

Fort Prince of Wales

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MANITOBA LAND



**ASSOCIATION
OF MANITOBA
LAND SURVEYORS**

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by R. A. Vassil, a long-retired MLS

I last served as a Manitoba Land Surveyor in 1965. Overall, I actually served as a surveyor on four continents: in Australia as a NSWLS and VLS; in Canada as a DLS, MLS and ALS; in Central America as a BLS; and in Antarctica on my Australian qualifications. In the covering years of 1950 to 1987, like my former colleagues in the Association of Manitoba Land Surveyors, I could pass on many interesting survey experiences. But in respect to brevity, and of possible more relevance to my Manitoba friends, I have chosen one which, in particular, I recall with much nostalgia in my latter stage of life that I would dearly love to relive.

The anecdote I have selected was my survey, as a DLS and MLS, of National Historic Sites in Churchill, Manitoba. The “pearl” of these sites was Fort Prince of Wales.

In July, 1963, I led a survey party for the Canadian Government, based from Ottawa, consisting of Archie Dickson, DLS, and Edmund Lea and Tony Leaver, both engineering students from the University of Manitoba.

We had just concluded a survey of the Camperville Indian Reserve, carried over from 1962. To get the party to Churchill, we had to travel rather lightly equipped, which meant that we could not take our outboard-motored freighter canoe. We drove our long-wheelbase Land Rover from Camperville to The Pas and then took the CNR train to Churchill. This train allowed us the joys of rail travel in those days of bedroom sleepers and silver service dining-car. Those days were certainly “the days”!

On arriving in sparsely populated Churchill, we obtained accommodation at, I think, the only hotel. Fort Prince of Wales is situated adjacent to the left bank of the Churchill River, opposite the community, and it commands entry to the port of Churchill. To get to the left bank we hired a boatman to take us across each morning, through an escort of killer whales and seals, and he would return to collect us each evening at an agreed time. Unfortunately, we had no radio communication with the boatman. Hudson Bay, itself, at the time was surrounded by pack ice with grain ships waiting for entry to the Churchill wharves.

The land on the left bank was unpopulated with the exception of a very small group of Indians, living in tepees and cooking over open fires, about two or three kilometres south of the fort. They showed almost no interest in our activities. The fort was built in the mid-1700's by the Hudson's Bay Company. It was built comprising of blocks of stone and its design was in the classic military star-shape with the capacity for its weapons to provide enfilading fire on any besiegers. A very large number of the cannons were still in their original emplacements, on inside galleries around the highest parts of the walls. In further defence of the fort, there was a headhigh V-shaped stone wall several metres out from the fort's gate. The roofs of all the internal structures of stone were long gone.

The fort was sacked by the French Admiral LaPerouse, shortly after it was built. I have been led to understand, that the French fleet arrived at a time when most members of the fort's garrison

were on a large foraging expedition to build up supplies for the forthcoming winter. The French fleet fired a few shots and, after landing with no casualties on either side, they burnt some of the buildings before sailing away into Hudson Bay. Incidentally, an Australian postscript to these events was that the same Admiral LaPerouse in January, 1788, on an exploration voyage with two men-of-wars, sailed into Botany Bay in New South Wales on the very next day that Captain Arthur Phillip of the Royal Navy had arrived with some fourteen ships. Phillip's ships were mostly loaded with convicts for settlement in what was, then, an extremely miserable place. And, a further footnote was that LaPerouse, on the best of terms with Phillip, sailed away north towards the Solomon Islands where he and his ships disappeared. Rather unexpectedly, in 2005, evidence was conclusively found in the Solomons on the fatal demise of the expedition.

Well, back to the survey story of Fort Prince of Wales. Unfortunately, this is where my memory of the events starts to fade; I would dearly love to have my official diary of my surveys in 1963, that was lodged with the Canadian Government Legal Surveys Division in Ottawa. I am pretty sure that I took azimuth observations on Polaris, but I can't recall tying into any previous surveys, for the simple reason that there weren't any! I probably just ran "virgin" lines in all of the surveys there to enclose and define these Historic Sites.

On the same side of the river and further upstream (it was within walking distance!), we next surveyed the site of Careening Bay (now Sloop Cove), where boats of the era were hauled out of the river for maintenance. On this very flat area of rock there were various carvings, one being the signature of Samuel Hearne and a macabre one of the hanging of an unfortunate sailor, garbed in the obvious attire of the 1700s.

On this west side of the river, we saw many above-ground graves of Indians. The graves were made of piled stones, which of course we left entirely undisturbed. And we also saw many polar bears lying on the close-to-shore pack ice; in our absolute naivety we thought of them as charming innocuous creatures of the wild. After seeing more recently on television, travel shows of exhilarated tourists in highly protected vehicles observing the polar bears, at close quarters in their naturally wild and dangerous state, I am thankful that we didn't encounter any of the bears close up.

To complete our survey of Historic Sites, we then worked on the Churchill side of the river. The site on this side was Cape Merry Battery and its Magazines; the Battery, together with Fort Prince of Wales, was built to protect the estuary of the river from both sides. I can't remember the exact details of the survey, but I do remember that we ran a shore line traverse and, because of foul weather, I had only one limb of the moon to observe, which led to a labourious calculation to determine azimuth. It meant having to depend, more than usually, on a knowledge of latitude for the large parallax corrections to be made for the moon.

On completion of these surveys we returned south by the same route. On reaching Winnipeg, we were next on our way to survey the Indian Reserve at Berens River. To reach this river, we took an interesting and quaint steamer voyage aboard the SS Kenora. But, that adventure is another nostalgic story.