

BRIEF HISTORY OF GRAND MARAIS

Grand Marais was first noted by the great French explorer, Pierre Sieur de la Verèndrye in 1732, and was mentioned in a letter from one of his sons, who called the area “grand marais” – the great marsh. It was not until the late 1800s and early 1900s however that Métis settlers established a fishing settlement here. W. L. Morton, in the first major academic history of the province, *A Manitoba History* (on page 87), refers to the period of the mid-1800s when “Granmaree” was a destination for local farmers who would visit the fishing station established there to buy whitefish in the fall, after the harvest was done.

The roots of change at Grand Marais can be traced to the year 1903, when the Canadian Pacific Railway established a full-scale summer playground called Winnipeg Beach on Lake Winnipeg’s west side, less than an hour’s commute by train. Overnight, Winnipeg Beach was a roaring success.

Not to be overtaken in this new kind of commercial venture, the Canadian National Railway (CNR) established its own competing summer vacation spot on the east side of Lake Winnipeg – and called it Grand Beach. With a large campsite area for overnight visitors, a hotel, diving docks, outdoor playgrounds, a dance hall, eateries and souvenir shops, parks, and a boardwalk flanked with amusements, the community was a major success story. And with its pristine, blonde, three-kilometre-long stretch of fine silica sand, and warm, sand-bottom waters, Grand Beach made for an unparalleled experience. To this day Grand Beach remains Manitoba’s most popular beach.



An early log house at Grand Marais. (Photo courtesy of Pearl Mulligan Collection)

The little community at Grand Marais was completely recast between 1914 and 1916, by the CNR's local development, as railway workers quickly took up lots in Grand Marais. By the early 1920s there was a firmly established summer community here.

Between about 1920 and 1960, Grand Marais was a thriving summer place, with a host of businesses along Grand Beach Road, and hundreds of cottages and cabins dotting the old beach line. The rail line that brought visitors to Grand Beach first swung directly through Grand Marais. During the 1960s, however, when Grand Beach was sold by the CNR, and the province turned it into a provincial park, the community gradually lost its many commercial establishments, and the village assumed its current bucolic character. And while most of the commercial landmarks are gone, the community boasts its first church and the many cottages that still suggest the informal, light-hearted atmosphere that has defined Grand Marais for more than a century.

Today, the approach to Grand Marais is a marshy one (as La Verendrye would know) as Highway 59 bisects an impressively large and beautiful marsh known as "The Lagoon," once called The North Harbour. These wetlands and the harbour flank the village of Grand Marais to the east. To the north it is bounded by Grand Beach Provincial Park and its provincially-owned cottage area. The beautiful three-kilometre strand of the west and east beaches is now conserved in its natural state as gone are the former amenities associated with railway ownership, although the boardwalk and some small retail outlets remain.

To the southeast of Grand Marais lies a continuation of "The Lagoon" and more wetlands. Its western border is Lake Winnipeg and its shoreline. This shoreline is paralleled by a road dyke that begins in the south and winds northward then westward, rising via a sand and silt bluff that reaches heights of more than 30 feet from the lake's shoreline. This bluff, and road dyke, offer panoramic lake views and



A boxcar cabin at Grand Marais. (Photo courtesy of Pearl Mulligan Collection)



Family group in front of Grand Marais cabin, ca. 1950.

serve as a favorite gathering spot for locals and tourists at sundown. These sunsets can best be summarized in the words of John Macoun in his 1882 book *Manitoba and the Great Northwest* (which is not specifically focused on Grand Marais, although for those of us who live and visit here it surely seems so):

“It must be seen at sunset, when just as the ball of fire is deepening below the horizon, he throws a flood of red light, indescribably magnificent upon the illimitable waving green, the colors blending and separating with the gentle roll of the long grass, seemingly magnified toward the horizon into the distant heaving swell of a parti-colored sea.”



View of the “Summerhill” Cottage, showing a range of stone features.

THE STONE BUILDERS OF GRAND MARAIS

CNR employees or “railroaders,” some of whom helped to build and maintain the line heading into Grand Beach, and others who worked in ancillary operations such as the campsite, began to clear land in Grand Marais as early as 1914. Land was cheap and it did not take long for modest cabins to start dotting the landscape.

The railways paid modest salaries to many of the railroaders and this meant that if a worker wanted to build a summer dwelling the materials had to be inexpensive, and of a size and shape that could be easily transported via boat or train. Naturally-occurring materials, such as clay, sand and wood were also exploited for construction purposes. The abundance of stone meant that certain key building features, like foundations, fireplaces and chimney stacks, outdoor fire pits, stairs and rails, walkways and even a few fences came to be formed of this ancient and trusted material.

Given this background, it goes without saying that many of the cabins were completely self-designed and hand-built. Furthermore, one could say that the inception of development of the area was forged, to some degree, on a kind of fellowship given the number of railroaders who first built in the area, and on an emphasis on humble architectural expression.

And so we can assume that any of the stone features we are currently exploring are the handiwork of an original owner – perhaps with help from neighbours and also perhaps with some advice from people more experienced in construction with stone. There were a few well known people whose names are attached to certain projects (see under fences), but it is safe to say that the Grand Marais builders were all amateurs. This did not preclude compelling examples of stonework design and substantial skill in construction: On the contrary, as this investigation illustrates.

BUILDING WITH STONE

Historically, stone was the most durable building material and therefore the material that was most sought after for significant building construction projects. From the Egyptian Pyramids (2630-663 BC), to the Great Wall of China (7th to 2nd Century BC) to the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe (beginning in the 12th century), stone has come to be the preferred material by which to express durability, power, seriousness and occasionally even elegance, once the major art of stonemasonry was established. In Manitoba our own distinct stone building heritage can be explored at such different places as St. Andrews-on-the-Red Anglican Church (1845-49), Virden Canadian Pacific Railway Station (1906) and the Manitoba Legislative Building (1912-20), where local work with granite and/or Manitoba limestone is something to behold.

The stonework at Grand Marais is not at these levels, but it is still contained within the history of stone masonry, and it is thus worth placing our local heritage in this context, at least in terms of history if not in terms of craftsmanship.

During the earliest periods of human history, stone was used mainly for tombs and ceremonial functions – a reminder that the great weight and difficulty in cutting made it “practical” only for the most important buildings and structures. The oldest known stone structure, the Pyramid of Djoser, Egypt, which dates to 2667–2648 BC, was a burial tomb. The so-called Knap of Howar, in Scotland, is the oldest stone house (dating to 3700 BC, from the Neolithic Period).



This view of an Egyptian pyramid shows the massive stone blocks used in its construction.



Bavarian stonemasons, c. 1505.

At the same time, the use of stone in the foundations of otherwise wooden buildings is also ancient. This kind of focused use of stone only required the movement of a few rocks to support key juncture points, but was still greatly curtailed by the weight of the material and by the skill required to lay and secure the stones in a monolithic unit. The development of mortar in 1794 by Joseph Aspdin was key to this part of the use of stone in building projects.



The amazing stonework on Reims Cathedral in France, from 1211-1311. The cathedral was the site for coronations of French monarchs before the Revolution of 1789.



This view shows the stonework of the Great Wall of China, built from the 7th to the 2nd centuries BC, and enlarged and augmented at various other times.



St. Andrews-on-the-Red Anglican Church (1845-49). The subtle effects of Manitoba limestone are visible in the walls of the church and also the more rugged fence.



This view of the Virden Canadian Pacific Railway Station (1906) suggest the powerful physical and visual effect of large granite blocks used to form up these mighty walls.



Manitoba's Legislative Building (1912-20) is a tour-de-force of stone construction, here showing the delicate possibilities of our own Tyndall stone carried out in a variety of Neo-Classical forms and details.

In terms of actual construction, there are just three types of stonework used in building projects:

- Rubble Masonry – where roughly dressed or found stones are laid in a mortar to form walls (as in Grand Marais)
- Ashlar Masonry – where stones are dressed (or cut, usually in a quarry) and often set up in finely designed walls with intricate features and details
- Stone Veneer – where stone is used as a protective and decorative covering for interior or exterior walls and surfaces (as with bricks)

It is obviously rubble masonry that is the focus of activity at Grand Marais, but even here there are certain qualities of the material, as well as concepts and skills required to make sure that the creations worked, stood and endured.

When you take some time to look at the various stone features at Grand Marais, it doesn't take long to start developing questions about their construction:

- How did people get so many stones so far from the likely main source – the beaches?
- How did they move them?
- How did they lift the occasional large stones?
- How are stones held in place?
- And then of course, trying to imagine people working on them – how long did it take to build certain features – the big stone fences; the chimneys?

So, let's start with the typical tools used for stonework. That should start answering some of these questions.

The basic tools for shaping a stone are the mallet, chisels and a metal straight edge. With these three key tools one can make a flat surface - the basis of all stonemasonry.



A stonemason with his tools – a mallet and chisel in his hands and then various hammers leaning against the workbox.

A mason's hammer has a long thin head and is called a Punch Hammer. It would be used with a chisel or splitter for a variety of purposes. A walling hammer can be used in place of a hammer and chisel or pincher to produce rubble or pinnings or snecks.

Chisels come in a variety of sizes and shapes, dependent upon the function for which they are being used and have many different names depending on locality. There are different chisels for different materials and sizes of material being worked, for removing large amounts of material and for putting a fine finish on the stone.

The actual movement or placement of stones requires other tools and implements, including shovels, hoes, wheelbarrows, perhaps a cement/mortar mixer. More specialized tools include the masonry trowel which was used for the application of the mortar between and around the stones as they are set into place. Filling in the gaps (joints) with mortar is referred to as pointing. Pointing in smaller joints can be accomplished using tuck pointers, pointing trowels, and margin trowels, among other tools. Mixing mortar is normally done today with mortar mixers which usually use a rotating drum or rotating paddles to mix the mortar. Stonemasons use a lewis together with a crane or block and tackle to hoist especially large stones into place.



An early image of a cement mixer, attached to the back of a wagon.

And so we move on to the actual work, imagining how that would have unfolded.

First, getting the stone to a site in Grand Marais: We can see that certain sites with the largest stones are mostly close to the beach areas – along Grand Marais Boulevard. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in these cases stones were “harvested” from the beach areas—beach and cliffs—and carried by a “bucket brigade” (a line of people each passing an object to the next in line) back to the building site. This obviously would have required a considerable number of people, and also likely that this work took many days to complete. This is known for the McQuade/Mulligan Stone Fence (ca. 1921), where Tannis Mulligan (Devanik) clearly recalled lines of adults and children passing stones from the beach up a long flight of stairs to the cliff top and then via a wheelbarrow back along the lot to the front, where a fence was built.

Other sites, quite a bit further back from the beach area, appear to have been developed with smaller stones – easier obviously to carry this distance. It is possible that wheelbarrows or even trucks were used for this purpose by the 1940s.

It is likely that all the stones were washed to removed grit and debris – this might have been a chore for the children.

So now we imagine a big pile of stones. What next? For the larger projects—foundations and fences—it is likely that a trench would have been excavated to act as the bottom layer. This might not have been such hard work given the sandy nature of the area’s top cover. Such a trench might have been a foot or two deep. It is likely that larger stones, and certainly “ugly” stones, would have gone in here, carefully arranged and slurred with mortar. This part of the job would have been hard labour and likely done by the men, hopefully with the reward at least of a few cold beers.

Now the men start to build up the feature – a short foundation wall, some steps, a fence, a chimney. It is likely that one man is supervising the work – at least to



Laying stones.



A cut-away diagram showing a stone wall or fence under construction.

determine stone placements. Others move the stones into place and sling on the mortar. Gradually the structure comes into shape, into being. Certainly these do not go up in a day and they are likely covered with burlap bags and wetted awaiting the next day's attention. And then the whole feature even when finished might be covered to let the mortar cure – for about three days.

And then – voila. After all the work, the sweat and presumably some tears, the project is completed.

CHALLENGES WITH STONE CONSTRUCTION FEATURES

Many of Grand Marais's stone features are nearing the 100-year mark, several of them built in the 1920s. And so it is natural that they will be showing their age.

The chief culprit is climate. What was soft and malleable in summer turns hard and irresistible in wintertime. Frozen ground pushes harder than a wall can resist. Even with its tons of stone bearing down, a wall is heaved up by frozen earth. Stones are displaced when the wall is raised up on frost. More damage occurs when the wall comes back down during a thaw. The weight of the feature flushes water from under and soil particles run out with the water. With less soil under the wall, the base stones sink farther down. And then in the late fall and early spring, the freeze-thaw cycle can happen daily as night temperatures fall below freezing and then warm again during the daylight hours.

The earth is alive and continually tries to take back what it has given up. Stone walls are pulled down by other forces beside the climate; perhaps the strongest is the earth they stand on. There is a ton of stone in every yard of a three-foot high wall. In summer, the earth is warm and soft, and impressionable. Day after day, a wall's heft is pressed by gravity into the soil. The soil compresses and is squeezed out in the

direction of least resistance. As the soil moves away from the wall, the wall's base stones follow it, shifting down and out into the surrounding ground.

But while the powers of gravity and weather are constant, stone features resist. One of the wonders of a seemingly immovable wall is that it is flexible. Walls bend and slouch over the years, but they decline to break. While they may not have the straight spines and narrow waists of their youth, walls of a certain age, whose bottoms have spread and who have lost their original height, are still impressive.



Barnfather/Garrioch Fence, still standing nearly 100 years after it was built, in 1919.