

# Walking on the water

DEC. 31, 1990

Poor old Buffalo Lake.

It never had any pretensions of grandeur like Lesser Slave Lake or Lake Athabasca. It was never a brash, upstart lake like Sylvan, nor did it beg to have its picture taken like that vain Louise.

No, Buffalo Lake was perfectly content to be little more than an overgrown prairie slough. Albertans who stumbled upon Rochon Sands Provincial Park accepted the lake for what it was: a lovely hideaway for bird-watching and wading. Nobody expected Waikiki, so no one was disappointed.

Buffalo Lake prospered in relative obscurity, sparkling under the summer sun without a care in the world, until Premier Don Getty won the Stettler byelection. That's when its troubles began.

All of a sudden somebody in Edmonton resurrected a plan to raise the water level, and stabilize the lake for boaters and swimmers. The idea had been tossed out years earlier because of the environmental consequences, but with the election, it bobbed to the surface like a pop can in Pigeon.

Then the premier built his new homestead on land overlooking Buffalo Lake, later buying 640 acres adjacent to his property for a reported \$209,000. His aide said he planned to "throw a few cattle on it" or use it for hunting, but Stettler rumor had it he was planning something bigger — much bigger.

Alone at night, Buffalo Lake started to ripple with apprehension.

The government began to plan a new environmental study just in case — by some slight error in judgment — the scientific experts had been wrong the first time (accidents happen, don't they?). Albertans were told that the

timing of the new study after the byelection was just another coincidence.

When West Yellowhead MLA Gerry Doyle questioned the propriety of Getty's lobbying efforts for the \$15 million Buffalo Lake project so near his own property, the premier replied he was only defending the interests of a community with the potential to be one of Alberta's top tourism areas.

Think of it. Majestic Banff, breathtaking Jasper, magnificent Kananaskis — and Buffalo Lake.

"One of the keys to it is having a healthy Buffalo Lake as a recreation-tourism attraction, and we're going to do all the necessary things from an environmental point of view, and then we're going to make it happen," the premier said in early December, taunting his NDP critic: "Isn't it too bad?"

Well, Buffalo Lake thought so. The signs were everywhere that the premier just wouldn't leave it in peace.

Since Getty had come to the constituency, Stettler had been awarded the 1991 Alberta Summer Games, a \$500,000 alcohol and drug abuse treatment centre, and \$750,000 in grants for a new tennis court and other recreation facilities.

Getty has asked environment officials to try to build an experimental waste incinerator for the county. A Calgary firm wants to construct a \$48 million greenhouse in the area. With all this busy activity, would anyone leave a little lake alone?

These days Buffalo Lake sees the writing on the wall. Pitch-and-putt golf courses. Water slides and pony rides. Hot dog stands in the Rochon Sands. Goodbye to the ducks, hello to the weekend yahoos.

If bodies of water could weep, this one would weep buckets.