



Gunn – River Lot 109

In 1813, Donald Gunn, age 16, began his career with the HBC. From Caithness, not far from Orkney, Gunn was hired as a labourer. He crossed the Atlantic on the same boat as a contingent of Lord Selkirk's settlers. One of his first jobs that fall was to be part of an advanced party to Red River to build houses for the settlers that would arrive the following spring from York Factory.

When his contract with the HBC ended, he joined the Settlement at Red River and became a successful farmer. In 1826, he married Margaret Swain, the Metis daughter of James Swain. Together, they had 7 children, 6 of whom survived childhood. He took up land on the east side of the Red River, but later moved to the west side and ceded his former lot to his son, John.

Gunn attracted the attention of Rev Wm Cockran who was looking for an instructor for his trades school in St Andrews. Gunn worked as a teacher for 17 years, training young Metis and native boys the skills that would make them good farmers and/or HBC employees.

Both Lord Selkirk and Peter Fidler had donated collections of books to form a Red River Settlement library. It was to Donald Gunn that these gifts were entrusted. Gunn became Manitoba's first librarian! He loaned, repaired and kept track of the collection that was located at his large house. His children had constant access to the books. Reading together was a part of every day.

Gunn was a devout Presbyterian (Church of Scotland member) and hosted meetings of Presbyterian worshippers. Although Lord Selkirk had promised a minister for his mainly Presbyterian settlers, the HBC had only sent out Anglican (Church of England) priests. Until 1851, only Church of England churches were constructed in the "English" parishes. Presbyterians shared the churches and the cemeteries, but uneasily. They also held services at the homes of prominent Scots like Donald Gunn. When John Black, a Presbyterian minister finally was hired for Red River, work began on a log church on land that Donald Gunn donated. Later, in 1872 the Little Britain church was constructed nearby.

Gunn was also a scientist and meticulous note taker. He recorded details of weather and wherever he travelled, he took samples of new plants, insects and birds. These he carefully documented and sent detailed descriptions to the Smithsonian museum. When William Kennedy was building a case for annexation of the Red River Settlements by Canada, it was to Donald Gunn that he turned for statistical evidence on the climate, the soil fertility and the rate of growth of the economy of the colony.

In the 1860's, he and other local scholars investigated the mysterious mounds across the river from his property. They discovered that the 20 ft high and 100 ft long mounds were actually native burial chambers and speculated on who had built them and what their true purpose was.

During the Riel Resistance, he, his sons and most of his neighbours joined the 300 citizens who marched together to Kildonan Church in February, 1870 to demand the release of Riel's prisoners. Fortunately, the demonstration of force was sufficient and the prisoners were set free before violent confrontation could occur.

When Riel asked for St Andrews parish to send representatives to a Convention to discuss the terms under which Manitoba would join Canada, Donald Gunn was chosen.

After the Red River Resistance, Adams Archibald, the new Lieutenant-Governor, wanted to set up institutions to assist him in governing the province. He selected an executive council of wise counselors. Among the first selections was Donald Gunn.

Gunn distinguished himself a few years later by voting to abolish the executive council. He felt that no group of government appointees should be able to overrule the peoples' elected representatives.

Gunn's large stone house stood on lot 109 until the 1920's. Even today parts of its foundation still rise from underground to remind us of this great Pioneer!

Donald Gunn's son John operated the water mill on Gunn's Creek (at Lockport) from the 1850's onward. He was elected to the legislature in Manitoba's first provincial election and re-elected in 1874. One of Donald's daughters became a teacher and eventually was a pioneer teacher at Clandeboye School. She could teach in English as well as several indigenous languages and was therefore a very effective frontier teacher in St Andrews.

Donald Gunn's descendants have intermarried throughout the Red River North region. Their families have contributed greatly to the development of communities such as Cloverdale, Selkirk, Clandeboye, and Petersfield.

For more information on Donald Gunn's family, please go to: redriverancestry.ca, or the Memorable Manitobans section of the Manitoba Historical Society website: MHS.mb.ca