

HOW NORQUAY GOT ITS NAME

by John P. Kyba

This musically sounding name is heard and seen on many maps from the spectacular Mt. Norquay in the Banff National Park to Officious buildings and streets in Winnipeg and other Manitoba centres.

Where did this name originate and how did the town of Norquay receive this name?

Many of us are familiar with John Norquay from reading the history books on Western Canada, the second premier of Manitoba, a Meti by birth, but it was the earliest rancher and settler, Nathaniel D. Wylie, who had the honor of selecting the name for the CN location, west of Pelly.

Mr. Wylie himself, was a most interesting person. Those of us who were fortunate in having him for our Sunday school teacher, or those who served with him on the Norquay (village) school board or the Prairie Valley School District board of which had him for their secretary, will recall many interesting tales of early life in the Norquay area. Only his children and grandchildren may know more than the rest of us.

As a farmer, rancher and trapper at the turn of this century, Mr. Wylie had the misfortune to break his leg. He managed to drag himself to his little cabin where he applied a splint which enabled him to move about the cabin but no more, the story goes.

The leg got worse and worse until he was no longer able to move about. There were no close neighbours so he reconciled himself to the inevitable end. Gangrene was setting in but he was helpless.

Lying in bed, he thought that he saw a phantom peering through the window. It turned out to be an Indian whom he had never seen before. This was an answer to his prayer. The Indian dressed the leg, then tied him to a travois and dragged him several miles to his Indian community.

There, with the help of other Indians, Mr. Wylie was taken to Fort Pelly and received medical attention which saved his life. This episode affirmed his belief in prayer and respect for the native people. Just how well Mr. Wylie knew John Norquay he did not say, but this bit of information on the Meti leader will help to understand why



Norquay's muddy Main Street, 1912.



Main Street, Norquay, 1917.

anyone who knew him would admire him.

John Norquay was a grandson of Oman Norquay who came from the Orkney Islands north of Scotland. Most Hudson Bay's Company factors did. It seems that John's ancestor came from north of 'quay' but would not reveal his name so was called 'the man from North-quay' and later, simply Norquay. Even to this day some pronounce it 'Nor-kee.'

John was born at St. Andrew's near Fort Garry in 1841. He was left an orphan at a tender age and was raised by Mrs. James Spence who saw that he obtained a good education. At 17 John became a school teacher but showed more interest in buffalo hunting and farming. He was a huge man weighing 300 pounds, had a likable smiling personality and was a good speaker.

He could converse in Cree, Sauteaux, and Sioux. His schooling also gave him some knowledge of French, Greek and Latin. It was no great surprise, therefore, that when the first elections for the newly formed province of Manitoba

were held, he was elected to the legislature in 1870.

Premier Henry Clark soon acknowledged his capabilities by appointing him his minister of public works, and later, minister of agriculture. His pleasing personality and his oratorical ability commanded respect of his fellow legislators and in 1878 he was asked to form the government in Manitoba and become its second premier.

The Hon. John Norquay had a unique style of telling stories about himself. He would first have a good and hearty laugh putting his listeners in a pleasant frame of mind. Then he would narrate the story and have another hearty laugh, this time having his audience laughing heartily with him.

One of his favorite stories was of how Scott's Angus bull helped him become premier of Manitoba. Norquay was a Conservative while his neighbor was a staunch Liberal. There was no way that his Liberal neighbor would vote for Norquay. On election day the Liberal was busy with his farming until just before the closing of the polls. To save time in getting to vote he decided to take a



Norquay, taken from "Wylie's Hill" in the 1920's.

short-cut across Scott's pasture. It so happened that Scott had a ferocious Angus bull who did not take lightly to intruders onto his domain and gave chase scaring the Liberal voter up a tree. It was some time before the Angus gave up and went home. It was too late for the voter also. The election results gave John Norquay a victory by a one-vote margin. John went on to greater heights, thanks to Scott's Angus bull.

Historians claim that only D'Arcy McGee could match his ability in debates. He died in 1889 at the age of 48 from appendicitis.

George Stanley in his *The Birth of Western Canada* claims that if John A. Macdonald had included John Norquay in his cabinet, the Meti uprisings in the Red River and in Saskatchewan would have never occurred. One can now realize why the name Norquay for the new community was so appropriately chosen.

The inscription at St. John's cemetery where John Norquay lies reads:

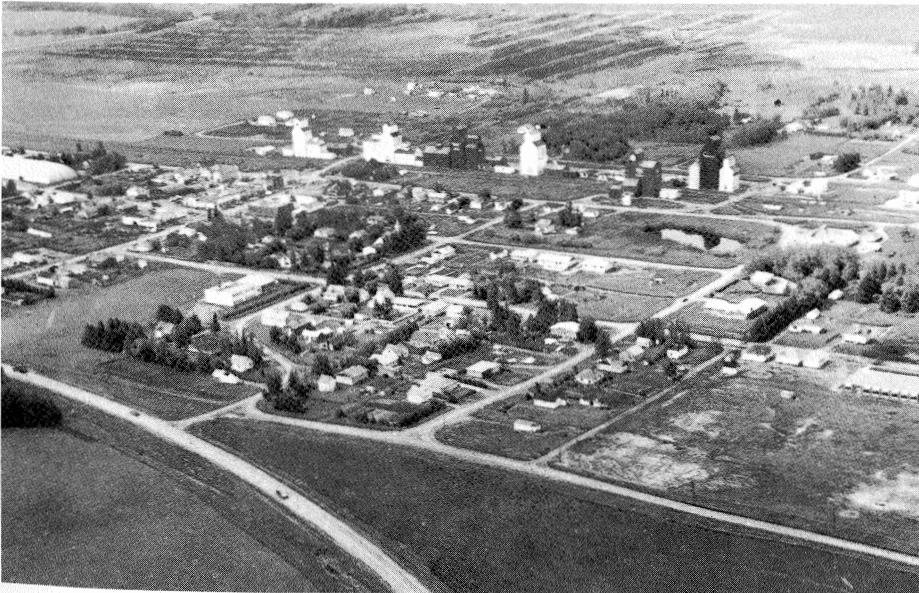
'To the memory of the Hon. John Norquay who was for many years Premier of Manitoba. By his sudden and all to early death his native land lost an eloquent speaker - an honest statesman, and a true friend.'
'Born May 8, 1841, died July 5, 1889.'

Norquay may truly be looked upon as cosmopolitan. Here is to be found, and all working together in the community and for the good and welfare of the community, Canadians of many and diverse racial origins but all having in common their Canadian citizenship. Here, in goodly numbers, are to be found Canadians whose family trees have their roots deeply embedded in the rich

dark soil of the Ukraine of the northern peninsula of Norway and Sweden and have found this new land worthy to become their adopted home. The call of this new land reached the eager ears of many in the Danish Peninsula also. A sprinkling of people from the British Isles is usually to be found in most communities, Norquay being no exception. These, together with Dutch, German, Polish and Americans comprise most of the population, not failing to mention the ubiquitous Chinaman.

From these widely separated lands, then, they came and settled in this well-watered parkland area, for here was to be found all those things necessary for a successful pioneering adventure. Here were wood, shelter, pasture land, game and fish, but best of all, liberty and freedom. So here they settled, living first in their log or sod houses, later to be replaced by modern dwellings.

And Norquay has been especially favored above many communities in that her population is so diverse, for each group brought with them some of the culture of their homeland. The oppressor may take one's material possessions but he cannot deprive one of the skill of his hands, or the vision in his brain, or the hope and courage in his heart. And so we have the skills and culture of many groups, all blended into one splendid Canadian culture which, however, is still in the making but which will be so much stronger and better because it has within it the best of many and diverse view points and ways of life. This developing Canadian culture will have within it the same virility as that which prompted men and women to turn their backs on the old homeland and venture into all the uncertainties attendant upon pioneer life in a new country.



Bird's eye view of Norquay, 1970. Gateway to the upper lakes, the last stop before entering Porcupine Forest Reserve. Some of the best big game hunting in the province. Good fishing 40 miles north. A small town with a warm heart!