



1637 MAIN STREET
COLIN INKSTER RESIDENCE
“BLEAK HOUSE”

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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The story of the Inkster family parallels the transition of Red River settlement into the City of Winnipeg. John Inkster was a native of Scotland's northern Orkney Islands, coming to Rupert's Land as a servant to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821,¹ but within five years, he had married and was working a farm in the parish of Kildonan as an independent settler.

Kildonan had been settled a few years earlier by a group of Selkirk Settlers, many of whom had been cleared off the Sutherland estate in the Strath of Kildonan to make room for herds of sheep. Displaced and desperate, they immigrated to the centre of the fur trade empire where they were further made unwelcome by the earlier inhabitants, the native and mixed blood people and the fur traders. Their farms and tiny settlement provoked tensions that came to a head at the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816. The battle was so-called because of a nearby stream and riverbank area which lent their name to John Inkster's log house, located near the site of the unfortunate incident.

Inkster did not limit himself only to his farm on the west bank of the Red River. He operated a mill on his property and eventually opened a store, stocked with articles from the United States, Canada and England. The store was a success and provided Inkster with the capital to build a new, large Seven Oaks house. The store remained open until his death in 1874.² John Inkster was appointed to the Council of Assiniboia which he served from 1857 until it was dissolved in 1870. He was also the Rector's Warden of St. John's Cathedral.

The house at Seven Oaks, which replaced the original log dwelling, was built in 1851 to 1853 with a major flood in 1852 delaying construction. It featured Red River frame construction with a siding of weatherboard for extra warmth.³ The house was two storeys high with a dormered attic and a sweeping veranda on all four sides. The heavy stone foundation was laid by John Inkster, who had learned stone masonry in Scotland. The heavy spruce logs, all hand-hewn, were rafted down-stream from Baie St. Paul.⁴ The house is now a museum and has been restored to the 1850 period.

The Inkster's raised nine children in the house, many of whom scattered about the country after

leaving the homestead to marry or set out in business. All had been educated at St. John's parochial school.

One son, Colin, born in 1843, and grew up in Seven Oaks house, was to become a tall, lean man of strong constitution. After attending St. John's school,⁵ Colin worked his father's farm and entered into an ox cart transport business between Red River and St. Paul, Minnesota. During the political troubles of 1869-70, young Inkster was involved in various meetings and accompanied James Rose to Riel's headquarters in Fort Garry to negotiate for the release of several men held prisoner there.⁶

In 1871, Colin Inkster was one of seven men appointed to the first Legislative Council, an upper house derived from the House of Lords in the British parliamentary system. In 1874, he was made Speaker of the Council and appointed Minister of Agriculture to the government. Over the years, it became clear that this second Legislative Council was superfluous to the machinery of government,⁷ but any bill to abolish it had first to be passed by that same body. In 1876, a motion to abolish the Council was put forward and a tie vote resulted. As Speaker, Inkster had to vote, and he cast his vote in favour of abolition. In a blatant act of patronage, he was promptly given the position of High Sheriff of Manitoba,⁸ a position that he tended with wisdom and honour for fifty-one years.

Known to all as Sheriff Inkster, he is said never to have missed a court session until his retirement in 1927, at the age of eighty-four years. In later years, his jurisdiction was limited to the Eastern Judicial District as the province expanded its political boundaries.

Inkster had married Annie Tait, the daughter of another Orkney fur-trader, in 1871. In 1874, after his father's death, Colin decided to build his own house within the confines of the Seven Oaks property. His sister Mary continued to live in the family home until her death in 1912 and it was she who administered the family estate.⁹ Some of the younger Inkster's farm was certainly an inheritance, but Colin continued to make mortgage payments to Mary on more land during the 1880s.

They built Bleak House in a manner similar to that of Seven Oaks. In 1873, Inkster had purchased a woodlot in Baie St. Paul so it is possible that logs used in construction were floated from there. The house is assumed to be of log construction with an overlay of siding.¹⁰ The interior was finished in the winter of 1874-75, as numerous accounts to suppliers in the account books describe. All the supplies were purchased locally from such companies as Stobart's and James Ashdown.¹¹ When the two-storey house was finished in 1875, Colin's brother George teased him in a letter:

I see that you are riding a pretty high horse at present but look out; you are apt like other great men to have a fall. but Mr. President & Speaker you only seemed to care about the Honour of your Position; the first question I'll ask would be, what pay do you get?¹²

Whatever his wages, they went to supporting his wife and their five children. Inkster did have enough left over to buy up land for speculation in the province. He purchased several lots in the form of "script" from Métis, and seems to have held mortgages for several other people. His personal papers also indicate that he was assisted in his land ventures by knowledge gained from his position, a situation in Manitoba that was very common until the turn of the century.

Despite his many public duties, Inkster continued to farm his own land, and kept two or three hired men for that purpose. He was a "scientific" farmer who purchased a series of purebred cattle and stud horses to develop superior strains. In 1893, one of his stallions won first prize at the Winnipeg Industrial Exhibition. As late as 1926, when he was over eighty years of age, Inkster still had chickens for sale in the market.¹³ A barn existed on the property until recent years.

Like his father before him, Colin Inkster was also the warden of St. John's Cathedral. It was Colin who trekked seven hundred miles to the end of steel in the United States to accompany Archbishop Machray on his journey to Red River in 1865, and he continued as the warden for sixty years. He also a member of the first advisory council to St. John's College.¹⁴

From remaining literature on Manitoba's public events, it is clear that Inkster's prestigious career led to many honours in later years. He was a witness to the formative events in 1870, played a

prominent role in the urban development of Winnipeg and by his great longevity (he died in 1934) he was able to pass on a personal account of ninety years of our history. Healthy to the end, Inkster was the subject of innumerable articles and interviews, a favourite speaker to club functions and delivered lectures to the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society. When he retired as sheriff in 1927, attendance at a Manitoba Club dinner held in his honour read like a Who's Who.¹⁵ He retired to Bleak House and its immediate property to the City of Winnipeg.

When John Inkster built Seven Oaks, it was one of a string of Selkirk Settler farms along the Red River, running far north as the Frog Plain. By 1874, Colin Inkster's Bleak House was a small farm three miles north of the new city. As the city crept forward slowly, suburbs to the east, west and south grew at a rapid rate. The north end of Winnipeg had deteriorated to become the "foreign quarter" which implied overcrowding and slum conditions.¹⁶ The area was badly isolated, remote from the city and virtually a settlement unto itself. "The true cause of this isolation was the level crossing intersecting Main Street" stated a 1912 article. The CPR line was crowded with trains that choked up traffic for hours so that "the section north of the tracks did not fill up rapidly and those who located there were not of a desirable class."¹⁷ Finally heeding the problem, the city constructed an underpass which permitted a free flow of traffic and in 1912, the rate of development escalated to 25% a year. The new Redwood Bridge also alleviated the traffic situation and the area was beautified by the creation of Kildonan Park, the Kildonan golf course and the exhibition grounds. The extension of sewer and power lines, as well as street car service, further enhanced the area for residential development.¹⁸

The speculation that accompanied this growth forced land values to increase and Inkster began to find the taxes on his land very steep. In 1921, there was only real development as far north as Inkster Boulevard, but the 6.25 acres around Bleak House cost \$1,071 in municipal taxes,¹⁹ a staggering amount for the time. The rest of the original Seven Oaks land was already sold, but Inkster was forced to sell other property he held to pay the taxes on his house. When his tax bill for 1926 hit \$1,200, Inkster wrote the City Hall to complain that he was being taxed out of existence, while the high rate was impeding others from building in the area. This he attributed to the large

amounts of non-taxable land – the parks, golf course and exhibition grounds; in his estimation, 1/6th of the land of West Kildonan.²⁰ By the time of his death in 1934, residential development had reached his property (thereby reducing his own taxes somewhat) although it was mainly in a strip along Main Street and east to the Red River.

The Inkster family kept most of the land around Bleak House. The last Inkster in the house, Sybil, died in 1973. The house was restored and converted into a Senior citizens drop-in centre, funded by Health and Welfare Canada, the Department of Manpower and private donations. It was officially opened 21 October, 1978. The centre is now self-supporting and provides space for activities and hobbies for many seniors.

Bleak House is named after the Dicken's novel which centres on a household whose members' lives are wrenched by the vagaries of the legal system and the social structure. The Bleak House of the novel is also a country estate.²¹ In the event of Colin Inkster's appointment as a guardian of the law, this gives his choice of names a satirical twist.

The house itself is two storeys, wood siding on a full stone foundation. It was built in two sections set at right angles to each other, but the addition is nearly as old as the main house. Originally heated by stoves, there are three chimneys in the house. An addition to the rear included an electric fireplace, installed between 1912 and 1932.²² A rear porch and the front veranda are probably from this century but there are no building permits issued for alteration by the Inksters. The interior has been altered completely but there remain some hints of its earlier appearance. The front foyer has an alcove and a beautiful bannister leading up the stairs. Parts of the rear addition are also unchanged. A large archway separates a well-lit nook on the front of the house from the bedrooms on the second floor. A wardrobe and a table from the Inkster family remains. Most, and possibly all of the window frames have remained on the inside and it is here that the great thickness of the walls can be measured.

The barns and out-buildings from the farm period are gone but a handsome little summer-house

remains just west of the house. Aluminum windows and a wheelchair ramp are the major concessions on the exterior to the new function of Bleak House. The grounds, covered with large oak trees, are just as they have always been and provide a park-like atmosphere for the historic old home of Sheriff Colin Inkster and his family.

Footnotes--

1. Eleanor MacEwan, "Seven Oaks House Home of John Inkster", paper prepared for the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba, July 1979, p. 2.
2. "Hon. Colin Inkster, Past High Sheriff, Chats of Red River Settlement", Free Press, 23 January, 1932.
3. Jill Wade, Red River Architecture 1812-1870, Master's Thesis, Department of Fine Arts, University of British Columbia, 1867, p. 50.
4. The Story of Seven Oaks House, pamphlet issued by the Seven Oaks House Museum.
5. Frank Howard Schofield, The Story of Manitoba, The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., Winnipeg 1913, p. 14.
6. W.L. Morton, ed. Alexander Begg's Red River Journal and Other Papers Relative to the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, The Champlain Society, Toronto, 1956, p. 191 and 215. Inkster's role should not be over-stated in these happenings, but he was certainly company to the decision-makers.
7. "A Sheriff Half a Century" clipping from biographical file on Colin Inkster in Provincial Library, n.d.
8. Robertson's Political Manual of Manitoba and Northwest Territories 1887, Winnipeg, 1887, p. 168.
9. Colin Inkster Papers, letter from 23 July, 1874.
10. Lillian Gibbons, "Historic Houses" Canadian Antiques Collector, November/December 1971, p. 19.
11. Inkster Papers, op.cit.
12. Ibid., letter from 26 January, 1875.
13. Inkster Papers, op.cit., correspondence from 1926.
14. W.J. Healey "Eighty Years on the Red River" MacLean's Magazine 15 February, 1926, p. 49.
15. Clipping in the Inkster Papers, op.cit., 4 February, 1927.
16. Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1975, p. 171.

17. "Tide of Winnipeg's Population Pouring Northward" The Dominion October, 1912, p. 13.
18. Ibid., p. 15 & 16.
19. Inkster Papers, op.cit., from a Letter in 1921.
20. Ibid., from a Letter in 1926.
21. Una Pope-Hennessy Charles Dickens, Howell, Soskin Inc., New York, 1946, pps. 353-57.
22. Electricity was run out to the area in 1912 and Inkster mentions the fireplace in an article in the Free Press 23 January, 1932.

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Plate 1 – Colin Inkster on the steps of Bleak House, ca.1930. The veranda may have been added in this century. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 2 – Colin Inkster, centre, on the front steps of his house at the age of 87, ca.1930. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 3 – Bleak House as it was in 1965, virtually unchanged in 90 years. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Dan Spurrill Collection #19.)