

Morden, Manitoba

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One of Manitoba's richest agricultural areas, the Pembina Valley is home to the picturesque town of Morden. About an hour's drive from Winnipeg, this culture-rich town boasts a diverse history, one that ranges from ancient dinosaurs to early Aboriginal settlements and the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Touring around Morden, driving by beautiful Victorian houses on tree-lined streets, one doesn't really get a sense of this town's ancient history. Millions of years ago, this area lay beneath the Colorado Sea, which covered most of southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the United States to the Gulf of Mexico. Within this sea flourished mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, giant turtles and other kinds of prehistoric sea life. Over time, the sea retreated and gave way to Lake Agassiz,



The town sign inviting you to take a walk in Morden

which later too retreated, leaving behind nutrient-enriched soil. The Chipewyan, Cree and Assiniboine came to inhabit this area and take advantage of these fertile soils that yielded Saskatoon berries, plums and wild herbs, as well as flowers and shrubs.

The first known white man in the area arrived in 1738. La Verendrye, along with his sons and a group of 50 men, journeyed from Fort la Reine, passing within about 18 kilometres of Morden on their way to the Missouri River. Later, in 1802, a partner in the Northwest Trading Company, Alexander Henry, came to the area and established a trading post called Pinancewaywining Post, meaning "on the way down to the

ford." According to the town's history, it was at this post that the Red River ox cart was first conceived and built (see www.mordenmb.com/). Fur trading at this post began to attract settlers, most notably the Métis.

The first known settlers in the direct vicinity of present-day Morden were the Morden family. In 1874 Alvey Morden, along with his four sons and one daughter, left Walkerton, Ontario, to settle in the area. But it wasn't until January 1, 1882, after the Canadian Pacific Railway had built a track through the area, that it was renamed for its founding settlers and incorporated as a municipality. It was originally called Cheval, after the Mort Cheval Creek, which provided water for the steam

Morden Fast Facts

Circulation: 82,612

Membership: 4,757

Computers: 6: 2 OPACs plus
4 staff computers

Number of members: 1,761

Staff: Head Librarian Mary Toma
Branch Librarian Cathy Ching

Community population: Approx. 6,500

locomotives. Today, Morden is still bisected by the railway south of Stephen Street.

Once Morden's town site had been laid out and the railway firmly established, the neighbouring towns of Mountain City and Nelsonville decided to join ranks with Morden, and many of their residents moved their houses to the town. Moving buildings became an art, and it is said that the townspeople were able to move one building a day, even with snow on the ground! By 1900 hardly a building remained in either town while Morden had flourished, growing to a population of over 1,500. This small town, which had electricity starting in 1895 and a telephone office in 1890, was perfect for attracting residents. Morden became the commercial centre for the thriving agricultural area, able to provide most goods and services for its farming families. According to information from Adolph Dack's article "I Remember Morden," printed in Morden's 80th anniversary and reunion booklet from 1962, the town boasted a blacksmith shop, Rabinovitch's General Store, bowling allies, a Hudson's Bay department store, a furniture store and the Manitoba Hotel.

An important addition to the town was the establishment in 1915 of the Dominion Experimental Station by A.P. Stevenson, who had a keen interest in horticulture. Stevenson was able to show how rich the land around Morden was. Credited with growing one of the first apple crops on the prairies, he

had an orchard that supplied apples, plums and other fruit for many Manitobans. It was Stevenson's hard work that influenced the federal government's decision to put the research station in Morden.

Proud history

Today, evidence of Morden's early years can be seen all around the town. Morden has one of Manitoba's finest collections of late 19th- and early 20th-century architecture, its trademark being its Queen Anne style houses, which are characterized by romantic towers, lively colours and use of wood and stone. Other styles include Italianate, Second Empire and Gothic Revival.

One of the most important buildings in town is the library. The building, which in its lifetime had housed a carpet shop, a restaurant and an adult education centre, became the library in 1996. Part of the space was rented to a bookstore. Then in 2001 the library expanded to make use of the complete building. The library is supported immensely by its community. For Mary Toma, the head librarian, the role of the library is to act as the centre of the community, a place where "no one should leave empty-handed." For Mary, one of the highlights of working in the library is finding the right material for people.

The Morden branch library is part of the South Central Regional Library system. The South Central



The entrance to the Morden Library

Regional Library was first established in 1965 as the Morden-Winkler Regional Library as a result of referendums in both towns. Library branches were officially opened in the two locations on October 20, 1965. In 1976 the Rural Municipality of Stanley joined the system as a third partner and the library's name was changed to the South Central Regional Library. A library branch was opened in Altona when that town became a partner in 1988. The Town of Gretna became the fifth partner of the library region in 1992. The Rural Municipality of Rhineland and the Town of Plum Coulee became partners in 2001 and 2002. The Rural Municipality of Thompson joined in 2009.

The library has one full-time and six part-time staff, as well as numerous volunteers from the community who assist with mending books and decorating the library for special events and holidays, as well as organizing a book sale. One of the most memorable staff members at the library was Mary Anne, who assisted with shelving books for 26 years.



The library quilt

What is remarkable is that since having a stroke at the age of 12, Mary Anne lost the ability to read. Yet she was still able to shelve books correctly, making it hard for Mary to imagine the library without her. She recently left the library, and Mary says her shelving skills will be very hard to replace.

The library serves a diverse population of mixed ages and ethnic backgrounds. Over the years, technology has opened more opportunities and increased circulation numbers because people can quickly access the library's catalogue from the library or from home. Interbranch loans are also very popular, allowing people to access materials from all four branch libraries.

Taking to the airwaves

Recent additions to the library include Russian and Ukrainian titles, which were acquired as part of a provincial project to provide multilingual materials to library patrons. Morden was chosen as one location for such collections due to the large number of immigrants in its popula-

tion. The library in the neighbouring city of Winkler houses a German collection.

The library offers numerous programs, which are always well attended: author visits, family literacy day, school visits and the annual summer reading program sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group. This extremely popular program had more than 1,100 children registered this summer.

One new endeavour that the librarians in the South Central Regional Library have been experimenting with is a radio feature called "Off the Shelf," where librarians provide a weekly book review. This has been very popular, with many people asking about the title that was reviewed on the radio. These reviews are also available on the library's blog at <http://scriblog.blogspot.com/>.

In 2008, Canadian Heritage named Morden a Cultural Capital of Canada due to its "long-standing commitment to the arts and culture." It's an award the town takes pride in. One of the notable events is the annual Corn and Apple Festival, launched in 1967 to celebrate Canada's Centennial, and held in the centre of town during the fourth weekend in August. Delicious foods – corn on the cob and apple cider provided by the town, plus borscht whose ingredients are provided by a nearby Hutterite colony – are just some of the festival offerings. The festival also boasts the largest parade in Manitoba, and has featured



The interior of the library

appearances by Prairie Oyster, Colin James and Randy Bachman, to name a few. Other important cultural events held in Morden are the Back Forty Festival, the Morden Festival of the Arts, and the Canada Beach Blast.

Morden is also home to the Canadian Fossil Discovery Centre, which has the largest collection of Cretaceous-period marine reptile fossils in Canada. There is also the Manitoba Baseball Hall of Fame and the Pembina Threshermen's Museum.

So if you're in the area and want to experience some true prairie history, head to Morden where the fossils are old, the houses are beautiful and the culture is strong.

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