

Rooster Town: A Metis Road Allowance Community

The last known road allowance community in Winnipeg was situated at Grant Ave. and Waverley St., it was known as Rooster Town. In the book *Reflections, Yesterday and Today* (MMF Press 1979), Jim Day of St. Laurent says, “I was born and raised on the outskirts of Winnipeg in a place known as Rooster Town. This place was situated where Grant Avenue is today.” This community existed until the late 1950s.

“In the early years of the depression of the 1930s a number of homeless families, many of whom were destitute Metis built small shacks illegally on the Canadian National Railway property adjoining city owned land just off Grant Boulevard. As well, as suburban development advanced in River Heights, other shack dwellers re-located to this area. The area, now roughly between Weatherdon Avenue and the tracks from Cambridge to Rockwood Streets became known as Rooster Town.

Over the next quarter century the number of squatters varied with economic conditions. By the 1950s at least 30 to 50 people clustered there in more than a dozen shacks. Many owned their homes, but some paid \$15 to \$20 per month rent. Most of the men worked as seasonal labourers, cutting sod, delivering coal, or performing other casual work, and collected relief from the city when unemployed. Their wives raised their children in two to three room shacks without running water, sewer connections or other services.

After 14 children came to school with the skin disease impetigo in late 1951 the Winnipeg Tribune reporter wrote: “Whatever you do... don’t touch the Rooster Town children. You might get a skin disease. So the teacher calls for a group game and tells the children to join hands. Nobody would dare join hands with the Rooster Town children.”¹

In response the City directed Public Health nurses and social workers to the community. Alternate housing was found for six or seven families in 1952, but many preferred to stay where they were. In the summer of 1959, the city offered the last families cash payments of \$50 to \$75 to move or face eviction proceedings. With the school opening of Grant Park School in September 1959 and plans for a surrounding park area Rooster Town and its social problems had no place in Winnipeg’s suburbs.”²



¹ *Winnipeg Tribune*, December 20, 1951. “Heard of Rooster Town? Its Our Last Suburb.”

² David G. Burley, *City and Suburb Housing in 20th Century Winnipeg*. Winnipeg Real Estate Board, 100th Anniversary, 2003.

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