What makes a person, event or theme historically significant?

Research of historical subjects is interesting and rewarding. This kind of work brings us into a fascinating encounter with the past, and even provides us the opportunity to start to understand it.

Sometimes, research can also be used as an aid to determining significance – to help judge and decide which aspects of history are more valuable than others. This kind of work is especially important when communities are seeking to undertake commemorations, and where it is essential that the reasons for these choices are clear to the community at large.

It is these reasons that are the focus for this guide. It has been designed (with help from the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism) so that the typical issues and questions that accompany this kind of work are identified and discussed in some detail.

It should be noted at the outset that there are two common words that need clarification for all of us involved in this kind of endeavour: interesting and significant. Many aspects of history—people especially—are interesting. All of us have lead vibrant lives, full of incident and meaning. Many of us will assume some level of significance in our family history. But not many of us have claims for significance to a whole community, to the extent that our contributions to the development of the community might be commemorated with a plaque. It is this kind of distinction that is the subject of this guide.

No matter what the subject—individuals or groups, events or historical themes—there is a conventional approach that has been used successfully by heritage agencies for several decades to help define significance. Four basic criteria are employed:

- Connection to Historical Theme
- Temporal Extent of Historical Influence
- Demographic Extent of Historical Influence
- Connections to Extant Sites (sites still in existence)

For people and groups there is an additional criteria that can help in this kind of exercise:

- Nature of Leadership/Claims

Themes and Events

Themes, and especially events, are those points in history when an act, decision or natural phenomenon altered or informed the direction of a community's evolution. These points include the arrival of the first settlers (thus defining the location of the community), the arrival of a rail line (thus marking the economic security of the community), the selection of community for a notable government function (thus expressing the community's importance), the establishment of the first business (thus marking the community's commercial heart), the development of a major business, industry or manufacturing operation (thus expressing the community's economic resourcefulness), the delivery of telephone service, electrification or early gas power (thus defining a major alteration in the daily lives of a community), a fire that destroyed a downtown (thus defining a moment when a community rebuilt or relocated). There are of course many other events and themes, but these examples suggest some primary contours.

All of these aspects of history are clearly of <u>short duration</u> – some can be marked by a single day and many others by not more than a few months. The point being that these are typically not spread over a long time – they are sharp and discrete moments that can be more effectively celebrated. It is also important to define them all to get a complete sense of the history of the place.

Given these suggestions for the nature of historical events, it is clear how the criteria noted above can be helpful in defining and assessing significance. To reiterate, the basic subjects for this kind of exercise are:

1. Connection to Theme
2. Temporal Extent of Influence (influence over time)
3. Demographic Extent of Influence
4. Connections to Extant Site (sites still in existence)

Connection to Theme

This involves a review of the thematic framework for Manitoba history that has been included at the end of this guide, and the selection of one theme that most effectively connects to the event under review. For example, the arrival of a rail line would best be connected to Tertiary Industries and the sub-theme of Transportation. This focus immediately suggests the subject's relationship with other historical aspects that connect to transportation (like an old trail, ferry crossing, bridge, roadways, etc.), and raises questions about the relative importance of the subject under consideration with those other competing subjects. Once the theme has been defined, it will be possible to employ the other three criteria to actually compare and contrast the subject event with events of a similar nature.

Temporal Extent of Influence (influence over time)

What can be defined as a single, discrete event (like the day the railway tracks reached a certain place) usually also can be seen as the inaugural moment of a whole concatenation of events and activities that follow – and that also can be seen as describing the history of that particular theme (of the railway in the community for example). This criteria allows for a comparison of an event and theme (railways) with other similar threads of the same theme (as noted above, like an old trail, ferry crossing, bridge, roadways, etc.), and for an objective assessment based only the duration of the theme, with the assumption being that

those themes that lasted longer likely had more historical impact on the community. The obvious questions that can help clarify and inform assessments in this regard are focused by numbers of years:

- Did the event/theme last one year?
- Did the event/theme last five years?
- Did the event/theme last ten years?
- Did the event/theme last a generation?
- Is the event/theme still ongoing?

Demographic Extent of Influence

It is also assumed that events and themes whose impact affected more people will have more significance than those whose impact was focused only a few people or even only on one generation. Thus, to use the example above, it is likely that trails and a ferry crossing will have affected fewer people than the railway, bridge and roadway, and that therefore those latter events/themes would be of lesser significance (although of course still interesting). Obvious questions that can help clarify and inform assessments are focused by numbers of people:

- Did the event/theme affect a street-worth of people?
- Did the event/theme affect a neighbourhood worth of people?
- Did the event/theme affect half of the community?
- Did the event/theme affect the whole community?

Connections to Extant Sites (sites still in existence)

Events and themes that can be connected to a site or place often have more resonance than those events that were so ephemeral that no trace of their existence remains. To continue to use the examples above, all of these themes—trail, ferry, rail line, bridge, roadway—all likely have some physical manifestation. That is, there is probably a spot (even if the original site qualities have been changed) that can still allow visitors and community members to "get close" to the actual site of a certain event, and to imaginatively connect with history. Questions that can help clarify and inform assessments in this regard include:

- Are there completely intact site connections that still exist where the event/theme occurred?
- Are there extant site connections that still exist (but in a compromised state) where the event/theme occurred?
- Are there apparent extant site connections that still exist where the event/theme occurred?
- Are there hints of extant site connections where the event/theme occurred?
- Is there at least an accessible place (without an extant site remains) where the event/theme occurred?

People and Groups

Individuals of historical significance can typically be divided into two broad groups: those whose life work helped define and guide the course of community history (traditional candidates in this mould will be politicians and major business people); and those whose lives stand as examples for the community (often these will be famous people, usually renowned on a larger stage – a Stanley Cup winner or a famous Canadian writer for example).

The discussions developed above, for events, can be recast for an assessment of people using the same criteria (with the addition of Nature of Claims):

1. Connection to Theme
2. Nature of Claims
3. Temporal Extent of Influence (influence over time)
4. Geographic Extent of Influence
5. Connections to Extant Sites (sites still in existence)

It must be observed at the outset that this kind of exercise should not be confined to the stereotypical "movers and shakers" in a community – politicians and business people. There are many others whose lives should be considered for their contributions to the evolution of a community. For example, some obvious additional candidates will include clergy, school teachers, school principals, bankers, railway station agents – all people whose work would have touched hundreds, and who would have garnered some level of respect in the community. And don't forget about the often unsung heroes: the choir master, barber, major volunteer, and many others, whose local activity and leadership might have had as much effect on the life of a community as any major politician.

Connection to Theme

This involves a review of the thematic framework for Manitoba history that has been included at the end of this guide, and the selection of one theme that most effectively connects to the individual under review. For example, the life of an early mayor would best be connected to Political History and the sub-theme of Elections, candidates and elected officials. This focus immediately suggests the subject's relationship with other historical aspects that connect to political life (other mayors in particular), and raises questions about the relative importance of the subject under consideration with those other competing subjects. Once the theme has been defined, it will be possible to employ the other four criteria to actually compare and contrast the subject with people of a similar nature.

Nature of Claims

At this level of scrutiny it is first necessary to determine the placement of the person into the correct camp: one whose life work helped define and guide the course of community history; or one whose life stands as an example for the community.

Questions and examples that can help clarify and provide assessments in this regard include:
- Was the person a Creator? That is, did they make, invent, devise an idea, product, invention that was used within the community (and also without) that had an impact on the evolution of the community? Very few people will attain this kind of status.
- Was the person a Popularizer? That is, did they take a pre-existing invention, idea or product and turn it into a local expression?
- Was the person an icon? That is, a person born/raised in community whose fame rests in actions and results beyond the community (Sports figures, Wop May, Neil Young, etc.)
- Was the person an exemplar? That is, a person connected with a community and who is renowned (war hero).

- Was the person an excellent representative of a basic occupation? For example, a wonderful example of a country doctor – did really good things; this is also where people of same ilk are compared – barbers/bricklayers. etc
- Was the person a good representative of a basic occupation? That is, a notable example of a country doctor – did a really good job.
- Was the person a typical representative of a basic occupation? That is, were they like most people?

Temporal Extent of Influence (influence over time)

This examines a person or group by defining the length of time of their influence in a community. Questions that can help clarify and inform assessments in this regard include:
- Did the person's influence last one year?
- Did the person's influence last five years?
- Did the person's influence last ten years?
- Did the person's influence last a generation?
- Is the person's influence still ongoing?

Demographic Extent of Influence

This helps define significance by defining the number of people affected by the activities of an individual or group. Questions that can help clarify and inform assessments in this regard include:
- Did the person/group affect a <u>street</u> worth of people?
- Did the person/group affect a neighbourhood worth of people?
- Did the person/group affect half the community?
- Did the person/group affect the whole community?

Connections to Extant Sites (sites still in existence)

The lives of people and groups that can be connected to a building, site or place often have more resonance than those that cannot. Questions that can help clarify and inform assessments in this regard include:
- Are there major extant site connections that still exist where the person lived or worked, and that are key reflections of their claims to significance?
- Are there extant site connections that still exist (but in a compromised state) where the person lived or worked, and that are key reflections of their claims to significance?
- Is the person buried in the community and is there a gravemarker?
- Are there good extant site connections that still exist that have less direct connections to the person?
- Are there compromised extant site connections that still exist that have less direct connections to the person?

Thematic Framework of Manitoba History

Economic History

Primary Industries

- Hunting and Trapping
- Fishing
- Cereal Grain Farming
- Animal Farming
- Dairy Farming
- Special Product Farming
- Lumbering
- Mining

Secondary Industries

- Manufacturing leather, clothing, etc.
- Processing fish
- Milling, brewing, distilling
- Processing and packing meat
- Making dairy products
- Processing special agricultural products
- Making lumber products
- Making ferrous mineral products
- Making petroleum products
- Making other mineral products
- Making chemical products and drugs
- Manufacturing electrical products
- Manufacturing machinery and equipment
- Constructing buildings and other structures
- Constructing communications or energy systems

Tertiary Industries

- Trade
- Finance
- Professional service
- Non-professional service
- Transportation
- Communications, culture, and knowledge
- Energy

Political History

- Political parties and groups
- Elections, candidates, and elected officials
- Government policies, activities, and decisions
- Government administration
- Legal systems and personnel

Social and Cultural History

- Early Aboriginal communities
- First Nations and Métis communities
- Group immigration and settlement
- Pioneer life
- Volunteer community organizations
- Religious life and institutions
- Teaching and learning, educational life and institutions
- Domestic life
- Cultural expression
- Recreation and sport
- Science and exploration
- Grieving and death