

Chapter 1





La Verendrye, a French explorer, is credited with being the first European to explore North Dakota. He visited the area in the 1730s, more than 60 years before Lewis and Clark, in his quest to find a passage to the Pacific Ocean. *Print courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.*

Who was La Verendrye?

Few North Dakotans would question that Verendrye Electric Cooperative has the most unique name of all the electric cooperatives in the state. Many North Dakotans are somewhat familiar with the name — especially if they remember their history lessons — but it is still a mystery to many.

The cooperative bears the name of the French explorer, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, the Sieur de la Verendrye. “Outside of North Dakota, most people don’t know of him at all, except maybe people in Canada,” said Tracy Potter, director of the Fort Abraham Lincoln Foundation in Mandan. Potter has studied La Verendrye extensively. “He really is a

fascinating historical character. He was a soldier by age 12 and he fought in one of the bloodiest battles in Europe. It was only later in life that he became an explorer.”

Verendrye Electric bears the explorer’s name because of where the cooperative was founded. It was organized in 1939 in a tiny town named Verendrye, located about 13 miles northeast of Velva. In 1941, the cooperative moved its headquarters to Velva, but has always kept its original name. Verendrye is home to David and Jo Ashley, who moved there in 1990 after the town was empty for several years.

THE MAN

La Verendrye was born November 17, 1685, the fourth son of Rene Gaultier de Varennes, governor of Three Rivers, Quebec. According to the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, La Verendrye's father came to Canada in 1665 during the time France was colonizing Canada. Before becoming a fur trader and explorer, La Verendrye served in the French Army beginning at the age of 12. He arrived in France in 1708 to serve in the army, and was wounded in a battle in northern France between French and English forces in the War of the Spanish Succession. He was also held prisoner for 15 months. He returned to Canada and was married there in 1712. He and his wife had four sons and two daughters. The sons eventually accompanied him on his journeys. After spending time farming, he eventually joined forces with his brother to fur trade out of a post north of Lake Superior before leading voyages to discover a route to the Pacific Ocean.¹

Potter said the French believed there was a large gulf that extended to about Nebraska that would lead them to the Pacific Ocean. La Verendrye was on a mission to discover that elusive passage, and along the way, he helped France by setting up posts for fur trading.

¹ Yves F. Zoltvany, *Gaultier de Varennes et de la Verendrye, Pierre*. Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 3. University of Toronto. 1974. Accessed July 3, 2013 (http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/gaultier_de_varennes_et_de_la_verendrye_pierre_3E.html.)

EXPLORING NORTH DAKOTA

La Verendrye never found the elusive waterway to the Pacific, but in 1738 he reached Mandan villages in North Dakota, and is credited with being the first known European to visit the Northern Plains in what is now the United States. He made his way to North Dakota more than 60 years before the legendary Lewis and Clark. He died on December 6, 1749 in Montreal. La Verendrye wrote about his visit to the Northern Plains — including his interaction with the Mandan Indians — in a translated journal available from the Champlain Society.

Although the town of Verendrye bears his name, no one really knows exactly how close La Verendrye came to the town site. “It’s pretty clear he was somewhere in the Turtle Mountains, but we don’t know exactly where,” Potter said. “He probably followed the Souris River loop, but there is no guarantee of that.”

Dr. Raymond Wood, a retired professor of anthropology at the University of Missouri, Columbia, said it is also unclear exactly which Mandan villages La Verendrye visited. Wood edited the book, *The Explorations of the La Verendryes in the Northern Plains, 1738-43*, which was written by G. Hubert Smith and published in 1980.

“There’s no doubt he visited Mandan villages near Bismarck, but exactly which ones is the question,” Wood said.

Potter said there is even debate about whether he visited the Mandan Indians or the Hidatsa Indians, and if he was at the Missouri River near Bismarck or farther north near the Washburn and Stanton areas. Potter said La Verendrye mentions the Mandans, but it is possible he misidentified the tribe based on what he was told by the Assiniboiné Indians. He said when La Verendrye reached the Missouri River, he had a group of 650 Assiniboines traveling with him.



This is the actual lead plate La Verendrye's sons buried near Fort Pierre, S.D., that proclaimed the land for France. It is currently on display in the Museum of the South Dakota State Historical Society in Pierre. *Courtesy of the Museum of the South Dakota Historical Society.*



This illustration depicts La Verendrye's sons burying a lead plate near Fort Pierre proclaiming the Missouri River basin for French King Louis XV. The plate was discovered by school children on Feb. 16, 1913. *Courtesy of the Museum of the South Dakota Historical Society, Pierre.*

SOUTH DAKOTA HISTORY


Although La Verendrye never made it farther south than North Dakota, his sons firmly planted the Verendrye name in South Dakota. In Fort Pierre there is a Verendrye Museum and a National Historic Landmark celebrating an important item two of the sons buried there. Potter said La Verendrye's sons eventually made it as far south as Wyoming.

Two of La Verendrye's sons buried a lead plate claiming control of the entire Missouri River Drainage for France. The plate was dated March 30, 1743. It was discovered by children on February 16, 1913, and is now on display at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. A replica of the plate can also be seen at the Verendrye Museum in Fort Pierre.

Darby Nutter, president of the Verendrye Museum, said the discovery of the plate was very significant, and there are all kinds of stories of how the kids found it and what they intended to do with it. "It was said that one of the kids was going to throw the tablet into the Bad River, but another talked him out of it," Nutter said.

Although the museum bears the Verendrye name, most of the museum's artifacts contain Native American items and early frontier items because there's really nothing besides the plate that signifies the Verendryes' journey through South Dakota.

"The museum is not dedicated to the Verendryes because all they left us in history was the plate," Nutter said.



A statue of La Verendrye is displayed outside of the Quebec National Assembly building. La Verendrye's legacy remains strong in many parts of Canada where there are also parks, streets and other monuments that bear his name. *Courtesy of the Assemblée Nationale, Quebec. Photo by Christian Chevalier.*





A special display was opened at the Museum of Manitoba, Winnipeg, in 2013 to celebrate the 275th anniversary of when La Verendrye built Fort Rouge. Winnipeg is also home to a living history group, La Compagnie de la Verendrye, that re-enacts the life of soldiers and voyagers who accompanied La Verendrye. *Image courtesy of the Manitoba Museum and La Compagnie de la Verendrye, Winnipeg.*

CANADIAN HISTORY

La Verendrye is an important part of Canadian history where he is more known than in the U.S. There are parks, statues and streets named after him. “He was certainly the most important French explorer of his day, especially in North America,” Wood said.

In 2013, residents of Winnipeg, Manitoba, celebrated the 275th Anniversary of when he established the trading post Fort Rouge. As part of the 275th Anniversary of Fort Rouge, the Museum of Manitoba had a temporary display that included

maps and artifacts from La Verendrye’s group.

There is a group of people in Winnipeg, known as La Compagnie de la Verendrye, that consist of people who re-enact the history of La Verendrye. The living history group dresses in French uniforms and all of the members speak French. Michel Loiselle, who has been a part of the group for 20 years, said La Verendrye is considered a local hero. Winnipeg has a park, a school and a street named after La Verendrye. “He’s one of the better-known Canadian explorers,” Loiselle said.



A monument in Fort Pierre, S.D., marks where La Verendrye's sons buried a lead plate proclaiming land for French King Louis XV. *Courtesy of the Museum of the South Dakota Historical Society, Pierre.*

LA VERENDRYE'S LEGACY

Various accounts of La Verendrye's journeys describe him as being disappointed because he did not receive the recognition he thought he deserved from the French government. Potter said he was relieved of command for not finding the nonexistent bay to the Pacific, but he was redeemed before he died. French officials eventually realized the bay didn't exist and they reinstated La Verendrye.

Potter said La Verendrye played a significant role in helping France compete with England in the commercial fur trade, and that his legacy impacted Lewis and Clark. "After La Verendrye, there was always a French connection to the Mandans and Hidatsas," Potter said. "When Lewis and Clark came through the area, they met Canadians that were there because of La Verendrye."