

Historical Side Trips

The Fur Traders, 1792

Alberta's Iron Horse Trail has many connections to the history of North Eastern Alberta partly because it runs through each community in the region, as did the CN railroad. But its history goes back even further, to the fur trade days. When Chief Factor John Rowland had the Edmonton – Winnipeg trail blazed in 1815, it often traversed on or near to what later became the CN Railway. Likely it was built on existing trails from even earlier times.

Alberta's Iron Horse Trail brings together a rich tapestry of Western Canadian history. The area of today's trail followed many early trails of aboriginal peoples, especially the Cree and Chipewan. The earliest European explorers were travelers working for the Hudson's Bay Company or the North West Company. Although Anthony Henday had traveled down the North Saskatchewan in 1755, little exploration of the region took place until 1792.

Parts of Rowland's trail eventually became known by various names such as the Carlton Trail, the Victoria Trail, the Fort Pitt – Battleford Trail, and the Frog Lake Trail. The trail stayed north of the North Saskatchewan River because of ongoing disputes over territory south of the river which was prime buffalo hunting country. Even the early fur traders had not fared well there. However, the Cree north of the river had good rapport with the Hudson's Bay Company ever since its early establishment on the Hudson Bay in 1610. The trail grew to be used by most explorers traveling across Rupert's land.

The Missionaries, 1862

As missionaries entered western Canada, Alberta's Iron Horse region had Father Lacombe establishing St Paul des Metis and the Macdougall family establishing Victoria Settlement. When it was established in 1863, the Victoria Mission sat right along the Carlton Trail. Where once the trail had only accommodated packhorses, it now became capable of handling carts and wagons. Father Lacombe is said to have employed the first cart brigade to carry freight over the trail from Red River to Carlton House in 1862. Victoria, the first permanent settlement along the trail between Fort Pitt and Edmonton, brought the Methodist faith to the nearby Crees. In 1864, George McDougall opened the first protestant schools west of Manitoba - one at Victoria, and the other north at Whitefish Lake. Today, the Victoria Trail is Alberta's oldest highway.

The Pioneers and the beginning of towns, 1905

When Alberta became a province in 1905, its main concern was to attract settlers to the vast acres of arable land throughout the province. The province advertised land to prospective settlers throughout the world. To thousands of people in many countries, this land looked very attractive, and so they came. Some stayed and others became discouraged or were homesick for the land they left behind and eventually gave up their homestead rights for one reason or another. These settlers endured many hardships, including our long, severe winters. Some were very poor when they got here and had a difficult time to make ends meet. Many others joined these early settlers and by the time of railway development in 1919 towns had sprung up and settlement started all along the proposed path of the railway.

Historical Sites near the Trail

Fort George / Buckingham House (Elk Point) 1792 – 1802

A connecting trail from Alberta's Iron Horse Trail is due to open in the spring of 2010. Experience some of Alberta's earliest fur-trade history at the Fort George and Buckingham House Provincial Historic Site. Let modern technology offer you a glimpse into the dreams of Louis, the voyageur, after a hard day of paddling. Listen to the musings of William Tomison, the Chief Factor of Buckingham House as he writes his journal. Begin to know the First Nations peoples whose lives were so affected by the arrival of the two fur-trade giants - the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company - as they battled for supremacy in the rich fur-trade era of the 1700s. In the midst of it all was the country wife, providing a link between two cultures.

Archaeology has revealed the original sites of Fort George and Buckingham House. Both are accessible through a system of pathways and signage.

On the north bank of the North Saskatchewan River, the Interpretive Centre commands a breathtaking view of the river and valley.

The Centre is located 13 km southeast of Elk Point on Secondary Road #646. A connecting trail from Alberta's Iron Horse Trail is due to open in the spring of 2010.

Victoria Settlement, 1862

Discover history on the North Saskatchewan River along the Victoria Trail, where Reverend George McDougall founded a Methodist Mission to the Cree in 1862. This is where the Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Victoria in 1864 to trade with local peoples. The Mission and Fort became the nucleus for a Metis community whose river lots extended six miles along the bank of the river. This land title system still exists today.

Today, step inside the 1864 Clerk's Quarters or the 1906 Methodist Church to hear the story of a once bustling community that saw a new surge of missionary and commercial activity at the turn of the century. Learn why this thriving settlement experienced a sudden decline and all but vanished.

Catch a glimpse of an exciting period of Alberta's past through exhibits, trails, and a variety of activities provided by costumed interpreters.

Located 10 km south of Smoky Lake on secondary highway #855, and 6 km east on the historic Victoria Trail.

Metis Crossing, 1860

This historic site is the most recent addition to the colourful interpretation of Alberta's history. It is located on the North Saskatchewan River just west of Victoria Settlement and tells the story of the Metis people.

Museums

Vilna's Historic Main Street

Smoky Lake Railway Station Museum

Smoky Lake Museum – Over 10,00 ft of indoor and outdoor displays from 1900 - 1940

Musee St. Paul Museum - two museums in one giving the history from the mission of St. Paul des Metis onward

Bonnyville and District Museum – a rich collection of native, French and Ukrainian cultures that helped form the Bonnyville community

Cold Lake Museum – a year round display of Air Force History

Heinsburg Railway Park – Alberta's only restored wooden water tower as well as other Railway displays

Sights

Elk Point Mural Park – a 100 foot mural taking a comprehensive look at a century of the region's history; from the 1885 Rebellion to the years of pioneer settlement and into the times when Elk Point became a thriving farm community

Peter Fidler Statue (Elk Point) - A ten meter tall chainsaw carved statue overlooking the north entrance to Elk Point

Angus Shaw Statue (Bonnyville) – a seven meter hand-carved statue of Angus Shaw the builder of Shaw House, the first European settlement in the area.