

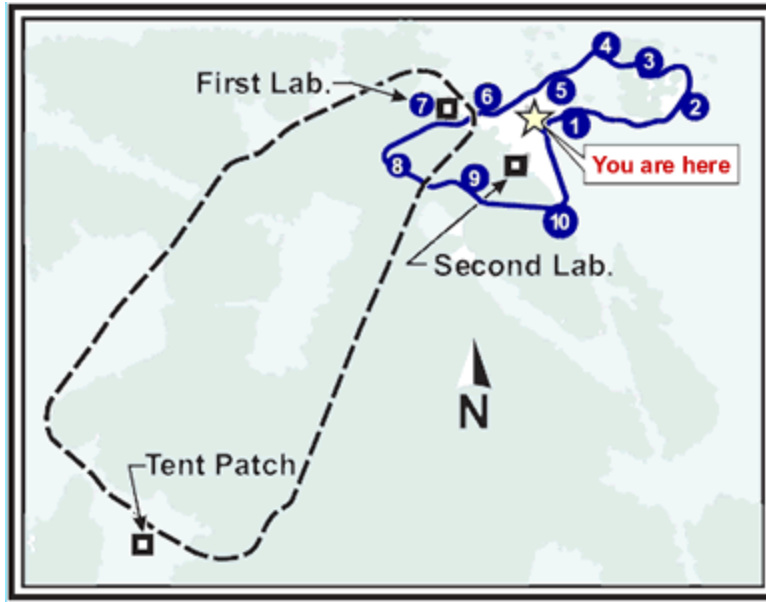
Western Parks

Criddle / Vane Homestead Self-guiding Interpretive Trail



Courtesy of Manitoba Archives

The Criddle and Vane families were Manitoba pioneers, well-known for their contributions in the fields of science, art, sports and culture, as well as for their somewhat eccentric lifestyle. By taking a walk through this historic homestead you take a step back in time and experience what life was like for this family. The Homestead Self-guiding Trail features interpretive signs that lead you through the history of the Criddle/Vane family and their life and struggles as early pioneers. See how they created a world unto themselves with their grand house St. Albans, sporting events, scientific pursuits at the Bug House of Aweme and more. For a longer excursion, hike the Tent Patch trail and enjoy the shaded forested path to Criddle/Vane's original tent patch site, then return through native mixed-grass prairie.



Tent Patch & St. Albans

The Criddle/Vane Family arrived at the homestead August 1882. Their first accommodations were two tents which were located in this spot. With winter coming, a house was the priority. Not knowing how to build, Percy hired two neighbors to construct the house while he and Edwy, then eleven, cut and hauled logs from Spruce Woods. They moved into the house at Christmas. With only a wood stove for heat and chinking between the logs falling out - it was a cold first winter. An addition was built in 1886 and the following year the house received its crowning glory - two lightening rods from England. The family lived in the log house for twenty-four years.

When it came time to move into the new house in 1906 Percy wrote in his diary: "Going to begin the Exodus from the log house where we have lived so long-where four of the children have been born-where Elise died-and where we have passed through the early hardships of pioneering. Many a jolly party and lots of other pleasures have we had in it- and now its glory is to fade."



Alice Criddle in front of log house, 1898.

Across the Ocean and Faraway

Percy Criddle was not your typical pioneer. He was a merchant who knew nothing of farming. Educated in England and Germany, Percy had studied law, medicine and music. At the age of thirty-eight he decided to uproot his two households, sail across the ocean to Canada, and make his fortune farming the *Wheat Fields of the World*. His two households included Elise and her five children and Alice and her four children. Percy kept a diary. It is full of gems about pioneer life and the land and wildlife before extensive settlement. It also provides insight into the life of the Criddle/Vane family.



Percy and Elise.



Percy and Alice.

The trip across the ocean was miserable. Half the family travelled steerage to save money. The family, three adults and nine children, arrived in Brandon in August 1882. Percy took a couple of days prospecting for a homestead. Then on August 24 with land registered and provisions bought, the family set out for their new home. Percy went on ahead while Alice and Elise and the children were to find their way behind him. Not familiar with driving oxen, the women and children arrived late that evening.

The Big House

Percy designed the big house, but the excellent construction was due to Mr. Harms, a family friend. The boys were kept busier than usual in 1906 helping MR. Harms build while keeping up the farm. The house cost \$1560 to construct. There are eight bedrooms upstairs and a kitchen, dining room, music/billiard room, and a library on the main floor. The East Wing was added in 1916 for house guests. Many of the visitors were colleagues of Norman's, here to study insects and plant life. Grand parties were held here, especially on New Year's Eve. Percy would play the organ while couples danced through the music room, down the hall into the dining room and around again. The red hall lamp, a gift from Edwy and Harry, gave a rosy glow as dancers whirled beneath it. Percy, Edwy and Harry often sang as a trio at parties.



East Garden view of St. Albans, 1917.

The log house and the big house were known as St. Albans, all the family homes were given names. Percy loved flags and used them to signal the family and neighbours. Alice made him the St. Albans flag -black with gold cross and crown.

The Big House was destroyed by a fire in the summer of 2014.



Percy playing the organ.

Lean Years

Like many pioneering families, the first years were extremely difficult. Arriving late the first year they had no crop, no produce, and no garden. Supplies had to be bought and cash was scarce. Hunting supplemented the food supply but gun powder was dear. Alice and some of the children developed scurvy in the lean years-not enough fruit and vegetables.

Percy wrote: “Nothing but shorts and potatoes with an occasional rabbit to eat – all of us half-famished. Really, ‘tis almost too disheartening, and one loses courage.”



Garden at St. Albans, 1917

Where you are standing was once one of the many gardens. Fruit and vegetables were nurtured and stored for the winter months. Each of the children had their own garden plot where they were encouraged to grow wild fruit. The children credited their knowledge of plants and insects to their work in the gardens. At an early age they were responsible for weeding and picking harmful insects from the plants. As adults several of the first generation bred their own plant varieties; Harry bred roses, Evelyn bred vegetables, Stuart bred lilies, Maida bred geraniums, Talbot bred lilacs and he crossed pumpkins with marrow to make marrowkins.



Log hunting shelter, 1900

Milk House

Dido's Dairy was built in April 1883. Percy did not like animals so the oldest girls, Minnie and Isabel (*Dido*) were put in charge of Mrs. Nelly, the cow, and her calf, Mr. Calf. The milk, cream and butter were wonderful additions to the family larder during the lean years. Any extra was

sold in Brandon for much welcomed money, as Percy said: “pretty good business, but a lot of work for the girls.”

The next year Minnie went to work in Brandon as a domestic. She was 16. Her wage brought some income into the struggling farm. The following year Isabel joined her. Their wages provided the family with money in the lean years.

Eventually Beatrice, and later Maida and Julia took over the dairy. In 1909 a new concrete milk house was built. You see the remains of the foundation here. Alma described it as: “A neat little dairy, with rows of shelves to hold the wide flat pans of milk, from which the cream was deftly skimmed, when cream separators were not a part of the dairy equipment. As the years passed, Virginia creeper grew over the low walls, covering it with a cooling shade.”



The Milk House

Well Oak

Alma wrote: “*The Well Oak was as much a part of St. Albans as the barns or the house itself. The well gave good water and the oak tree cast shade over the area, creating a cool oasis on a hot day*”. The well also provided fun on a cold day. Norman noted that it took 1750 pails of water to create the skating rink in front of the well.



Skating at the well, 1897

As the farm grew, the number of sheds and barns up the hill increased. Edwy was chief builder. As the oldest son, Edwy shouldered much of the responsibility for the farm, but all the children contributed in some way. Thirteen bright and hardworking children are the reason the family survived.



Julia and Alma, 1916

Bug House of Aweme

This is the site of the first Entomological Laboratory in western Canada. Norman Criddle was appointed Entomological Field Officer in 1912 and shortly after his brothers built him the lab. Inside was Norman's collection of butterflies, beetles and other insects- neatly mounted in more than 80 cases.



The first lab 1913-1923. Volunteers with the Criddle/Vane Homestead Heritage Committee restored the first lab in 2006.

The lab was Norman's office when working at Aweme- the district name on the insect specimens found around the world. Some of the world's greatest entomology collections include Aweme specimens traded by Norman. The homestead has always been a place of pilgrimage for entomologists. Many respected scientist worked here with Norman. Today it is an important site because of the continuous collection over a long period of time. Entomology students from many universities still study insects collected from Aweme.



The second lab, 1923.

In 1923 the second lab was built. It was like a natural history museum. The "Bug House" was a regular stop on Sunday outings. If Norman was not here, Maida showed visitors the many specimens and insects collected from around the world.



Norman at work in his lab, 1925.

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Tennis Anyone?

Percy enjoyed sporting events and over the years encouraged competition among his thirteen children. In the first summer of 1883, he decided to build a tennis court. For twenty-three years the “children” had to cut the various tennis courts with knives and scissors. They did not own a lawnmower until 1906. This was one of the three tennis courts on the property. Lawn tennis parties were popular events at the St. Albans homestead. The girls were even encouraged to play. Maida, Stuart and Talbot were known as very good tennis players, winning tournaments in local towns and Winnipeg.

The children competed in many sports. Harry played hockey for Treesbank and Edwy, Harry, and Cecil were well known football players. Cecil was the smallest of the boys but a nimble wrestler. His older brothers liked to taunt the biggest players at football matches to wrestle with their little brother - Cecil always won. Years later Edwy carried on the family tradition of lawn tennis parties at his farm called St. John's.



Playing tennis at St. Albans



Playing tennis at St. Albans

Fore!

The first golf course on the homestead was created in 1914 with four holes, prior to that it had been played indoors as a parlor game. How that occurred is left to our imagination. Golf became the *cat's pajamas* after World War I, largely because there were not as many men around to play team sports. This is the 9th “green”, a sand-green, the last green in the course. The golf course went through five different configurations over the years. The last course had 9-holes most of which were across the road.

Of all the first generation children, Evelyn seemed to enjoy the course the most. He golfed his way out to the windmill to water the cows and back again. On Sundays, when the visitors came out for a round or two, Evelyn would rise early to level the greens before the guests arrived. Evelyn golfed and gardened up to his death at age 96. Years later, Stuart's son Percy, built Glen Meadows Golf Course on Vancouver Island where some of the family retired.



Gentlemen golfing at St. Albans, 1915



St. Albans Golf Course, 1915

Weather Station

The *Thermometer Box* as it was known contained a number of weather instruments. Percy brought thermometers from England but they broke the first winter—from the cold. A new set was sent from England that could endure a Manitoba winter. Percy began weather records in 1884 and sent one copy to Ottawa for the meteorological record. The second copy he kept and added notes about wildlife, bird migration, and other observations. It would become a valuable record of weather and natural history.

Later Norman and Maida kept the meticulous records, taking the readings at 9 a.m., no matter the weather. Maida received a plaque from the Canadian Meteorological Service for the third longest weather record kept by any one Canadian family. Today the family records are kept in the Manitoba Archives.



Maida at the weather station, 1953

Naturalist & Artist

Alice was one of the first women to attend Cambridge University where she studied languages, literature and natural history. Once in the new world, Alice became the children's teacher as Percy did not approve of the local schools. Norman Criddle the eldest son of Alice was greatly influenced by his mother. Norman preferred walks on the prairie or through the woods, rather than sporting events. A walk with Norman was a favourite pastime with his friends.



Norman Criddle

Alma wrote: "These were trips for fun and learning, as the groups around Norman never tired of hearing him talk about his friends, the inhabitants of Nature's world. His descriptions of flora and fauna, his tales about their wonders, fascinated his listeners."

His love of nature can be seen in his paintings. They say he never picked the plants he painted but drew them in the field or from memory. It was his accurate renderings of flora and fauna that drew the attention of the scientific community and launched his career. It was Normans work, greatly assisted by his brothers and sisters, which put Aweme, and Manitoba, on the map as a centre for scientific research on the prairies.



Norman and friends in the Sandhills, 1914

The Palace

Edwy Vane was the eldest son of Percy and Elise. As the oldest child in the family he became the son in charge of the farm and remained at St. Albans to work while his siblings were sent elsewhere as hired hands. When a young school teacher, Miss Emily Steer, became a regular visitor to St. Albans, Percy quite approved of her until he noticed the attraction between her and

Edwy. Percy did not want to lose his son to marriage. Amid protests, Edwy and Emily were married in 1897 and settled into the house whose foundation you see here. They called it the Palace, in jest.

As long as they remained living in the Palace, Edwy worked on the homestead. But by 1905 they decided to leave much to Percy's displeasure to start their own legacy. Edwy was very successful. In 1913 they bought a new farm and had Mr. Harms build their house, complete with tennis courts which he names St. John's.



Emily and Edwy, 1897



The Palace

Gardenview

Stuart's house was called Gardenview. Just down the slope was a large garden, brimming with flowers, vegetables and strawberries, raspberries and fruit trees. Gardenview was built in 1919, with a house-raising bee, for Stuart and his new bride Ruth. The large birdbath was built under a tall oak and easily viewed from the window so the family could watch the birds. Stuart enjoyed the many variations of flowers he grew- pansies, roses, sunflowers and lilies. He developed a strain of lily that was named after him- *Lilium Stuart Criddlei*.

In 1968, at the age of 91, Stuart was recognized at the first Convocation at Brandon University. He received an Honorary Doctorate of Science for his lifelong work studying mammals, on his own and with his siblings; Stuart published more than 20 papers on the subject. One of Stuart's most prized possessions was the badge he was given when appointed to the Manitoba Game Advisory Committee.



Gardenview



Stuart and specimens, 1953

Home to Rest

The family cemetery was created when Elise passed away in 1903. Percy wrote of her passing: “My memory keeps going backwards and forwards over the 41 years of changes and vicissitudes through which we have travelled together... I see a thousand things to tell me of her work and doings and how steadily and quietly she labored for the general good.”

Stuart made Elise the cement headstone, and they buried her beneath the boughs of the spruce tree. From the oldest to the youngest- Alma was the next to be laid to rest in the cemetery. She was just twenty-three. Little Alma was a girl with a sunny disposition who made pets of the calves and piglets. It was a sad time at St. Albans as she slowly succumbed to cancer.

Within a year of Alma’s tragic death, Percy passed away. Then sadly Alice followed a few weeks later. As the family members passed they have been brought home to the homestead or to the cemetery at Milford.

The Criddle/Vane homestead- the site of grand parties and picnics, lawn tennis and golf tournaments as well as the study of nature and art- was sold in 1960. Maida and Evelyn were the last to live here before they retired to the west coast. Today, members of the Criddle and Vane families are still living in the area, as well as across Canada. Many return to visit the homestead often.



Alma, Percy and Bobby, 1913