

THE HUMAN GEOGRAPHY OF THE LESSER SLAVE LAKE AREA  
OF CENTRAL ALBERTA

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
McGill University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

---

by  
Gordon Clark Merrill  
October 1951

THE HUMAN GEOGRAPHY OF THE LESSER SLAVE LAKE AREA  
OF CENTRAL ALBERTA

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
McGill University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

---

by  
Gordon Clark Merrill

October 1951

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Location of the Area .....	1
Geographic Interest of the Area .....	3
Aim of the Thesis .....	7
II. PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE AREA .....	8
Geology .....	8
Topography .....	11
Drainage and Hydrography .....	14
Climate .....	17
III. THE PHYSICAL SETTING IN TERMS OF SOIL, VEGETATION, AND FAUNA .....	21
Soil .....	21
Vegetation .....	26
Fauna .....	28
IV. HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE AREA UP TO 1914 .	30
Prewhite Era .....	30
Early White Activity in the Area .....	32
The Klondike Gold Rush .....	38
The Opening Up of the Peace River District.	44
V. THE HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT SINCE 1914 .....	52
VI. THE ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION ....	60
Ethnic Groups Involved in Settlement .....	60

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
1. Salt Prairie Settlement, an area of gently rolling topography.....	47
2. Natural Hay Meadows of Buffalo Bay.....	47
3. Several abandoned buildings in the ghost town of Grouard.....	50
4. Present day Grouard, with Indian Co-operative in the distant background.....	50
5. Delta land of agricultural value in the Driftpile Indian Reserve.....	76
6. Hospital, Driftpile Indian Reserve.....	76
7. Graph of Wheat Yields in the Municipality of High Prairie.....	82
8. Planted windbreak, common in the High Prairie district.....	85
9. Typical Ukrainian farmstead in the Heart River Settlement.....	85
10. Lumber yard, Imperial Lumber Company, Kinuso....	90
11. Burned-over forest in vicinity of Kinuso.....	90
12. Graph showing Ethnic Origin of the Commercial Fishermen of Lesser Slave Lake.....	96
13. Mink pens, a common sight from Slave Lake to Jousard.....	99



## FIGURE

## PAGE

14.	Provincial School in Kinuso.....	101
15.	Provincial School in High Prairie.....	101

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1950 a field party under the leadership of Dr. Bogdan Zaborski of McGill University carried out a geographical reconnaissance survey of selected areas in central Alberta for the Geographical Branch of the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, Ottawa. A rapid traverse made along the south shore of Lesser Slave Lake, from the village of Slave Lake in the east to High Prairie in the west, revealed much of interest to the human geographer. This marked the starting point of the field research for this thesis in human geography. The writer was able to return to the Lesser Slave Lake area later in the summer of 1950 for an additional fourteen day period of more detailed study. The field research increased the interest in the history of the area. The Public Archives and the Library of Parliament in Ottawa proved to be excellent sources of material of an historical nature. Research has been continued during the past year at the University of California in Berkeley. Much of the material presented was gathered while in the employ of the Geographical Branch, and the Branch has kindly consented to its use in this thesis.

#### Location of the Area

The area of study is located between  $55^{\circ}13'$  and  $55^{\circ}46'$

north latitude,  $114^{\circ}25'$  and  $116^{\circ}47'$  west longitude. It corresponds roughly to Improvement Districts 124 and 125, as set up by the Alberta Department of Municipal Affairs. It is in no manner believed that the area thus defined represents a geographical region. Much of the available information on the area has been in terms of the Improvement Districts, and it has been considered desirable to adopt similar boundaries in order to handle the material. After the geography of the area has been dealt with, a critical analysis shall be made with a view to the recognition of geographical regions. Although the area of study is large, covering approximately four thousand square miles, settlement has been limited to a narrow fringe along the south shore of the lake, and to the agricultural area to the west, centering upon High Prairie. It is estimated that approximately six hundred square miles of the area have been settled up to the present time.

Lesser Slave Lake is the major physical feature of the area, and is located in its central part. The locational map of the Lesser Slave Lake area shows its space relationship to Edmonton and to Peace River. The village of Slave Lake, at the eastern end of the lake, is approximately one hundred and thirty miles north-northwest of Edmonton. Peace River is located approximately one hundred and twenty-five miles northwest of Slave Lake. Situated roughly midway between Edmonton and Peace River, this area has served as a thoroughfare to

points north since the beginning of white settlement. This is a fact of considerable importance, as much of the history of the area has been written in terms of movements of people through the area to the Peace River and Yukon districts.

In eastern Canada agriculture, even pioneer agriculture, has not extended much beyond 49 north latitude.<sup>1</sup> Lesser Slave Lake is located four hundred and fifty miles north of the international boundary line, above 55 north latitude, and must be considered to be on the northern fringe of prairie settlement. This fact is best underlined by considering the area to the east of Lesser Slave Lake. North of the town of Athabaska, agriculture does not extend beyond Calling Lake, which is approximately the same latitude as Lesser Slave Lake. On the other hand, agriculture has pushed farther north in the area which lies to the west, in the Peace River District. But one must not attach too much significance to the position of Lesser Slave Lake on the northern fringe of settlement. In many respects the area has lost the qualities of the frontier.

#### Geographic Interest of the Area

Many elements of the cultural landscape of the area are of particular interest to the human geographer. It is an area

---

<sup>1</sup> W. A. Mackintosh, Prairie Settlement, The Geographical Setting. p. 153.



youthful in its history, with the major portion of its settlement having been accomplished in the last thirty-five years, or since the building of the railway in 1914. The earliest interest in the area was centered upon the fur trade, and the first settlements sprang up around the trading posts. Grouard, which has since become a ghost town, was the site of the first settlement in the region of Lesser Slave Lake. The early settlers at Grouard did not farm extensively, as they had only a local market for their grain and vegetables, but they produced good crops. The excellent quality of the grain and vegetables was commented on by early travellers, and the fame of this country was known for many years before extensive settlement took place.<sup>2</sup> A number of the true pioneers of the Lesser Slave Lake District are still living there to-day, and they represent a source of much interesting information on the conditions of life in the early years of settlement.

To-day a number of economic activities contribute to the wealth of the area. An excellent agricultural community is located to the immediate west of the lake, where good soils provide the physical basis for settlement. Smaller pockets of agricultural land are found in the valleys and deltas of the Driftpile and Swan Rivers, which enter Lesser Slave Lake from

---

<sup>2</sup> F. A. Wyatt, Preliminary Soil Survey of the Peace River-High Prairie-Sturgeon Lake Area. p. 9.

the south. Lumbering is also an important industry in this area, and present expansion indicates an even greater role for it in the future. Several industries are based directly upon the resources of Lesser Slave Lake. Commercial fishing is a well-established industry, and at the present time there are many mink farmers located on the south shore of the lake in order to exploit the non-commercial varieties of fish as mink feed. The development of these industries, and the sharp differences in appearance that they give to the landscape, are of considerable geographic interest.

A number of ethnic groups are represented in the population of the Lesser Slave Lake area, as is true of most areas in the prairie provinces of Canada. Anglo-Saxon, Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, French, and Scandinavians are present, and the distribution of these groups in the area under study appears to show a pattern. Settlers of east European origin arrived in the area later than the Anglo-Saxon settlers, and have tended to settle on the poorer soils within the pockets of agricultural land. Smaller concentrations of other groups, such as French and Scandinavians, are recognized but less readily explained. Although the assimilation of the east European people appears to take place fairly rapidly, certain aspects of their culture stand out in contrast to that of other groups in the area.

### Aim of the Thesis

In this introductory chapter an attempt has been made to outline the major points of human geographic interest in the Lesser Slave Lake area. It is an area of present day contrast and of historical change, and it is felt that the application of geographic techniques of study shall contribute toward an understanding of the history and the development of the area. A number of the elements of the cultural landscape, such as the pattern of settlement, and the distribution of ethnic types, have been expressed on maps which have proved to be useful aids to synthesis. Perhaps the greatest justification of this thesis is to be found in its contribution to the historical geography of the area. The "living history" represented by the intimate knowledge of the still living pioneers is interesting, and is worthy of being recorded.



## CHAPTER II

### Physical Geography of the Area

The reconnaissance nature of the field work did not permit a detailed study to be made of the physical geography of the Lesser Slave Lake area. But it is believed that a knowledge of the physical geography is necessary to an understanding of the nature of settlement and land use. This chapter, and the one following, aim at a description of the of the physical environment, and are based almost entirely upon the available published material.

### Geology

Geologically and structurally, this area occupies a position similar to the plains of Alberta. The Geological Survey of Canada, through a field study made in 1918 of the geology of the Swan Hills in the Lesser Slave Lake district, connected the stratigraphy of the Edmonton district and central Alberta with that along the Peace River.<sup>1</sup> The structure is simple, with no indications of important faults or structural breaks. Unconsolidated deposits of Quaternary age are widespread throughout the area, and consist of alluvial, sand-dune, glacial, and lacustrine deposits. Sediments of lower

---

1. John A. Allen, Geology of the Swan Hills in Lesser Slave Lake District, Alberta, p. 7c.

Tertiary age were probably deposited over most of the area, but most of these and any later Tertiary sediments that may have been deposited were removed by erosion.<sup>2</sup> In this connection it is interesting to note that the Swan Hills represent residuals of erosion from the preglacial plains level which stood upwards of two thousand feet higher than at present. In this respect the Swan Hills can be compared to the Hand Hills and the Cypress Hills of southeastern Alberta.<sup>3</sup>

The geographer is primarily interested in the topography of an area, and only in a more limited sense in its subsurface geology. The present surface of the Lesser Slave Lake area is the result of erosion and deposition over a long period of time, and has a similar geologic history with that of most of north central Alberta. Apparently there were three main stages in the development of the surface features. These may be referred to as, pre-glacial erosion, glacial erosion and deposition, and post-glacial erosion.

The stage of pre-glacial erosion was the longest of the three, although it has not been determined definitely when it began. In the area of study this period of erosion removed most of the deposits of Tertiary age, with the exception of sediments of Tertiary age remaining as residuals in the Swan

---

<sup>2</sup> Ralph L. Rutherford, Geology and Water Resources in parts of the Peace River and Grande Prairie Districts, Alberta, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, op. cit., p. 9c.

Hills. The general result of this erosion was a surface of gentle slopes extending from the upland to the base of the stream valleys. The stream valleys were not entrenched to their present depth, so that apparently the relief at the close of this period was not so marked as at present.<sup>4</sup>

From the standpoint of the geographer, the second stage of glacial erosion and deposition is of major interest. Large areas with relatively flat surfaces resulted from this stage in the physiographic history. It is believed that the low-land area centering upon High Prairie is one such area. It is difficult to determine the extent of glacial erosion accomplished by the ice sheet during Pleistocene time, but the most important results with respect to the present surface were accomplished during the gradual retreat of the ice-front, when drainage was blocked by the ice-sheet, glacial lakes were formed, and deposition was widespread. At this period in geologic history Lesser Slave Lake was more extensive in area than it is to-day. Gradually the more shallow parts of Lesser Slave Lake have silted up, chiefly with clays and fine material derived in large part from the marine shale formations which form the underlying strata.

The third stage in the development of the present surface is that of post-glacial erosion and deposition. Streams

---

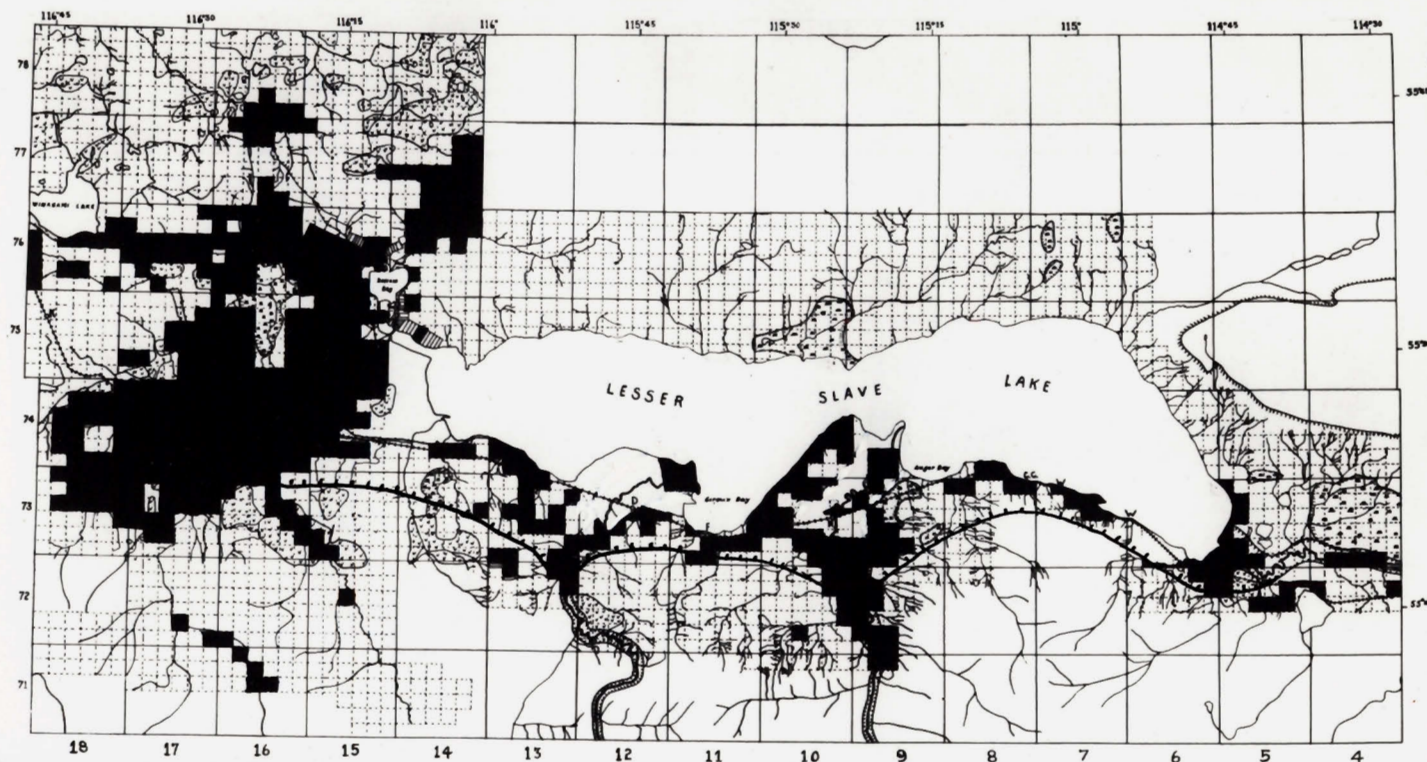
<sup>4</sup> Rutherford, loc. cit.

have cut channels into the soft deposits of the lowland areas, as for example the East Prairie and West Prairie Rivers as they have flowed through the lowland area of High Prairie. Geologically speaking, little time has elapsed since the Pleistocene, and post-glacial erosion has lowered the upland areas only to a minor degree, since in many places the mantle of glacial debris has not been removed. It appears clear that glaciation has been the single most important fact in the geologic history of the Lesser Slave Lake area, having been the agent of formation of what is now the finest agricultural region within the area.

### Topography

Lesser Slave Lake has an elevation of nineteen hundred feet above sea-level. A narrow fringe of lowland extends along the south shore of the lake, and broadens out at its western end, forming the extensive lowland area which centers on High Prairie. Rail and highway routes are located on this lowland fringe, and settlement has been limited fairly sharply to this area, particularly to the High Prairie region and the valleys and the deltas of the rivers emptying into the lake from the south. The pattern of settlement is shown by map 2 on the following page. This lowland area was at one time in the geologic past a part of the lake bottom.

From the south shore of the lake the land rises slowly



# 1950 PATTERN OF SETTLEMENT MAP LESSER SLAVE LAKE AREA

0 4 8 miles  
scale

■ Privately Owned Land

□ Crown Land

Map based on information obtained  
at the Office of Municipal Affairs,  
High Prairie, Alberta

for the first ten to fifteen miles, then very abruptly to the summit of the upland, known as the Swan Hills, which begins from twenty to thirty miles south of the lake. Stream action has dissected the upland, and has produced a number of mesas, such as Wallace and House Mountains. The Swan Hills stand up to 4,300 feet above sea-level, representing a relative relief of 2,420 feet above Lesser Slave Lake. This range of hills has an east-west trend, and taken with the shape and the direction of drainage of the lake, permits the recognition of an east-west grain to the physical landscape.

Marten Mountain is a conspicuous feature in the topography of the area, and may be seen for a number of miles by travelers approaching from the south. It is located to the immediate east of the lake, and stands approximately eleven hundred feet above it. Although lower than the Swan Hills, Marten Mountain represents a more maturely dissected part of the same upland.<sup>5</sup>

Between the Swan Hills and the alluvial plains are numerous irregularly rounded spurs and ridges, all thickly forested. This is a region of considerable economic interest to the lumberman, but it has little agricultural value, and has not been settled.

The valleys of the rivers are not deeply entrenched in

---

<sup>5</sup> Allen, op. cit., p. 9c.

the lowland area along the south shore of the lake. Farther to the south in the upland, the Swan River valley forms a very conspicuous break in the topography. The valley of the Swan broadens rapidly as it leaves the hills, and represents a good agricultural area. The Driftpile River valley also broadens out considerably in its lower course, providing another pocket of flat, alluvial land suitable for agriculture.

### Drainage and Hydrography

Lesser Slave Lake occupies a long and irregular basin which extends from Grouard in the west to Slave Lake in the east, a distance of over sixty miles. The major axis of the lake is oriented in an east-west direction. The width of the lake varies from a minimum of three miles at the Narrows to twelve miles at Giroux Bay, and has an average width of eight miles. The approximate area of the lake is 485 square miles.

The south shore of the lake is very irregular, a result of the extensive deltas built up by the streams which enter the lake from the south. The Swan River is the largest of these streams, extending between fifty and sixty miles south of the lake, and draining an area of approximately one thousand square miles. The Driftpile River is only slightly smaller, and has also built up an extensive delta. The third stream of significant size entering the lake from the south is the Assineau River, which has not built a large delta.



The area to the west of the lake is drained by the Heart River, with its main tributaries, the East and West Prairie Rivers. From the north the principal streams are the Narrows River, Marten River, and Salt Creek. The north shore of the lake is very regular, as these streams from the north have not built deltas into the lake.

Lesser Slave Lake is drained by the Lesser Slave River, which enters the Athabaska River at Smith. In its lower course the Lesser Slave is approximately two hundred feet wide, shallow with a stony bottom, and a number of rapids. Above this lower portion of the river, which extends for a distance of eighteen miles upstream from Smith, the river decreases in width to one hundred feet or less, becomes deeper and more tranquil. In ascending the stream the banks decrease in elevation, until near the lake they are scarcely above the water-level, and broad swamps with fine grasses are found close to the river. The Lesser Slave River is one of the largest tributaries of the Athabaska, and at ordinary highwater has a discharge of about 2,300 cubic feet per second.<sup>6</sup> Drainage of the area of this study is thus to the east by the Lesser Slave River into the Athabaska and eventually into the Arctic Ocean.

No sounding operations have been carried out system-

---

<sup>6</sup> Geological Survey of Canada, Memoir 108, Mackenzie River Basin, p. 23.



atically on Lesser Slave Lake, and no charts of the lake are in existence. However, the local fishermen have a considerable knowledge of the physical characteristics of the lake. Figure 3 combines information from a number of sources on the depths of the lake, and although the map is only approximate, it is probably a fairly true representation of the form of the lake. It is noted that the portion of the lake west of The Narrows is quite shallow, with a maximum depth of approximately forty feet. The lake tends to get quite rough and choppy during storms, and a danger to navigation definitely exists at these times. The roughness is no doubt due to the great expanse of water which is exposed to wind action, combined with the extreme shallowness of the lake.

In 1940, Professor R. B. Miller of the University of Alberta carried out a study of Lesser Slave Lake for the Alberta Department of Fisheries. Miller was chiefly concerned with the degree of infestation to be found in the fish of commercial variety in the lake. During the course of his investigations, Miller made several hauls for plankton, and the following forms were found: *Daphnia pulex*--not common; *Limnetis* sp.--abundant; *Diapodomus ashlandi*--abundant; *Cyclops viridis*--abundant; *Cyclops bicolor*--abundant.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> R. B. Miller, Lesser Slave Lake Whitefish Investigation, ( an unpublished report to the Alberta Department of Fisheries, 1940 ), p. 1.

The supply of groundwater is quite adequate in the Lesser Slave Lake area. In the parkland soils groundwater is found at a depth of approximately fifteen feet. In some of the areas of grey wooded soil the wells must be much deeper, and the government gives financial assistance up to one hundred dollars in preparing such wells.

A knowledge of the dates of freezing and thawing of the lake is of considerable value. Although the ice cover of the winter does not halt the commercial fishing on the lake, its formation marks the time of shift to a winter fishing technique. In addition, these dates are of climatic significance. The spring break-up of ice occurs about the middle of May. The freezing of the lake in the fall normally takes place between the 10th and the 20th of November, with departures from normal as great as the 1st November to the 7th December.

### Climate

C. E. Koeppé, in his book entitled The Canadian Climate, divides the country up into a number of climatic provinces. The Lesser Slave Lake area is a part of the Continental Lowlands province, as defined by Koeppé. Situated inland from the oceans, the area has a continental climate. This characteristic is the more pronounced because of the formidable nature of the great Cordilleran barrier which keeps out the ameliorating effects of the Pacific.

---

The region is marked by cold winters and warm to hot summers, with considerable extremes of temperature, both diurnal and annual. In the prairie provinces there is a great northward sweep of the summer isotherms, bringing high summer temperatures to areas of high latitude. This tendency is the more pronounced in the northwestern part of the prairie provinces, as evidenced by the fact that the northwestern coniferous forest disappears about latitude 53 north on the eastern boundary of Manitoba, while it extends to latitude 61 north just east of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>8</sup> Winters are generally severe, with low temperatures, but considerable variation takes place from year to year in the nature of the winters. People living in the area talk about the mild winters of certain years, the hard winters of other years. Occasional Chinook winds do bring high temperatures in winter, but Koeppe believes that the reason for this variation in the severity of the winters is to be found in the lack of uniformity from year to year in the paths of cyclones across the country.<sup>9</sup> This appears to be a plausible explanation. Variations in winter cyclone tracks in other parts of Canada bring great variability in the nature of the winters.

The Lesser Slave Lake area has an average yearly

---

<sup>8</sup> W. A. Mackintosh, Prairie Settlement, The Geographical Setting, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> C. E. Koeppe, The Canadian Climate, p. 118.

precipitation of approximately seventeen inches. Although this figure is low, a high percentage of the precipitation falls during the growing season. Equally important is the dependability of the rainfall in this area. During the course of the field studies, many people directly engaged in agriculture were questioned about the rainfall, and without exception all emphasized its dependability. Crops are produced successfully in this area when they are being burned through lack of rain in areas to the south. The reliability of the precipitation is capable of measurement. One method is to take the average variation from the mean annual precipitation, and express it as a percentage of the mean. Employing this method, the Lesser Slave Lake area has an average variability of 19 per cent, as compared to an average variability of 25 per cent at Medicine Hat. Areas of less than 20 per cent variability are not considered to be "problem areas" in the prairie provinces.<sup>10</sup>

Although the area enjoys high temperature in the summer, with an adequate amount of summer rainfall, and a growing season of sufficient length for the type of crops grown, a real climatic hazard is found in the occurrence of early frosts. A number of farmers in the area have experienced heavy losses as a result of frosts in August. In general,

---

<sup>10</sup> Mackintosh, op. cit., p. 174.

however, the climate of the area is a favorable element of the physical environment, in marked contrast to a number of areas located farther to the south in the prairie provinces.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PHYSICAL SETTING IN TERMS OF SOIL, VEGETATION, AND FAUNA

##### Soil

Agriculture is the most important industry in the area of this study. The patches of good soil which are found within the area provide the physical basis for agricultural settlement. A knowledge of the soil, and the vegetation which in turn reflects the quality of the soil, thus becomes basic to an understanding of the settlement of the Lesser Slave Lake area.

In 1935 the Soil Survey Division of the Research Council of Alberta published a report on the soils of the High Prairie area. The work was of a preliminary nature, with the soil types recognized on the basis of relative virgin productivity and their possibilities for immediate and future settlement. The soils were related to the vegetation, a simple method and yet one which gave a good indication of the agricultural worth of the soil. The soil map which accompanies this thesis is based upon several maps published by the Research Council of Alberta.

There are a few areas where the soils still retain many of the characteristics of prairie or parkland soils. These have been mapped as parkland soils, and are the best soils within the area. They invariably have a surface A<sub>1</sub>

horizon which is dark colored, and one in which the organic matter is intimately mixed with the mineral matter. The most extensive area of parkland soil is roughly a circular area located to the immediate west of Lesser Slave Lake, covering an area of approximately two hundred square miles. The alluvial soils of the Driftpile and Swan valleys also belong to this general type. The physical characteristics of the parkland soils have been described by F. A. Wyatt as follows:

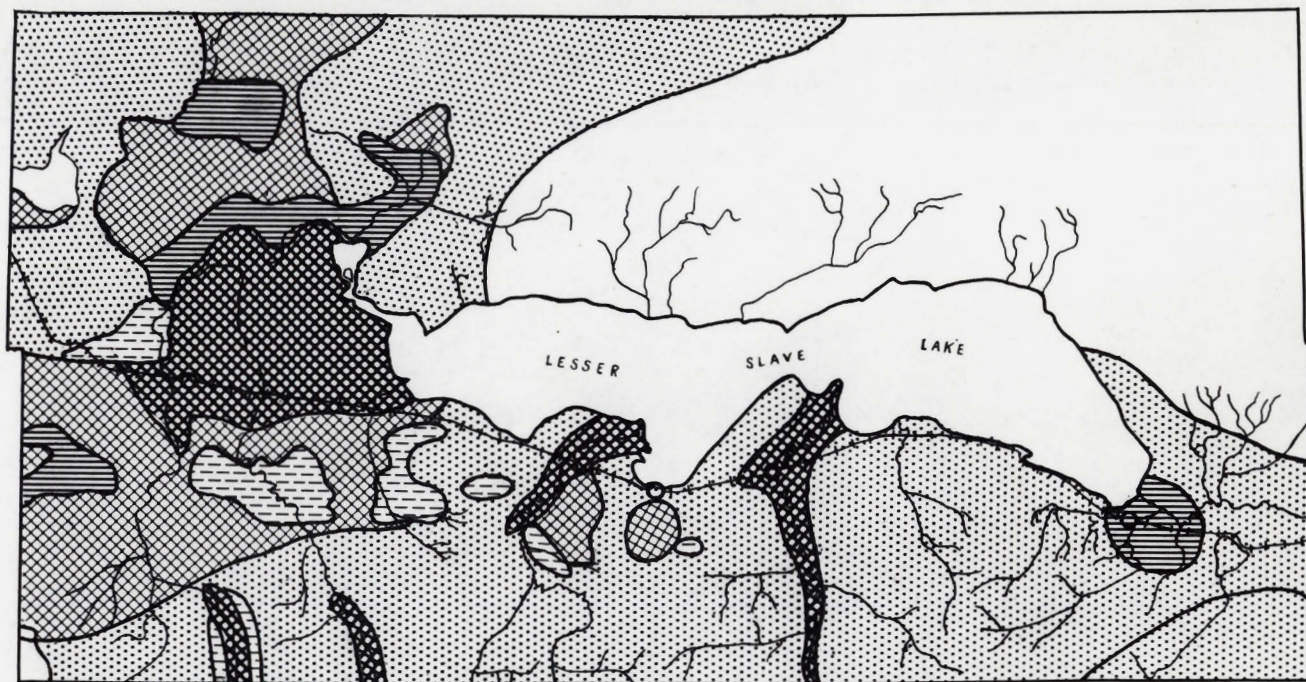
- Horizon A<sub>1</sub> -- black loam to clay loam from 5 to 10 inches thick.
- Horizon A<sub>2</sub> -- light-colored, leached layer, usually 1 to 3 inches thick, silty.
- Horizon B<sub>1</sub> -- darker in color than A<sub>2</sub>, heavy clay loam to clay; columnar and granular; from 6 to 15 inches thick.
- Horizon B<sub>2</sub> --- from 2 to 8 inches thick and encountered at depths from 20 to 30 inches below the surface, usually granular.
- Horizon C -- This is the partly modified parent material, usually heavy textured, sometimes having the appearance of secondary shale. The tree and shrub roots often penetrate this to the depth of several feet.<sup>1</sup>

X The area of study lies within the wooded soils belt of Alberta, and the majority of the soils in the area belong to the wooded groups. Between the true wooded and the true parkland soils are to be found many soils which are transitional. The area of the soil map shown as "third class wooded" may be considered to have a true wooded soil. The typical soil of

---

<sup>1</sup> F. A. Wyatt, Preliminary Soil Survey of the Peace River - High Prairie - Sturgeon Lake Area, p. 15.





SOIL MAP OF LESSER SLAVE LAKE AREA

SOIL TYPE



Parkland



1st Class Wooded



2nd. Class Wooded



3rd Class Wooded



Muskeg



Uns surveyed

0 6 12 miles  
scale

Map based on Preliminary  
Reports of the Alberta  
Soil Survey

G.C.M.



this type has an upper layer, or  $A_0$  horizon, which consists largely of leaf mold or plant debris, and which varies in thickness from one to four inches. Below the  $A_1$  layer is a badly leached  $A_2$  layer. The essential difference between a parkland and a true wooded soil is the nearness to the surface of the leached layer in the case of the wooded soil. When true wooded soils are broken the plowed depth consists almost wholly of the  $A_2$  or badly leached layer, which is low in fertility. The first and second class wooded soils are actually transition phases between the parkland soils on the one hand and the true wooded soils on the other.<sup>2</sup>

First class wooded soils appear to occur adjacent to the parkland soils, but it may be noted that not all areas of parkland soil are bordered by this type. Although inferior to the parkland soils, they are considered to be suitable for agriculture, and are now largely settled. Second class wooded soils occur extensively throughout the western portion of the Lesser Slave Lake area. In areas of good location, close to the highway or the railway, settlement has taken place on this soil, but much of it is still open to settlement. Third class wooded soil is submarginal to present day agricultural techniques, and is without agricultural settlement. Roughly 50 per cent of the Lesser Slave Lake area has

---

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

soil of this type, and the figure should probably be increased to 75 per cent, as the unsurveyed portion in the northeast of the area is considered by the local inhabitants to be of this soil type.

The soil of the muskeg areas remains to be discussed. This soil type is small in terms of area, and is of limited agricultural value. It presents many problems to the settler who attempts to bring it under cultivation. The muskeg consists largely of organic material, underlain by clay or other soil material fine enough to hold the moisture in the basins or flats. Many settlers attempt to bring muskeg land into cultivation by burning off the surface material. Muskeg areas which have been burned are a familiar sight in north central Alberta. Informed sources claim that the burning of peat land should be resorted to in only a small number of cases. In addition to destroying the valuable humus, this practice often leaves the field in an irregular and unworkable condition.

This brief summary of soils is sufficient to reveal the limiting nature of the environment in terms of soil for agricultural settlement. Much of the Lesser Slave Lake area is of no agricultural value to-day, nor is it likely that improvements in agricultural techniques alone shall alter the situation a great deal.

## Vegetation

The forest cover of the area under study represents a source of considerable wealth, and is the basis for a well established lumbering industry. Much of the land to the south of the lake is totally unfit for agriculture. The Alberta Government has wisely closed this land to settlement, and has placed it in the Lesser Slave Forest Reserve. Another large tract of land to the northeast of the lake, including Marten Mountain, also belongs to this reserve.

Many different species of trees are found in the forests of the area. Spruce and poplar are predominant, and may be considered to be the characteristic cover. Birch is also quite widespread. Black spruce and tamarack are found on poorly drained areas, and considerable stands of lodgepole pine occur on sandy and gravelly elevations. Thus, considerable variation exists in the forest cover throughout this whole area, in response to local conditions. Much of the timber in the area has been burned over, and the good stands are usually small in area, and well scattered.

In tracts of merchantable timber the possible yield per acre varies between rather wide limits. On certain areas around Lesser Slave Lake there are stands of spruce running up to thirty thousand board feet per acre. Elsewhere throughout the district, particularly in the stream valleys, stands of ten thousand to twenty-five thousand are fairly common.

Taking the country as a whole, the exploitable forest will yield on the average three thousand to five thousand board feet per acre, including saw material, fuelwood, and other timber of merchantable size.<sup>3</sup>

The land which is open to agricultural settlement in the area generally has a bush cover. Clearing costs are relatively high, as the cover is often dense, but in many cases some return may be gained. A number of settlers in the High Prairie district have sold cut timber for wood pulp, and although the volume of pulpwood which leaves the area is not high, it is interesting to note the existence of such activity.

Large areas of excellent natural grassland occur along the lowland areas bordering Lesser Slave Lake. The most extensive area of grassland is found in the vicinity of Buffalo Bay, at the western end of the lake. Early travellers in this area were impressed by this resource, and believed that it would some day be the basis for large scale raising of cattle. In 1899 a federal government party passed through Grouard on its way to the Peace River district to make treaty with the Indians. Members of this party gave descriptions of the vast hay meadows to be found near Grouard, reporting the area to be capable of supplying winter feed for thousands of cattle.

---

<sup>3</sup> F. H. Kitto, The Peace River Country of Canada,  
p. 54.

At the present time a small quantity of hay is cut from this natural grassland, but frequent flooding in this area has prevented its development. Natural hay meadows also existed throughout much of the lower Swan River valley, and were the initial attraction which brought the first settlers into that area.

### Fauna

The earliest economic activity in the area was that carried on by the fur traders. The Hudson Bay Company had a post at Grouard for a number of years, but to-day the old post is abandoned and in a miserable state of repair, reflecting a change in the economy of the area, and also the failure of the country to stand up to intensive trapping. Large numbers of marten and beaver were taken in this area during the nineteenth century. As late as 1878, as many as twelve thousand beaver skins were taken from the Lesser Slave Lake district by the fur traders.<sup>4</sup> To-day trapping is of small importance in the area.

Big game, such as moose, deer, and bear are still quite plentiful, at least in the areas removed from settlement. Wolves are also present, and probably account for the small number of sheep raised in the area.

---

<sup>4</sup> Geological Survey of Canada, Report of Progress,  
1879-80. p. 90B.

The only element in the fauna of present major economic importance is the fish in Lesser Slave Lake and in the many small streams. Whitefish is the most important commercial variety, although many other varieties of fish, such as pike, ling, grayling, and tullibee are present.

In summary, the physical environment of the Lesser Slave Lake area has been one offering both possibility and limitation. Agriculture is possible in the area, indeed some very fine patches of agricultural land are scattered throughout the district, but it is an agriculture which is limited in its areal distribution, and limited in its choice of crops by a climate which has a number of limiting features. Resources of the area are many, but they are not inexhaustible. For instance, furs at one time were of major economic importance, but intensive trapping tended to exhaust this resource. Perhaps the most important characteristic of the physical environment of this area is its variation from place to place. This variation has given distinctive patterns of distribution to many elements of the cultural landscape.

## CHAPTER IV

### HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE AREA UP TO 1914

The Edmonton, Dunvegan, and British Columbia Railway, now known as the Northern Alberta Railway, was built during the First World War in order to open up the Peace River district. It reached High Prairie in 1914, McLennan in 1915, and Peace River in 1916. The arrival of steel in the Lesser Slave Lake area gave a great impetus to settlement, hence the year 1914 is a significant date in the history, marking the end of one period of settlement, and the beginning of another.

#### Prewhite Era

Anthropologists to-day find many striking similarities in the culture traits of the North American Indians and certain tribes of northeast Asia. If early man entered North America across Bering Strait and moved southward along the eastern side of the Cordillera, it is quite possible that this area was first visited by man at a very early date. Such a discussion is beyond the scope of this study, and with this sole suggestion of the antiquity of man in the area, the emphasis shall be placed upon the more recent history.

Jenness believes that prior to 1750, bands of the Beaver tribe occupied the territory around Lesser Slave

Lake.<sup>1</sup> These Indians were a hunting people, with a material culture based upon the moose, caribou, and beaver. Buffalo were also hunted by the Beaver Indians, but they did not hold the buffalo in as high esteem as the moose, which gave them not only meat, but skin for clothing and the covers for their tents.<sup>2</sup> Jenness further states that the Beaver did not have a real tribal unity, but were divided into a number of independent bands that roamed over separate hunting territories.<sup>3</sup> This no doubt helps to account for the later failure of the Beaver to hold the territory of Lesser Slave Lake against the invading Plains' Cree.

In pre-European times the Cree lived in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and periodically moved out from their home on the edge of the forest to hunt the buffalo on the prairies. There they allied themselves with the Assinaboine, a prairie tribe of Indian. The introduction of the horse and firearms encouraged other bands of Cree to join them, and the number of Plains' Cree increased.

Although the actual date is uncertain, at least sometime prior to the year 1760, bands of Cree Indians moved into the basin of the Mackenzie, and drove out or destroyed the

---

<sup>1</sup> Diamond Jenness, The Indians of Canada. p. 383.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. p. 384.



Indians of the Lesser Slave Lake area. Presumably these were the Beaver. Sir Alexander Mackenzie visited this district between 1789 and 1793, and he wrote in his journal the "Slave" Indians of Lesser Slave Lake, presumably referring to a number of Beaver Indians held in captivity by the Crees, and not referring to the correctly named Slave Indians who occupied the land in the vicinity of Great Slave Lake. Although some controversy exists over the origin of the name "Slave" as applied to the Indians of the Lesser Slave Lake area, the essential point to record is that the area was in the hands of the Cree when the whiteman arrived.

The Cree Indians did not possess a strong culture, and it appears that they borrowed many features of their culture from the other Indians of the plains region. The Cree had a military society to which entrance was gained by doing a valorous deed, and numerous religious societies which sought to increase the success of the hunters. These were culture traits common to many Indians of the plains. The Cree were a hunting people with little agriculture, and it is interesting to note that even to-day, although settled on good agricultural land on the Driftpile and Swan River Reserves, these people do not readily take to tilling the soil.

#### Early White Activity in the Area

The fur traders began to penetrate into this part of

Canada during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Sir Alexander Mackenzie is reported to have been the first white-man in the Lesser Slave Lake area, reaching there before 1793. A complete survey of the Athabaska river appears to have been made in 1799 by David Thompson, one of the greatest of Canadian explorers.<sup>4</sup> Thompson reached Lesser Slave Lake in 1802. The rapidity with which the fur trade expanded into this area is evidenced by the fact that the Northwest Company had built a post at the western end of the lake before 1802. The Hudson's Bay Company also built a post in the same general area. As one writer has caustically stated it, the two companies always planted themselves cheek by jowl so that there should be no lack of provocation.<sup>5</sup> Open conflict between the two companies resulted, here as elsewhere in the lands of fur, and in 1817 the Northwest Company seized the Hudson's Bay post. These posts were combined after the union of the two companies in 1821. A long and quite successful period of fur exploitation followed.

In 1870 the western lands of the Hudson's Bay Company were transferred to Canada. One claim to the land being elim-

---

<sup>4</sup> Geological Survey of Canada, Memoir 108, Mackenzie River Basin. p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> C. Mair and R. Macfarlane, Through the Mackenzie Basin ( a narrative of the Athabaska and Peace River Expedition of 1899 ). p. 50.

inated, the government recognized the legality of the claim by the Indians to their native and traditional soil. Treaties were made with the Indians of these western lands in order to open up various parts of the west to settlement. In 1888 the Canadian government made its first earnest effort to inquire into the resources of the great Mackenzie basin, and believing the area to be rich in economic resources, determined to prepare the way for a treaty with the Indians.<sup>6</sup>

The interest of the government in making a treaty with the Indians was understandable. A number of factors operated to make the other party to the agreement, the Indians, also desirous of treaty. Some were immediate, and others had operated over a long period of time. Contact with the white-man had meant contact with the many diseases to which the Indian had not built up an immunity, with the result that the Indian population was greatly reduced by epidemics. It is reported that an epidemic of small pox in 1838 swept off at least half the population of the prairie tribes. In 1886 Dr. Mackay, officer-in-charge of the post at Lesser Slave, wrote a letter to the Commissioner of the Hudson's Bay Company in which he reported details on an epidemic of measles in that year which had caused the deaths of sixty-four Indians at

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

that post alone. A more immediate reason for seeking treaty was the failure of the fur trade. The fur animals were becoming scarcer and scarcer the result of intensive trapping over a long period, and many of the natives were suffering extreme privation. Many letters to the government were written by missionaries and trading post factors in the northwest, demanding some sort of governmental action on the problem. The following is an extract from a letter written in March, 1890 by the Rev. F. Desmarais of the Lesser Slave mission to the Lieutenant Governor of the North West Territories:

I am in great need of help, that any delay whatever makes my poor heart uneasy for my poor children. Some of these poor little ones arrive every day from different parts of the north. They are starving. I must find means to feed them.<sup>7</sup>

In June of the same year the Cree Indians of the Lesser Slave Lake area applied to the government for a treaty.

Although many of the Indian treaties were made in order to open the land for settlement, it appears as though the discovery of gold in the Klondike was a more immediate motive to the government for the writing of a treaty with the Indians of the Lesser Slave Lake and Peace River districts. It was decided to hold the first conference in 1899 with the Indians of Lesser Slave Lake. The meeting was held at the settlement

---

<sup>7</sup> Letter of Rev. F. Desmarais to the Hon. J. Royal, 7 March, 1890, on file at Indian Affairs Branch, Ottawa, Canada.

of Lesser Slave, which is present day Grouard. Kinooshayoo and Moostoos, a worthy pair of Cree brothers, were the spokesmen for the Indians, and impressed the Hon. David Laird, Treaty Commissioner, by their straightforward manner and ability to enter into discussion. The treaty was signed on the 21st. of June, 1899, and the Indians surrendered their land on the following terms:

- (1) Lands were to be reserved for the use of the Indians to the extent of 150 acres for each Indian.
- (2) Each Chief was to receive a present of \$32, each Head-Man \$22, and each Indian \$12 at the time of treaty.
- (3) Each Chief was to receive an annuity of \$25, each Head-Man \$15, and each Indian \$5.
- (4) Each Chief was to receive a medal and a flag, and each Chief and Head-Man a suit of clothes every third year.
- (5) School teachers were to be provided for the Indians, and implements, cattle, ammunition and twine were to be supplied.

In July 1950, the writer had the opportunity of attending an Indian meeting held on the Driftpile Indian Reserve. The Indian Agent was outlining at this meeting the principal points in a new Indian Act that was before parliament at that time. The Indians showed great interest in the legislation, and in

addition, a remarkable ability to see the future significance of any changes in the Indian Act. The terms of the treaty signed in 1899 were known by all the members of the band, and were injected into the meeting at every turn.

The task of writing a treaty with the Cree brought a number of civil servants into the area. It is possible to reconstruct conditions of life in the Lesser Slave Lake area in the closing years of the last century from a number of the accounts written by these men. It appears that many members of the government party were disappointed to find the Indians quite so civilized. Expecting to find paint and feathers, the scalp-lock, the breech-cloth, and the buffalo robe, instead they met a body of respectable-looking men and women, well dressed and independent in their feelings.

The settlement of Lesser Slave was described in some detail. The Indians arrived in great numbers to attend the treaty conference. It was a scene of much activity, the settlement virtually overflowing with buggies, buckboards, and saddles. The women were brightly clad, in a modern fashion according to most accounts. "A number of the girls were extravagantly dressed, the love of finery being the ruling trait here as elsewhere."<sup>8</sup> It is not clear whether the author meant that the love of finery is common to all members of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Mair and Macfarlane, op. cit., p. 38.

femin<sup>n</sup> sex, or just to those of the Indian race. But in defence of the squaws, one must add that no doubt they were dressed for the occasion.

It is interesting to note that scenes of privation were not recorded. On the contrary, a number of the members of the treaty-making body wondered how the fur trade could have supported such a large number of people in such style. But it must have done so, for there was as yet little or no farming among the old "Lakers". Perhaps one should not place absolute faith in such accounts of prosperity. The Indians would not have increased their bargaining power by appearing destitute, and they probably realized the fact. At the same time, the representatives of the government would not have wished to describe the Indians in too dismal terms, as it would have reflected adversely upon the government. All things considered, the descriptions given by the missionaries and traders must be considered as being closer to the truth..

### The Klondike Gold Rush

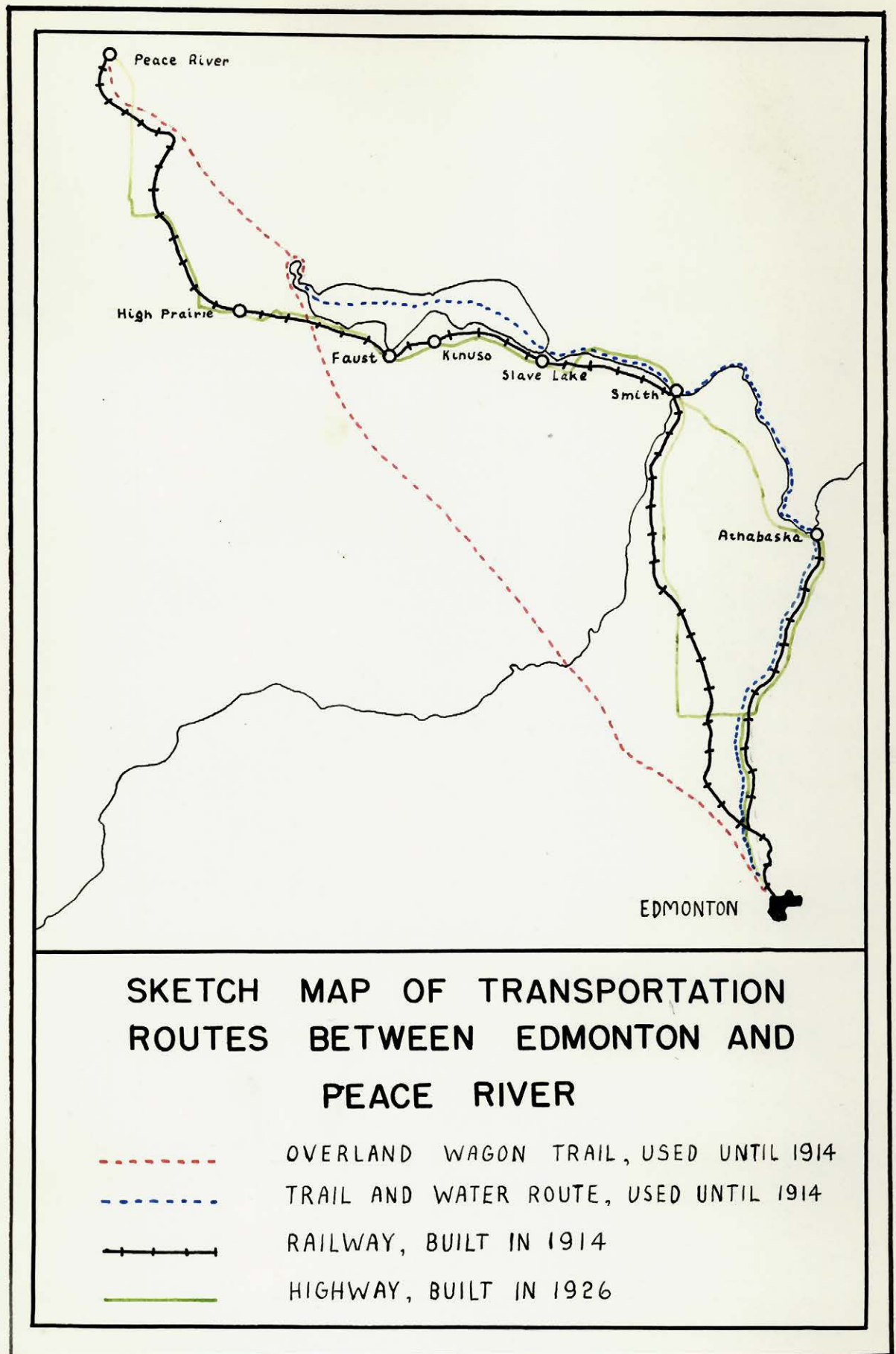
The discovery of gold in the Yukon at the close of the last century was an important event in the historical geography of the Lesser Slave Lake area. The people who took part in the Klondike gold rush made their way north along a number of different routes. One such route was north from Edmonton, through the Lesser Slave Lake country, into the

Peace River district, and beyond into the Yukon. A large number of the prospectors followed this route in the years following 1898, and the Klondike gold rush must be recognized as an important factor in the early development of the area of this study. Here is the first example of an oft-recurring theme in the local history of settlement. The development of areas farther to the north, first the Klondike, then the Peace River district, and now Alaska, all have had an effect upon the development of the Lesser Slave Lake area.

The Klondikers actually followed two routes north from Edmonton. The most popular of the two was north to Athabaska Landing by road, following the valley of the Tawatinaw River, as does the highway to-day. Tawatinaw means, " a passage between the hills ", and is most descriptive of the approaches to Athabaska Landing. From there, it was customary to travel by York boat up the Athabaska and Lesser Slave Rivers to the lake. A steamboat of the sidewheel variety, called the " Northland Sun ", was operating on the lake at this time, and it carried men and freight to Grouard at the western end of the lake. The alternative route was along a direct trail from Edmonton over the Swan Hills to Grouard. The two trails joined at Grouard, from where the route was again overland to the Peace River and points beyond.

The overland route was across the Swan Hills, and was used mostly in winter. Travel was not easy along it. A man





would probably have welcomed as much encouragement as possible while struggling slowly over such rough country. But encouragement was not always found. It is reported that a sign board erected along the trail at the summit of the Swan Hills gave the following warning to travelers: "Due north, Dawson City, starvation, and death; due south, home sweet home, and a warm bed."<sup>9</sup>

The trail from Edmonton to Athabaska Landing also presented a number of difficulties. There was no actual road, but only a natural track through the bush. A few short but indispensable bridges had been erected, but beyond this necessary improvement, little work had been done along it. The trail has been described as one mud-hole after another, each one apparently deeper than the former. There were stopping-places at intervals of about fifteen miles, but they provided neither hay ~~nor oats~~ for the horses, nor even a decent meal for human beings, and as they were too filthy to sleep in, one wonders what purpose they were expected to serve.<sup>10</sup> But such hardship would matter little to people seeking fortunes in gold. And strangely enough, despite the conditions of the trail, the rates for freight from Edmonton to Athabaska Landing were not high, varying between a dollar and a dollar

---

<sup>9</sup> News item in the Edmonton Bulletin, 13 March, 1899.

<sup>10</sup> David T. Hanbury, Sport and Travel in the North-land of Canada. p. 21.

and a half per hundredweight.<sup>11</sup>

The journey from Athabaska Landing to the lake by York boat was equally slow and arduous. To-day the trip is made by motor vehicle over a good highway in a matter of a few hours. But back in Klondike days the boat trip required from eight to fifteen days. Many travelers were quite vocal in their complaints against such poor facilities for travel. The Reverend Erastus J. Lawrence, a missionary who travelled over this route in 1887, decided that it warranted a letter to the Senate Chamber. He wrote to the Honorable G. G. Stevens as follows:

" I think the government owes it to us to open a good trail up the Athabaska and Lesser Slave Rivers, and around Lesser Slave Lake. It has taken seven full days to travel the fifty-five miles from Athabaska Landing to the junction of the Lesser Slave River and the Athabaska River present day Smith . Another six days were taken to ascend the Lesser Slave River to the Lake. This section will in time, I think, be one of the finest stock regions in the northwest. Pasturage, hay, and an abundance of water are to be found throughout the entire region."<sup>12</sup>

The opinion of the Reverend Lawrence on the possible future of this part of the country was not shared by all his fellow travelers, but his demands for a good road were echoed again and again by people who made the trip in the years that followed.

The 1900 settlement of Lesser Slave became known as

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of Rev. E. J. Lawrence to the Hon. G.G. Stevens of the Senate Chamber, 13 December, 1887, on file at Indian Affairs Branch, Ottawa, Canada.

Grouard, after a Roman Catholic bishop who built a mission there. Little written material exists on the conditions of life in Grouard at this time, and what does exist is somewhat contradictory. In January, 1899, a correspondent for the Edmonton Bulletin wrote an article for his paper in which he gave a figure of one thousand for the resident population of Grouard, or Lesser Slave, as it was called at that time.<sup>13</sup> On the 7th of August of the same year, another article in the Edmonton Bulletin gave a figure of three hundred for the population.<sup>14</sup> No doubt the population changed from day to day in this thriving community, and both figures might well have been correct, but it is clear that one must be hesitant about reaching too many definite conclusions on such a basic feature of the settlement. But there appears to be no controversy on the nature of the citizens. The population is reported to have been composed of Indians, half-breeds, French, and a conglomerate mixture of faint-hearted ( or tenderfeet ) Klondikers, who would go no further because the trails were not macadamized.<sup>15</sup>

Mr. Vicotor Maurice, a former mayor of High Prairie, and a pioneer in Grouard, was able to give a number of interesting facts about the early days of settlement in the latter

---

<sup>13</sup> News item in the Edmonton Bulletin, 26 January, 1899.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 7 August, 1899.

<sup>15</sup> Loc. cit.

place. In his opinion, Grouard was built by the Klondikers. Situated at the western end of the lake, at the terminus of the water route, it became an outfitting center for the prospecting parties setting out on the overland route to the Peace River and the Yukon. In 1900 Grouard had two saw mills, a blacksmith shop, a mission, and a number of trading posts. Probably a number of other small businesses had been established there by this time. Trading in fur appears to have been slow in 1900, explained by some on the grounds that the Indians still had treaty money, and would not trap the animals. Others claim that the Indians were without funds within four days of receiving treaty. The latter seems more likely. But if activity was low in furs, it was not so in agriculture. A large resident population in Grouard provided a ready market for agricultural products grown locally. Many potatoes were grown in the area at this time, and enough grain to warrant the building of a grist mill at Grouard. Over two hundred thousand pounds of whitefish were canned for winter consumption in 1900, and it appears that whitefish and potatoes constituted the staple diet.

#### The Opening Up of the Peace River District

Many Klondikers passed through the Peace River country on their trek to the Yukon gold fields. Settlement in the Peace as well as in the Lesser Slave Lake area was stimulated

by the focus of world attention occasioned by the discovery of gold, and the arrival of many fortune-seeking people. No doubt a number of Klondikers, either before or after failure in the gold fields, settled in this frontier farming area. A figure of ten thousand acres is given as the occupied acreage of the valley bottom at Peace River Crossing in 1904.<sup>16</sup> Although the greatest amount of settlement has taken place in this area since the arrival of the railroad in 1916, the fame of this valley was spreading during the opening decade of the twentieth century, and land-hungry people began to move. These people followed the same route north from Edmonton as had the Klondikers before them, and history began to repeat itself in the area around Lesser Slave Lake. Once again people were passing through the area on their way to a more northern settlement. These people required goods and services at this midway point on their journey, and of even greater importance, a number of them decided to homestead in the Lesser Slave Lake area.

Grouard began to boom after 1900. The Klondikers may have built Grouard, but it remained to the settlers bound for the Peace River district to bring the period its greatest development. In 1908 Mr. Victor Maurice operated a steamboat on the lake, in addition to a general store and a blacksmith shop at Grouard. According to Maurice, the town at this time

---

<sup>16</sup> W. A. Mackintosh, Prairie Settlement, The Geographical Setting. p. 169.

had twenty-two stores and businesses of all kinds, a police center, a newspaper office, and three churches. The Roman Catholic Mission at Grouard had a fine church, a convent, and a large school. The Hudson's Bay Company post at Grouard was a headquarters for many other smaller posts in the northwest.

It was during these years that agriculture really began to show promise of later emergence as an important industry in the Lesser Slave Lake area. Pioneers began to "squ" "squat" on land in the vicinity of Grouard. When the area was surveyed, the government granted "squatter" rights to these people, and departed from the regular Dominion land system of survey in the township and range pattern in order to conform as closely as possible to the improvements made by the people. Thus, in place of the regular townships, we find "settlements", namely, Lesser Slave Settlement with forty-one lots, Big Prairie Settlement with ~~thirty-five~~ lots, and the Heart River and Salt Prairie Settlement with forty lots. These were the areas of earliest agricultural settlement, and reflect the advantage of a location close to Grouard. The fine agricultural land near High Prairie was not being settled to any extent in these early years of the present century, as it was located too far away from the center of activity in Grouard.

The conditions of travel began to improve about this





Fig. 1. Salt Prairie Settlement,  
an area of gently rolling topo-  
graphy.



Fig. 2. Natural hay meadows of  
Buffalo Bay.



time. By 1911 the Alberta Government had already spent a considerable amount of money on road building and improvement. A road had been built from Athabaska Landing to Grouard, following the Athabaska and Lesser Slave Rivers, and the south shore of the lake. This road was excellent for winter travel, but it was not suitable for heavy hauling in the summer. For this reason, settlers were advised to come into the area during the summer carrying light loads, to erect buildings and put up hay for the winter, then to bring in their heavy loads during the winter.<sup>17</sup> Similar improvements had been made on the road from Edmonton to Athabaska Landing. Thus, the present pattern of roads began to emerge.

Steamboat transportation flourished during the period from the Klondike gold rush in 1898 to the building of the railway in 1914. To-day no vestiges remain of this early and colorful method of transportation. In 1911 there were five vessels operating in the carrying trade from Athabaska Landing to Grouard. The traffic is reported to have been very heavy, and the Northern Transportation Company which operated these steamboats had difficulty meeting the demands for service. The company provided comfortable accommodation for its passengers. The "North-Land Call", a new steamboat placed in

---

<sup>17</sup> News item in the Edmonton Bulletin, 17 June, 1911.

service in 1911, was modern in every respect, having electricity, staterooms, cabin service, and a dining salon.<sup>18</sup>

At about this time it became apparent that a railroad was going to be built from Edmonton north to the Peace River district. Enthusiasm was high in Grouard, as it was beleived that the railway would pass through the town, ushering in an era of even greater prosperity. Lots were surveyed far back from the limits of the town, and were sold to speculative buyers throughout the world. One choice lot was sold to a San Francisco millionaire for a reported purchase price of thirty thousand dollars. In a conversation with Mr. Dompnier of the office of Municipal Affairs in High Prairie, it was learned that a number of these lots in Grouard were sold to purchasers in such distant places as India. Some of these absentee owners still hold title to the land, but their enthusiasm must be low after the passage of forty years and still no return on their investment.

The Edmonton, Dunvegan, and British Columbia Railway reached the Lesser Slave Lake area in 1914. The engineers engaged in the building of the railway decided the route to be followed on the basis of ease of construction and maintenance. It failed to pass through Grouard, and the bubble of

---

<sup>18</sup> News item in the Edmonton Bulletin, 15 January, 1911.



Fig. 3. Several abandoned  
buildings in the ghost town  
of Grouard.



Fig. 4. Present day Grouard,  
with Indian Co-operative in the  
distant background.

prosperity which had surrounded that community broke. The decline of Grouard took place virtually over night. Many buildings were removed immediately from their foundations, and placed on foundations in the new community of High Prairie. The population of Grouard fell rapidly, and soon only a few Indians and half-breeds were left in this truly ghost town.

The period of settlement which ended with the building of the railroad in 1914 had accomplished little more than the rapid fall of Grouard would suggest. The agricultural possibilities of the Lesser Slave Lake area had been recognized, but only a small number of settlers had taken up land for farming purposes. But although the railroad was built in order to open up the Peace River district, it was nevertheless realized that it would also bring a measure of prosperity to this region. The opinion expressed by a Dominion land surveyor in 1909 was held by many, and it is worth repeating. After working in the district west of the lake, this man wrote to the Surveyor General of Canada as follows. "Only the facilities of a railway are wanting to make this as fine a tract of farming land as there is in the West."<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> News item in the Edmonton Bulletin, 17 June, 1911.

## CHAPTER V

### THE HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT SINCE 1914

The building of the railroad in 1914 reduced Grouard to the state of an abandoned town, but at the same time it brought the possibility of sound economic development to much of the Lesser Slave Lake area. It has made no essential difference to the land to the north of the lake, which has always been without settlement. But along the south shore of the lake, from Sawridge ( the present day village of Slave Lake ) in the east to High Prairie in the west, it has had a tremendous influence. Before the arrival of the railway, Grouard was the center of activity in the Lesser Slave Lake area, serving as it did as a way station between Edmonton and the Peace River district. Agricultural settlement was limited to the areas close to Grouard, and to the delta land of the Swan River. The present day communities of High Prairie, Faust, Canyon Creek, and Widewater did not exist before 1914. Sawridge had been the site of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police post since Klondike time, but prior to the coming of the railway it had a very small population, and was of little significance as a settlement.

The railway preceded settlement in many parts of the Canadian West, and to a very high degree that is also true in

the area under study. One might well ask why this had to be. The fifteen years of settlement prior to the coming of the railway had produced much color, but little of a lasting nature in the way of settlement. The resources of the region had been the same before and after the coming of steel, but the improved transportation facilities permitted fuller exploitation of them.

Prior to the building of the railway, the journey from Edmonton had required weeks of toil and hardship. With the railway, the trip could be made in one day, while the traveler enjoyed all the comforts and conveniences of modern railway service. It is no doubt true that the determined pioneers did not need the luxury of first class rail travel, but on the other hand the Lesser Slave Lake area needed settlers in reasonably large numbers, and the railway was able to carry all who wished to settle in the area.

The primary industries of the Lesser Slave Lake area, agriculture, lumbering, and fishing, required outside markets before a significant degree of development could take place. In the early days the farmers in the Swan River valley used to sell their agricultural produce in Grouard, and this constituted their cash income, if indeed it was paid for in cash. The railway made it possible for the agriculture in the whole area to produce for what was virtually a world market. The

same general comments hold true for lumbering, although in the case of this industry it had a pre-railway development of even lesser significance than that of agriculture. Faust, an important lumbering center at the present time, did not even exist prior to the railway. It is reported that a small amount of fish was shipped out from the Lesser Slave Lake area to Edmonton annually even before the railway was built. At this time it was a winter fishing industry, with the catch being frozen and hauled to Edmonton by horse-drawn sleighs.<sup>1</sup> But the real development of the fishing industry had to await the arrival of the railroad.

Although the whole area to the south and west of the lake developed rapidly after the coming of the railway, the most spectacular change occurred in the area of parkland soil situated to the west of the lake. Despite the fact that the agricultural possibilities of this locale had long been realized by many people, settlement of it had not taken place for lack of transport facilities. The pioneers of High Prairie credit the first breaking of the sod in the area to one Frank Mearon, from Aylmer, Quebec. This man worked for several years in Grouard as a blacksmith, then in 1904 he took up a homestead near the present day High Prairie.

---

<sup>1</sup> F. H. Kitto, The Peace River Country of Canada, p. 59.

Although he is reported to have farmed there with moderate success, few settlers followed his example of taking land so far from the old transportation route through Grouard. But when the railroad was built directly across the High Prairie lowland, settlers began to come into the area in great numbers. As the land had been surveyed in 1909, the government immediately opened it to settlement, and several townships were very quickly taken up. The hamlet of High Prairie sprang into existence near the point where the railway crossed the West Prairie River. From a population figure of less than twenty-five in 1913, the four townships in the immediate vicinity of High Prairie had a population in 1921 of over five hundred people.

Improvements in road transportation did not keep pace with the growing development of the Lesser Slave Lake area, Prior to 1926, the road from Athabaska Landing to High Prairie was still best described as a trail. It was unfit for motor vehicles, and traffic along it consisted chiefly of horse-drawn vehicles, Between the years 1926 and 1930 however, improvements began to be effected in the road system, and at the end of this short period a fairly good road existed between Edmonton and High Prairie. The old section of road from Athabaska Landing to Mirror Landing (present day Smith ), which in the early days had kept to the north side of the Athabaska River, was abandoned in favour of a new road



well to the south of the river. From Mirror Landing to the east end of Lesser Slave Lake, the old trail along the north bank of the Lesser Slave River was kept and put into fairly serviceable condition. The old trail along the south shore of the lake was also retained, and brought up to the standard of a good road. It is interesting to note that many of the original trails in this area have thus become the highways of to-day.

The most recent improvements in the roads have resulted from the pressures of war. During the Second World War, the importance of the route along Lesser Slave Lake as a feeder-line to the Alaska highway was realized, and a number of improvements resulted. The heavy nature and volume of traffic in the years of war required a good surface, and the road was much improved by a gravel surface. But lest one attach too much significance to these improvements, it is perhaps necessary to point out that heavy summer rains can make the road difficult of passage even to-day, although travel is always possible.

In 1943 a daily train service to and from Edmonton was started, and since 1947 an excellent service has been provided by bus, both to Edmonton and to Peace River. The improvements in rail and road transportation are very important features in the development of this area since 1914,

reflecting the growing need of the area for outside contacts, and its growing prosperity.

Since 1914 the Lesser Slave Lake area has lost many of the features of the frontier. The population has increased, and a more complex regional economy has developed. These features are to be given consideration in later chapters. But at this point it is desirable to outline in brief the growth of a number of the present day settlements.

The village of Slave Lake is located at the eastern end of the lake, within a pocket of soil of agricultural value. No farming was carried on here at all in the early days of settlement, according to one pioneer of this district, and even to-day there are only about thirty farms in the vicinity of the village. The railroad brought a small amount of prosperity to Slave Lake, but the real development came with the road improvements of the late twenties. Slave Lake is located far enough from Edmonton that most of the drivers of motor vehicles bound in either direction decide to stop there for rest and a tank of gasoline. A study was made in the summer of 1950 on the number of cars which stopped at Slave Lake, and the number represented a large percentage of the total traffic. Although it is almost all through traffic in the broad sense of the term, the services provided by Slave Lake to the large number of motor vehicles and their occupants

account for much of the local activity.

Canyon Creek and Widewater are small communities located along the south shore of the lake, between Slave Lake and Kinuso. Although Canyon Creek came into being early, with the establishment of a saw mill there in 1916, little real development in either of these places took place until after the building of the road in 1926. Kinuso came into being with the railroad, and has enjoyed a steady growth since its beginning. The local history of Faust on Giroux Bay is of considerable interest, showing as it does the influence of the railway and the later improvement in the road transportation. Faust dates from the arrival of the railway in 1914. The first settler was a man named Adams, who very early in the life of Faust attempted to establish a box factory there. The business failed, Adams moved away, but other people came into the community, and it began to develop. In 1916 a fish plant was established in Faust, and it is still operating to-day, a well established and successful industry. Lumbering also had an early start in Faust, with a lumber mill being established there in the early twenties. The road in 1926 brought further development, particularly in the field of services to be offered to a travelling public. This small community now has a modern first class hotel, built to meet the demand for accommodation made by the many travelers using

this route.

Perhaps the significance of the transportation facilities in promoting settlement and development is best realized when viewed in a negative manner. Joussard is located approximately twelve miles from Grouard, on the south shore of the lake. It is an old settlement, which started early in the present century when the Roman Catholic Church established a mission and a residential school for the Indians there. Located as it is off the main road and not served by the railway, Joussard has had a very slow growth. The quietness of Joussard is in marked contrast to the bustle and activity of all the other settlements located along the south shore of the lake. But there is a virtue to the location of Joussard. It is a most pleasant little community, and a number of summer cottages are located there, in appreciation of its solitude.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION

The prairie provinces of Canada are noted for the large number of ethnic groups which compose the population. This is in marked contrast to the eastern provinces where the Anglo-Saxon and the French elements are predominant. A study of the ethnic origin of the population, the distribution of the various ethnic groups throughout the area wherever the concentration is sufficiently great to recognize a pattern, and the most important of their racial characteristics which find expression in their life in the Lesser Slave Lake area, these are to be the points of interest in this chapter.

#### Ethnic Groups Involved in Settlement

The population of the Lesser Slave Lake area shows the mixture of races characteristic of the prairie provinces. Anglo-Saxon, East Europeans ( Poles and Ukrainians ), Germans, French, Scandinavians, Indians, and half-breeds are the ethnic groups most common to this area.

Robert England, in his book entitled, The Colonization of Western Canada, recognizes three periods in the settlement of the prairie provinces. The first period, from 1870 to 1896, took place before the Lesser Slave Lake area was being

actively settled by people seeking to establish farms. But no doubt the area of this study received many settlers during the other two periods described by England, namely, the second period from 1896 to 1914, and the third period from 1914 to 1930. The proper method to have adopted in a study of the ethnic groups of this area would have been in terms of direct interviews with a sufficient number of people of each group to permit generalities to be drawn concerning the time of their arrival in the area, their reasons for coming, and so forth. But such a method would have involved more time than was available, and a dependence upon the literature is forced upon the author. However, this is valid to a degree. A number of the features of settlement described by England find expression in the Lesser Slave Lake area.

During the first decade of the present century Canada sought settlers for her western lands. Cheap agricultural land was no longer available in the United States, and it was apparent that governmental activity along promotional lines would bring settlers. "The government through offices mainly in the western states took advantage of every method known to salesmen..... trips of rural editors, conducted tours of groups of landseekers, displays of farm produce, and literature."<sup>1</sup> A number of the settlers who came into the prairies

---

<sup>1</sup> R. England, The Colonization of Western Canada. p. 68.

from the United States at this time settled in the province of Alberta, in fact, it is said that Alberta now has more citizens of American birth than any other province in Canada.

The agricultural settlement in the valley land of the Swan River was started by a group of families from North Dakota. Mr. F. Hill, who is a successful farmer in the Swan River valley to-day, was a member of the original party which left North Dakota in 1907, bound for the Peace River country, which, according to Mr. Hill, was being promoted at that time as a "Garden of Eden" by the Canadian Government. These people came in wagons drawn by horses and oxen. They took the north shore of the lake on their planned journey to the Peace, and eventually they reached Grouard. There they were told by the Indians about a very fine valley to the south of the lake. The party had travelled a long distance, the women and children had found the trip difficult, and the members of the group decided to remain in the Swan River valley for at least the coming winter, and possibly to move on to the Peace River district in the spring of the following year. In the valley they found hay meadows, thick grass vegetation, and a soil both fertile and easily worked. They decided to stay, and more people from North Dakota joined them in the following years. American settlers formed thus the core about which grew the successful agricultural settlement of the Swan

River valley.

The movement of American settlers into the Canadian prairie provinces was of considerable magnitude during the first decade of the twentieth century. Statistics given by England show that in 1901 over five thousand Americans semi-grated into Western Canada, in 1903 over thirteen thousand, and in 1904 the number had increased to over forty thousand,<sup>2</sup> It is possible that a number of these eventually settled in parts of the Lesser Slave Lake area, but the Swan River valley is the only place where one finds a concentration of settlers of American birth.

The rich agricultural land to the west of the lake, centering upon High Prairie, experienced its initial rush of settlers after the coming of the railway in 1914. This was a period in the colonization of Western Canada when the war had interrupted the arrival of immigrants into Canada from overseas. No doubt this accounts for the fact that settlers of Anglo-Saxon origin were the earliest ones to arrive in this particular area.

Another group which arrived in the area at an early date was the French. The Roman Catholic Church had been active here since a very early time in the history of settlement.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 68.



A number of French settlers were attracted to the area around St. Bruno's Mission, and this fact is reflected in the concentration of people of French origin in present day Joussard. The arrival of settlers of French origin was not concentrated in any one period, but continued until very recent years, and may still be going on. An illustration of this fact is possible. During the course of the field study, a visit was made to the Heart River Settlement, near Grouard. The most successful farmer in this settlement has a farm of over one thousand acres. This man arrived in Grouard in 1934, and worked for the next two years as a chauffeur to the Roman Catholic priests at the Grouard mission. He then began to farm on mission land as a sharecropper, and in the next fourteen years he succeeded in purchasing a farm of the present size. Perhaps it is not out of place to add that his native "habitant" ability to farm was not the only characteristic that he brought from Quebec. Since 1936 his family has grown by the addition of twelve healthy children.

Many Ukrainians and Poles have settled in the Lesser Slave Lake area, particularly in the vicinity of High Prairie. The local people make no distinction between these two nationalities. Hence both Ukrainians and Poles shall be grouped for purposes of this study under the general heading of peoples of East European origin. Although this fact has not been

verified in the field, it is beleived that these settlers of East European origin did not arrive in the area until after the First World War, probably first coming in during the twenties, and possibly continuing during the next several decades. These people were late arrivals in the High Prairie district, and have taken up lands adjacent to the core area of parkland soil.

A number of other settlers of North European origin, Germans and Scandinavians in particular, have settled in the area of study. These people are not as numerous as the other groups, and the author is able to offer little information as to the time of their arrival in the area. A small settlement consisting almost exclusively of people of Scandinavian origin is located between High Prairie and Grouard. One correspondent ~~believed~~ that these people settled in there after the First World War, but this opinion has not been verified.

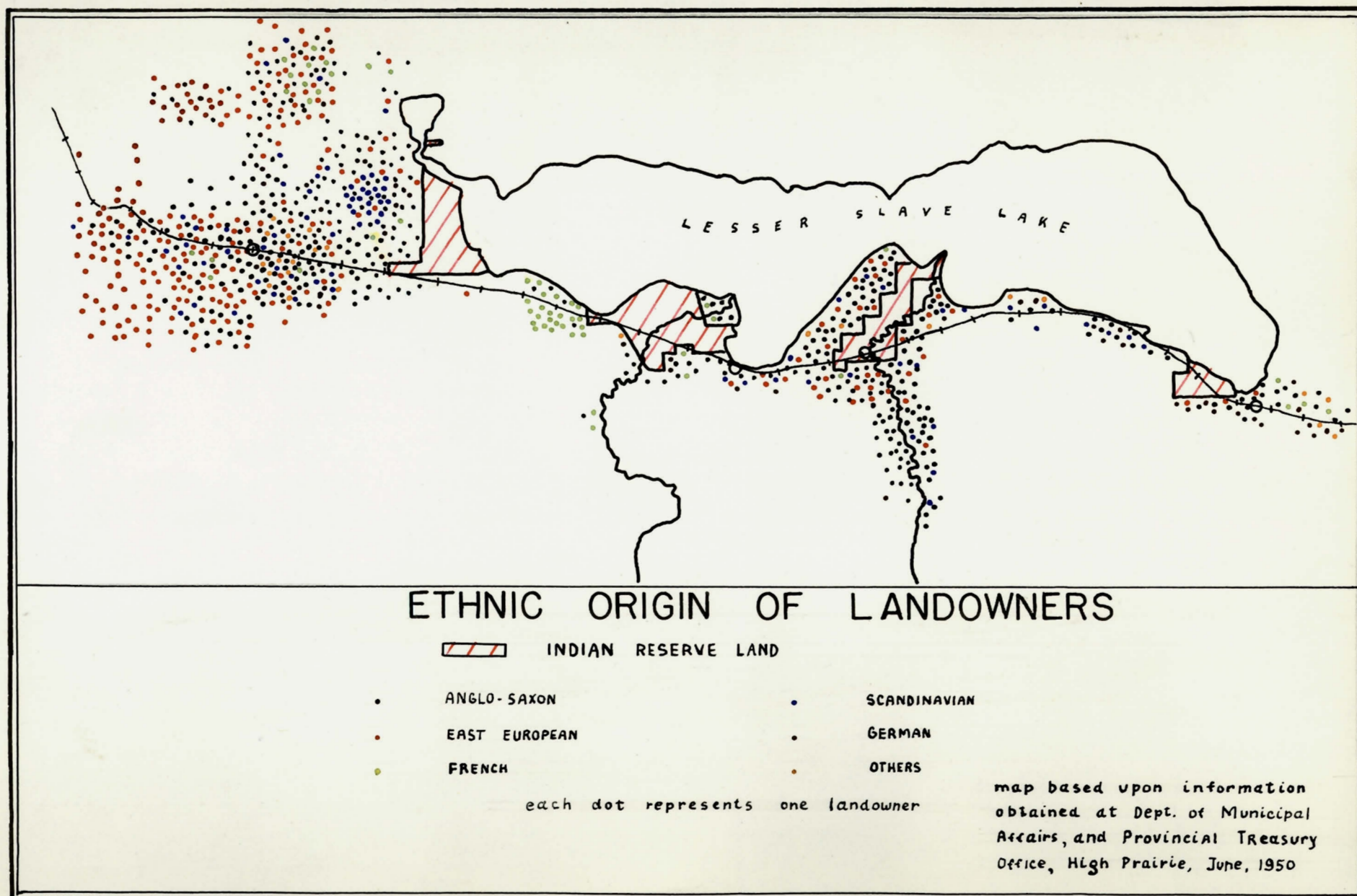
The original owners of the land, the Indians, are located on the numerous reserves along the south shore of the lake. The number of Indians on these reserves is not large, but the native population is considerable when the half-breeds are taken into consideration.

#### ~~Study of Individual Ethnic Types~~ T

A number of people holding administrative positions in

the Lesser Slave Lake area were willing to assist in the identification of ethnic types, thus permitting this aspect of the population to be treated in some detail. Mr. Dompnier, of the High Prairie office of the Alberta Department of Municipal Affairs, was particularly helpful, making available to the writer up-to-date information on the sections of land in private hands, and identifying the ethnic origin of each landowner. Perhaps it is proper at this point to evaluate the authenticity of this information. In at least 90 per cent of the cases, Dompnier was absolutely certain about the reliability of his statements concerning ethnic origin. In the remaining 10 per cent, he made what should be considered well-informed guesses. Mr. Charles Scott, Fishery Inspector of Lesser Slave Lake, gave some information on the ethnic origin of the commercial fishermen of the area, all of whom he knew personally. Thus, it appears that few reservations need be placed on the information presented on this topic.

A map has been prepared showing the ethnic origin of the landowners. Although there are a considerable number of people resident in the area who are not landowners, detailed information was not available on them. Despite the missing element of the population, it is believed that the map does show the general distribution of ethnic types throughout the area of study, and if non-landowners were included, probably few differences in pattern would result. One difference,



G.C.M.

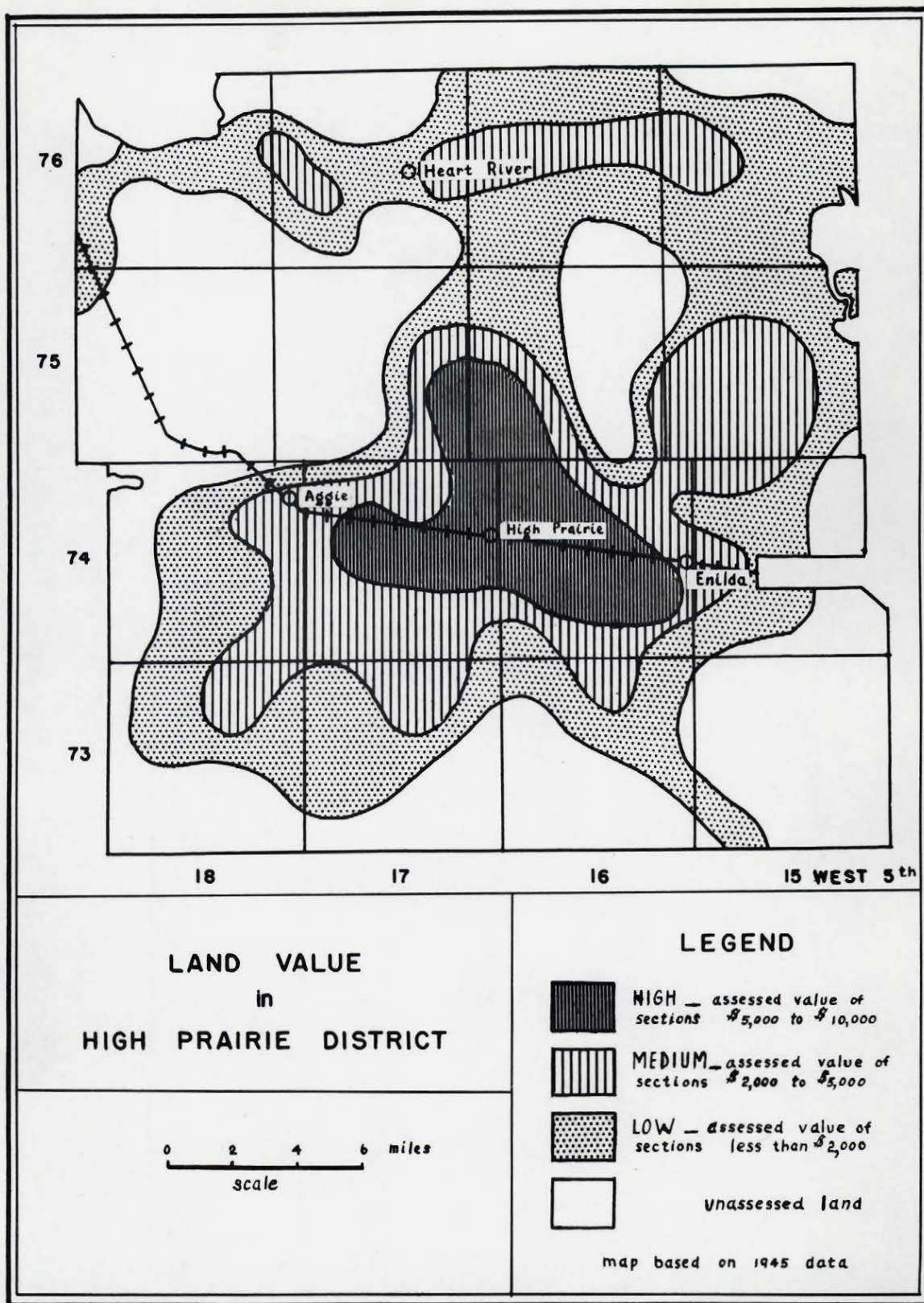
however, is certain; a large number of half-breeds and non-treaty Indians living in and around Faust and Kinuso are not owners of land, but they are permanent members of the population of these places, and must be taken into account.

People of Anglo-Saxon origin account for approximately 50 per cent of the population of the Lesser Slave Lake area, and are distributed widely throughout it. Most of the hotels, stores, service stations, garages, and similar businesses are owned and operated by these people. In particular is this true of the larger units of industry, such as the planing mills and fish plants. In addition, many of the successful farms in the area are in the hands of members of this group.

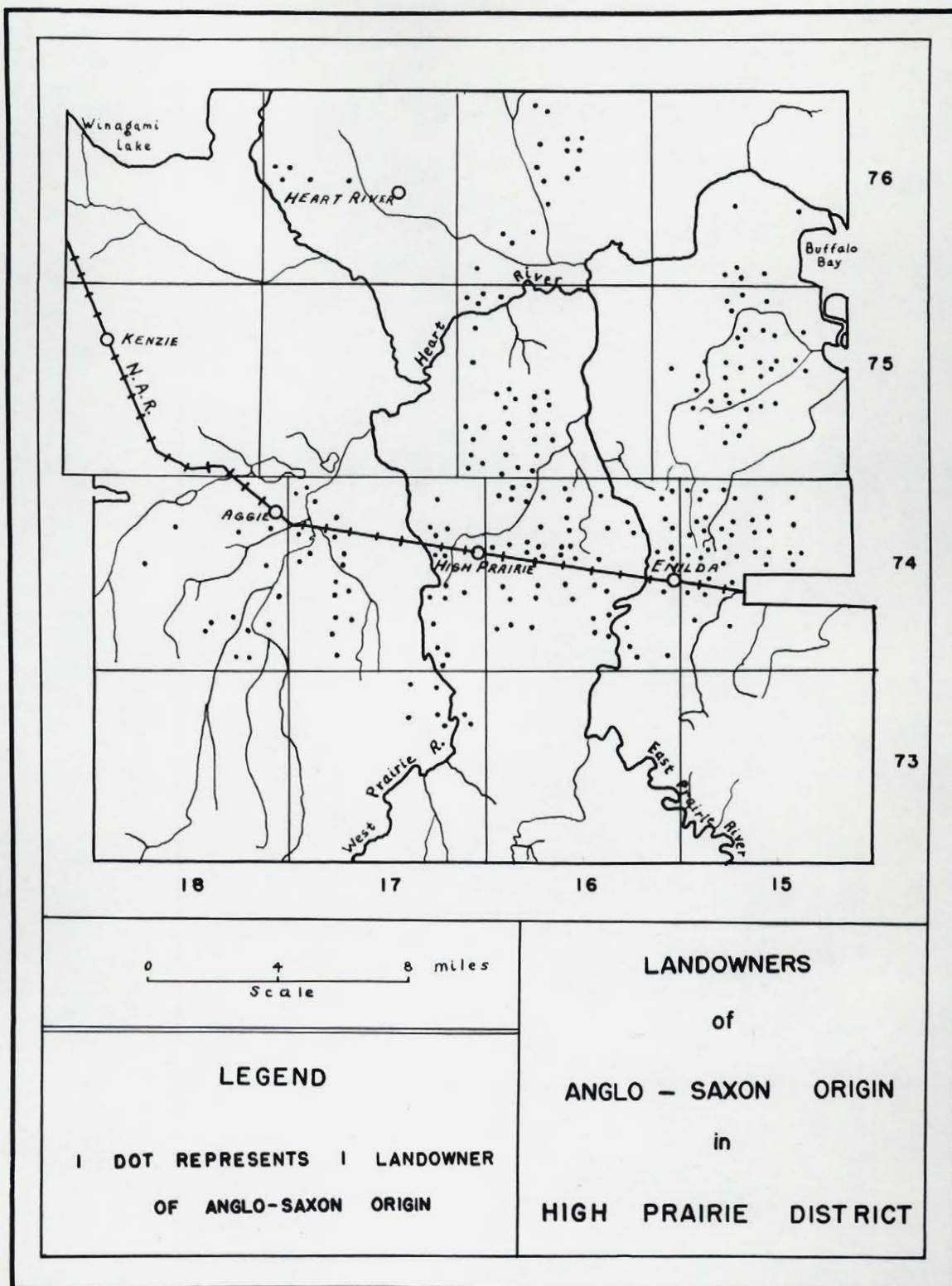
A detailed study has been made of the agricultural area in the general vicinity of High Prairie. A series of maps showing the distribution of landowners of Anglo-Saxon and East European origin, and the value of the land, are found on the following pages. The advantages of an early arrival on the part of the Anglo-Saxons is apparent. These people settled on the parkland soil near High Prairie, and have built up an excellent agricultural community.

The Ukrainians and Poles arrived on the scene at a somewhat later date. The best soils having largely been taken up, these people tended to take up the soils that are transitional between the parkland and the true wooded soils.





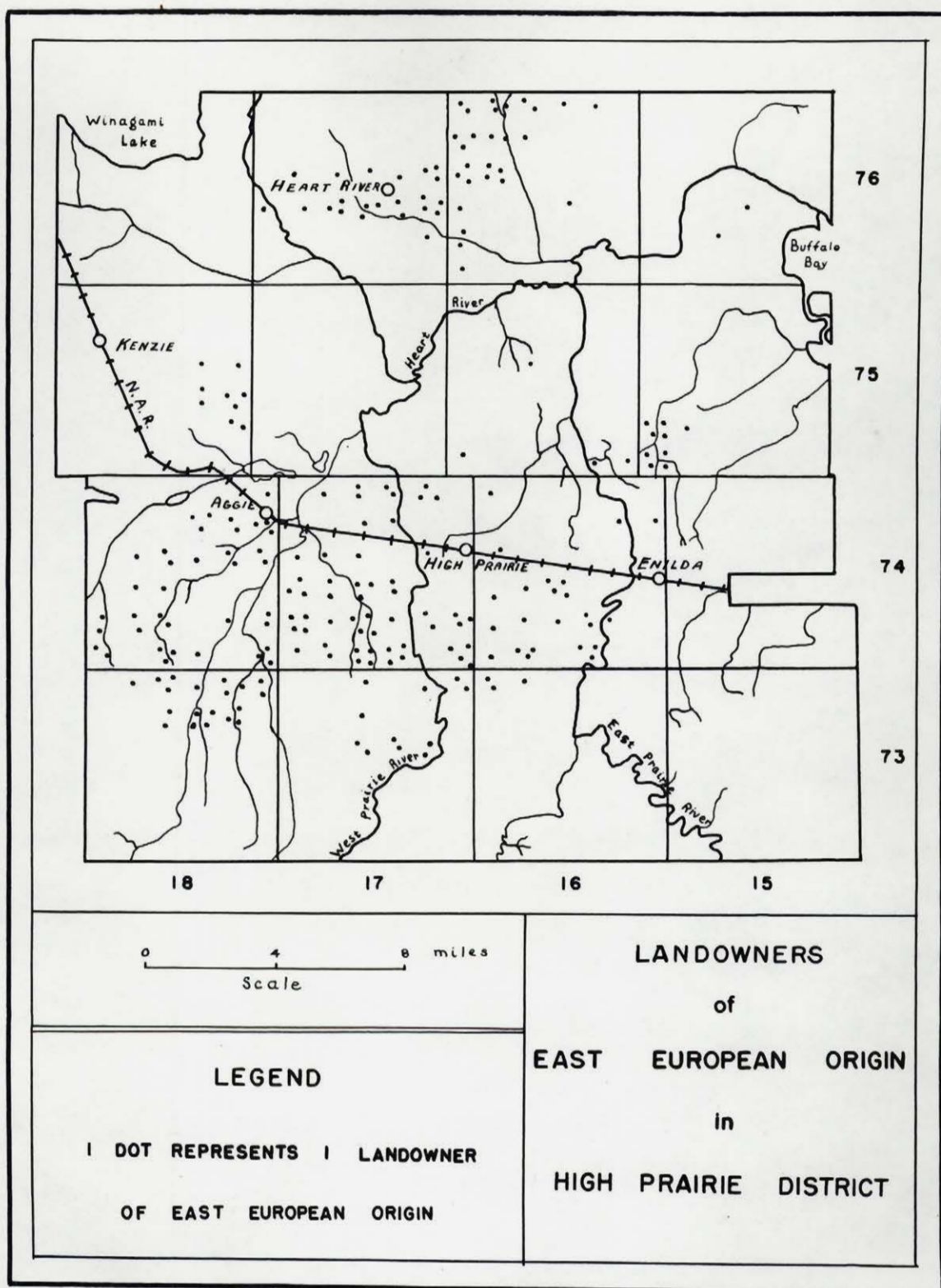
G.C.M.



G.C.M.

**MAP 7**





G. C. M.

**MAP 8**



It is interesting to note how marked is the tendency of these people of East European origin to remain farmers. Very few commercial establishments here are owned or operated by Poles and Ukrainians. However, the second generation of these people shall probably be more inclined to leave the farm. Very few people of East European origin are employed in the labor force of the lumber industry, although a few may take employment in the woods during the winter logging season. In a similar manner, commercial fishing holds little attraction for them, as shown by the graph which has been prepared on the ethnic origin of the people engaged in the commercial fishing industry of Lesser Slave Lake.

The preference of the people for agriculture is reflected in the degree of success attained in that industry by them. Industrious and energetic, few cases of failure in establishing a homestead are recorded among them. At the present time there is a movement of these people onto the parkland soils of the High Prairie district, by purchase of farms put up for sale.

The East Europeans are highly respected members of the community. Assimilation of the second generation of these people is rapid, the result of the school system which brings the children of all groups together. It is interesting to note the value that these people place upon education. The

central school system of this area is an excellent one, but it involves much time spent in the school van. Some groups are against the centralized schools for that reason, but the East Europeans are the group most vocal in its support, desiring the best possible education for their children.

The number of people of French origin in this area is not great. The only sizeable concentration of French is found at Joussard. Although there are some farmers among them, the majority of French located there are chiefly engaged in commercial fishing and mink farming.

A small settlement of Scandinavians has already been mentioned at an earlier point in this thesis. Other Europeans, such as Germans and Belgians, are represented in the population, but no district has a majority of these people in its population, and in actual numbers these groups are small. It appears that no sharp differences exist in the approach that these people take to settlement.

The Indian and half-breed population of the Lesser Slave Lake area is large. The original Indian treaty signed in 1899 established a number of reservations along the south and west shores of the lake, and the Indians who have remained on the treaty live on these reservations. In a conversation with Mr. Lapp, the Indian agent for the district, it was learned that there are approximately seven hundred treaty Indians administered by his department. The Sucker Creek,

Driftpile, and Swan River Reserves are the largest, accounting for six hundred of the Indians. The remaining one hundred live on the smaller reserves located near Slave Lake and Grouard.

The Indian Affairs Branch has made a conscious effort to encourage farming on these reserve lands. In truth it must be said that little success has been gained along these lines. Although the Driftpile and Swan River Reserves have some excellent agricultural land, only a handful of treaty Indians have taken to farming. At one time these Indians kept a large number of cattle, but high prices ~~for~~ beef, and unscrupulous buyers, have, according to the Indian agent, destroyed this activity. The failure of the Indians to make full use of their agricultural land is the source of some conflict between them and their neighbors, particularly in the Kinuso district. A number of farmers in that area would like to increase the size of their farms by means of the purchase of reserve land not in actual use. Although a tribe is permitted to sell reserve land if it so wishes, seldom does the willingness to sell exist, and a certain amount of ill-feeling results.

The education of the children of treaty Indians was made a responsibility of the Crown by the Treaty of 1899. All of the Indian children of the Lesser Slave Lake area

attend residential schools operated by the Roman Catholic missions at Grouard and Jousard. The Indians Affairs Branch pays the cost of this education, which amounts to three hundred dollars per year per student. The Indians are in favor of sending their children to the non-residential provincial schools, and a number of such children are now attending the centralized school in Kinuso.

The difference between a treaty Indian and a half-breed is usually considered to be a matter of racial purity. In the Lesser Slave Lake area this is most definitely untrue. The treaty Indians are reported to have as much white blood in their veins as the half-breeds, but they are considered to be full-blood Indians because they have not elected to go off treaty. The two groups, treaty Indians and half-breeds, have many contacts with each other, usually to the disadvantage of the former. Half-breeds are permitted by law to buy liquor, and a certain amount of their purchases are reported to eventually reach the treaty Indians.

Although figures are lacking, it is a recognized fact that the half-breed population is much larger than that of the treaty Indians. Many of the half-breeds are engaged in the lumber industry. They make up a high proportion of the winter employees of the industry, working in the lumber camps. An interesting establishment is the Indian co-operative



Fig. 5. Delta land of agricultural value in the Driftpile Indian Reserve.



Fig. 6.. Hospital, Driftpile Indian Reserve.

at Grouard. The members are non-treaty Indians and half-breeds, and under the direction of Father Fogard, a Roman Catholic priest, they have established a successful co-operative. The aim of this undertaking has been to increase the independence of these native people, and to develop their native skills. Products of manufacture, such as mocasins, have won a wide market throughout Canada.

One other element exists in the population of the Lesser Slave Lake area. The lumber industry requires a large number of seasonal employees during the winter logging season. The labor force resident in the area is not large enough to meet this demand, with the result that men are brought in from Edmonton each winter for work in the lumber camps.

Although the area has experienced several periods in which the population increase was rapid, such as during the Klondike gold rush, and immediately after the railroad was built in 1914, in general the population has grown slowly but steadily. This is understandable. As shall be discussed in following chapters, the economic development of the Lesser Slave Lake area has proceeded at a moderate rate since 1914, and the population growth has tended to keep up with it, but not to surpass it. People of mixed ethnic origin have taken part in the settlement of this area, but racial differences have tended to disappear quite rapidly. This is a generality,

but it appears to be valid. An exception could be made in the case of the Ukrainians and the Poles, who are in a sense a separate group. Little conflict exists between these people of East European origin and the other elements of the population, but perhaps there is a small amount of jealousy on the part of the latter when the willingness to work hard on the part of the former results in a considerable degree of rapid success.

## CHAPTER VII

### AGRICULTURE IN THE LESSER SLAVE LAKE AREA

The leading industry in this area of study is agriculture, both in terms of wealth produced, and in the number of people directly engaged in it. Climatic differences are believed to be slight from one place to another within the boundaries of this study, and although the climate largely determines the types of crops grown, the type of soil is the critical factor in the distribution of agriculture. A very close correlation is seen to exist between the pattern of settlement, map 2, on page 12, and the distribution of soil types, map 3, on page 23. In places where the soil provides the physical basis for agriculture, settlement based on that industry has taken place. Within any soil zone, there are many classes of soil separated on the basis of physical properties, such as topography, drainage, number of stones present, texture and size of soil particles, and so forth. These no doubt condition the pattern of settlement within small units, such as the townships, but in broader outline it may be said that agricultural settlement has tended to take place on the parkland and the first class wooded soils.

Soil suitable for **agriculture** is of limited distribution. Agricultural settlement has taken place in the High

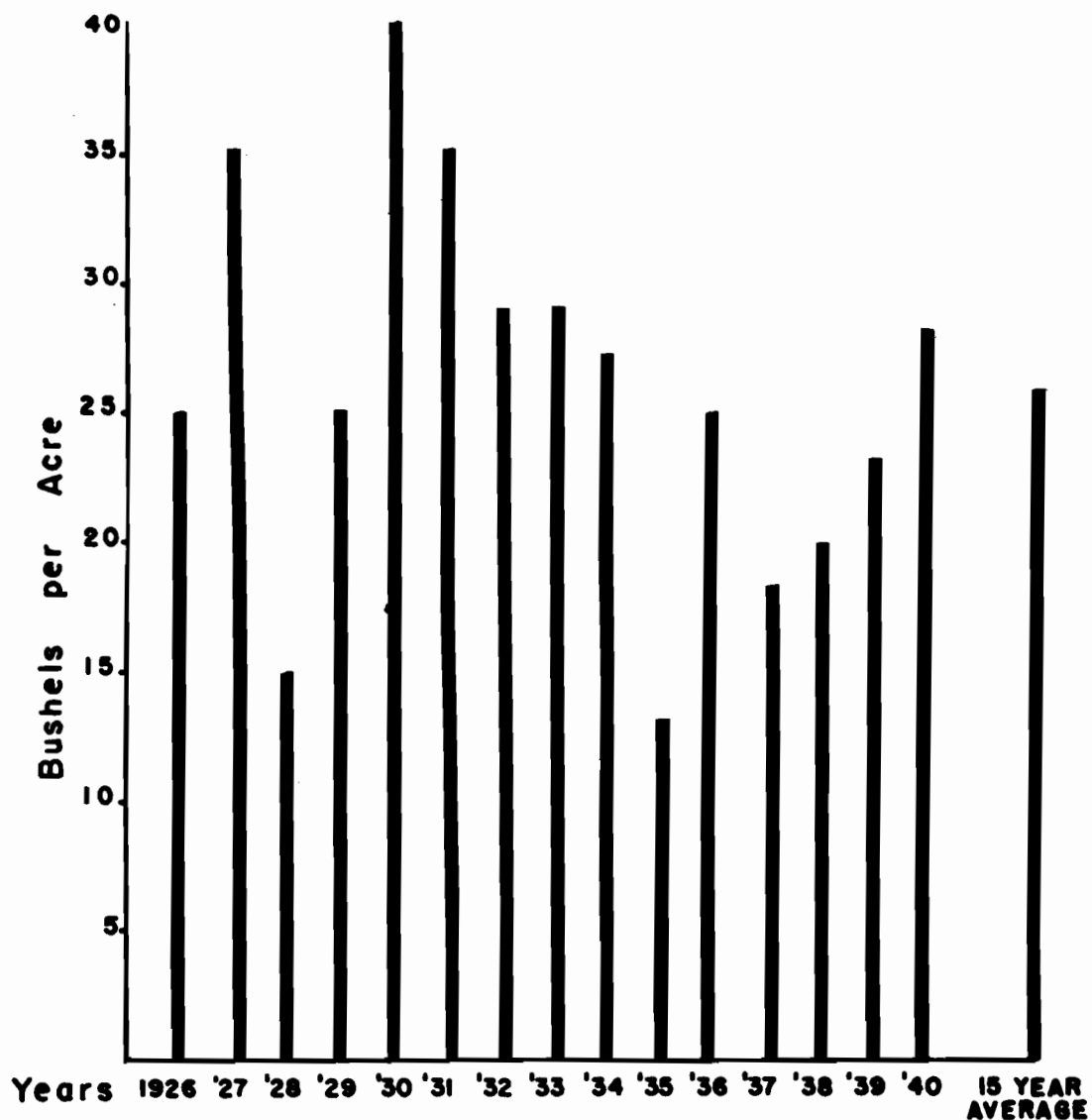


Prairie district, and in the Swan River valley. Several other small patches of good soil exist, but other factors have prevented the development of farming communities on them. The Driftpile Indian Reserve is one example of this, with the cultural attitude of the Indians toward agriculture conditioning the use to which they put their land. Isolation is also a determining factor. Some good valley land of limited extent exists south of High Prairie, but it is separated from the High Prairie core area by poorer soil types, with the result that its settlement has not yet taken place. Although agriculture is the leading industry, it is of limited areal distribution, using approximately 15 per cent of the total area included in this study.

During the early years of settlement, a large number of cattle were kept in the High Prairie district. The natural grasslands northeast of High Prairie, on the lowlands bordering Buffalo Bay, attracted stock-raisers. To-day these lands are still used to graze some animals, and in some years hay from this area is shipped out to other points, but frequent flooding has reduced the value of this land. A number of the old inhabitants of this district were interviewed during the field studies of 1950, and they stated that cattle raising was quickly followed by a period of greater dependence upon wheat and barley. To-day agriculture in the Lesser

Slave Lake area is characterized by mixed farming. If a point of change must be recognized, most people in the area would place it around 1930, when the farmers began to realize that mixed farming promised more economic return over the years.

Agriculture is a relatively safe venture in this area. Crop failures do not occur with the same frequency as in some areas in the more southern parts of the province. Rainfall is generally quite adequate, and of proper seasonal distribution. Hail damage is also relatively infrequent of occurrence. In 1949 a hail storm brought some damage to crops in the Swan River valley, reducing the yield by 10 per cent. Local inhabitants of that area report this as being the first hail damage experienced in the Kinuso area for the past twenty-five years. The greatest hazard is to be found in early fall frosts, to which all farmers here appear to have adopted a philosophical attitude. A number of them have seen entire crops destroyed by early frosts in August. But many years are free of early killing frosts, and in general the farmers enjoy a steady return for their efforts. The consistency with which reasonable crops are produced in this area is best shown by a graph. On the following page is Figure 7, a graph based upon wheat returns over a fifteen year period. The poorest year, 1935, gave a return of thirteen bushels to the acre. The average yield



**WHEAT YIELDS in MUNICIPALITY  
of**

**HIGH PRAIRIE 1926 - 1940**

**Average yield 25.8 bu. per acre**

Based upon Manual of Grain Yields,  
Sanford Evans Statistical Service

G.C.M.

**FIG. 7**

of approximately twenty-six bushels to the acre compares most favourably with yields in other parts of the province.

Good transportation facilities permit the farmers of this area to produce for distant markets. Over the years a definite type of agricultural economy has emerged, and one which appears to be well suited to the area. Barley, wheat, and oats are the most important crops, given here in the order of their importance, although individual years may show wheat or oats in the leading position. The number of cattle kept is large, some for beef and some for milk. High Prairie has a pasteurizing plant, but as yet it has no creamery. During the war a large number of hogs were raised in the Lesser Slave Lake area, but this has not continued during the post-war years. The number of poultry kept is not large, although some individual farms have as many as five hundred head of poultry.

Although two distinct centers of agriculture are recognized within the area of this study, namely, Kinuso and High Prairie, the latter town serves the larger agricultural district. Three grain elevators are located in High Prairie, and in 1949, according to one estimate, these elevators handled over one million bushels of grain, mostly barley and wheat.<sup>1</sup> As a means of comparison, the elevator at Kinuso in the same year handled approximately 110,000 bushels, or roughly 10 per

---

<sup>1</sup> Estimate made by Mr. Reynolds of High Prairie.

cent of the High Prairie output.<sup>2</sup> During the same year 105 carloads of beef cattle were shipped out from High Prairie by rail. The annual wealth produced by agriculture in this area is thus of considerable proportion, and makes it the number one industry.

The farms are generally large, the average being about one half section. The farms are well-mechanized, and the farm operators follow progressive methods. Wind erosion can be a problem here, and a number of farmers have grown wind breaks. In the High Prairie district such wind breaks are quite a common feature of the landscape.

But one must not believe that the agricultural economy in the Lesser Slave Lake area is fully developed, and completely stable. In a number of ways change occurs, the most important one being yearly increases in the amount of cultivated land. The most recent increase followed closely after the last war, when many veterans took up land under the Veteran's Land Act. This is particularly true in the Swan River district, where in 1947 the permits issued to sell grain jumped in number from forty-seven to ninety-seven.

---

<sup>2</sup> Information provided by elevator operator at Kinuso.



Fig. 8. Planted windbreak, common  
in the High Prairie district.



Fig. 9. Typical Ukrainian farmstead  
in the Heart River Settlement.

## CHAPTER VIII

### NON-AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRIES OF THE AREA

The most active period of settlement in the Lesser Slave Lake area was based upon agriculture. Since the arrival of the railroad in 1914, however, the possibility has existed for the development of other industries. To-day lumbering, commercial fishing, and mink farming play relatively important roles in the economy of the area. The development and present day activity of these industries shall be discussed in this chapter.

#### Lumbering

In the agricultural area of High Prairie, lumbering most definitely plays a secondary role. However, in the land to the south of the lake, lumbering is the most important industry. Faust has long been a center for the industry, but recent expansion has brought development in lumbering to other areas along the lake, and in particular, to Kinuso.

Spruce is the only species which is economically valuable in the region. Several years ago an attempt was made to promote the use of poplar but for several reasons it failed. According to the mill operators, the public has a prejudice against poplar, and in addition it has a bad name in

the trade. It tends to warp badly, and it soaks up moisture, which from the view of the mill operator is most undesirable, as the increase in weight makes shipping charges very high. Despite such a drawback, the mill operators of the Lesser Slave Lake area would welcome a market for poplar, as it is widespread throughout the timber tracts.

Early surveys in the Lesser Slave Lake area revealed the limited amount of good agricultural land available to settlement. The government decided to close certain parts to agricultural settlement, and established the Lesser Slave Forest Reserve, which embraces the Swan Hills and the upland area between these hills and the lake. The government controls the activity of the lumbermen in this reserve. The companies are free to carry out investigations in the reserve area, and an individual company may ask the government to put up for lease a certain tract of land as a timber berth. All companies are then able to make a bid for the lease. Whenever a company has a bid accepted, it must then conform to the regulations set down by the government concerning the size of the timber cut, and the condition in which the area is to be left. Thus, the government has a considerable measure of control over the exploitation of these forested lands.

The timber berths are usually quite small, and



scattered in their distribution. Most of them yield between five hundred thousand and three million board feet, making it necessary to move the camps in the woods every two or three years. A good average yield for the timber berths worked during the past few years would be eight thousand board feet per acre, according to the owner of the McRae Lumber Company of Faust. The scattered occurrence of good tracts of timber have forced the operators to work farther and farther away from the mills. At the present time, the companies are hauling lumber from areas twenty-five to forty miles south of the lake. Tractors operating on winter logging roads carry this lumber to the planing mills located on the shore of the lake. Although it appears to be a long distance, the consensus of opinion among the operators would indicate that the cheap and efficient transportation provided by the tractors has all but eliminated distance as a cost factor.

A number of large companies dominate the industry, but there is still a place for the small operators. The amount of capital required to start a sawmill in the woods is not high. A number of people do this as a seasonal activity, operating a sawmill during winter, and fishing during the summer. These small sawmills do not produce finished lumber, but sell their output to the larger companies who operate planing mills. Lumbering is an industry of seasonal employ-

ment. The permanent employees of this industry for the whole Lesser Slave Lake area number less than one hundred persons. But during the winter operations, seasonal employment is provided for upwards of eight hundred men. Many are local men, often Indian and half-breeds, but the supply is always unable to meet the demand, and workers are brought in from Edmonton.

Lumbering is a primary industry, made possible in this area by the transportation facilities provided by the railway. The local market for lumber is quite insignificant, accounting for less than 1 per cent of the total output. The mills sell direct to dealers in all parts of Canada and the United States, good grades of spruce finding a ready market in areas as far distant as Clearwater, Florida. The total output of the industry in the Lesser Slave Lake area is approximately fifteen railroad cars each week throughout the year.

The McRae Lumber Company started in Faust during the early twenties, and is the oldest company in the area. The high prices for lumber has brought considerable development in the industry in the Lesser Slave Lake area during recent years. In 1948, the Imperial Lumber Company began operations in a new planing mill located in the village of Kinuso. The Swanson Lumber Company of Edmonton went into production in the village of Slave Lake in 1949, and it is believed by a number of people that a planing mill similar to the one in Kinuso shall be built in Slave Lake within the next few years.



Fig. 10. Lumber yard, Imperial  
Lumber Company, Kinuso.



Fig. 11. Burned-over forest in the  
vicinity of Kinuso.

Whether this takes place or not, the fact remains that lumbering is an important industry in the Lesser Slave Lake area today. A governmental policy of controlled cutting, and an industry producing a finished product, suggest a continued existence for lumbering in this area.

### Fishing

Reference has been made earlier in this thesis to a small scale commercial fishing industry in the Lesser Slave Lake area prior to the coming of the railway in 1914. At that time the catch was frozen and hauled on sleighs to Edmonton. The transport facilities limited this activity to the winter season. Thus, as is true of the other industries of this area, development of fisheries on a large scale could not take place until railway transportation became available.

In 1916 William Menzies built a fish plant in Canyon Creek. Several years later he moved to Faust, and established there the Menzies Fisheries, a company which is still in operation, and which to-day plays a major role in the commercial fishing industry of this lake. The move from Canyon Creek to Faust was probably in response to the better fishing opportunities in the western portion of the lake. In addition, Giroux Bay offers a sheltered harbor to the fishing craft. The advantages of a location in Faust are expressed on a map on

the following page, which shows the distribution of fish packing plants in the Lesser Slave Lake area. Seven of the nine such plants are located west of The Narrows, and four of them are located in Faust.

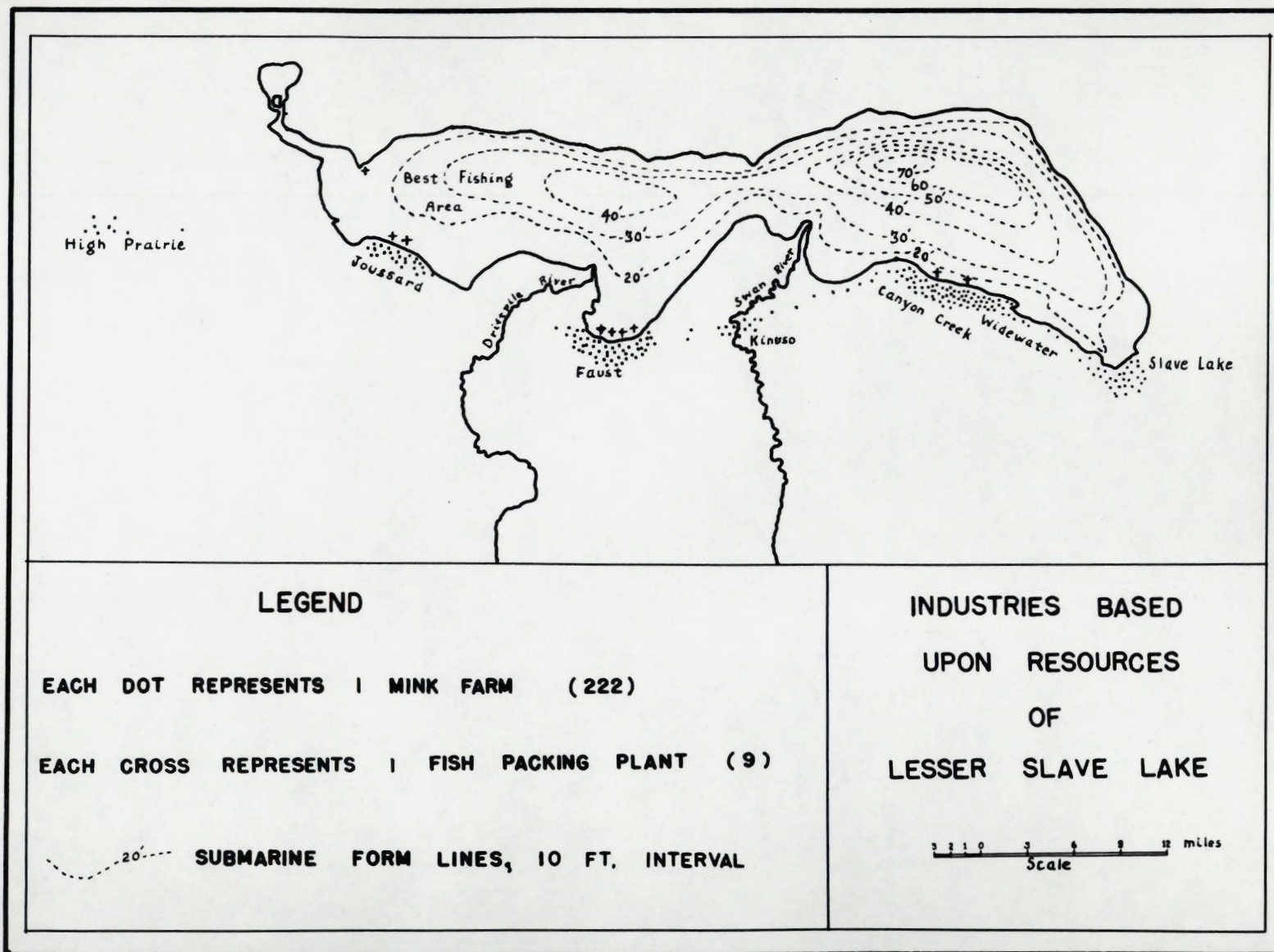
A number of different varieties of fish are caught in Lesser Slave Lake. Tullibee, pike, perch, pickerel, two kinds of sucker, ling, and Rocky Mountain whitefish are the most common.<sup>1</sup> Of these varieties, whitefish is the only one of commercial value.

During the twenties, when commercial fishing was in an early stage of development, some truly enormous catches of whitefish were made. Operating without a limit on the catch, the commercial fishermen at that time took between one and a half million and two million pounds of whitefish each year out of the lake. The result of such heavy fishing was a sharp decline in catch, as too heavy demands were being made on this resource. About the year 1930, a measure of governmental control on the quantity of fish taken was adopted. Since then the catch has not been permitted to exceed one million pounds per year. The war years were an exception, when commercial fishing was again permitted to operate without a limit on catch. Heavy fishing once more reduced the numbers of fish in the lake, and since the war the limit has been reduced sharply, varying from year to year between five hundred thousand and seven hundred thous-

---

<sup>1</sup> Miller, op. cit., p. 3.





G.C.M.

MAP 9

and pounds.

The Alberta Department of Fisheries has an office in Canyon Creek, with a resident Fishery Inspector stationed there. In addition to controlling the amount of fish taken, the inspector enforces a number of closed seasons throughout the year. Commercial fishing begins with the spring break-up of ice, about the middle of May, and continues until the 15th of June. The lake is then closed to commercial fishing until the 1st of August. after which date it remains open until a summer limit of four hundred thousand pounds of whitefish is taken, or until the 30th of September, whichever comes first. Commercial fishing is again permitted during the winter, when fishing is carried on through the ice. Winter fishing begins on the 1st of December, and continues until the end of March, or until the winter limit of three hundred thousand pounds of whitefish is taken, whichever comes first.

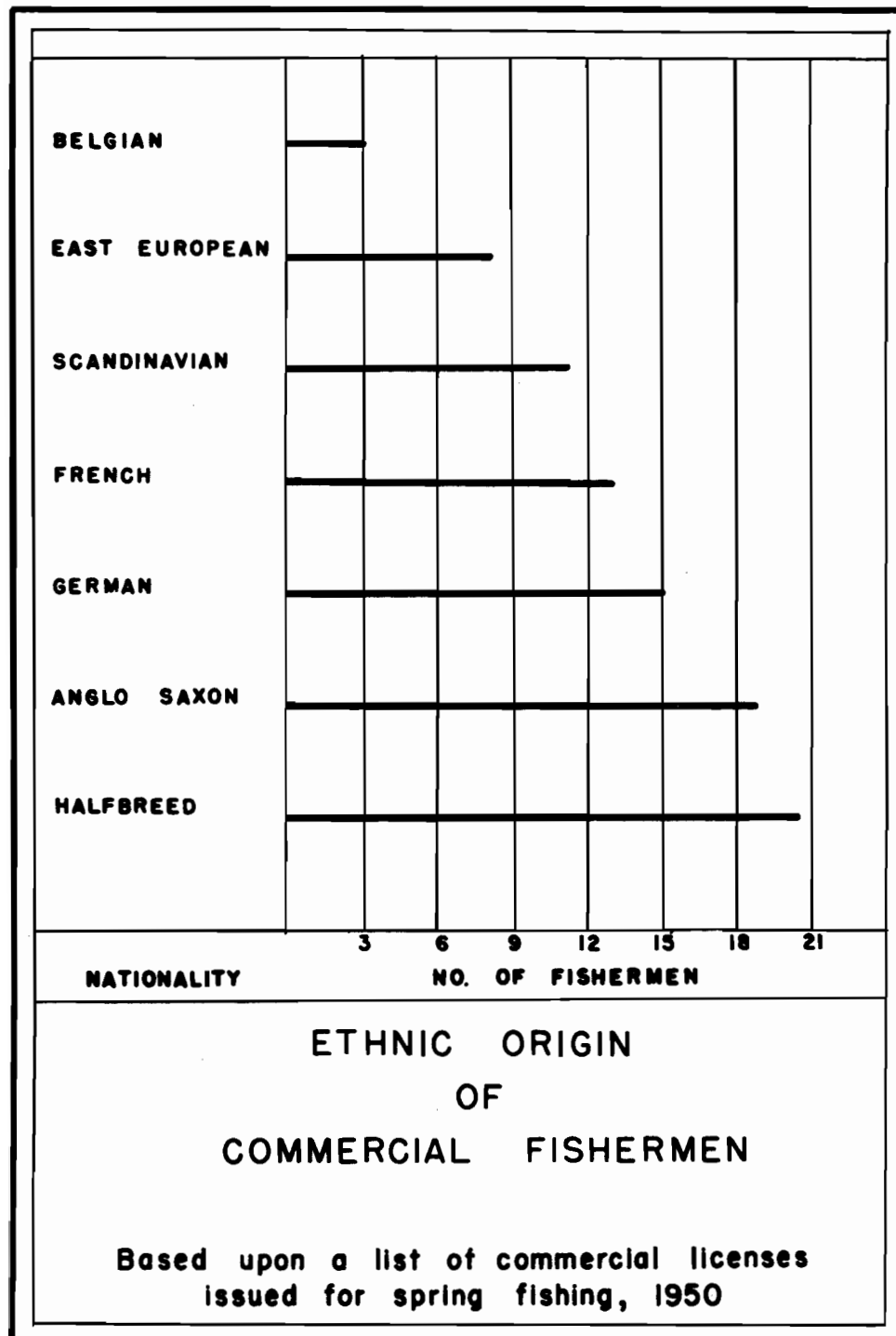
The writer is able to speak with some authority on the quality of this product. Menus offered to the public by eating establishments in the Lesser Slave Lake area invariably include whitefish, and it is excellent. A similar judgment must be accorded to this product in other parts of Canada and the United States, as the industry produces for a wide market. The American market is of considerable importance, taking a large portion of the catch. In this regard it may

be pointed out that the investigations carried out in 1940 by R. B. Miller were occasioned by the inability of the product to gain entry into the United States under a pure foods law. A study was made of the infestation of whitefish in the lake, and it appears that suitable measures were adopted to correct the situation.

To-day commercial fishing is an industry of secondary importance in the Lesser Slave Lake area. It is an industry providing employment to a considerable number of small operators. The Fishery Inspector estimated that approximately one hundred and twenty-five commercial licenses would be issued in 1950. The majority of these fishermen own their own small craft and fishing gear, and sell their catch to the large fish companies, such as Menzies Fisheries, in Faust.

A graph has been prepared showing the ethnic origin of the people engaged in commercial fishing in Lesser Slave Lake. This graph appears on the following page. It is based upon a list of license holders for the spring fishing of 1950, about one hundred in number, and thus quite representative. It is interesting to note the large number of half-breeds engaged in this industry. Perhaps more emphasis should be given, However, to the small scale operators. Only a small amount of capital is required to start commercial fishing in the lake. The number of people engaged in this industry





G.C.M.

**FIG. 12**

varies from year to year, and many people move in and out of the industry within a relatively short time. At the other end of the scale, the East Europeans show very little interest in this sort of employment.

### Mink Farming

During the nineteenth century the chief product of the Lesser Slave Lake area was fur. The decline of the fur trade has been discussed elsewhere in this thesis. However, it is interesting to note that once again fur is demanding attention. To-day there are more mink farmers located in this area than in any other area of comparable size in Alberta. A very considerable portion of the wealth produced along the south shore of the lake comes from mink, and the role played by this industry in the present day economy is an important one.

Mink are the largest members of the weasel family, Mustelidae. They belong to the genus *Mustela* and the species *vison*, therefore the scientific name of the mink is *Mustela vison*.<sup>1</sup> Mink are small animals, weighing from one and a half pounds to four pounds, having small heads, short ears, long slender bodies, and short legs. In the wild state the mink is found chiefly in the northern regions of this continent. The raising of mink began in Canada early in the present

---

<sup>1</sup> C. K. Gunn, Mink Ranching, p. 3.

century, and has since grown to be an important ~~branch of the~~ Canadian fur **farming** industry.<sup>2</sup> Several strains of wild stock were used as parental stock, but a long period of controlled breeding has made these strains no longer readily distinguishable in ranch-bred mink.

The concentration of mink farms along the south shore of Lesser Slave Lake is of particular interest to the geographer, showing as it does a very neat adaptation to the possibilities offered by the environment. Since the mink is a carnivorous animal, its main feed ingredient is meat or fish. A location on the lake permits mink farmers to exploit the resources of the lake as mink feed, tullibee, ling, suckers, and other rough fish being the major item in the diet. Although this is no doubt the main reason for the concentration of mink farms along the south shore of the lake, it is not the only one. Moderate shelter from excessive wind is also desirable in the location of a mink ranch, because excessive wind has a detrimental drying effect upon mink fur which detracts from its lustre and quality as a market product. To obtain such conditions, mink farmers prefer a location close to water dampness at night to produce most favorable furring conditions. The Lesser Slave Lake area thus

---

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.



Fig. 13. Mink pens, a common  
sight from Slave Lake to Jossard.

emerges as an ideal location for the industry.

A map has been prepared showing the distribution of mink farms, and it accompanies this thesis on page 93. Mink farmers prefer a location on the shore of the lake. Concentrations of mink farms are found at Slave Lake, Widewater, Canyon Creek, Faust, and Joussard, all at points where the highway is close to the lake. In the delta lands of the Drift-pile and the Swan Rivers, the highway is located several miles inland from the lake, and little development in mink farming has taken place in these parts, and of course the land here has an agricultural value. The qualities of location demanded by the mink industry are thus fortunate, permitting sound development in areas of limited utility to the other industries of the area.

Here is an industry for a man who likes variety in his working day, for full exploitation of the lake demands much time spent fishing. No limit is placed upon the catch of rough fish used as mink feed, except a time limit made necessary by the movements of fish. The season is closed to mink fishermen when commercial fish and rough fish are in the same feeding grounds. The season opens for these fishermen about the 15th of July, and remains open until the end of October. A winter season of six weeks duration begins about the 15th of January. Thus, for five months of the year the lake is open to fishermen taking catches of rough fish. One





Fig. 14. Provincial school in Kinuso.



Fig. 15. Provincial school in High Prairie.

further control however is enforced as a protection to the commercial fishing industry. If, during any open season, the mink fishermen are taking whitefish in excess of 5 per cent of the total catch, the lake is automatically closed to mink fishing.

It has been estimated that five million pounds of rough fish are taken from the lake by the mink fishermen each year. This catch represents a tremendous saving to the operators of mink farms. Elsewhere in the province, mink are fed poorer grades of meat, such as horsemeat, beef tripe, and so on, at a cost of approximately four cents per pound. An average expenditure is made in the Lesser Slave Lake area of two cents per pound in order to obtain fish as mink feed. A differential thus exists of two cents per pound, giving a considerable economic advantage to the mink farmers of this area. One operator alone saved over two thousand dollars in 1949 on his feed bill by using rough fish.

The advantages of the Lesser Slave Lake area for mink farming having been outlined, consideration shall now be given to the development of the industry. The ~~first~~ mink were introduced into the area in 1926, and since that time a slow but steady increase has taken place in the number of mink farms along the south shore of the lake. Mr. D. Fraser, head of the Fur Farming Branch of the Alberta Department of

Agriculture, in a personal interview estimated the mink population of the Lesser Slave Lake area in 1950 to have been approximately fifty thousand, and the number of licensed mink farmers to have been over two hundred. The development of the industry has been described above as slow but steady. In the long term consideration, this is true. But during those years when prices are high for mink pelts, a large number of people start up in the business, only to fail when the price level returns to normal. Successful mink farms require heavy capitalization, and in terms of the establishment of successful farms, the increase in number has been slow but steady over the years. During the course of the field study in the summer of 1950, the writer visited the Kenny mink farm located close to Faust. This farm is considered to be the best one in the area, and as such it is not truly representative, but it reveals the large amount of capital required to produce a modern, well-equipped mink farm. An investment of over twenty \$20,000 had been made in fishing equipment, the major expense being a motor launch. The fishing gear permits the operator of this farm to take rough fish in excess of his own needs, and he sells feed to other mink farmers. Another \$10,000 had been spent on a modern freezing plant, permitting the storage of feed for the months when the lake is closed to fishing. Expensive machinery, such as grinders, had been installed for the preparation of the mink feed. The pens were of sound



construction, as were all the other necessary buildings. In all, the farm was valued at \$75,000, the figure including the value of the breeding stock, but not the 1950 kit, which it was estimated would bring \$20,000 on the market.

Lumbering no doubt produces the most wealth in the area along the south shore of the lake, but mink farming is more important in terms of the number of people dependent upon it for a livelihood. The future of the industry is far from certain. It is dependent upon the fashions of the day, and as such is vulnerable to any change in the fur fashions of the world. It is a luxury product, and hence is subject to large fluctuations in demand. But of even greater concern in the Lesser Slave Lake area is the continued availability of rough fish for feed. Some years ago a concentration of mink farms existed around Lac la Biche, northeast of Edmonton, but the demands made on the fish population for mink feed were too heavy, the supply diminished, and the industry failed. The Alberta Department of Fisheries is interested in the commercial variety of fish in Lesser Slave Lake, and it is permitting the present heavy fishing of rough fish in order to determine what effect, if any, it has on the quantity of whitefish in the lake. It is possible that the department may at some future date decide to curtail the mink fishing in order to protect the commercial fishing industry, or the rough fish may fail to reproduce in sufficient numbers.

Although a number of well established mink farms would no doubt continue some sort of operation despite a closed lake, many of the smaller operators would leave the area. Thus, although the industry is important to-day, its economic foundations are not absolutely secure.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The writer has been impressed, time and again during this study, by the amount of development which has taken place in this area during the past fifty odd years. Prior to the Klondike gold rush, the cultural landscape was of great simplicity. The population at that time consisted of Cree Indians, and a handful of whites engaged in the fur trade. The transportation routes were those provided by nature, and according to all reports, nature had not been overly generous. But since 1898 a modern network of transportation facilities has been given to the area, a number of different industries have developed, and the cultural landscape has changed from the simplicity of a frontier to the complexity of a settled area in which man is active in many ways.

It is sometimes possible to recognize a pattern in the history of a selected area. For instance, an island might well have a history which has been dominated by the one simple fact that it is an island. In much the same way, to the mind of the writer at least, the history of the Lesser Slave Lake area has been intimately concerned with the basic fact of its location, on the best land route north from Edmonton to the Peace River district and beyond. In 1898

this mere fact of location brought the men of the Klondike, streaming through the area on their long trek to the Yukon. Grouard came into being for the Klondikers, and a number of them decided to stay, some as failures to be sure, but some fired with enthusiasm over the future of the Lesser Slave Lake area. During the early years of the present century, location again brought benefits, as settlers heading for the Peace River district slowly made their way north through the area. A man seeking new land is apt to take it where he finds it, and a number decided to remain in the Lesser Slave Lake area. In 1914, the railroad was built, not to promote settlement around the lake, but to connect Edmonton and Peace River. But location along the best railroad route to the north brought a high measure of development in the Lesser Slave Lake area. Of recent years, the Alaska highway has exerted a similar influence, but of lesser degree. The highway along the south shore of the lake is a feeder-line to the famous Alaska highway. Although the local people often complain about the heavy traffic of these recent years, the merchants know that the increased traffic has meant an increase in business. Thus, it appears that time and again the development of the Lesser Slave Lake area has been in response to the new opportunities invariably ushered in by another development farther to the north. It has been these events

in history which have changed the cultural landscape, bringing in people, and a variety of industries.

The cultural landscape is here dominated by contrasts. One cannot travel from Slave Lake in the east to High Prairie in the west without noticing the variation in the landscape from district to district. Pockets of agricultural land are separated by areas where the only economic activity has been in the hands of the lumbermen. Other areas are characterized by the oblong pens of the mink farms. Perhaps the greatest amount of contrast of all is experienced when the well developed, prosperous farming region near High Prairie comes into view. Nothing like it has been seen for over a hundred miles, and it appears as an oasis.

A further contrast is seen in the population. Within the course of one block in High Prairie it is possible to meet a great variety of people; perhaps several Indians off one of the reserves, an old American who came into the area at the turn of the century, a Ukrainian who has won for himself a good farm in the past fifteen years, a Canadian business man who failed in a drier part of the prairies in the thirties and decided to try his luck in the north. These people lend a flavor to the cultural landscape. Although of different backgrounds, they at least hold one thing in common, enthusiasm for the Lesser Slave Lake area, and a confidence

in its future. This is more than a topic of conversation. Most of these people have witnessed the slow but steady development of this area. Perhaps the best measure of their confidence is the activity of their sons and daughters. In general, they refuse the pull to Edmonton, and remain at home. Much new land is broken and brought into cultivation each year, and in many cases it is at the hands of young people who have been born and brought up in the area.

The place-names which people give to an area are a part of the cultural landscape, and a certain amount of research has been carried out on their origin. The writer believed that some of the place-names might well show interesting connections with the homelands of the people who settled here during the past fifty years. It is true that a number of place-names have their origin in the earlier Indian names. Kinuso is the Cree word for "fish". The name "Slave" has its origin in a Cree word of similar meaning which was used in reference to a tribe of Indians of marked timidity. Several places are named in appreciation of the natural landscape, hence High Prairie, and Driftpile. The latter is a translation of the Cree name for the river, at the mouth of which driftwood piles up. But any connection with other areas is totally lacking. Faust is named after T.E. Faust, an engineer on the railway.<sup>1</sup> Aggie and Wagner, although only points on the railway,

---

<sup>1</sup> Geographic Board of Canada, Place-Names of Alberta, p. 50.

are on the map, recording again the names of early employees of the railway. Enilda is a pleasant change from this dependence upon the names of railway people. It is named after the wife of the first postmaster, a woman by the name of Adline, and it is merely the reverse spelling. Perhaps the sought-after color is only to be found in Shaw's Point, named after a whimsical old chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company post at Grouard. "He appears to have been a man of many eccentricities, one of which was the cultivation of a very long fingernail, which he used as a spoon to eat his egg."<sup>2</sup>

The concept of the frontier appears to be largely a matter of the cultural landscape. It is difficult to find many expressions of the frontier in the Lesser Slave Lake area of to-day. In various parts of north central Alberta, the progress of settlement has been recorded in a unique and interesting manner. It is possible on occasion to recognize three homes on the farmstead of to-day, a log cabin dating from the period of first settlement, a very modest frame house which was the next family dwelling place, and finally a third house at present in use. The frontier is thus recognizable in these parts as being a phenomenon of the immediate past. But such a sequence of events is not recorded in the Lesser Slave Lake

---

<sup>2</sup> F. H. Kitto, *The Peace River Country of Canada*, p. 51.

area to any marked degree. Perhaps the frontier days are too far removed from the present to be given such expression. At any rate, the appearance of the farms and the villages suggests activity, prosperity, and outside contacts not characteristic of the frontier.

The school system of to-day serves as an excellent index of the progress of this area. From Slave Lake to High Prairie, the school children benefit from the present system of centralized schools. Many highschool students are carried in school vans from points as far distant as forty miles, in order to give to them the many advantages of the larger schools. The old one-room school has disappeared in the Lesser Slave Lake area, as have most of the other characteristics of frontier days.



## CHAPTER X

### CONCLUSION

Emphasis has been placed upon the variations in the cultural landscape found throughout the area of this study. In the beginning administrative boundaries were chosen as the limits for the Lesser Slave Lake area. After having developed the essentials of its human geography, an analysis is now necessary. The area of study is not a geographical region, but within it such a region does exist. It is the area of lowland along the south shore of the lake, opening up in the west to include the agricultural region around High Prairie. This lowland area stands up to scrutiny as a geographical region, in terms of both its physical and cultural geography.

All of this lowland area was at one time in the geologic past beneath the waters of the lake, and shares a common geomorphological origin. In the more recent geologic past, modifications have taken place in the lowland, by the delta-making activities of the Swan and Driftpile Rivers. Human records in this area permit no estimates of the rate at which this process is preceding to-day, but no doubt it is still going on. There is considerable physical variation throughout this lowland area. From one place to another within this physiographic province the soil varies from true wooded

to parkland type. The vegetation cover includes areas of forest, parkland, and natural hay meadows. But all of this lowland shows an essential physical unity, all the more clearly when one considers the role it has played in the human geography of the area.

In the early days people heading for the Yukon and the Peace River district often followed the north shore of the lake for reasons which are not entirely clear. But modern transportation routes follow the lowland, and to-day along the south shore of the lake, the villages are spread out along the railway and highway as beads along a string.

The best opportunities for settlement are found on this lowland fringe. South of the lake, the land begins to rise, and physical conditions preclude settlement. It is true that lumbering is active in this area, but the permanent aspects of the lumbering industry, such as the planing mills, are all located on the lowland. Agricultural settlement is also largely confined to the same area, and of course, the industries based upon the resources of the lake are all located along the shore.

The pattern of settlement map which accompanies this thesis is of considerable aid in establishing the boundaries of the geographical region. The westernmost part of the map begins to show a decrease in the amount of land in private hands. An extension of the map in all directions would bring

into view areas very sparsely settled. This is particularly true of the land to the north and to the south of the lake. The Swan Hills are not settled at all, and a similar concentration of people would not be found until one reached the Athabaska watershed south of the Swan Hills. Thus, in comparison to the surrounding country, this lowland area along the lake begins to emerge as a concentration of people, although not of major proportions.

High Prairie is not centrally located in this geographical region, but it is the core in terms of the human geography. Slave Lake, at the eastern end of the geographical region, is located approximately midway between High Prairie and Athabaska. But the people of Slave Lake recognize High Prairie as their most important neighboring town. High Prairie is the banking and medical center for all the settlements along the south shore of the lake. The Sisters of Providence operate a hospital in High Prairie. There are three resident doctors at this hospital, and a modern clinic is in operation there.

Throughout the whole area of this study, Edmonton is recognized as "the city", and is often referred to as such. But the everyday demands of the people living within the Lesser Slave Lake area are adequately met by the services offered in High Prairie. Edmonton serves chiefly as a marketing center for the products of the primary industries of this geographical region.

The limited amount of time spent in the field study has not permitted answers to be given to all the questions concerning the human occupancy of this region. A more detailed study could be made of the ethnic groups present in the population. More detailed treatment could be given the various forms of land utilization in the area, particularly the agriculture. But the present study has shown the historical development of this area since the turn of the century. In a short period of fifty years, the Lesser Slave Lake area has established itself as an important producer in a number of industries. Many of these industries are well established, and show evidence of expansion. Thirty-seven years ago Grouard was reduced to a ghost town, reflecting the poor economic foundations upon which it had been built. To-day, High Prairie, the successor of Grouard, could suffer no such fate, strong evidence of the sound development of this area along the northern fringe of prairie settlement.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alberta Department of Agriculture, Farming in Alberta.  
Edmonton: King's Printer, 1949. 40 pp.
- Allen, John A., Geology of the Swan Hills in the Lesser Slave Lake District, Alberta. Geological Survey of Canada, Summary Report, Part C, 1918. Ottawa: King's Printer, 1919. 51 pp.
- Bowser, W. E. and McCalla, A. G., Cropping for Profit and Permanency, Bulletin no. 44, Department of Extension, University of Alberta. Edmonton: King's Printer, 1946. 55 pp.
- Burpee, Lawrence J., The Search for the Western Sea ( the story of the exploration of north-western America ).  
New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1908. 650 pp.
- England, Robert, The Colonization of Western Canada ( a study of contemporary land settlement, 1896-1934 ).  
London: P. S. King and Son, 1936. 341 pp.
- Geographic Board of Canada, Place-Names of Alberta. Ottawa: King's Printer, 1928. 138 pp.
- Geological Survey of Canada, Report of Progress, 1879-1880.  
Ottawa: King's Printer, 1881.
- Geological Survey of Canada, Memoir 108, Mackenzie River Basin. Ottawa: King's Printer, 1919.
- Gunn, C. K., Mink Ranching. Department of Agriculture, Publication no. 827, Technical Bulletin no. 74. Ottawa: King's Printer, 1949. 60 pp.
- Jenness, Diamond, The Indians of Canada. National Museum of Canada, Bulletin 65. Ottawa: King's Printer, 1932. 446 pp.
- Kitto, F. H., The Peace River Country of Canada. Department of Interior. Ottawa: King's Printer, 1930.
- Koeppel, Clarence E., The Canadian Climate. Bloomington, Illinois: McKnight and McKnight, 1931. 280 pp.
- Mackintosh, W. A., Prairie Settlement, The Geographical Setting. Canadian Frontiers of Settlement, vol I. Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, Ltd., 1934. 242 pp.

Morton, Arthur S., A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71.  
London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1939. 698 pp.

Rutherford, Ralph L., Geology and Water Resources in parts  
of the Peace River-Grande Prairie Districts, Alberta.  
Province of Alberta, Geological Survey Division. Edmonton:  
King's Printer, 1930. 68 pp.

Wyatt, F. A., Preliminary Soil Survey of the Peace River - High  
Prairie - Sturgeon Lake Area. Research Council of Alberta,  
Report no 31. Edmonton, 1935. 28 pp.