

(This info-sheet was prepared February 9, 2000 by Ed Ledohowski, Historic Resources Branch, from information obtained from local history books: *Lasting Impressions*, published by the Swan River Historic Society, 1984; and *Tent Town - A History of Minitonas and District*, published by the Minitonas Community Centre Committee, 1979.)