
Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Heritage Resources Management Plan

Historic Context Statement

Before 1780-1980



REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY
OF **WOOD BUFFALO**

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

What is a historic context statement? It is a report on the development of the built environment and the cultural landscapes of a defined area – in this case, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. As a public history, the context documents specific themes, including peoples, historical periods, institutions, design, and events/occurrences that have helped shape the region. Typically developed in the early stages of heritage management, it is used as a tool for evaluation – establishing a reference point for a basic understanding of a resource's *significance*. Additionally, the context helps the reader better understand the relationship between a resource to the historical and social contexts.

A historic context is not a timeline that lists events or documents citizens. It cannot function as a

comprehensive history or an academic research project. This document takes a bird's eye view; historic context statements should be concise and approachable by all readers. Indeed, the historic context is a glossing-over of hundreds if not thousands of years. Still, it gives the heritage community a foundation for examining and evaluating Historical Resources and Cultural Landscapes. It opens the door to more detailed research in the continuing stages of heritage management.

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo covers over 67,000 km² in northeast Alberta. It was established on April 1, 1995. The amalgamation of the City of Fort McMurray and Improvement District No. 143 included Conklin, Janvier, Anzac, Fort McKay, Fort Chipewyan, and Fort Fitzgerald. It is essential to understand that historical themes will follow patterns that predate the imposition



Confluence of the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers - 1938 showing extant historical resources (HBC structures).

George Mellis Douglas/Library and Archives Canada/3918953.

of government boundaries. In many cases, the genealogical relationship between communities exists despite being in different municipalities. Nevertheless, this historic context gives a brief survey of the significant development influences and impacts starting just prior to 1788 (the establishment of Fort Chipewyan) and continuing through the 1970s (bringing the context within the heritage scope – 40-50 years prior to the current day).

A Works Cited and Additional Reading listing follows this context for those interested in learning more about the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

SECTION 2. BEFORE 1780

For thousands of years, the ancestors of the Cree and Dené have lived in the place that would become The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. When the glaciers melted more than eight thousand years ago, the ancestors of the Cree and Algonquian people moved from the south. At the same time, the Athabaskan Dené arrived in the region west and Northwest.¹ The *Great Waterways* and *Boreal Forests* were the homes to diverse societies that shaped the environment around them.

These Indigenous Peoples had hunting-based economies, which demanded a lifetime of travel throughout the region.² Land-uses were established based on resources and the natural environment.³ This economic and cultural cycle linked people to the seasonal landscapes.

However, it was far more than a geographic or physical linking; it was a genealogical relationship.

The ecosystems and Indigenous people had a “kinship-like relationship of interdependence, respect, and stewardship.”⁴ That relationship formed “the foundation of the people’s complete physical, spiritual, and cultural existence.”⁵

This genealogical relationship applied to the people and landscapes throughout the region. Land-use overlapped between different Indigenous Peoples, each with their own unique relationship to the land and resources. “Different peoples may have occupied the same lands at different times or in different seasons.”⁶ Overlapping land use was common, and the land itself was certainly not limited to European ideas of ownership.⁷ This ecosystem (peoples, landscapes, and resources) developed over countless generations. These were ever-changing systems with marks that persist today.

The heritage resources that remain from these times may not be immediately evident to settler-society. This is partly due to the cultural lenses through which a settler views this region – applying beliefs about Western-European cultural heritage to Indigenous places. For example, a settler lens might expect significant spiritual sites to be marked with churches, even though Métis, Cree or Dene people may express spirituality differently. Likewise, natural processes like soil acidity, floods, wildfires, and human intervention have shaped and reshaped the landscape since the earliest peoples.⁸

It is important to understand that First Nations were constantly changing societies prior to contact. Nevertheless, the collision of Euro-Canadian cultures and First Nations brought unprecedented

1 Fort McMurray 468 First Nation, *Nistawayaw: “Where Three Rivers Meet:” Traditional Land Use Study* (Calgary, AB: Nicomacian Press, 2006), 1-4.

2 Fort McMurray First Nation #468, *Comprehensive Community Plan* (Fort McMurray, AB, 2012), 9.

3 Fort McMurray First Nation #468, *Comprehensive Community Plan*, 10.

4 Mikisew Cree First Nation, *Wiyôw’tan’kitaskino (Our Land is Rich) A Mikisew Cree Culture and Rights Assessment* (2015), 13-14.

5 Fort McKay Environment Services, Ltd., *A Profile of the Extended Community of Fort McKay* (Fort McKay, AB, 1995), 4.

6 Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, *Footprints on the Land – Tracing the Path of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation* (2003), 31.

7 Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, *Footprints on the Land*, 31.

8 Fort McMurray #468 First Nation, *Nistawayaw: “Where Three Rivers Meet,”* 117.



Sir George Back. 16 July 1825, watercolour "Portage La Loche between Lac La Loche and the Clearwater River" (Methye Portage).

transformations beginning in the early 18th Century. The earliest presence of Europe was felt before any Euro-Canadian explorer set foot in the Northwest. Shortly after the establishment of fur trade enterprises by French and British North Americans at the end of the 1600s, Northern Cree from Hudson Bay and James Bay acted as middlemen bringing trade goods from around the world to the Northwest. The Athabasca River carried global trade long before Europeans knew it existed.

Much of the 18th and 19th Centuries Indigenous built heritage still exists today. However, Indigeneity is not relegated to a distant past. First Nations and Métis continue to use the land, and it has continued importance to their cultures and identities. These landscapes are more than a collection of artifacts. Instead, they reflect a larger body of use, one that relates to acting on their knowledge of specific landforms and waterways, and resources. Collectively, Indigenous Peoples of these lands constructed and maintained cultural landscapes that are ancient, some that are more than ten thousand years old. Nevertheless, Indigenous Peoples have incorporated material culture from around the world and imbued these artifacts with their way of knowing. This can create a unique blend of ancient and modern that is still 100% Indigenous built heritage.

"Aboriginals understood that land ... reflected and informed their distinctive cultures, identities and experiences."

Patricia A. McCormack, *Walking the Land: Aboriginal Trails, Cultural Landscapes, and Archaeological Studies for Impact Assessment*. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 13, no. 1 (2017), 110-135.



The Western Interior of British North America in 1821.

Ted Binnema and Gerhard J. Ens (eds.) *Hudson's Bay Company, Edmonton House Journals, 1821-26* (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 2016), xviii.

SECTION 3. FUR TRADE ERA: 1788-1899

As early as 1782, fur traders attached their posts to pre-existing Cree and Dené trade networks, and for 150 years (until the 1930s), the fur trade was the primary economy of the region.⁹ Small and large trade posts were dotted across the land.¹⁰ Very few of these posts remain intact because most were semi-permanent by design in conjunction with the aforementioned natural processes. While structures may no longer be present, the locations of many

of these posts can be found within the historical record.

The earliest continuous settlement in Alberta, Fort Chipewyan, was established as a trading post in 1788. Other prominent Hudson's Bay Company posts, Fort McKay and Fort McMurray were established later in the 19th Century. Additionally, there were many other posts from smaller companies in the region. Geographical evidence of these posts is less well known by Euro-Canadian Historians due to inadequate record-keeping.

⁹ Patricia McCormack, *Fort Chipewyan and the shaping of Canadian history, 1788-1920s: "we like to be free in this country"* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 5-6.

¹⁰ Arthur J Ray, "Commentary on the Economic History of the Treaty 8 Area," *Native Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (1995), 180.



Fort Chipewyan, ca1930 - HBC lower right.

Glenbow Archives NA-3844-96.



Fort McKay Post, 1900.

Canada. Dept. of Mines and Technical Surveys / Library and Archives Canada / PA-019527.

Since the First Peoples, the Athabasca River was the spine of the fur economy; it carried people and consumer goods from across the world for hundreds of years. The river cuts through the thick forest, making locations such as Fort Chipewyan central to global trade networks spanning as far as India. The fur trade webbed like veins through the region. Trails, waterways and portage, traplines, cabins, and seasonal settlements were little pockets of activity within the boreal forest environment.

In the 1890s, Fort Chipewyan had roughly 150-200 permanent residents, and seasonal populations reached upwards of 700.¹¹ By contrast, the 1892

municipal census of Edmonton shows 700 residents – by any measure Fort Chipewyan was one of the largest economic communities in the region.

Fur trade forts were pluralistic societies. People from across western Europe would become Hivernants living in Pays d'en Haut. Frequently the associated settlements were built on more than business relationships, Country Marriages were the standard of the time, and many families would learn to call these posts home.¹² Fur trade posts were small villages of sorts, with the same amenities you might expect elsewhere. Although

11 Donald Grant Wetherell and Irene Kmet. *Alberta's North*. Reprint, Edmonton, Alta.: Canadian Circumpolar Institute Press, 2000, 26.

12 Sylvia Van Kirk. *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*. University of Oklahoma Press 1983, 3-5.

Year(s)	Name – Company	Approximate Locale
1778	Pond House – Northwest Company	Embarrass Portage
1788	Fort Chipewyan I	Lake Athabasca (Southwest)
1780s	House at the Forks (aka McLeod's Fort) – Northwest Company	Fort McMurray
1797	Fort Chipewyan II	Fort Chipewyan
1799-1805	House at the Forks – Northwest Company	Fort McMurray
1802	Fort Chipewyan III	Fort Chipewyan
1802	Nottingham House	Fort Chipewyan
1815-1819	Beren's House – Hudson's Bay Company	Mountain Rapids
1819-1822	Beren's House – Hudson's Bay Company	Pierre au Calumet
1821	Unknown – Northwest Company	Christina River
1822	Unknown – Hudson's Bay Company	Fort McKay
Mid-1800s	XY Fort	Fort Chipewyan
1870-1896	Fort McMurray – Hudson's Bay Company	Fort McMurray
1891	Old Red River Post – Hudson's Bay Company	Fort McKay
1896-1907	Fort McKay – Hudson's Bay Company	Fort McKay
1917	Lynton Station (Cache 23) – Alberta and Great Waterways	Lynton
1921-1926	Waterways – Alberta and Great Waterways	Waterways

Frumhold and Associates LTD., Historical Resources Impact Assessment Timberlea and Area Four Subdivision. (Fort McMurray, AB. 1979), 87.

Hivernants

A fur trade term to describe people who spent the winter months hunting and trapping, and summer months in more defined settlements (fur trade posts). It is derived from the word is French for winter.

much of everyday life was dictated by company demands, there were also times of celebration such as dances on significant holidays or friendly competitions.¹³

Many Métis from the southeast of Canada moved north for work. During the 1880s and 1890s, in the wake of the 1885 Resistance, many Métis came from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to seek refuge from the rush of settlement.¹⁴ The Métis migrants would live with local Métis, Dene and Cree. Although there are many similar experiences between First Nations communities and Métis Peoples, there are significant cultural and material differences, especially in the context of surviving heritage sites.¹⁵ Although these differences are sometimes more subtle than the stark difference between Euro-Canadian migrants and the Indigenous people.

While some aspects of the fur trade were amicable, conflict was also common. Many of the fur trade posts were located in places already significant for local Indigenous Peoples, displacing or fundamentally changing the Indigenous relationship to the landscape.¹⁶ Europeans were not keen to adopt local practices in many instances, replacing Indigenous traditions with their own.

As more Settlers moved to this region after Treaty 8 was signed (1899), these cultural tensions became more common. These conflicts could range between settler and Indigenous trappers, and they often occurred between government officials and Indigenous People.

The early to mid-1800s saw regular expansion and contraction of trading posts throughout the region. Some of these settlements and pockets of development have been continuous, and in some cases, the historical patterns of trapping and hunting are still in use. Regionally, Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay and Anzac south to Conklin were pivotal in the fur trade, and Fort McMurray's primary role was its strategic location in the transportation network.¹⁷ In 1883, the first steamboat (S.S. Grahame) was launched at Fort Chipewyan, running both south to Fort McMurray and points north northwest.¹⁸

SECTION 4. TREATY & SETTLEMENT: 1899-1912

It is difficult to define the magnitude of change after 1899 (Treaty 8). Settler economies altered the environment and culturally significant locations in less than a generation. This process is commonly called by historians as *Settler Colonialism*. The process of *Settler Colonialism* has dramatically changed the landscape over time. Unlike the migrant fur trade settlements, which were more transient, *Settler Colonialism* is an ongoing system of power that normalizes the continuous settler occupation of lands and resources to

13 Daniel Robert Laxer, *Listening to the Fur Trade: Sound, Music, and Dance in Northern North America 1760-1840* (PhD diss: University of Toronto 2015), 308.

14 Gerhard J Ens, "Taking Treaty 8 Scrip, 1899-1900: A Quantitative Portrait of Northern Alberta Metis Communities," in *Treaty 8 Revisited: Selected Papers on the 1999 Centennial Conference, Special Premier Issue of Lobstick: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1999-2000), 229-258.

15 Jason Surkan, "Material Culture: Metis Folk Home" Last Modified August 9, 2017. <https://metisarchitect.com/2017/08/09/material-culture-metis-folk-home/>

16 Allan Greer, "Settler Colonialism and Beyond". *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 30, no. 1 (2019), 66-69.

17 James Parker, *History of the Athabasca Oil Sands Region 1890-1960, vol. II: Oral History* (Boreal Institute for Northern Studies. 1980), xxii.

18 James Grierson MacGregor, *Paddle Wheels to Bucket-Wheels on The Athabasca* (Reprint, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 86-90.

which Indigenous Peoples have a genealogical relationship.

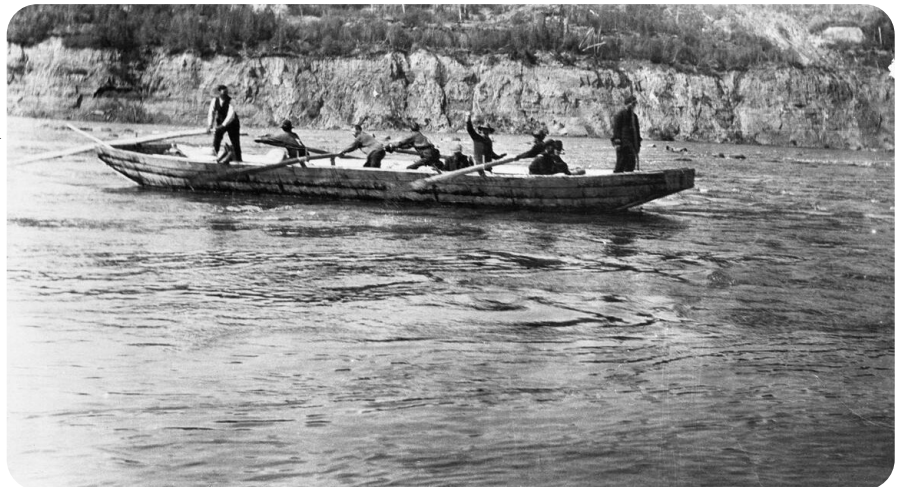
Settler Colonialism in North America is fuelled by ethnocentric beliefs that assume European values are superior, inevitable, and natural. These intersecting dimensions of *Settler Colonialism* are used as justifications for the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples' lands, resources, and cultures. In other words, many places that were 'Indigenous Landscapes' were permanently altered by settler enterprises.¹⁹

From the 1890s to 1930, the federal government controlled the natural resources in the region with aspirations of economic development and global trade. As early as 1891, regional reporting addressed the tremendous economic potential for petroleum extraction in the Athabasca valley.²⁰ Legislation and regulations were imposed to initiate societal change. The focus was on settlement and resource development.²¹

By 1896 the North West Mounted Police would send patrols up the Athabasca River. In a letter to Clifford Sifton, the Minister of the Interior, Sgt Heatherington reported that "The Detachment was very coolly received ... this I think partly due to the fear of the Fishery and Game Laws being fully enforced."²² In addition to police outposts, these efforts to impose state control and assimilate Indigenous Peoples in the built environment include missions and schools (residential and day-schools).

Natural resource extraction, including minerals,

was the primary motivation for a large portion of settlement in the region. Prior to Treaty, there were a series of geologic surveys conducted. This preliminary work contributed to the gold rush in the late 19th early 20th Centuries, whereby thousands of folks set north dreaming of striking rich. Elder Joseph Cheecham recalls his first memories of Fort McMurray around the height of the Klondike Gold Rush, when there were only two or three buildings in the area: "[Locals] would work on riverboats going downstream (barging) from Lac la Biche to Fort Chipewyan. I can remember when they used dogs for the trip that took place one month. One man would walk in front of the dogs with snowshoes because there was no road. There was nothing in that country for a means of



Survey Team on Athabasca near Fort McMurray, 1915.

Glenbow Archives NA-1882-5.

transportation or moving freight. The people would bring their freight to Athabasca to be moved by scow on the river."²³

In 1912 Fort McMurray saw a land boom as early survey work speculated on available resources. This

¹⁹ Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 124-7.

²⁰ Hereward Longley, "Uncertain Sovereignty: Treaty 8, Bitumen, and Land Claims in the Athabasca Oil Sands Region." Chap. 1 In *Extracting Home in the Oil Sands: Settler Colonialism and Environmental Change in Subarctic Canada*, edited by Clinton N. Westman, Tara L. Joly and Lena Gross, 23-47 (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 30-33.

²¹ James Parker. *History of the Athabasca Oil Sands Region 1890-1960, vol. II: Oral History*. Boreal Institute for Northern Studies. 1980, xiv.

²² White to Sifton, 31 August 1897 forwarding Heatherington to Office Commanding, 11 July 1897, LAC, RG 18, v. 141, f. 567-595 as present-ed in Irwin, Robert "Assembling Sovereignty: Canadian Claims to the Athabasca District Prior to Treaty No. 8", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48:4, (2020), 619-653.

²³ Fort McMurray #468 First Nation, Nistawayaw: "Where Three Rivers Meet:" *Traditional Land Use Study* (Calgary, AB: Nicomacian Press, 2006), 38-39.



A Coming Great Electric, Oil, Mining, Industrial and Distributing City---Now in its Swaddling Clothes. A New Star in the Real Estate Firmament---Shining Brightly

WHAT FORT McMURRAY BASES ITS FUTURE GREATNESS UPON

Lumber

Along all the streams and lakes in the Fort McMurray District large timber limits of poplar, white spruce, jack pine, tamarack and birch exist. These varieties are all well suited for lumber. In fact, it is well known that sufficient timber exists in this district to supply all Western Canada with lumber for several generations to come. Many are already seeking sawmill sites at Fort McMurray and this industry employing thousands will undoubtedly be well established in advance of the Railway.

Pulp Wood

The white spruce and the poplar, the two varieties of timber best suited for pulp manufacture predominate in the Fort McMurray District. The manufacture of pulp and paper should speedily become a Fort McMurray leading industry. Cheap electric power so easily available will aid this greatly.

Asphalt

World's Greatest Deposits.

The enormous outcrops of tar sands in the vicinity of Fort McMurray depend chiefly for their commercial value upon railway transportation. Analysis of these sands show that it is composed of 81.75 per cent. of silicious sands, 5.85 per cent. of pure water, mechanically mixed, and 12.42 per cent. of pure bitumen or mineral tar. In its native state and with very little refining it may be used for paving, roofing and many other commercial purposes. The pure asphalt, rock asphalt and tar sands found here in inexhaustible quantities and ever in great demand, commanding a high price in the markets of the world will give to Fort McMurray enormous wealth. Their mining, refining and manufacture will give employment to thousands.

"During the warm weather tar, or this pitch, free from any mixture of sand, oozes out of the banks, as if by pressure, in places where the black strata appears to be superheated with the thick petroleum. This accumulates among the vegetable matter on low grounds, and may be collected in considerable quantities."

"It is possible that the tar also rises in some places from pressure beneath. It is taken in barrels to pools of the Hudson's Bay Company and to the Marine Stations and after boiling it down so that it will harden on cooling, it is used for putting over boats, roofs, etc."

—Geographical Report, 1903, Pages 21, 22.

Glass

The tar sands in the Fort McMurray District provide the two essentials for a glass-making industry—the tar and the silica, for tar sand burns freely if supplied with sufficient air and the sands consist of grains of pure vitreous quartz, suitable for the manu-

facture of the finest white glass. This industry alone should be developed to supply thousands of men, adding further to Fort McMurray's greatness.

Gas

Of combustible material the Fort McMurray District has beneath its soil a store, that, occasionally proves embarrassing, as when boring for petroleum a flow of natural gas is released which cannot be capped for some time, and whose roar can be heard for two or three miles. Gas in great quantities, plenty of wood and nearness of great bodies of coal will supply the coming great city of Fort McMurray with plenty of light and heat.

Oil

As to the possibilities of striking oil, according to reports made by prominent experts and geographical surveyors, there is lying under the ground in the Fort McMurray District, richer deposits of oil than those in California. Five oil boring outfits are already in the field. The oil is there. It has already been tapped and every indication points to a tremendous flow as soon as the wells are sunk deeper. In all probability the drips now in the field will reach the main oil bearing sands before the close of the 1912 season. The result will be a rush to these fields the like of which has never been seen before on the American continent.

Salt

Near Fort Smith, on the northern frontier and tributary to Fort McMurray by waterway, there is a very extensive bed of salt on the surface. Adjoining Fort McMurray an oil prospecting concern, penetrated during boring operations, a layer of rock salt two hundred feet in thickness. The water of Saline Springs just below Fort McMurray is so heavily impregnated with salt that large lumps of salt have been deposited on the surface. Salt refining is a profitable industry and the product always finds a ready market. This industry bids fair to add to Fort McMurray's renown.

Furs—Fish

The furs of the great North country will always bring a certain amount of wealth to Fort McMurray—The cold waters of Northern Canada's streams and lakes, produce the finest fish, the leading varieties, the trout and white fish are in great demand among the epicureans in the cities of Eastern Canada and the United States. The curing and packing of fish will undoubtedly become a profitable industry employing many.

Agriculture

The region tributary to Fort McMurray is one of great rivers, lakes and forests containing the immense valleys of the Athabasca, Clearwater and lower Peace River, comprising a magnificent extent of land only waiting for a railway to make it take rank as some of the finest stretches of territory in the province. One government explorer states that the Clearwater Valley alone will accommodate 350,000 settlers.

"No further proof of the splendid home making possibilities to be found in Northern Alberta can be needed when it is remembered that the prize wheat exhibited as long ago as 1876 at the Centennial Exhibition held in Philadelphia, U.S.A., was grown at Fort Chippewyan on Lake Athabasca in latitude 59 degrees, 750 miles north of the International Boundary. Moreover, far up at Vermilion—on the Peace, 700 miles from the nearest railway point, Edmonton, in a latitude almost as far north as Northern Labrador, yet in a country of luxuriant growth and mild climate, a modern electric lighted flour mill, with a capacity of 35 barrels a day, has been in operation for some years for the sole purpose of dealing with the wheat grown in the vicinity. But it must not be forgotten that altitude makes more difference in the successful growth of crops than latitude, and Vermilion is only 950 feet above sea level, while Edmonton is 2158 feet and Calgary is 3380 feet." All this vast productive agricultural territory is directly tributary to Fort McMurray by navigable water routes, the very cheapest method of transportation, and the completion of the railways to Fort McMurray will bring this great territory into direct communication with the outside world.

Flour Mills

Electric power has always been a potent factor in the upbuilding of the milling industry. Fort McMurray will have the power. The great valleys tributary will grow millions of bushels of wheat. All this wheat must eventually be transferred at Fort McMurray from boat to train. Is it not reasonable to suppose that elevators of large capacity for the storing of grain and mills for its manufacture into flour will be built there?

Electric Power

Cheap power is a necessary requisite for the upbuilding of large industries. Fort McMurray is well favored in this respect. Just south of Fort McMurray and in view from the hill top the Athabasca river

breaks into a series of rapids from which, according to authority, nearly a quarter of a million horse power can be derived. The Grand Rapids on the river above Fort McMurray, a magnificent spectacle, could in their descent of sixty feet in a quarter of a mile, develop at least 60,000 horse power, in an ordinary season.

Other Resources

Other natural resources known to exist in this country are gold, copper, galena, iron ore, silver, mica, limestone, sandstone and gypsum, all of which will require capital and labor for their development.

Transportation

All Fort McMurray needs now to start it on its road to greatness is a railroad. That need is soon to be supplied. The last session of the Alberta Parliament guaranteed the bonds for a C.N.R. extension to Fort McMurray. Surveyors are already in the field. Construction work will be rushed to rapid completion. There will be millions upon millions of long waiting capital pour into Fort McMurray to develop the known great natural resources of this district an empire in extent. Then will thousands of settlers and city builders flock to this richly favored section. The great river highways of the north will provide easy and cheap communication for all this vast territory with Fort McMurray the head of navigation on the Athabasca River. Railways will in the course of a few years radiate in every direction out of Fort McMurray, but the great water highways will always remain to serve throughout this vast territory in keeping down freight and passenger rates to Fort McMurray the distributing and manufacturing centre.

Special

Since this advertisement was written English Capitalists realizing the future greatness of Fort McMurray and the wonderful richness of great north country tributary, have arranged to build a second railway without government aid from Edmonton to Fort McMurray and from there westward to the Peace River and eastward to the Hudson's Bay to connect with a fleet of ocean going steamers. This new road, it is understood, will become a fourth transcontinental line. It is proposed by this syndicate which is backed by the London and Dominion Trust Co., representing \$45,000,000 of capital, to have the line from Edmonton to Fort McMurray in operation within two years, from which point the east and west extensions will be built.

To have a city you must have people. To have people you must have employment for them. To have employment you must have industries. To have industries you must have natural resources, transportation facilities, cheap power and fuel. Wherever these four salient things are found linked together, there Capital will center, there a city will grow. Its light cannot be hidden. It will ever shine brightly before the world and like a great, glorious GODDESS OF OPPORTUNITY beckon to her the wise, the prudent and the venturesome, those ever seeking greater and wider opportunities, only to be found in newer fields of endeavor. FORT McMURRAY has these things in all their fullness. In a very few years a city teeming with life, fashion and industry will stand where only a settlement exists today. Have you the vision to see and the power to grasp this wonderful opportunity? Things move fast in this new world; in this last section of the Last Great West. It is no place for a drone. Indecision spells failure. A wishbone is no use as a backbone. There is only one time to buy to make the big profit and that time is in advance of development. THAT TIME IS TODAY. Lift yourself out of your indifference. Speed up your blood, let it race through your veins enjoy the sensation. Be a pioneer in spirit if not in person. A few hundred dollars invested in Fort McMurray central business property today will return thousands in a brief time. Action today spells success for the future. CALL, WRITE OR WIRE:

B.H.HAYES & I.L.ACKLEY Sales Managers

THE FORT McMURRAY ORIGINAL TOWNSITE CO., LTD.

A COMPANY BACKED BY TWENTY-FIVE OF EDMONTON'S LEADING BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL MEN. A SUFFICIENT GUARANTEE OF RESPONSIBILITY

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survey work and early exploration caused influxes of people to the region – with different peoples chasing different resources. As aspirations changed or resources were exhausted (salt, for example), many folks left as quickly as they had come, unable or unwilling to live in the long winters and the imposing forest, others falling victim to the boom-bust cycle. Bearing a similarity to the fur trade, many of these settlers went back to where they originally came. Nevertheless, some stayed ready to call northern Alberta home.

SECTION 5. SETTLER COLONIALISM: 1913-1939

In the 1910s, Fort McMurray became a hub of settler activity. A 1913 North West Mounted Police patrol report (based out of Fort Chipewyan) describes the activity in the region. On January 7, Sgt A.H.L Meller stopped and offered a few supplies to a trapper living on the Embarras River who had been burned out in the fall. The trapper informed Meller that he would take the first dog-train to Chipewyan to get more supplies. That same report continued to talk about a large Oil Derrek by Fort

Settler-Colonial Development Villages

Fort Chipewyan was an essential part of a global trade network, and Fort McMurray held a strategic location in the shipping logistics – however, these were only two of many settler communities of Wood Buffalo. These four villages represent the intersecting dimensions of Settler Colonialism when settlers attached themselves to pre-existing Indigenous places. In each case, Indigenous Peoples used and inhabited these spaces prior to settler incursion and continued to be primary users and residents of the settlements.

Fort McKay – A permanent post, Old Red River Post, was established on the Little Red River (MacKay River) in 1891. In 1898, due to fires and lack of resources, The Hudson's Bay Company moved its entire Fort McMurray fur operation to Fort McKay. The area was well known for its trapping and bush-economies. The village saw early growth due to natural resource prospecting and explorations in the early 1900s – including both salt and oil.

Fort Fitzgerald – Previously known as Smith's Landing, Fort Fitzgerald was renamed in 1915 for a fallen Northwest Mounted Police Inspector. Fort Fitzgerald occupied an important place in the Mackenzie Basin, as the path north left the river on a 16-mile portage to Fort Smith. Early years saw Fitzgerald as a bustling freighting terminus, as goods flowed in for storage to be freighted to Fort Smith. The community included HBC and religious facilities, as well as housing for workers. During WWII Fort Fitzgerald was home to 600 U.S. troops.

Anzac – Named for WWI Australia and New Zealand Army Corps. Anzac Station opened in 1917 when the railway developed north towards the Clearwater River. The small village grew larger in the 1950's when Anzac becomes home to the Royal Canadian Air Force and Cold War era radar installations.

Conklin – Conklin Station and Post Office are established in 1924 via the Alberta & Great Waterways Railroad. The fur rich area also became a site for mink farming. In the 1940s, commercial fishing became a key economic driver – shipping fish via the Northern Alberta Railway south to Edmonton.

James Parker, History of the Athabasca Oil Sands Region 1890-1960, vol. II: Oral History (Boreal Institute for Northern Studies. 1980).
Golder Associates, Socio-Economic Baseline Report for the Wood Buffalo Region (Fort McMurray, 1996).
Merrily Aubrey, Place Names of Alberta, Vol IV (Calgary, AB. 1996).
Alberta Municipal Affairs, Conklin Land Use Plan and Plan of Subdivision (1982).
Donald Grant Wetherell and Irene Kmet, Alberta's North (Reprint, Edmonton, Alta.: Canadian Circumpolar Institute Press, 2000).

Garbutt Business College

Calgary Lethbridge

Directors of Successful Destinies

Chinook

GAZETTEER AND DIRECTORY

Chipman 419

CHINOOK

A station and post office on the Kindersley-Calgary branch of the C. N. R. 215 miles west of Saskatoon and 50 miles from Hanna. Located on Sec 19, Tp 28, Rg 7 west of the 4th Mer., in the electoral division of Medicine Hat.

The soil in this district is a chocolate loam, clay subsoil, and there is an abundance of water.

Postmaster—Charles E Neff

Banner Hardware Co
Chapline M T sec treas Board of Trade
Dobson Percy R implts
Empire Lumber Co Ltd
Hewett M J implts
Miller J R gen store
Mills E B general store
Mills & Meade implts
Union Bank of Canada

CHIP LAKE

A post office on Sec 32, Tp 53, Rg 10, west of the 5th Mer., in the electoral division of Edmonton. Nearest railway and express office Leaman.

Postmaster—R E Brouse
Brouse Bros general store

Hardisty, Limited

Distributing and General Forwarding Agents

Storage and Warehousemen

OFFICE AND WAREHOUSES:

Cor. 4th and McKenzie Phone 1445

DISTRIBUTING WAREHOUSE:

Cor. Syndicate and Sutherland, Edmonton Phone 5434

CHIPEWYAN

A Hudson's Bay Co's post at the west end of Lake Athabasca, 437 miles from Athabasca, the nearest telegraph and railway.

It is the main distributing point and was formerly the headquarters of the H B Co for Athabasca district.

Is reached partly by wagon and partly by boats. Has a saw mill owned and operated by the Nativity Mission.

The H B Co's steamer "Grahame" runs south 185 miles to Fort McMurray on Athabasca River, 102 miles north to Smith's Landing on Great Slave River, and also west 273 miles up Peace River to Red River, four miles below Vermilion Chutes. Has Anglican and Roman Catholic missions, convent and Roman Catholic school. Mails are received 10 times a year.

Postmaster—P Mercredi

Justice of Peace—John Wylie

R N W M P, Sergt A H L Millor

Constable R B Garfit

R C Nativity Mission Rev Father Le Doussal O M I superior Rev Father De Chambeuil O M I, Rev Louis Le Tresse

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645 First Street, Edmonton

St Paul's Mission (Anglican) Rev H M Adams

Deschene Charles carpenter

Flett James Z steward

Flett John B carpenter

Fraser Colin fur trader (headquarters) outposts Fond du Lac and Ft MacKay

Garfit R B, R N W M P

Gouin Wm trapper

Grey Nuns Holy Angels Convent

School Rev Sister St Angele superior

Hudson's Bay Co Pierre Mercredi in charge William Lyall clerk

Jewell Ernest B

Johnson Wm engineer S S "Grahame"

Lepeni Francois pilot S S "Grahame"

Letresse Rev Fr priest

Loutit George river pilot

Loutit Peter boat builder

Loutitt Thomas carpenter

McLennan R J engineer S S "Primrose"

Onize Villebrun fisherman

Steamer "Keewatin" Colin Fraser owner

Steamer "Grahame" Captain Link-

later master H B Co owners

Steamer "Primrose" H B Co owners

Trudeau Walter A fur trader

Wylie John W engineer S S "Keewatin"

Wylie Willie cook

CHIPMAN

A station and post office on the main line of the C N R, 44 miles east of Edmonton. Located on Sec 30, Tp 54, Rg 18, west of 4th Mer., in the electoral division of Victoria. This is a farming district. Mails daily.

Population—175

Elevator capacity—10,000 bushels

Postmaster—Mrs E J MacLennan

Churches:

Methodist—Rev E Barnes

Presbyterian—Rev A D MacDonald

YORK & McNAMARA

Real Estate and Financial Agents

44 (10145) Jasper Ave. W., Edmonton

Phone 1850 P.O. Box 697

Peace River Crossing Properties

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REALTY INVESTMENTS, LTD.

P.O. Box 252 Rooms 200-204 Armstrong Bldg., 621 Fourth St., Edmonton, Alta. Phones 4364, 6771

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Ramsay's Greenhouses

Edmonton Alberta



Fort Fitzgerald, 1920s.

Previously known as Smith's Landing, Fort Fitzgerald was a busy shipping hub, and the start of a 16-mile portage to Fort Smith. In 1929, it boasted a population of 300 people in the townsite.

Glenbow Archives NA-2597-33.

McKay, which was reported to have struck “good flow.” Upon arriving in Fort McMurray, Meller states that the town is experiencing a “boom,” although he can’t imagine why calling McMurray “a wretched place for food and furs.” Nevertheless, a land speculator and trader, William Gordon, was en route to Edmonton to advertise 1000 new lots.²⁴ This report further illustrates a colourful history of built heritage, alluding to trap lines, natural resource extracting and growing settlement.

As early as 1890, economic instability issues began to reverberate in communities throughout the region.²⁵ The primary wage labour economies for First Nations and Métis were trapping, processing, and trading furs as well as work in transportation. This could include working as a guide or freight work carrying consumer goods inland and along the Athabasca River. The incursions of Euro-Canadian trappers and increased mineral resource extraction disrupted Indigenous trapping.²⁶

These economic pressures coupled with incoming

settlers forced First Nations to move to reserves. During the 1920s, the program of surveying reserves in the region began in full. In many instances, this compounded the economic struggles of Indigenous Peoples. The position of land claims was carefully regulated to position them away from prime development locations. Likewise, Indigenous trap lines were not protected in this process, and many land claims were ignored.²⁷

The federal Department of Indian Affairs failed to provide the training, tools, or policies to facilitate a transition to an agricultural economy in many parts of Canada.²⁸ In particular, the Janvier Reserve received little to no support despite promises in Treaty 8. This issue was further exasperated because much of the land along the Athabasca River is unsuitable for commercial agriculture due to the landform and immense boreal forest.²⁹

This period saw a further threat to the labour economy; freighting work was put under pressure due to the railway development. The Great Alberta

²⁴ Sggt A.H.L Meller Patrol Report January 25th, Library Archives of Canada, RG18-B-1, vol 1717, file 130, file pt.1.

²⁵ Canada Sessional Papers, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended March 31 1909*.

²⁶ Patricia McCormack, *Fort Chipewyan and the shaping of Canadian history, 1788-1920s: “we like to be free in this country”* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 218-221.

²⁷ Hereward Longley, “Uncertain Sovereignty: Treaty 8, Bitumen, and Land Claims in the Athabasca Oil Sands Region.” Chap. 1 In *Extracting Home in the Oil Sands: Settler Colonialism and Environmental Change in Subarctic Canada*, edited by Clinton N. Westman, Tara L. Joly and Lena Gross, 23-47. (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 30-33.

²⁸ Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019. 13-14.

²⁹ Bennett McCardle and Richard C. Daniel, *Development of Farming in Treaty 8, 1899-1940* (Edmonton: Treaty and Aboriginal Rights Research of the Indian Association of Alberta, 1976), 60-96.

Waterways Railway reached Lac la Biche in 1915. Because of the First World War, the railway would not be completed to the new town of Waterways just south of Fort McMurray until the 1920s.³⁰ Developing slowly from Conklin pushing north, it arrived at Draper (Waterways) in 1921. In 1925 the rail line was extended an additional 3.7 miles, and the Waterways Station and the townsite was moved

to the current location at the Hangingstone River. The rail line stopped short of Fort McMurray, much to the dismay of the Fort McMurray locals.³¹

The miles-long trip between the end-of-the-line and the McMurray townsite was completed on foot or water. The navigable rivers and trail systems were still the main transportation corridors outside of the limits of the rail line.³²

30 Patricia McCormack, *Fort Chipewyan and the shaping of Canadian history, 1788-1920s: "we like to be free in this country"* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 223.

31 Ena Schneider, *Ribbons of Steel – The Story of the Northern Alberta Railways* (Calgary, AB, 1989), 118-122.

32 McCormack, *Fort Chipewyan and the shaping of Canadian history, 1788-1920s*, 111-115.

Alberta and Great Waterways Railway

In 1909 Alberta and Great Waterways Railway started working towards linking Edmonton with Fort McMurray – better connecting the south to the Mackenzie River system. Due to multiple other variables (WWI, funding, landforms, etc.) it would take over ten years to reach the Clearwater River, and another twenty to reach Fort McMurray townsite. In 1929, the Alberta and Great Waterways Railway transitioned to the Northern Alberta Railway (NAR).

Stations South to North

- Conklin - 1924
- Leismer - 1916
- Chard - 1925
- Pingle – 1925
- Quigley - 1917
- Warper - 1917
- Cheecham – 1913 (Post Office only, no station)
- Kinosis - 1917
- Anzac - 1917
- Lenarthur - 1917
- Lynton (aka Cache 23) - 1917
- Duet – Unknown
- Draper (original Waterways) – 1921
- Waterways – 1925
- Fort McMurray (Prairie) – 1942/43

What About Janvier?

In 1922, the Janvier Reserve, (also known as Chipewyan Prairie) was surveyed. The railway had been laid in 1916 to the west, and a station (Chard) was built in 1925 to service the area.

Highway 881

Paralleling the Railway, Highway 881 is not formally developed until the modern era, after the year 2000. Before that time, transportation is railway, winter roads and trails.

Merrily Aubrey, *Place Names of Alberta, Vol IV* (Calgary, AB, 1996).
Ena Schneider, *Ribbons of Steel – The Story of the Northern Alberta Railways* (Calgary, AB, 1989).

THE CALGARY HERALD

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and Reliable Advertising

FORT FITZGERALD

(Landing name is Fitzgerald, or Smith Landing), a P. O. and trading post on Slave River, in Athabasca Prov. Elec. Div., reached by rail to Waterways on the A. & G. W. Ry., thence by boat. Is 280 miles north of McMurray, the nearest telegraph office, and 554 northeast of Edmonton. Has Anglican and R. C. churches, and post of R.C.M.P. Fish, fur, oil and lumber. Transportation facilities for whole of N. W. Territories. Population 300.
Greer W J postmaster
Leggo C S
Morie John A trader Northern Traders Ltd
Person & Norris traders
Postmaster—W J Greer
Russell & Wagemitz traders

FORT GOOD HOPE

a trading post on the Mackenzie River, 823 miles north of Fort Resolution.
Gowen E R agt H B Co
Hudson's Bay Co E R Gowen agt
Northern Traders Ltd
Robin Rev A postmaster

FORT KENT

a P.O. on S30 T61 R4 W4, in Athabasca Prov. Elec. Div., the nearest railway station and telegraph office on the C. N.R. is at St. Paul de Metis. The business and banking centre is at Bonnyville. Population 95.
Levasseur Alexis postmaster
Levasseur Octave gen store

FORT LAIRD

a Laird River point served by H. B. boats between Fort McMurray and Smith's Landing.
Hudson's Bay Co F McLeod agt
Northern Traders Ltd

FORT McKAY

a trading post 35 miles from Fort McMurray.
Clarke T mgr H B Co
Hudson's Bay Co T Clarke mgr
Shott Emil trader

FORT McPHERSON

a trading post on the Peel River, 40 miles south of junction with the Mackenzie River.
Deacon Rev S C postmaster
Northern Traders Ltd

FORT MacMURRAY

a P.O. and station on the A. & G.W. Ry. (ry. name McMurray) and on the Athabasca River at its confluence with the Clearwater River, in Athabasca Prov. Elec. Div. Is 177 miles north of Lac La Biche and 203 miles northeast of Edmonton. Has telegraph, telephone and land offices and public school. Has fur, asphalt, limestone, salt, coal oil and is distributing point to north for 200 miles, 2000 miles through McKenzie Basin to Arctic. Population 300.
Alta Prov Police Corpl John G Macdonald
Alberta Salt Co mfrs
Armit Robert interpreter
Arsenault Ulric J clk
Athabasca Fish Co fish supply
Bell Benson H traper and sec U F A Local
Bennett George H land and property owner
Biggs Mrs Mary J land and property owner
Card Gerald Indian agt
Carey J fire ranger

Conn Thomas property owner
Conservative Association, Hector Ducharme pres and Thomas Wood sec
Currie A marine capt
Delorme Samuel tmstr
Denholm Russell G eng
Dom Govt Tel Service Chas Sommers lineman
Ducharme Hector bldg contr and sec Conserv Assn
Forestry Branch Dept of the Interior A H White chief
Furlough Fred dairy produce
Goloski George saw mill
Goodwin Frank govt lineman
Gordon Christina land owner
Gordon William trader
Grenier J A carp
Grenier Mrs Kate fancy goods
Hassen Pat cabt mkr
Hawkins Sidney contr
Hill Walter H druggist and sec Bd of Trade
Hogue E fire ranger
Hudsons Bay Co J J Loutit mgr
Indian Agency Gerald Card agt
Ings George A phys
Kushner Samuel fur buyer and gen store
Laffont Rev Father parish priest
Leggett Harry J of Paul & Leggett
Liberal Association Arnold Skelton pres
G A Morrison sec
Loutit J J mgr Hudson's Bay Co
Loutit W C trapper and trader
MacDonald Hugh D fire ranger
MacDonald John pilot
MacDonald John G const Alta Prov Police
McKinley John C eng and pilot
MacLeod Robert R mgr Royal Bank
McMurray Board of Trade William Paul pres
McVittie Harvey contr
McVittie Mrs Jemima dance hall
Malcolm Harry guide and trapper
Moor Nicholas acct and pres U F A Local and sawmill
Morimoto K barber and rooming hse
Morrison George A barber Sub Land Office and sec Liberal Assn
Morrison Mrs G A bakery
Munday F boat bldr
Murray G Fred boat bldr
O'Cooley Frank W hotel kpr
Owens H Grant auto livery mail carrier
Parry John gen store
Paul & Leggett gen merchts
Paul William of Paul & Leggett and pres Bd of Trade
Potts Cecil notary public and police magistrate
Rault Peter M blksmith and mech
Reidel Albert of Watt & Reidel
Richardson John mercht and fur buyer
Richardson W trapper and muskrat farmer
Rocke Guy V H postmaster and notary public
R C M P—Sergt Cecil Ward
R C Mission Rev Father Laffont priest
Ross Miss Olive nurse
Roy Lucein contr
Royal Bank of Canada Robt R Macleod mgr
Ryan Brothers freighting contrs
Ryan G Pat of Ryan Bros
Schmit Paul eng
Shairp J H carp and boat bldr
Shott Emile trader
Skelton Arnold meat market and pres Liberal Assn
Somers Charles F opr Dom Govt Tel Service
Sub-Chief Fireranger—Albert White
Sub Land Office George A Morrison
Sutherland Angus M druggist
Sutherland John eng H B Co
Telegraph Office Charles Somers
United Church
U F A Local, Nicholas Moor pres and B H Bell sec
Ward Cecil sergt R C M P
Watt Grant S of Watt & Reidel



Laying track on the AGWR, 1921. Boreal forest and muskeg presented a challenge to development.

Glenbow Archives NA-781-2.

In the 1930s, the Great Depression crippled the global fur market.³³ Additionally, a period of drought in the 1930s caused more fluctuation in furs (especially muskrat), which significantly impacted most regional trappers.³⁴ These changes were reflected in the built environment; for example, in 1939, Fort Chipewyan saw the demolition of many historic Hudson's Bay Company Buildings as the company retracted in scope.³⁵

33 Arthur J Ray, "Commentary on the Economic History of the Treaty 8 Area," *Native Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (1995), 169-195.

34 Golder Associates, *Socio-Economic Baseline Report for the Wood Buffalo Region* (Fort McMurray, 1996), 53.

35 Patricia McCormack, *Fort Chipewyan and the shaping of Canadian history, 1788-1920s: "we like to be free in this country"* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 111.

Fire & Ice

The drought of the 1930s brought increased risk of fire, and in 1934 a fire in Fort McMurray burned the "whole town" (commercial structures) – fortunately there were no reported injuries. Rebuild began immediately, and by 1935 the townsite included a new hotel, drug store, meat market, café, confectionary and barbershop.

In 1936, an ice jam in the spring thaw flooded the entire plain – nature once again shaping and re-shaping the development of the region.

Alvena Strasbourg, *Memories Of A Metis Woman* (Reprint, Alberta, 1998), 30-34.



Hudson's Bay Company-Fort Chipewyan, 1922.

Provincial Archives of Alberta /A3279.



Fort Chipewyan, 1946. Athabasca Cafe & Rooms; Hamdon & Alley LTD General Merchants

Northwest Territories Archives/N-2013-014-0391

SECTION 6. WWII & POST WAR YEARS: 1940-1964

When the economy recovered in the 1940s, it had a new focus – Oil and Gas. While the earliest work in the regional energy sector began in the 1910s, the Second World War drove massive demand for regional Oil and Gas development. The War brought a global market for synthetic products and energy, and in the years following, folks flooded north. The burgeoning industry brought employment opportunities, increased pay and often a higher quality of life to countless families.

WWII also brought a new demographic of migrants to the region. In 1942, thousands of American troops arrived in the region. Overnight the populations of Fort McMurray and Waterways more than tripled as trainloads of U.S. service members came to build the Canol Pipeline in the Northwest Territories. Throughout the three years from 1942 to 1945, troops and materials were steadily passing from the home base and shipping docks at Fort McMurray through Fort Chipewyan to Fort Fitzgerald and on their way to the Northwest Territories.³⁶ Development (both built form and economics) followed the path as people, employment and paycheques flowed through the region.

In Fort McMurray, the Prairie was developed into the base of operations – including a massive camp for soldiers and migrant workers (both temporary and more permanent structures) and the redevelopment and expansion of the shipyard. Additionally, a hospital and a 400-room hotel were built.³⁷ Improved transportation included the extension of the rail line from Waterways to Fort McMurray and the development of an airfield (which later became modern-day Fort McMurray International Airport).

When the Canol project ceased in 1945, the outward migration caused a major contraction in population throughout the region. The associated infrastructure was decommissioned, removed, or repurposed to suit community needs.

³⁶ Patricia McCormack. *Fort Chipewyan and the shaping of Canadian history, 1788-1920s: "we like to be free in this country"* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 111.

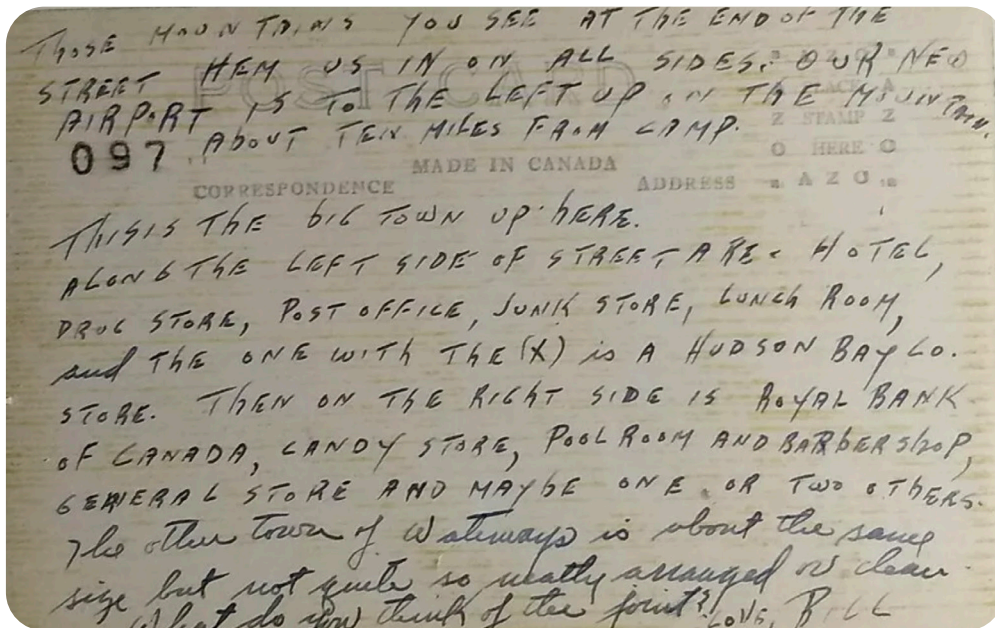
³⁷ Donald Grant Wetherell and Irene Kmet, *Alberta's North*. (Reprint, Edmonton, Alta.: Canadian Circumpolar Institute Press, 2000), 224.



US Troops in downtown Fort McMurray 1942. Bechtel-Price-Callahan (BPC) were the contractors in charge of the non-military labour force. BPC provided stable, well paying jobs to locals and migrants; however, the work was 'No Picnic.' Above, BPC employees are awaiting payment at the Royal Bank in Fort McMurray.

Richard Finnie/Library and Archives Canada/PA-171534.

Richard Finnie/Library and Archives Canada/PA-164900.



Postcard home from US Service Member, ca 1943:

"Those Mountains you see at the end of the street hem us in on all sides. Our new airport is to the left up on the mountain about ten miles from camp."

This is the big town up here. Along the left side of the street are a hotel, drug store, post office, junk store, lunch room and the one with the (X) is a Hudson Bay Co. Store. Then on the right side is a Royal Bank of Canada, candy store, pool room and barber shop, general store and maybe one or two others.

The other town of Waterways is about the same size but not quite so neatly arranged or clear.

What do you think of the forest?

Love, Bill"

c1943 - Postcard.

"It was like a boom, and it seemed like the way of life changed from that time on... and then, when they moved out of here, it was just like a ghost town. You could hear a pin drop." Alvena Strassbourg, 1979.³⁸

"When that was all over, and they started to move out again, a lot of stuff was sold... Buildings were sold as well. My house at the Prairie was at one time a warehouse, cut into four pieces and sold to different people." Julian Mills, 1979.³⁹

Along with Canol, other early Oil and Gas development included work at Draper (1922) and Bitumount (1925), and Abasand in Fort McMurray (1936). Various other sites, projects and interests continued after the wartime boom. This period cut more lines through the forest, leaving pockets of industry. The earliest Oil and Gas developments are now grown over in the deep woods, not unlike the remnants of the fur trade era.

As the energy industry grew, so did the associated towns in region. On May 6, 1947, Fort McMurray and Waterways amalgamated and were incorporated as a village on December 29. A year later, in 1948, Fort McMurray was proclaimed a town, and by 1965 there were 1,804 people living there permanently.

During this time, the region was the gateway to the north. In the 1950s, over 100,000 tonnes of freight would be hauled up the Athabasca River; however, 1964 saw the completion of the Great Slave Lake Railway, which fundamentally changed freighting patterns for the Mackenzie Basin. Goods now moved through northwestern Alberta versus the northeast, which signalled a massive reduction of the regional shipping hubs. This fundamental shift could have triggered a significant contraction in populations, but Fort McMurray continued to act as a staging point for industry across the county. Interestingly, Fort McMurray sees a nearly exponential growth in population in the 1960s.

From WWII to Cold War

In 1956, Stony Mountain was home to part of the D.E.W. Line (Distant Early Warning). Once again people migrated to the area, participating in the development. Anzac became the temporary home (and for some, the permanent home) for these Cold War workers.

³⁸ James Parker, *History of the Athabasca Oil Sands Region 1890-1960, vol. II: Oral History* (Boreal Institute for Northern Studies. 1980), 35.

³⁹ Parker, *History of the Athabasca Oil Sands Region 1890-1960*, 33.

Air Travel and Freight - Takes Off

Air travel and freight service arrived in the region in the late 1920s. Bush pilots and their services quickly became a vital service to the entire region. Air strips were on water, ice and wherever landscape allowed. Goods, people and mail now moved by air, no longer constrained by muskeg or landforms, and this revolutionized transportation in the region. In practical terms, it had equal if not greater impact than the arrival of the railway.

The air strips developed during the Canol Project furthered this revolution opening the region to larger and faster service. Eventually leading to the development of the modern airports in Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan in the early 1960s.

Alvena Strassbourg, *Memories Of A Metis Woman* (Reprint, Alberta, 1998).

Donald Grant Wetherell and Irene Kmet, *Alberta's North* (Reprint, Edmonton, Alta.: Canadian Circumpolar Institute Press, 2000).

POPULATION STATISTICS Fort McMurray 1951 - 1970

- o 1951: 926
- o 1956: 1,110
- o 1961: 1,186
- o 1965: 1,804
- o 1970: 6,132

SECTION 7. BOOM: 1965-1980

In 1964, the Great Canadian Oil Sands plant construction began, and in 1966 Highways 63 was completed. As Oil & Gas development continued and transportation networks continued to open up, the region was again moving further into boomtimes. This once again brought migrant workers to the urban centers with a particular focus on Fort McMurray.

Fort McMurray was more than a working town. Evidence of this is reflected in the town's built environment. In 1967 it boasted: 5 restaurants, 2 barber shops, a beauty parlour, a jewellery store, and a 'tourist service,' among other stores.

Surrounded by the woods and heavy industry, the threat of fire remained no small concern. As such, the town of Fort McMurray invested in their fire fighters. In February 1965, the town could boast an 800-gallon tank truck and one 600-gallon tank truck in their department of 12 volunteers. The 30 fire hydrants and 700 feet of 1 1/2" hose were more remarkable.⁴⁰ The town was focused on making the community safe as it continued its exponential growth.

The influx brought extensive housing development to Fort McMurray. In the early

1990s, it was estimated that 90% of the building stock in Fort McMurray had been constructed in the 1960s and 70s.⁴¹

The same period saw a dramatic increase in population at Fort Chipewyan. This population growth inspired changes in the built history. Urban services were added to the community (electricity-1959-61, telephone-1962, and first waterline and treatment plant-1968).⁴² Early mid-century development saw undersized and cramped quarters, but by 1971 construction efforts shifted to larger accommodations to better suit the needs of the average Fort Chipewyan-sized family.⁴³

Although the building of Métis houses had essentially terminated by the 1930s, recent field research comparing the historic houses to contemporary Métis-built homes reveals some remarkable similarities between these ancestral homes and more recent construction. Métis architecture is vernacular, meaning that it is not formally standardized. Instead, it follows a time-honoured tradition passed down from generation to generation. The most distinct feature of this style of architecture is that a home is intimately informed by its environment, earthwork, a specific style of construction and the distinct lack



1930s Vernacular Housing, Fort Chipewyan.

Alberta Heritage Survey HS-34455/85R218.

⁴⁰ Department of Industry Development Government of the Province of Alberta, *Survey of Fort McMurray* (1965), 6-10.

⁴¹ Golder Associates, *Socio-Economic Baseline Report for the Wood Buffalo Region* (Fort McMurray, 1996), 24.

⁴² Golder Associates, *Socio-Economic Baseline Report*, 53.

⁴³ John W. Chalmers, *On The Edge of The Shield*. (Reprint, Edmonton: The Boreal Institute for Northern Studies, 1971), 9.

New Town Fort McMurray

In 1956, the Province of Alberta created The Alberta New Towns Act. It was developed to assist new urban centres, and communities expanding at unsustainable levels. While it took away much of the foundational 'local' elements of municipal government, it offered a toolkit of administration, funding, policy and planning assistance when rapid growth in a community outpaced the ability to properly meet community needs.

In 1964, Fort McMurray acquired 'New Town Status' – retaining it until 1980. This allowed borrowing from the Alberta's general revenue (up to one-million dollars) and brought the Provincial Planning Board's assistance in planning and development. It also allowed for a coordinated approach to development outside the town – including roadways, bridge work, etc. In that regard, under the New Town directive 1965 saw the completion of the Grant MacEwan Bridge over the Athabasca River, and flood control work on the Syne, and in 1966 Highway 63 was completed.

In 1966 the first subdivision developed under the New Town administration was Poplar Grove. This was followed in 1968 with Birch Grove and Clearwater. These three subdivisions were still within the Lower Townsite.

Continued pressure and population growth, lead the New Town to explore options of outside the Lower Townsite. Continued 'New Town' development led to the 1973 developments of Beacon Hill and Gregoire Mobile Home Park – the first subdivisions developed outside the historical areas of the river valley.

The New Town of Fort McMurray General Plan of 1974 looked to push development further and further to the periphery with a focus on single-family homes in a suburban environment. The Plan examined possible development in all four directions (crossing both the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers).

New Town development had its detractors throughout – pointing to a lack of democratic processes. Community leaders learned “that under the New Town status, while the Province would entertain opinions from local residents, its decisions were final.”

Compiled from:

Town of Fort McMurray, *The New Town of Fort McMurray General Plan* (1974).

Donald Grant Wetherell and Irene Kmet, *Alberta's North* (Reprint, Edmonton, Alta.: Canadian Circumpolar Institute Press, 2000).

Irwin Huberman, *The Place We Call Home*. (Reprint, Fort McMurray, Alta: Historical Book Society of Fort McMurray, 2004), 176-177.

McMurray Gets Town Status

A cabinet order-in-council Friday granted new town status to Fort McMurray in the oil sands area of northeast Alberta.

Effective June 30, the new status will give the town increased borrowing powers and more flexibility in the control of land developments.

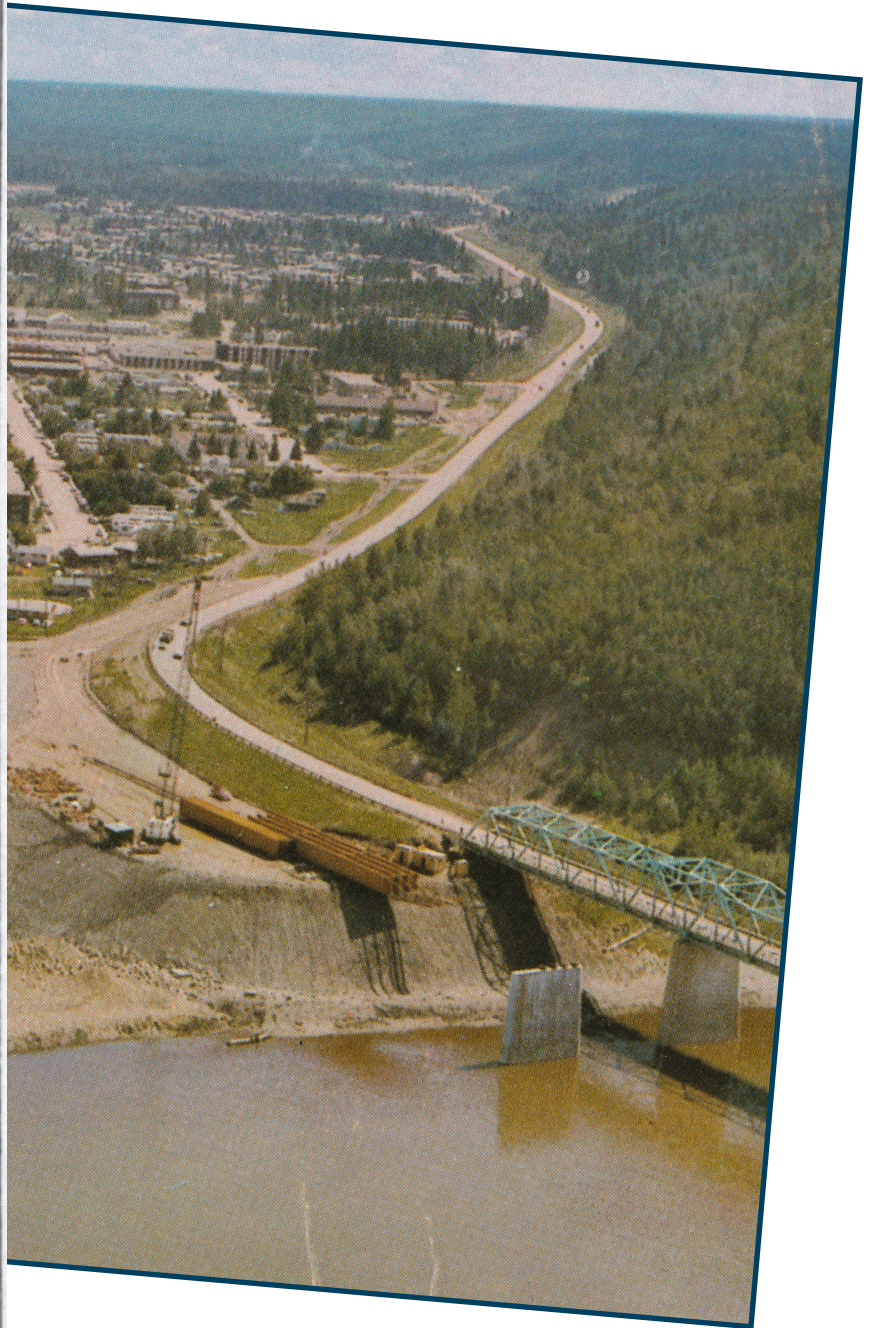
The order re-affirms McMurray as the community centre for workers involved in Canadian Oil Sands Ltd.'s \$190 million oil sands processing plant construction.

FLOOD PREVENTION

Based on a provincial planning board recommendation, the government is expected to be involved in the construction of a \$300,000 flood-prevention dike system around McMurray, and a \$125,000 causeway.

In its report to the cabinet, the provincial planning board said a large area of the river valley is liable to flooding during spring break-up of Athabasca and Clearwater river ice.

Consulting engineer Dr. Tom Blench said "unless the flood problem is alleviated the land available for new developments will be severely limited."



Fort McMurray 1970s - Postcard.

Edmonton Journal, Saturday June 13, 1964, Page 2.

of compartmentalization in the house layout.⁴⁴ This is a form of architecture unique to this part of the world and could be found in communities with a Métis presence (e.g., Anzac, Conklin, Fort Chipewyan).

*“The Métis people [Fort Chipewyan] that I talked to do not want the government to build homes for them that they cannot afford to maintain and pay for. They want the government to implement a program so that they can **build their own homes.**”*

A.O. Fimrite Minister, Northern Alberta Development Council-1968⁴⁵
(emphasis added)

Unfortunately, housing did not always keep up with demand in the region. Supply and demand issues increased costs above the means of most residents. In 1977, Minister of Housing and Public Works Bill Yurko commented that “chances are rather small one can afford to buy a single-family dwelling.”⁴⁶ This was a boom period, but much different and far more aggressive than the previous boom-bust cycles. The built environment struggled to keep pace.

A 1980 study conducted by the University of Alberta Population Research Laboratory of family demographics illustrates how Fort McMurray Developed in the wake of massive economic growth. The study suggests that workers migrated in two major waves: the first, for the construction of the Great Canadian Oil Sands plant during 1963-1968, when the population grew at a rate of 38.5% per year. The second wave arrived during the development of Syncrude during 1973-1978, during which the population grew at 21.4% annually. These

migrants, like previous migrations, were primarily single men who lived in construction camps near the plants. However, as the Great Canadian Oil Sands plant became operational, family migration became more prominent, a pattern encouraged by recent policies of both companies.⁴⁷ These Fort McMurray residents were better off economically than many other Canadians. The average total household income from the study sample was \$27,000 in 1978, considerably higher than estimated Alberta incomes at \$17,600.

This study also gives an idea of the diversity of settlers living in Fort McMurray. Twenty-one percent of the people included were first-generation immigrants to Canada, ready to make northeastern Alberta their home. Interestingly, over half of these immigrants had migrated since 1971, with only 30% of the study sample being born in Alberta.

Most respondents were Protestant (46%), followed by Roman Catholics (30%), other non-Christian religions (13%) and “no religion” (11%).⁴⁸ These

Population GROWTH.
Fort McMurray started the decade with a 1970 population of 6,132, and by 1980, the population totaled 27,874!

demographics reflect more extensive societal changes in Alberta and Canada. In 1962 new federal immigration regulations were introduced. These eliminated some of the overt racial discrimination from Canadian Immigration Policy. Skill was prioritized as the criteria for determining admissibility rather than ethnicity or the country of

⁴⁴ Jason Surkan, “Material Culture: Metis Folk Home” Last Modified August 9, 2017. <https://metisarchitect.com/2017/08/09/material-culture-metis-folk-home/>

⁴⁵ Donald Grant Wetherell and Irene Kmet, *Homes In Alberta* (Reprint, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1991), 240.

⁴⁶ Wetherell and Kmet, *Homes In Alberta*, 300.

⁴⁷ Carol Vlassoff and John W. Gartrell, *Frontier Fertility: A Study of Fort McMurray Families*. Population Research Laboratory. Discussion Paper: No. 21 (University of Alberta Population Research Laboratory, 1980), 4.

⁴⁸ Vlassoff and Gartrell, *Frontier Fertility: A Study*, 10.

origin.⁴⁹ These changes helped open the region to a more diverse pool of immigrants.

The study suggested over 40% of newcomers intended to remain in the region. It noted that the proportion of residents who had stayed more than ten years had doubled since 1969. This was partly because of the development of modern educational, health and recreation facilities, a variety of community services and improved transportation networks.⁵⁰

The prolonged economic boom was driving-up populations, services, urban development, and consequently the built environment. The benefits of this economic growth were not evenly felt.

Indigenous communities continued to experience disproportionate amounts of poverty. Consequently, some of the best examples of First Nations and Métis heritage from the 1920s into the 1980s tell a far different story.

Likewise, the booming growth and changing demographics brought a culture shock to the local communities – with different languages, values, and knowledge systems.⁵¹ While “on the positive side, the oil and gas industry provided jobs with steady income and adequate housing for their local employees. Many people were able to earn a good living in the oil sands, gain skills and training, and provide a quality life for their families.”⁵² The Oil and Gas boom was substantively reshaping the region with successes

and challenges much like the cycles of the previous 200 years.

The territory that would become the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo saw profound change between the 18th to 20th centuries. As the 1970s ended, a world recession loomed, hitting the RMWB shortly after 1980, rippling across most industries, development, and communities.⁵³ Indeed, the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s hold a colourful history, but that will have to be an exploration for another time. Undoubtedly, there will be more to discover and lessons to learn – bringing the past into the present and teaching about ourselves and the places we work and call home.



Fort McMurray 1970s - Postcard.

49 Kelley Ninette and Michael Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 332-33

50 Carol Vlassoff and John W. Gartrell. *Frontier Fertility: A Study of Fort McMurray Families*. Population Research Laboratory. Discussion Paper: No. 21. (University of Alberta Population Research Laboratory, 1980), 22.

51 Fort McMurray Métis Local, 1935, *Mark of the Métis: traditional knowledge and stories of the Métis peoples of northeastern Alberta* (2012), 193-195.

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53 Donald Grant Wetherell and Irene Kmet, *Alberta's North* (Reprint, Edmonton, Alta.: Canadian Circumpolar Institute Press, 2000), 300-301.

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Northeast Alberta, 1928.

Northern Alberta, map showing disposition of lands. (CU14017124) by Courtesy of Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

CU14017124
G3562.N6 G4 792 1928.

~RMWB~
Historic Context 1788 – 1980

Part of the Heritage Resources Management Plan:
Informing
Survey (Identification)
&
Inventory (Evaluation)
of potential
Historic Resources & Cultural Landscapes.



Completed for
The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo

Completed by M. Dougherty Consulting
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