

PIGEON LAKE, ALBERTA

...a brief history

Pigeon Lake is one of the largest and most extensively used recreational waters in Alberta. The lake covers an area of 96.7 km² (37.3 sq. mi), and has a maximum depth of 9.1 m (30 ft.) It is an early tributary of the Battle River, connected through the Pigeon Lake Creek with no large water inflows. It is served by hundreds of fresh water streams and artesian wells, with levels highly dependent on snow and rain conditions. The water freezes over in November of each year and over the past half century has thawed to open water as early as April 16 in 2016 and as late as May 28th in 2013.

Historical records detail a large artesian well on the northeast corner of the lake used for fresh drinking water by Nakoda tribes and the Algonquin Cree who travelled the region as early as 1725. Anthony Henday, one of the first of the British explorers, travelled the area as an emissary for the Hudson Bay Company in 1754 when the lake was called "hmi-hmoo" by the Cree Indians. The name in English meant "Woodpecker Lake."

In 1858 the name was changed to Pigeon Lake in recognition of Passenger Pigeons, considered one of the prettiest doves in the world. They were said to have numbered in the millions and unfortunately were hunted to extinction.

In the mid-19th century Pigeon Lake became a gathering place for First Nations people from numerous tribes and therefore a desirable spot for the location of both a Hudson Bay Company Trading Post and a Christian Mission. In 1840 Rev. Robert Rundle, an English Methodist minister travelled through the area and prepared the following note in his diary. "Before I slept I went to the beach. What a spectacle. No sound was heard but the rise and splash of the fish in the lake. A slight ripple was all that was discernible on the lake. It lay almost like a sea of molten silver & the stars were reflected on its glassy breast. A mirrored heaven!"

Five years later in 1845, several years before other high profile missionaries Father Albert Lacombe and Rev. John McDougall came west, Rev Rundle built a mission on the lakes north shore. His development opened in 1847 and included an

“agricultural settlement” that focused on saving “both bodies and souls.” Rundle reported being distressed by the starvation of the local people due to their reliance on wild game and native vegetation. Unfortunately, both he and his assistant Benjamin Sinclair had limited success, but they did report “converting some Indians,” cultivating “a few acres” and “securing lumber for a church.”

After falling from his horse, Robert Rundle returned to England in 1848 in order to obtain medical care and never returned. His assistant Benjamin Sinclair abandoned the Mission in 1850 after his “converted native assistants were massacred by a raiding party of Blackfeet.” Several subsequent Ministers attempted to re-open the Mission between 1855 and 1868, but abandoned plans due to native hostilities.

More than twenty years after Rundle scouted the area for the Hudson Bay Company, the trading company established a post on the west shore, only to close it seven years later. In 1882 the Mission was opened yet again, then closed for the “last time” at the turn of the century. The location is now considered both a Provincial and National Historic Site.

In 1871, the Canadian Government entered into treaties with the indigenous people in order to “take up of lands for immigration and settlement.” By the time the mission closed at the end of the 1800’s, native hostilities had subsided and in 1896 the government established an “Indian Reserve” on the south east shore of the lake where the small tract of land became home to about two hundred people who came from the Ermineskin, Louis Bull, Samson and Montana bands.

The Band Treaties were followed closely by the “Dominion Lands Act” of 1872. The law was based closely on the United States “Homestead Act” and set out conditions for the development of the western part of the country. Advertising extolling the virtues of the west were circulated in Europe, Eastern Canada and the United States. The plan offered 160 acres of “free” property for a \$10 registration fee and a commitment to live on the land and improve it. The scheme resulted in thousands of people migrating to western Canada.

A 1905 pamphlet described the Pigeon Lake area as “being close to good live towns,” with “a fast railway service to Edmonton.” Other reported virtues included fertile soil, successful cattle raising or growing grain. Lumber was “available at \$12 to \$15 per thousand,” or you could “cut your own.” The promotional material

said there were “good schools” and “good roads to market.” Some of the 1905 claims were true, others were a bit distorted. For example, although the brochures were published in 1905, the first area school wasn’t opened until 1908 and the first Alberta government appropriations for road improvements weren’t made until 1913.

It didn’t take long for small farms to soon dot the area and the lack of schools was addressed by farm families themselves. Mr. Knut Hauge’s family donated land to the south of the current Lakedell school, while Mr. Carl Norstrum built the foundation using large rocks and mortar. Other families cut and hewed logs or donated equipment. In 1908, the area’s first school opened as Pigeon Lake School District 1601. The new school met provincial regulations that required a minimum of seven students in order to be designated a school district.

The small school also served as a church and a community center for 34 years, but burnt down during the night following a 1942 Christmas concert. The school was re-built on the site, but remained in use for only three years, eventually replaced by a new “centralized school” in 1946. The government’s view was that larger centralized schools would provide more opportunities, improved teaching and therefore better education. The so called “new school” on the current Lakedell site was in reality the old school and several others, transported from area communities and placed in a circle, to be later connected and remodelled. In 1968 an entirely new school was built at a cost of \$325,000 and named Lakedell after a community naming contest. The enrollment from grades 1 to 8 was 175 children, bused from 10 outlying communities.

In addition to farming, logging and fishing employed hundreds throughout the region. A fish packing plant was established in the hamlet of Mulhurst, supplying fish locally and to locations as distant as New York and Chicago. By 1918 more than 81,000 kilograms (90 tons) of fish were harvested from the lake annually, with some 400 commercial fisherman holding licenses. Walleye, Yellow Perch and Northern Pike were in abundance and the natives and settlers alike fished without limitation.

In 1906 a logging operation was established by A.J. Rowley, who relocated his mill from Ponoka to the North East end of Pigeon Lake at Mulhurst. Timber was then hauled to the hamlet of Millet for planing and finishing. Another sawmill was later built on the south west side of the lake by Messrs. Ferguson and Mullen and then

in the mid 1920's, yet another logging operation was built on the South East end of the lake near the reservation. Logs would be piled on the shore and then pulled to the mills by a paddle-wheeler boat.

The combination of farming, logging and fishing served as the basis of the local economy and it was not unusual for farmers to work for logging companies over the winter. The men were housed in cold, poorly insulated log houses and reported conditions as cold as "60 below." Working ten hour days, the Pigeon Lake camps paid \$4.25 a day "with \$1.20 deducted for room and board."

For most of the year, men and women worked hard while their children attended school. Then came summer and families discovered the delights of Pigeon Lake. Ever increasing numbers from both farms and town sites travelled by horse team and wagon along rough, dusty roads in order to spend the summer months battling sunburn and mosquitoes, usually on long sandy beaches on native reserve land.

While industry and commerce were growing in the rural areas, the economy was growing even more rapidly in Edmonton and other urban centres. The scattered communities around the shores although industrious, grew slowly and sparingly. Increasingly smaller scale logging, farming, sport fishing, cattle and buffalo ranching were supplemented by oil and gas exploration as early as 1922. Other businesses in the area included a macaroni plant, mattress factory, brick factory, fur farm and soft drink plant.

The sale of illegal "moonshine" also flourished in the district during prohibition between 1916 and 1923. In that period, a doctor's prescription was required to buy any legal alcohol, so illegal businesses were particularly lucrative in areas like Buck Lake, where hundreds of healthy robust men worked in the logging camps and had little to do but work and drink.

In 1923, one hundred and eighty acres of land was removed from Reserve 138A by the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs, sub-divided and sold off to the public. The area became known as Ma-Me-O Beach, a translation from the Cree word wapiski-mimew meaning "white pigeon."

By 1932 it was difficult to tell that this part of Canada was in the throes of an economic depression. With beautiful sandy beaches and clear shallow waters the lots sold quickly with thirty new cottages reportedly built or under construction as the economy collapsed in other areas of the country. Ma-Me-O remained a prospering community for years with new businesses including a popular dance hall named the "Elite Pavilion." The building opened in 1933 with fireworks, a popular Edmonton orchestra and a reported thousand people in attendance.

In spite of difficult travel conditions, visitors to the lake continued to increase from Wetaskiwin, Camrose, Leduc and Edmonton. The Wetaskiwin Board of Trade and the Edmonton Branch of the Canadian Automobile Association lobbied the province for road improvements and the Social Credit government responded by giving the dirt road "two coatings of gravel" in 1932 and 1934. The work was done by the Commercial Cartage Company under the "Employment Relief Scheme." While it was a popular decision with most residents, others protested that gravel lamed their horses. A local garage opened shortly after the road improvements and by 1937 Ma-Me-O Beach boasted a garage, Johnson's Meat Market, Wood's General Store, Nelson's Boat Rentals, Campbell's Coffee Shop, the Tea Kettle Inn, a barbershop, a pool room and firewood & ice sales.

As industrial life became more established in the cities, the demand grew for recreational property and Pigeon Lake was conveniently located. In 1932, anxious to capitalize on the expanding interest in Pigeon Lake property, the Snell brothers who had been logging in the Battle Lake area, arranged the purchase of Crown Land along the south shore of the lake for a development that would later be known as Crystal Springs.

The Pigeon Lake Indian Reserve transfer of part of its lands to enable the establishment of Ma-Me-O Beach in 1923, followed by development in Crystal Springs in 1932, served as a driver for more development around the lake. By the late 1940's, local oil and gas discoveries led to additional jobs and helped push even more expansion of the Summer Villages. As a favoured destination for many Albertans, Ma-Me-O Beach became Alberta's first Summer Village, incorporated in 1948.

In 1957 the Provincial Government set aside land for the creation of a park, which was for a time the smallest provincial park in Alberta. It has since become owned

and operated by the band members as the Four Nations Campgrounds 1 and 2. Rugged hand painted signs remain along Highway 13 as late as 2018.

The growth in the area continued throughout the era, along with a dramatic increase in property values. Since the turn of the 20th century, Pigeon Lake has seen the incorporation of ten distinct Summer Villages, four unincorporated communities, two Counties and the development of over 2,300 cottages. Most of the owners are seasonal cottage users with a total of slightly over 700 permanent residents reported in the 2011 census. The Summer Villages include Argentinia Beach, Crystal Springs, Golden Days, Grandview, Itaska Beach, Ma-Me-O Beach, Norris Beach, Poplar Bay, Silver Beach and Sundance Beach. The unincorporated communities include Fisher Home, Mission Beach, Mulhurst Bay and the Village at Pigeon Lake. The Counties of Leduc and Wetaskiwin also serve homes and cottages on the North and South sides of the lake respectively. A portion of the four First Nation bands remain housed on the South Eastern shores.

In addition to the First Nations owned campsites, the Pigeon Lake Provincial Park opened in 1967 and Zeiner Provincial Park opened in 1981, along with the revived Rundle Mission facility. Surrounding Pigeon Lake are three golf courses, a family fun park, numerous RV Parks, several Inns and Bed & Breakfasts, children's playgrounds, public picnic areas, boat launch sites, preserved wetlands, forests and nature trails, eight youth and church group camps, two Farmers markets and the "Village at Pigeon Lake."

The "Village" development is a unique historical looking hamlet of shops and amenities, providing area residents with groceries, restaurants, bar, gas, drugs, clothing, banking, accommodation, liquor, a spa, hair salon, post office, car wash, collectables and a range of other services, facilities and seasonal celebrations. Due to its location and extensive services, the site is particularly convenient for Crystal Springs residents. The downside of the new development combined with a by-pass road around Ma-Me-O Beach, was that many other related services throughout the area had difficulty competing and many went out of business.

An estimated 8000 people now live or recreate around Pigeon Lake. The area around the large water body contains a small first Nations "reserve" and is dotted with farms, acreages, cozy cottages and million dollar homes. With modern amenities and many opportunities for rest, relaxation and recreation, it is easily accessed by major highways, lying a half hour's drive from the city of Wetaskiwin

and less than an hour's drive to the cities of Leduc, Devon and the Alberta capital of Edmonton with an International airport. Location, beauty and opportunity make Pigeon Lake it one of Alberta's premier locations to live and visit.

The above information was adapted with permission from a royalty free booklet "The Summer Village of Crystal Springs" available on Amazon.ca

