



Firth – River Lot 86

Thomas Firth, an Orkney tripman for the HBC was listed as the owner of River Lot 86 in 1835. In that census, he had not cultivated any of his land, indicating that he was newly arrived to the Red River Settlement.

At age 38, after a 19 year career as boatman with the Saskatchewan (or Athabaska) Brigade – les Blaireaux (the Badgers), he settled with his indigenous

wife, Eliza and his children on a site high above the last set of falls in the Red River's "Grand (St Andrews) rapids".

Perhaps that first year, he provided a living, as many others did, from some combination of employment at Lower Fort Garry as a labourer, on the York Boats as a "tripman" to Norway House or as a hunter with the Buffalo Hunt or as a trapper in the winter. It was not easy to adapt to farming from a life of adventure and travelling through uncharted wilderness.

Most other tripmen who settled in the area (eg: Loutits, Truthwaites, Sinclairs) had little or no experience as agriculturalists. They had to learn by trial and error. It was no small wonder that so many of their early experiences with farming were failures.

When Reverend Cockran started his "trade school" at St Andrews church to teach these woodsmen and their offspring the principles of farming, it was a gamble on his part as to whether the experiment would work. By hiring Donald Gunn to be the instructor and setting up an experimental farm on his property at Lot 61, he improved the chances of all of these new farmers for survival and later prosperity.

Over the next few years, Firth must have put most of his energies into farming, because by 1840 his possessions included: a house, a barn, 4 stables and a male servant. By that time, he had 15 acres under cultivation and was on his way to becoming prosperous. During the 1840's and 50's he did so well that in 1861, he was able to build the beautiful stone house that still stands on the site today. Thomas died in 1875 and by 1885 the owner was listed as Thomas Norquay, the brother of John Norquay, the Premier at the time. In 1911, was bought by. EHGG Hay.

Donald Gunn

Gunn not only taught the techniques for the seasonal routines for clearing, ploughing, sowing, weeding and harvesting as well as how to care for livestock. He also demonstrated the value of the more inland portions of two-mile-long river lots. The area back of the fields on the river's edge were often covered in water due to lack of drainage. However, "the Big Bog" offered a resource that was as vital to 19th century agriculture as furs had been to the fur trade.

The tall grasses that grew in these wetlands provided ready supplies of food for cattle and for horses. Cows converted hay into milk, cheese, beef and leather. Oxen and horses changed hay into the energy needed to pull ploughs and wagons and to uproot stumps or to move boulders and logs.

Animal muscles were the labour-saving devices of the frontier in St Andrews and every successful farmer needed them. Livestock also provided manure for fertilizer, and knowing how to ripen it for use on the fields (or to mix it with clay to make a mortar for patching cracks in leaky cabin walls) was more knowledge that Donald Gunn shared.

As an instructor at Cockran's school, Gunn was the ideal source of the latest information about farming as he and his family were keen observers of nature and were excellent record-keepers. When Captain Kennedy and Alexander Isbister wanted statistics on farm productivity or climate at Red River, it was to Donald Gunn that they turned. Gunn produced 45 years of accurate records of harvests, temperatures, rain and snow falls and floodings – far more credible than the rambling generalizations and lies of HBC witnesses at the parliamentary hearings in London.

Edward Hay

EHGG Hay arrived in St Andrews in 1862 by a very circuitous route.

Born in Yorkshire, England, he apprenticed as a mechanic and came to New York in the 1850's. By 1862, he was an engineer aboard one of the earliest steamships to ply the waters of the Red River. Amid the Sioux uprising and massacres in Minnesota, he came to the fledgling village of Winnipeg.

Hay was hired to operate a Steam Mill in the area that later became St James.

He then moved to a mill being set up on Parks Creek by John Tait. For five years, he ran a steam mill of his own on the creek just north of St Andrews church.

He was well known and popular among his neighbours. He was elected to the first Manitoba legislature in 1870. He became the leader of the Liberal party of Manitoba and stood in opposition to another St Andrews resident, John Norquay, the leader of the Conservatives.

He was returned to the Assembly many times. One outstanding achievement of his terms in office occurred in 1878. He demonstrated the high quality of Manitoba ground flour to the assembly, when he gave out free loaves of bread to the legislators.

The government was thus convinced that the wheat grown in Manitoba was inferior to none anywhere in the world and that wheat growing, processing and marketing could be keys to Manitoba's future. During his lifetime, Manitoba Number 1 Northern became world famous and the milling industry became one of the biggest in the West!

Ever the entrepreneur, Hay moved to Portage la Prairie to build and operate a smelter. Later, he returned to St Andrews in retirement. In 1911, he purchased the stone Firth mansion overlooking the St Andrews Rapids near Lockport.

Hay was appointed as registrar of ships using the St Andrews Lock and Dam until his death in 1918. For many years, his daughters ran a Tea Room in the house.

For more information of the Firth or the Hay or Norquay families, please go to: redriverancestry.ca, or the Memorable Manitobans section of the Manitoba Historical Society website: MHS.mb.ca.