

Letter to Dr. E.K.Wright from George Cooke early 1960s

I arrived in Athabasca Landing before the railroad when the only method of communication with outside at that time was by stage coach or freight wagon over the Landing Trail to Edmonton. This road is well remembered by many of the pioneers as the only access to the north at that time and many of the earliest settlers in Peace River country had to come this way. It was also used extensively by many heading for the Klondike in Gold Rush days.

In those days our river front was a large shipyard. Large steamers like Athabasca River were built there, hundreds of flat-bottomed scows were built there every year as all freight to north was taken down river by scow and had to come through Athabasca Landing.

The great land rush at that time was in full swing. I intended going on to Peace River country and bought tickets from Northern Transportation Co. for Grouard on Lesser Slave Lake. One had to go from here to Mirror Landing (Smith) and reship on a smaller boat up the Slave River and then full length of Lesser Slave Lake to Grouard. After waiting nearly a month and not being able to get a berth I sold my ticket, and after looking around this area settled north of Baptiste Lake.

Regarding the Town of Athabasca at that time it was a hub of activity. In summer all the fur from the north came here by scow, pulled up the river by Indians and half-breeds and all freight taken back in scows, the steamers only being able to travel on the river from Mirror Landing to Grand Rapids. At very high water steamers could be run through the rapids and many of the very large paddle wheelers in the north were built here (in Athabasca). In the winter the freight was all moved by horse and ox-drawn sleigh and often as many as 80 to 100 loads a day would leave here. It was a great sight to see the line of sleighs leave here in the morning. I well remember seeing the first steam boiler for Fort Vermillion used to open a flour mill there. It was drawn by six black oxen and was a sight well worth seeing.

Athabasca at that time I should imagine was quite a lot larger than at the present time and it was anticipated it would be the distributing centre for the north. There were two large hotels-the Grand Union and Athabasca, both of which did a roaring trade especially when the transports and freighters returned from the north.

The Hudson's Bay Co and Revillon Freres had large fur-buying and shipping businesses; also other independent fur buyers were located here. The Hudson's Bay built the present store owned by Parkers and operated the two storeys as a department store in 1912.

The big land rush was on in 1911 and 1912 and the greatest part of available land within 15 miles of Athabasca was filed on. The real estate boom was on in 1911 and ¼ sections close to town were sold and subdivided and lots sold all over the world.

To my knowledge the first car to be owned in Athabasca was won in a raffle by Lance Smith, manager for Northern Transportation Co. This car was raffled by Kehoe clothing store and was a gray Dort and was freighted in from Edmonton in the summer of 1912. Being a very wet year the streets in Athabasca were very bad and impassable for a car. The railroad was under construction and with the help of many

onlookers ties from the track were placed on the street from one hotel to the other- the only passable road at that time. The following year Tom Sherman bought a Model T Ford and started hauling passengers to the Peace Country. That winter having practically no snow the river was glare ice and was crowded with freight teams, most of which had never seen a car before and in consequence Mr. Sherman was not popular with freighters due to the panic it caused to the horses.

The Roman Catholic sisters had a hospital on the same street as the present Roman Catholic Church. Dr. Olivier and Dr. McDonald were resident doctors. The RNWMP had barracks here and around 6 constables were stationed here.

Athabasca had a liquor store run by Jack Lessard. No liquor was allowed to be taken outside town limits without special permits so it kept the police busy checking all traffic for the north and west.

In those days the road problem was very bad. I had land on the north end of Baptiste Lake and as oxen were my means of transportation it used to take three days to make the round trip to Athabasca. There being no bridge over Baptiste Creek we had to go down to where it runs into the Athabasca River and ford it there.