

Stories of Fort Whyte and Whyte Ridge - Beyond the surface. Created and presented by Leanna Szypowski.

If you're living in Winnipeg, it is almost guaranteed that you have been to Fort Whyte or Whyte Ridge at one point or another, whether it was for a day out, or a place where you might have visited or lived. In this lovely presentation, I will take everyone on a journey through the origins of where the name of Whyte Ridge and Fort Whyte come from along with the origins of Fort Whyte and what this all means.

Part 1: Where the name comes from

The area of Fort Whyte was a nature rich land, filled with prairie swamps and aspen and oak trees. This area was relatively untouched until the early 1800's, when voyagers and fur traders first arrived. 1869 saw Louis Riel creating a new government, seizing Manitoba. Transportation ramped up in the late 1870's, with the first steam engine, with the new government under Louis Riel favoring Northern Pacific Rail.

In the 1880's, this led to the conflict between Northern Pacific Railway and Canadian Pacific Railway (CP).

Northern Pacific was looking to expand, but to do its expansions, it had to cross the Canadian Pacific tracks. CP wanting to prevent their competition from expanding, held onto any edge they had. Defending the railway in any way they could.

As I learnt from my lovely interviewee, Jessica Miller, this conflict was highly influenced by the lack of finances that CP had at the time due to the depression. "CP was struggling with finances, and with a depression around the corner, CP was desperate to hold onto their outdated deals and leverage. It was hard on my grandfather."

Canadian Pacific super intendant, William Whyte, was particularly vocal against the Northern Pacific railway's expansions. When Northern Pacific began to build, Whyte lead CP on the defensive, using any mean they could. The most notable was the use of a rail car and fence to block any attempts of crossing the tracks, erecting a physical barrier to block the advance. Whyte also set up a 200-man guard to block the rail. Yes, 200 people to block the rail.. This created a standoff that lasted into the winter.

Jessica Miller, the granddaughter of one of the people in the guard, said that “My grandfather was there, and with such high tensions, it became to a desperate attempt to protect their rail lines.” However, CP wasn’t exactly in the right as they prevented any of their competition to expand past their track.

The Canadian Supreme Court ruled against CP late that year. The remaining area was known as ‘Fort Whyte’, named by the press at the time as a joke due to the whole conflict. This however, is where both Fort Whyte, the wildlife area and educational center and the community of Whyte Ridge, get their name from.

Part 2: Origins of Fort Whyte

The first major development in the region was in 1911, when Canadian Cement Company created a digging site. This swampy area was full of large clay deposits and was why it was chosen. The operation started in 1913, when roughly 100 people were hired. Such a large plant made people move closer, so they could get to work with less trouble. Houses were built around the plant, which lead to the creation of schools, more housing, and stores, all created to support the community around the cement plant. Whyte Ridge was born.

In the 1950’s few of the residents in this new community, happened to be interested in raising waterfowl (ducks and geese) This caused them to develop a

waterfowl raising facility on-site. The public, loving the new green space, created nature trails around the sanctuary and generated funding for the area.

In 1970, Lafarge bought the cement plant and therefore operations in the area changed with the new administration. The waterfowl sanctuary opened as the Fort Whyte Nature Centre in 1974, now also called Fort Whyte Alive. The cement plant closed in the 1980's during the recession and is now used as a transport center, but some of the houses still remain and can now be found a long McGillivray road, which is just a few blocks down from IKEA. This was the beginnings of Fort Whyte.

Part 3: The Importance of it all

Fort Whyte Alive continues to expand and grow, and with it the impact it has on the surrounding community. There was an expansion of 200 acres in 1983. The Kiwanis bee exhibit in 1986 added bee farms and hand on education experience. The aquarium of the Prairies was added in 1989, which featured many local fish. 2000 saw the largest expansion, sizing to the size it is today with a whopping 640 acres.

As someone who has been to Fort Whyte many times, I can say that every tour was educational. Fort Whyte runs almost exclusively on volunteers, more than

350 of them in fact, and therefore is filled with all sorts of different stories and local experiences, making it inspired by the community. 125,000 people yearly visit Fort Whyte, and as one of the main (read as one of the only) attractions in Winnipeg, it leads to this having a major impact on the perceptions that people see of Winnipeg, and of what kids experience of the environment.

It is also really important to keep some stories like these alive. There are many cool stories about some of the things in both Fort Whyte and even throughout the city, some of which I hope were presented in all these other presentations.

Thank you all for listening and have a great day! Questions?

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