

Sawmilling - Annie Rypien

During the late 1800s, Athabasca became an important terminus along the route to northern Canada. "Athabaska Landing", as it was then referred to, was located on the most southerly tip of the Athabaska River; thus making it the closest link to Edmonton and the railway. (Athabasca, in the early years, was spelled with a "k" instead of a "c"). Athabasca, at that time, was also the end of the more difficult overland route, and the beginning of the water route to McMurray, Lake Athabasca, and the north. This was the route of the explorers, fur traders, settlers, missionaries, and all that travelled to this vast northland to fulfill their dreams and ambitions. The Athabasca area was also a land with a vast abundance of timber. As the migrant population increased, so did the settlement of "Athabaska Landing" grow into a town. Lumber was needed for the construction of homes, furniture, trading posts, and accommodation for the transients. Scows, small boats and steamboats also had to be built to transport these early adventurers, their cargoes of goods, and supplies. Thus began the need for lumber and the "Lumbering Industry" in Athabasca took on its beginning.

In the early 1880's rough lumber had been produced in Athabasca. Much of the lumber then was sawed by hand with a type of a cross-cut saw. This saw had a long blade between 5 to 7 1/2 feet in length with a handle on each end. This method of sawing was called whip-sawing. One way that this was done was to have two fairly large saw-horses. On these was placed a log and a platform. One man stood on the platform on top of the saw-horses, and another man below the platform while they sawed back and forth. The man below had a very saw-dusty job so they usually changed positions frequently.

The Hudson Bay Co. had trading posts in Athabasca and along various places in the north. They had to have lumber to build scows and boats to distribute their goods and supplies as well as pick up the furs. They hired men from Scotland to build the boats from the lumber that they had whip-sawed here in Athabasca.

Revellon Bros. was also another sawmill that first had their lumber whip-sawed in those early years.

Around 1900, a number of steam-operated saw-mills started to be built and to operate. Most of them had their mills located right in what is now part of the town of Athabasca. Most of them were located along the river. In 1905, J. H. Wood set up his sawmill in approximately the same area as the old brick school is located. Much of the timber that was sawed into lumber, came from

trees that were logged right in the town area itself. Later on, as the area was cleared of timber, the various saw mill operators turned to logging up river, along both sides of the river.

In the fall these mill operators set up camp and then logged during the winter time. These logs were then hauled by horses to the river's edge. After the spring break-up, they would float the logs, in booms down to their sawmills. Many of the mill operators filed on homesteads and then proceeded to log their land out. They used the larger logs for lumber, for the construction of river boats and buildings; while the smaller logs were used for stove wood for sale to the Hudson's Bay Co., the R.C.M.P., and or private homes. In this way, they cleared their land for farming; and at the same time they logged out their farm for their sawmill operation.

In 1909, J. H. Wood, set up a mill in the Bald Hill area. In the spring of 1913, he lost a good part of his logs in a flood during the spring break-up of the river. The flood took five booms of logs containing about 10,000 board feet of lumber in each boom. They were stock-piled too close to the river's edge.

In 1913, E. C. Groves erected a large sash and door factory. In 1915, Mr. Groves died. Messrs. Watt & Co., bought Grover Plant in June of the same year.

In the fall of 1914, Mr. Dent, manager of the firm of Watt & Co. went with a gang of men by way of the overland trail (the Peace River Trail) to Tomato Creek to start logging twenty-two and a half miles of timber limits conceded to Messrs. Watt & Co. by the Dominion Government. Mr. Dent and his men stayed at the stopping place at Tomato Creek kept by Mr. Archie Goodwin, and walked five miles to the site of their camp, returning to Tomato Creek every night. This back and forth trek on foot continued until shacks were erected to accommodate the men. By February of 1915, the men had a stock-pile of logs of excellent quality that could make about one million board feet of lumber.

Just before the spring break-up of 1915, a boiler and engine, sawmill outfit, edger, cut-off saw and planer were transported to the camp site. The large mill was erected, and under Mr. Dent's supervision, they started a scow building operations at the camp. When the ice was gone in the river, they brought down their lumber to Athabasca in the scows they had built themselves. They had a gasoline boat to aid them in this operation. They also built a supply of double bottomed scows, a type that was superior to anything formerly known in the locality and at a much lower price than Athabasca had before.

They made about 12 scows per weeks so that they would have a large stock of scows for the freighters and others proceeding down the river.

These scows were stored on land leased from the Hudson's Bay Co. in April of 1915. The CNR spur line, abutting on the Hudson's Bay Warehouse, greatly facilitated the work of loading lumber onto the CNR cars for shipment to other parts of Alberta.

In April, 1917, the lumber firm of Watt & Co. was reorganized under the new name of Athabasca Sawmills Ltd. Mr. Dent became the local manager. Their plans for the coming winter were to manufacture about four million boardful of lumber.

During the first World War (1914-1918) the demand for lumber increased and logging and sawmilling had become a very important industry in Athabasca. The post-war years also brought in an influx of settlers from eastern Canada, the United States, and Europe. Sawmilling and logging became a very important sources of income for these settlers, as well as for the fast growing youth population. Sawmilling also provided the settlers with lumber for the construction of their homes.

By 1920, beside Spruce Lumber Mills and Dent Mills, other sawmills started up. A Mr. Tutty, during the 1920s commenced a fair, sized sawmill operation along the river front in Athabasca. Much of the lumber produced by these mills came from timber up river, from the Tomato Creek and Bald Hill areas.

In 1921, Charlie Bissell, who later became a sawmill operator himself, came to Athabasca as a steam engine operator for Spruce Lumber Mills. In those days, a lot of men, including Mr. Bissell, had steam boiler papers. This qualified them to operate the steam engines of the thrashing machines of that time, as well as an engine on the railways, sawmills and boilers institutions like the schools and hospitals.

During the first few years, Mr. Bissell worked for Spruce Lumber Mills during the winter months, and then went back in the spring to his farm in Viking, Alberta. In 1924, he brought his family to Athabasca and formed a partnership with a Mr. Bossy to start a sawmill operation of their own. They acquired timber north of the river. A few years later, Mr. Bossy left the country, selling his share to Mr. Bissell. Mr. Bissell continued with he logging and sawmill operation in various areas north of the farm settlement and in the McCullough Lake area during the winter months.

For a number of reasons Mr. Dent decided to sell his mill operation in the late 1920's. His mill at that time was located on the east side of the Athabasca river, just south of where the bridge spans the river in Athabasca. Mr. Bissell purchased this mill from Mr. W. Dent.