

MOVING NATURES: Mobility and the Environment in Canadian History Edited by Ben Bradley, Jay Young, and Colin M. Coates

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Seasonality and Mobility in Northern Saskatchewan, 1890–1950

Merle Massie

“The most interesting, the most unusual, and most beautiful holiday I ever had,” declared Christina Bateman, summing up her adventure travelling in the summer of 1919.¹ A young, unmarried clerk at the University of Saskatchewan registrar’s office in Saskatoon, Bateman (then Henry) and her friend Nan McKay, a librarian at the university, decided to take a tourist excursion. Others might have boarded a train to go east to Ontario, west to Banff, or south to the United States, but the women chose to go in an unusual direction: north. Mobility played a major role in their trip. They hopped a train from Saskatoon to Prince Albert (the “gateway to the north”). Billy Bear, a Cree man from the Little Red River First Nation reserve, picked them up in Prince Albert. The three then bounced along the freight trail on a three-day trip in a horse-drawn wagon, through the boreal forest to the south end of Montreal Lake. The women transferred into canoes, now accompanied by experienced Cree guides Adolphus Ross and William Bird,

to traverse the Montreal River. A further four days brought them to Lac La Ronge and Stanley Mission, communities on the old fur trade highway of the Churchill River, in the Canadian Shield. McKay, whose father was the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) factor at La Ronge, had suggested the pair's northern direction. For Christina Henry, the trip was a new and eye-opening experience.²

Henry enthusiastically recorded the excursion in a travel diary and took numerous photographs; her archive offers modern historians a vivid snapshot of an intriguing transitional point in Canadian mobility history. The typical Canadian transportation story—river to railroads—ignores regions and spaces where neither transportation option was available or viable. The following chapter offers a case study of the north Prince Albert region of Saskatchewan, at the edge of the boreal forest. Henry and McKay's northern trip sits at the pivot point of a significant regional change in economic development that changed overland mobility in the area. Through a reading of contemporary maps, oral and local history, newspaper accounts, and advertisements, I trace the impact of seasonality and purpose on overland mobility, both before and after 1919.³ Large tracts of Canada's boreal forest had neither railroads nor rivers suited to large transport. Thus, overland transportation networks that facilitated commodity movement for the purpose of economic development were highly dependent on Canadian seasonality—specifically, winter—to move large loads of heavy goods. By 1919, tourism (and other noncommodity) use of the overland transportation network was starting to appear. Following that transition, roads were modified to reflect the seasonal shift from winter to summer, as well as growing mechanization and vehicle requirements. In the post–Great War period, the rise of summer auto tourism in the boreal forest necessitated physical changes in the transportation network.⁴ This chapter will broadly examine that transition as an example of the critical impact of seasonality and purpose on Canada's growing and changing mobility requirements in the twentieth century.

Indian Affairs as Road Builders? Treaties and Freight Trails

On a cold day in February 1889, at the north end of Montreal Lake in what is now central Saskatchewan, Wood Cree families from Lac La Ronge and Montreal Lake met with representatives of the Crown to sign an adhesion to Treaty 6 after years of requests.⁵ The purpose of the adhesion, from the government's perspective, was to rectify a serious legal error—officials were issuing timber permits throughout the commercial timber basket north of Prince Albert on land that had not yet been ceded through treaty.⁶ Once the treaty was negotiated and signed, officials faced a practical difficulty: the first treaty payment following the adhesion contained heavy agricultural implements, plows, large quantities of food and seed, twine, ammunition, clothing, and other goods.⁷ The only practical transport option was to ship the goods via canoe through Cumberland House and Stanley Mission—a costly proposition given the quantity of goods.

Anglican Archdeacon J.A. Mackay of Prince Albert offered a radical idea: "It would be an immense advantage if the cart road were opened to Montreal Lake. . . . The road has been commenced and I believe about \$200 judiciously spent would complete it."⁸ To suggest that the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) add roadbuilding to its duties was, indeed, radical. Local retailer Hillyard Mitchell, who operated a trading post at Waskesiu, agreed with McKay's assessment. "Until this road is cut," Mitchell declared, "there is no practicable road [from Waskesiu] to Montreal Lake during summer . . . except via Cumberland and Stanley. This is a long distance round and it would pay your Dept. to at once open the road mentioned."⁹ The DIA realized that the cost to finish the road was far less than water transport costs. A road would also facilitate future treaty payments, freight, communication, survey parties, and forestry, creating a direct overland mobility route to circumvent the inconvenience of the natural—but lengthy, expensive, and inadequate—traditional water transport.¹⁰ With the department's financial backing, the road was commissioned and cut, and most of the supplies arrived by wagon to the south end of Montreal Lake in time for the treaty payment in mid-September of 1889.

The HBC immediately grasped the implications of the completed cart trail as a cheaper transportation route to Lac La Ronge and Stanley Mission. The company shipped a small portion of its northern supplies to Prince Albert by rail, then overland using this route as soon as the road was completed. By 1890, the HBC had established a large depot on the southwest shore of Montreal Lake and was shipping all of its northern cache overland via this route.¹¹ Within one year of its establishment, the cart road from Prince Albert to the south end of Montreal Lake became a major north–south artery, used by the HBC, the DIA, local traders, First Nations, and lumbermen.¹²

Winter: Overland Freighting and Seasonality

Overland freighting never became a successful summer activity, despite completion of the cart trail. Boreal forest trails were generally incapable of supporting heavy wagon loads of goods. Indeed, HBC employee Sydney Keighley recalled a particularly brutal stretch of trail near Montreal Lake, where a “wagon entering it immediately sank to the axles. The stretch was corduroyed but the logs were constantly sinking out of sight.”¹³ Christina Henry concurred: Billie Bear had warned them that the last wagon stage to Montreal Lake “was a hard day’s travel, and it was—21 muskegs, rocks, and tree roots. Never had such a bumping in my life.”¹⁴ Shoring up the often-wet and impassable road forced wagon drivers to improvise. “Axes and hatchets were standard traveling equipment in that area, as there was no possibility of getting a load of any weight at all through the muskeg without building impromptu corduroy roads,” Keighley explained.¹⁵ Corduroy roads, created by chopping trees and laying trunks crosswise to form a rude roadbed, were common across boreal Canada. Muskegs—seemingly endless sinkholes of water, sedges, and black, tarry ooze—claimed wagon axles and snapped wheels. Horses, hopelessly stuck in bogs, had to be pulled out by the neck. Black flies and mosquitoes added to the misery of both horse and man.

Not surprisingly, then, freighting on northern boreal trails found its niche as a winter activity. Canadian winters froze water and muskeg to ice, offering a more efficient roadbed. The cart trail became a passable,



FIGURE 4.1. Freight swing with snowplow in northern Saskatchewan, c. 1930. Courtesy of Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan.

even good, winter freight trail and freighters took advantage of natural low-lying—and treeless—features of the landscape.¹⁶ Winter trails designed for horses deliberately crossed flat natural landscapes, easing the passage over muskeg and creeks and providing wide-open highways on the frozen lakes. However, even lakes had their drawbacks. Drifts had to be plowed. Freighters usually travelled in “swings” of several sleighs and horse teams, which gave tremendous force to the plow in front of the lead team, shearing through snowbanks and pressure ridges to create a road. Cracks in the ice and slush holes also presented hazards, particularly after a storm when fresh snow would cover open water. Experienced horses stopped at the first sign of water; others plowed ahead and sank. If a team did go through the ice, it was a struggle to

retrieve both the horses and the load.¹⁷ Even if the horses were successfully pulled out alive, severe frostbite and death would claim them if the freighter was unable to get and keep the animals warm and dry. Through the years, hundreds of horses were lost on the freight trails.¹⁸

Freighters funnelled supplies and commodities for the HBC, its rival Revillon Frères, smaller merchants, the massive lumber camps strung through the north Prince Albert region, and burgeoning commercial fisheries.¹⁹ As with the lumber industry, which relied on winter's seasonality to provide a firm transportation foundation, commercial fishing was a winter occupation. Before mechanized cold storage, fish were caught and then transported frozen. Commercial fishing ebbed and flowed according to profit and environmental constraints—as early as 1909 there were complaints of over-exploitation. Cleaning and packing procedures, the demand created by the Great War, and improvements in cold storage and mechanized transportation led to higher prices and a general expansion of the industry, which remained connected to overland freighting into the 1950s.²⁰

Loads would vary, and the types of supplies hauled by the freighters changed through the years. Before World War I, freight loads tended to favour supplies typical to an HBC post: flour, sugar, tobacco, dry goods, frozen foods, blankets and linens, kerosene and lamps, kitchenware, harness and repair items, and occasionally, canoes or stoves. Items were sacked and crated in large amounts: bags of flour or sugar weighed one hundred pounds each; a drum of gasoline, three hundred pounds. The freighter and his team carried their own supplies as well, from hay and oats to a grub box, bed roll, basic toolbox, and a change of dry clothing. Freighters gauged their loads carefully, depending on the size of the team, the route, and the strength of the sleigh. Large, bulky, and heavy equipment had to be broken up for transport. As gasoline engines became more common, outboard motors and drums of gasoline and oil connected winter freighting with summer requirements. On return trips, freighters loaded up with furs, or boxes of fish, bringing a paying load in both directions. Winter freight roads saw heavy use from firm freeze-up in early December to spring thaw, which ranged between mid-March and mid-April.

As an example of the scale of the freighting industry, in January 1919, sixteen teams—fully loaded with outbound supplies—left Prince Albert *in one day*.²¹ Other large swings left during the following weeks. Throughout each winter, the Prince Albert *Daily Herald* reported on the departure and arrival of freight swings, conditions along the trails and across the lakes, and news from the northern communities. No one took a northern freight trip for granted; blizzards, trouble on the trail, bad road conditions (slush, open water, ice heaves), broken equipment, and the potential for disaster weighed heavily. Although seasonality usually provided an efficient winter roadbed, harsh weather could more than counterbalance those advantages.

Rise of Tourism: Seasonality and the Shift to Summer

The functional infrastructure of trails leading north led to a seasonal shift in their use. Christina Henry and Nan McKay made their trip north in 1919 by following the winter freight trails. Luckily, their trip was possible in part because 1919 was a very dry year; the road was passable—just—if bumpy and full of muskegs and crossed by the devastation of that spring’s legendary forest fires.²² Nonetheless, Henry and McKay’s trip marks a divisional point in mobility: they used freighting knowledge and equipment provided by Billy Bear, who operated a winter freighting outfit, but they funnelled that assistance towards a new, tourist gaze that shifted the use of the trails from winter to summer. Both aspects—seasonality and use—are significant.

The Dominion land surveyor M.C. McCloskey, who surveyed the north Prince Albert region for postwar soldier settlement, remarked on the state of the roads.²³ He defined a road by its ability—at least in dry weather—to permit “motor traffic,” or automobiles, as opposed to horse-drawn conveyances. McCloskey’s observations recognized the growing transportation shift to personal automobiles across Canada. Moving north of the city, motor traffic roads deteriorated to “wagon trails,” or merely “trails.”²⁴ J. Woods of City Auto Livery in Prince Albert tested the condition of those trails in 1920. Woods drove past the agricultural settlements up the freight trail as far north as he could go “and succeeded in reaching a point within 20 miles of Montreal Lake.

This is considered to be the most northerly point in the province yet reached by an automobile.” The trail, according to Woods, was “pretty bad,” particularly the last fifteen miles (24 kilometres). In total, he travelled ninety-three miles (149 kilometres) over the seven-hour return trip. The *Daily Herald* went on to proclaim, “The trip is another evidence of the invasion of the northern territories by the advancement of progressive civilization, which is gradually bringing settlements, at one time considered remote, in easy contact with the city.”²⁵ Woods would have used the same trail taken by Henry and McKay in 1919. Whereas the women’s trip blended traditional transportation (horse and wagon, then canoe) with tourism, Woods’s trip—partly as an advertisement of his business, which rented cars to motorists for short-term jaunts—introduced modern motor tourism to the north Prince Albert landscape: “going for a drive” as a recreational outing. Both parties, however, brought tourism firmly through a seasonal shift to summer use of the winter freight trails. They also connected the transportation network to leisure and recreation, as opposed to extractive resource development or the simple freighting of goods.

While McCloskey assessed the roads, he also appraised the local lakes for their location, water depth, fishing potential, and scenic beauty. He singled out Emma Lake—located off the freight trail and thus not seen by either Henry or Woods—as “beautifully situated among rolling hills,” with “all the features desirable for a summer resort.”²⁶ Although the freight trail passed it by, the land around the southern portions of Emma and its sister lake, Christopher, were starting to be settled by homesteaders or leased by trappers.²⁷ Accessible only by locally known paths, both lakes began to attract interest as recreation destinations in the post-World War I period. In September 1920, a correspondent to Prince Albert’s *Daily Herald* reported a local couple and their baby spending a weekend at “Lake Emma.”²⁸ By the mid-1920s, the lakes had become popular with local residents.²⁹

Increased mobility due to automobiles led visitors from Prince Albert and farther afield to Emma and Christopher lakes. G.A. Crowley of Northside urged the Department of the Interior in 1925 to make a surveyed road to Christopher Lake for tourists. The lake, Crowley wrote, “has the prospect of being one of the Greatest Summer Resorts

in Saskatchewan. I've counted as many as 38 cars to this Lake on one Sunday and road not fit for a team on account of hummock and temporary corduroy for about four miles south of lake. . . . Cars run on low gear and are pulled or pushed through low places."³⁰ If the road was "not fit for a team" of horses, then it is no wonder that cars were having difficulty. The conceptual redevelopment of the north Prince Albert region as a tourism destination required a spirit of adventure, as demonstrated by those who put their cars through kilometres of mud to reach their destination. Their predicament showed the drawbacks of the shift to summer use of boreal trails. Residents and visitors demanded the roads be improved to accommodate motor cars. As tourism began to boom—despite the state of the trails—the trappers and homesteaders who owned lakeshore property soon built camping, boating, and bathing facilities, improved access, and provided services.³¹

Developing Tourism—"Like Any Other Industry"

During the 1920s, tourist recreation rocketed to public consciousness across North America in conjunction with the spread of motor vehicles and improved roads.³² This surge of interest reflected a change in social expectations, leisure time, and modest affluence. It was no longer necessary to be a member of the upper class to enjoy a holiday. The advent of motorcars, tents, and other camping supplies left over from the war effort, and a growing road network, encouraged the rise of auto tourism among those with a modest budget. As the 1922 annual report from Canadian National Parks Commissioner J.B. Harkin noted with pleasure and expectation, "the prosperity that has followed the building of motor highways has convinced everyone that tourist travel pays, and that it can be developed like any other industry."³³

Harkin had expressed an appropriate assessment: tourism was an industry. As pointed out by historian Aaron Shapiro, tourism—despite being rooted in landscape—was not a natural product. Rather, it was "developed, managed, and packaged by people and organizations," particularly on a large scale.³⁴ One of the most convenient ways to package and sell landscape was to promote it to those for whom it provided an experience in sharp contrast to everyday life. In most cases, landscape

tourism appealed most strongly to urbanites. By 1921, Canada found half of its population residing in relatively urbanized centres (from small to large), working waged or salaried positions with set hours and specified leisure time. Excursions to nearby lakes or resorts—for day trips, weekends, or a few weeks—became affordable mini-holidays that could be taken with little preparation and modest investment.³⁵ Brochures, maps, films, and information promoting tourist destinations in national and provincial parks, forestry reserves, and other “natural” areas were distributed in cities to receptive audiences.³⁶

Saskatchewan, however, bucked the urbanization trend, with 70 per cent of the province’s population living in rural areas in 1921.³⁷ “Urban jungle” rhetoric gained little traction in Saskatchewan. Recreating the north Prince Albert landscape as a tourism destination depended largely on exploiting Saskatchewan’s north-south ecological divide by imagining the north as the “playground of the prairies.” As Prince Albert MLA T.C. Davis commented in the Saskatchewan legislature in 1925, few people—from Saskatchewan or from other parts of Canada—had ever been north of the prairie to experience Saskatchewan’s own “beauty spot” of the northern boreal forest.³⁸ Prince Albert merchants used the inherent contrasts of this mental image to brand the north as a new vacationland, targeting prairie dwellers to discover and explore the forested, green, and watered northern boreal landscape on their own doorstep. For Prince Albert businessmen, supplying the new tourist trade—providing food, camping equipment, boat rentals, fishing tackle, gasoline, bathing suits, and rental cottages—would offset the losses experienced by the end of the lumber industry, which had collapsed after the fires of 1919. Prince Albert businessmen refocused their energy to capitalize on the northern landscape in *two* seasons: through resource extraction and freighting of fish, furs, and goods to and from the prairie market during the winter and the promotion of tourism to prairie residents during the summer.

Politics and Parkmaking: Prince Albert National Park

Despite the growing popularity of Emma and Christopher lakes, the main tourist destination in the north Prince Albert landscape was the Sturgeon River Forest Reserve, which began west of Emma Lake and covered several townships to the north, to surround Waskesiu Lake.³⁹ The Department of the Interior, through its forestry branch, promoted the increasing public connection between forest reserves and recreation across the Dominion following World War I. Interest focused on the domestic, everyday experiences of camping—hiking, photography, tenting, canoeing, cooking, eating ice cream, swimming, boating, and fishing—rather than visits to grand vistas or waterfalls. To facilitate the growing demand, the Forest Service began to provide camping and picnic facilities.⁴⁰ It also spent more energy on road maintenance by installing culverts and bridges, hauling gravel to build up roadbeds, clearing trees and creating ditches for drainage, and posting directional signage to encourage this new motor traffic.⁴¹ After all, it would reflect badly on the tourist experience if a group of expectant visitors spent their entire day pushing and pulling their car from bog to bog instead of relaxing at the lake.

As local reports indicated, despite municipal demands and efforts, the roads heading north were often quagmires of mud throughout the summer—the main tourist season.⁴² As interest grew in developing the forest reserve for tourism, its roads became the centre of attention. In 1925, local resident O.M. Lundlie led a party that toured up to Waskesiu. He reported that the roads “for the first 50 miles were good average trails on which 20 miles an hour could be travelled comfortably; but the remainder of the journey was heavy going.” Clearly, there had been little change since Woods’s 1920 journey, except that the destination was Waskesiu, not Montreal Lake. Forestry officials were hard at work on road improvements, “making a ‘dandy’ job,” Lundlie declared.⁴³

Lundlie’s visit to the forest reserve put a voice to a particular movement: namely, Prince Albert’s business elite wanted to change the forest reserve into a national park. Lundlie enthusiastically exclaimed that “in Red Deer Lake [Waskesiu], Prince Albert has an Asset which will More Than Repay Development.” The article declared that the lake would

be an “Ideal Site for a Saskatchewan Banff.”⁴⁴ A “Saskatchewan Banff” carried connotations that had nothing to do with mountains and everything to do with recreation and tourism, particularly the mercenary desire to capitalize on the summer tourist trade. Saskatchewan farmers, in the summer lull between spring seeding and harvest, could find refreshment and relaxation fishing and camping at the northern lakes, while urban residents with weekends and holiday time could flee the hot concrete jungle for the cool green north. The “playground of the prairies” concept took hold.

Prince Albert politicians and businessmen knew that a national park required greater federal involvement than did a forest reserve. It would elicit the financial resources to build infrastructure (roads, bridges, campsites) and create an advertising campaign. Local merchants would be able to ride the tourism wave, but with less effort on their own part. Thus, they pursued the national park idea with vigour, and it was then given a particular boost by political circumstance. In the fall of 1925, Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King lost his Ontario seat in the general election. The Prince Albert candidate, Charles McDonald, had won his seat handily. McDonald agreed to step aside to enable Mackenzie King to run. As was common in such cases, the local Liberals presented Mackenzie King with a “shopping list” of demands in return for a successful by-election, one of which was the creation of a new national park. Once elected, Mackenzie King formally requested at a cabinet meeting in May 1926 that a park be created in Saskatchewan.⁴⁵

The placement of the park presented the only stumbling block. National park officials were unconvinced that the Sturgeon River Forest Reserve was sufficiently beautiful to merit a park. An internal memorandum suggested instead that the Lac La Ronge region—the area visited by Henry and McKay in 1919—would be more suitable. “Before a successful national park can be created, you must have a natural park. The territory lying north of and within easy reach of Prince Albert is not naturally a park country, so it requires a critical selection to choose any area which might form a satisfactory national park.” In contrast, “the territory in the Lac La Ronge district and north is much more attractive.”⁴⁶ Prince Albert advocates were appalled. Such a park would be beyond the city’s reach. In fact, it would be beyond anyone’s

reach, as no roads existed farther north than the south end of Montreal Lake—and that trail, as proved by Henry, Woods, and Lundlie, had become progressively worse. Indeed, it was unfit for the needs of summer tourist motor traffic. The only tourists able to access a park at La Ronge would be occasional canoe adventurers such as Henry with ample time to make the trip, or those able to pay for a floatplane flight, not the far more lucrative weekend car excursionists or cottage leaseholders. This fact gave the Prince Albert group leverage in their fight to create a park closer to Prince Albert. Not only did a national park need to have “scenic wonders and beauties in sufficient abundance,” but promoters argued that it also must be “sufficiently accessible.” By 1926, accessibility was measured by the ability of the public to get there using motor roads.⁴⁷ And, if the forest reserve area was not sufficiently beautiful in itself, it was *when compared to* the open plains of the south. Its beauty relied on contrast. During the opening of Prince Albert National Park in 1928, one visitor wrote, “To many people the word ‘Saskatchewan’ calls up a mind picture of great stretches of open prairie, unrelieved by lake or forest. To them a description of the beauties of the new Prince Albert National Park will come as a surprise.”⁴⁸ Enough “surprise,” it was hoped, to entice a visit.

Roadbuilding: Breaking the Seasonal Hold

After the Great War, although tourism was surging, Prince Albert also saw its fishing, freighting, and mining industries explode as part of the northern “boom” of the 1920s and 1930s. Historian Liza Piper has documented this expansive period in northern Canada. In contrast to the dust and devastation in southern agricultural and manufacturing regions, the north experienced “a period of economic growth and expansion” during these decades. This story, Piper argues, “inverts classic accounts of the impact of the Great Depression in the Canadian west”; the north followed its own “economic trajectory.”⁴⁹ Increased commercial fishing and extensive mining development—including the creation of Flin Flon in Manitoba in the 1920s and Goldfields at Lake Athabasca in Saskatchewan’s far north during the 1930s—brought a measure of prosperity through extractive industrial development. Communities at

the forest fringe, tied to northern resource development through employment, freighting opportunities, and provision of foodstuffs, experienced significant economic growth.

The boom was not just economic; it was also visual and aural. At railway points such as Big River and Prince Albert, the noise was deafening. Freighter John Brooks recalled a typical scene: "It was the third week in November, 1928 and the town [Big River] was a hive of activity." With each train, people and goods flowed into the town, a popular northern depot. Commercial fishermen, freighters, and "tie hackers" who cut railway ties "were everywhere getting lined up for a job, getting their winter gear or just waiting for enough ice to travel. Blacksmiths were a busy lot, their anvils' ringing could be heard at all the major Companies' barns where horses were being shod all round in readiness for the freight road."⁵⁰ Brooks's vivid description underscored both the economic consequences of the northern boom and its reliance on seasonality; "waiting for enough ice to travel" indicates the impact of cold weather on human mobility within a wet boreal landscape. Industrial development and associated freight transport were, in the north Prince Albert region, winter occupations.

The state of the winter freight roads, though, left much to be desired for the new summer tourist traffic. To make the new national park viable, the road had to be drivable in sunshine and in rain all the way to and through the park. National and provincial governments worked in concert—the province from Prince Albert to the park gate, the federal government from the park gate to the main commercial development at Waskesiu. The seasonal shift to summer tourism needs dictated not just some upgrades, but a completely new tourism highway. The original Montreal Lake freight trail ran directly through Little Red River reserve before entering the Sturgeon River Forest Reserve—it did not pass either Christopher Lake or Emma Lake. Tourism-based businesses around those two lakes petitioned the provincial government to move the road. They wanted the new route to run straight north from Prince Albert along the settlement highway and then turn abruptly west along the fourteenth baseline. This proposed road would effectively serve two purposes: first, it would move the road closer to the burgeoning resorts; second, it would follow the road allowance rights-of-way as defined by

sectional surveys as opposed to the original cart and freight trails that snaked through the bush. The provincial government acquiesced.⁵¹

Within the new park, the road also changed. The winter freight trail deliberately connected low-lying areas that were easy to freight across in winter, such as streams, muskegs, and small lakes. In contrast, the engineer routed the new tourism road over high hills and dry ground and designed it “with as many curves as possible” to give the illusion of scenic wonder.⁵² A map of the forest reserve made sometime between 1925 and 1928 shows both the original freight trail and, hand-drawn in ink, the new road. This map visually records the physical modification of existing transportation trails to accommodate the new, tourism-based summer vehicle requirements. The new road, which crossed and recrossed the old freight trail, had a different agenda. It wove along the edge of Sandy Lake, offering tourists their first view of a major lake within the new national park. Where the freight trail closely followed the watercourse of the Spruce River, the new tourist road took to the high ground. It also had a new destination. Where the old trail broke off several miles south of the burgeoning Waskesiu resort to head off to Montreal Lake, the new road was built directly to its terminus: the cottage development at the lake.

Throughout the 1930s, both trails—the summer tourist highway over high ground, with its scenic hills and vistas, and the old freight road over low ground, marsh, and along the Spruce River—continued to see extensive use depending on the season. Visitor registrations skyrocketed at Prince Albert National Park: over 5,000 people visited the park in 1928; in 1929, that number doubled. In 1930, registrations almost doubled again, but those records were shattered in 1931, when a staggering 29,537 tourists visited the park.⁵³ Freight swings of horses or, by the end of the 1920s, caterpillar tractors continued to haul heavy goods primarily in winter.⁵⁴ Those who advocated both the park and the improved road system had envisioned this dual purpose of tourism and commercial development: “completion of this road system may well prove the initial, yet most significant, step in the development of the whole northern area of the province . . . [with] mining, timber, fish, fur and power resources likely to be as inspiring and expansive as that which marked agricultural development of Saskatchewan’s fertile

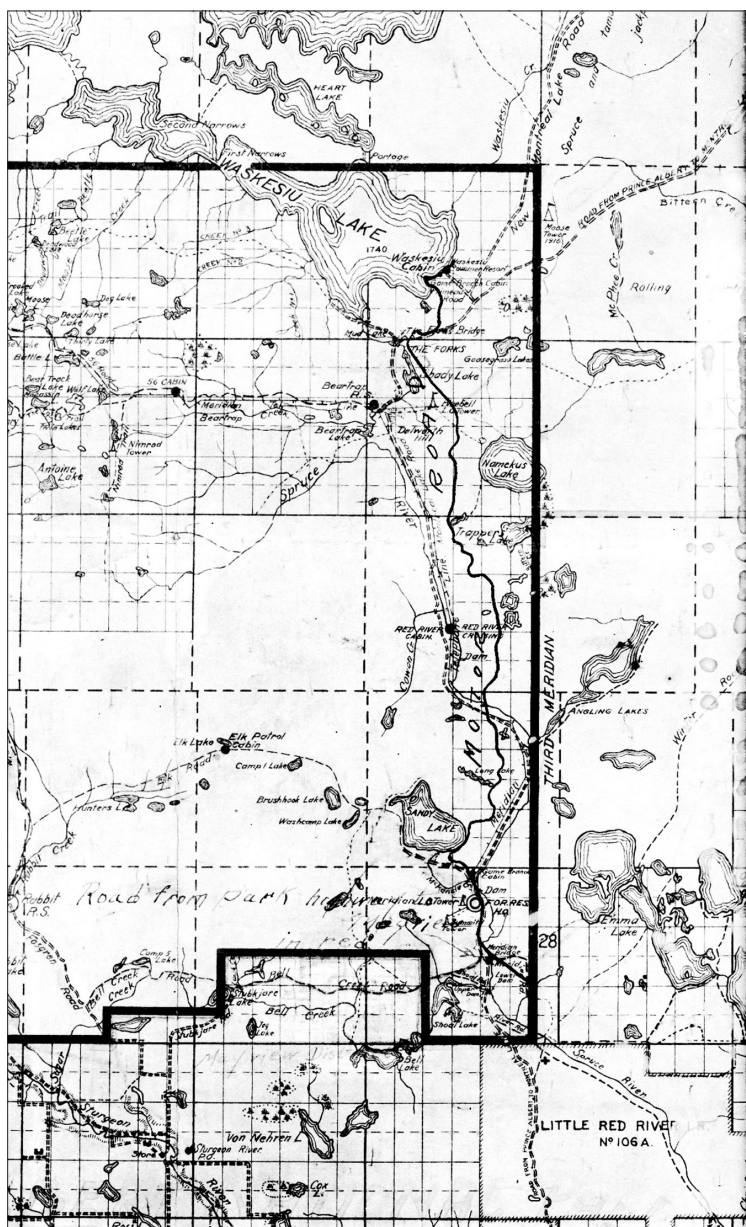


FIGURE 4.2. Sturgeon River Forest Reserve map, c. 1925. The dotted line shows original freight trail(s), while hand-drawn additions (c. 1928) show the new, curving motor road. The new provincial road is not shown, but it hooked directly onto the park road at the Third Meridian, passing just south of Emma Lake. Courtesy of Friends of Prince Albert National Park.

prairie belt.”⁵⁵ Water transportation using the natural river systems was abandoned. Waterways were re-envisioned—as sites of power generation, or of canoe recreation “with the charm of unspoiled country with the romance of the early days of the fur trade,” enticing tourists on adventures.⁵⁶

During the winter, horse freighters usually avoided the tourist highway, with its scenic but useless curves and hauls up and down hills, except when nature intervened. The winter of 1934 brought exceptionally bad winter conditions. That fall, heavy snows fell before muskegs or lakes had a chance to freeze. A harrowing report from Prince Albert described the freighters as “struggling in waist-deep snow. . . . Muskegs covered with heavy snow are still unfrozen and provide no footing of ice to hold the heavy loads. Progress is limited to only a few hundred yards a day.” Delay to the heavy-laden supply sleighs meant hardship at La Ronge, as “living costs have skyrocketed . . . , air freight rates being much higher than those charged by the overland freighters” and waterways useless in the depths of winter. Poor environmental conditions meant that caterpillar tractors could not be used, as they would sink. “Swings are made up entirely of teams of horses, floundering and stumbling through the deep slush of water and snow. Foot by foot they have crept on to their destination with gunny sacks bound about the legs of the animals to protect them from the serrated crusts of snow and ice.”⁵⁷ That winter, freighters used the summer tourist highway because it had a firmer roadbed despite its curves and steep grades. At the highway’s end, the swings were in trouble. Creeping along in deep snow, hacking down trees and trying to find good footing away from muskegs and lakes slowed the freighters’ progress almost to a standstill.

The situation placed excessive pressure on northern communities, where shortages were soon severe. A letter from the Indian Residential School Commission—an organization within the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada—to the DIA outlined the grave nature of the problem. The commission requested that the DIA put pressure on the Minister of the Interior for help in constructing an “all-weather road” from Waskesiu to Montreal Lake and initiate a corduroy road overland from that community to La Ronge.⁵⁸ No longer was it acceptable to rely on seasonality and winter to provide a frozen

roadbed; nature could not be trusted. Jurisdictional issues between the federal and provincial governments, as well as the overwhelming needs of the prairie south during the Depression, stalled northern roadbuilding. Freighters continued to ply the primitive winter trails past Waskesiu with horses or caterpillar tractors.

Caterpillar—or cat—tractors revolutionized northern transport. Cat tractors were efficient; unlike horses, they could run day and night and did not require rest. They could also pull far more freight provided the road was sufficiently strong to accommodate the weight. A small cat tractor could pull thirty tons of frozen fish or other goods while pushing a plow to open a road; another cat immediately behind on the clear road could haul even more. One caterpillar could pull two or three sleighs, depending on their size, weight, and the terrain. A strong horse team with a single sleigh could only pull between two to four tons, depending on road and weather conditions. Grades were no longer an issue; cat tractors could pull up and down hills with more ease than horses. Through the national park, the cat tractors could use the tourist road, compacting and improving it. Cats had another advantage: they were also used in summer to improve and expand northern road networks. The outbreak of World War II initiated a renewed interest in northern road development.⁵⁹ Mennonite conscientious objectors, brought to work camps at Prince Albert National Park, built a road first to Montreal Lake and then in 1948 to La Ronge, the first serious modern road efforts past Waskesiu.⁶⁰ The freight trail, originally built for horses, was gradually abandoned.

As roads improved and mechanization replaced horse swings, transportation began to break its seasonal restrictions. All-weather roads, graded in summer and cleared of snow in winter, went hand in hand with a modern transportation revolution. Postwar mechanization and industrialization transformed northern mobility, and in many cases reliance on seasonality to provide a frozen winter roadbed receded to the most remote and inaccessible parts of the boreal forest and tundra. Between 1920 and 1950, the original freight trails in the north Prince Albert area—built for resource extraction and the transportation of large quantities of bulk goods—were replaced by extensive road construction ventures that sought to create transportation networks

unbounded by seasonal restrictions. Winter and summer, modern trucks and semi-trailers plied the roads, alongside cars full of tourists eager for a northern adventure among the lakes and trees.

Today, the abandoned freight trails have come full circle. Within Prince Albert National Park, the old “freight trail” is used as a hiking and biking trail in summer and as a cross-country ski trail in winter. Freight trails outside the park boundaries continue to be used by forestry and firefighting units, hunters and berrypickers, fishermen, and (during the winter) snowmobilers who took over the old freight trails to develop extensive groomed routes. In the late 1960s, Saskatchewan extended Highway 2 from Prince Albert to La Ronge through an all-new route that avoided the park. The 1928 “tourism” highway was reclassified as the winding “scenic route” (Highway 263) from the Christopher Lake corner to Waskesiu. As a result, three levels of mobility corridors now exist in the north Prince Albert landscape: the original commercial freight trails, now largely used by hikers, skiers, and snowmobilers for recreational purposes; the tourism highway through the park to Waskesiu, avoided by large trucks and relegated to secondary status as a “scenic route” for tourists with time to spare for driving the curving, rolling road; and the new, modern all-weather highway, built for heavy purposes such as logging and pulp trucks, large-scale mining, and transport. This layered mobility landscape reinforces the importance of purpose as a key indicator of use.

Conclusion

Changes in overland transportation across the boreal forest region north of Prince Albert provide a representative case study of the broader, complex changes in mobility in Canada. While originally created and used as seasonally dependent winter transport corridors for resource extraction and movement of goods, freight trails were recategorized as tourist roads in the post–Great War era. Christina Henry and Nan McKay’s adventurous seven-day tourist trip from Prince Albert to La Ronge exemplified the opening of the boreal forest to the summer tourist gaze. In the interwar era, tourism grew alongside northern resource extraction and freighting, bringing a dual seasonality of winter

and summer to questions of mobility. Technical advances in both automobiles and road construction meant that infrastructure investment was closely tied to economic use and perception. In time, mobility broke the reliance on seasonality and created a “layered” landscape intimately tied to human use of the landscape.

Notes

- 1 Christina Bateman, “Northern Saskatchewan Holiday,” Christina Bateman fonds, A-281, Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon (hereafter SAB). Bateman’s typewritten document and its accompanying photographs can be found online, at the government website *Our Legacy*, database ID 27383, <http://scaa.usask.ca/ourlegacy/permalink/27383>. See also Duff Spafford et al., “The Amazing Adventures of Christina and Nan,” *Saskatchewan History* 63, no. 2 (2011): 14–33.
- 2 Bateman, “Northern Saskatchewan Holiday.” After a stay in La Ronge, Henry and McKay travelled by canoe along the Churchill River system to The Pas and then returned to Saskatoon by train.
- 3 On northern transportation, see C.S. Mackinnon, “Some Logistics of Portage La Loche (Methy),” reprinted in Greg Marchildon, ed., *The Early Northwest* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2008); Frank Tough, “As *Their Natural Resources Fail*”: *Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996); Jim Mochoruk, *Formidable Heritage: Manitoba’s North and the Cost of Development, 1870–1930* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2004); and David Quiring, *CCF Colonialism in Northern Saskatchewan: Battling Parish Priests, Bootleggers, and Fur Sharks* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004). The best analysis of transportation throughout the subarctic fringe is Liza Piper, *The Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009). See also Svein Sigfusson, *Sigfusson’s Roads* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1992).
- 4 Three interdependent ideas about mobility as identified by sociologist John Urry are particularly useful for this essay: first, the movement of objects (goods); second, the corporeal movement of people (particularly for leisure and escape); and third, the concept of imaginative travel, where the north Prince Albert boreal landscape was either a remote, difficult, and sometimes malevolent entity thwarting the efforts of freighters or a “wilderness sublime” destination for prairie travellers. John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007).
- 5 On Treaty 6 adhesion, see Arthur J. Ray, Jim Miller, and Frank Tough, *Bounty and Benevolence: A Documentary History of Saskatchewan Treaties* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000); Peter

- Goode, Joan Champ, and Leslie Amundson, *The Montreal Lake Region: Its History and Geography* (Prince Albert: Prince Albert Model Forest Association/Sentar Consultants, 1996). See also J.R. Miller, *Compact, Contract, Covenant: Aboriginal Treaty-Making in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- 6 Edgar Dewdney to Indian commissioner Hayter Reed, 6 December 1888, file 1754, vol. 3601, RG 10, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (hereafter LAC).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 J.A. Mackay to Hayter Reed, 20 May 1889, file 1754, vol. 3601, RG 10, LAC.
- 9 Hillyard Mitchell to Hayter Reed, 24 June 1889, file 1754, vol. 3601, RG 10, LAC.
- 10 Hayter Reed to Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs in Ottawa, July 1889, file 1754, vol. 3601, RG 10, LAC.
- 11 Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan's Playground: A History of Prince Albert National Park* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1989), 7. See also historical materials on the HBC post at Red Deer Lake cited in Waiser, *Saskatchewan's Playground*, 136–37. The HBC also moved its post to Montreal Lake and began operations at this new location, effectively making the post at Waskesiu redundant. By 1893, it had been closed. See James Shortt, *A Survey of the Human History of Prince Albert National Park, 1887–1945*, Parks Canada Manuscript Report No. 239 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1977), 7–8.
- 12 The trail soon became the leading north–south highway, facilitating exploitation and colonization of the north by southern economic, cultural, and political forces. See Quiring, *CCF Colonialism*; and Kenneth Coates and William Morrison, *The Forgotten North: A History of Canada's Provincial Norths* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1992).
- 13 Sydney Augustus Keighley, *Trader, Tripper, Trapper: The Life of a Bay Man* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1989), 64.
- 14 Bateman, “Northern Saskatchewan Holiday.”
- 15 Keighley, *Trader, Tripper, Trapper*, 64.
- 16 Ed Theriau and Patricia Armstrong, “Horses,” in *Lost Land of the Caribou* ([n.p.]: 1978), accessed 14 January 2015, <http://www.jkcc.com/horses.html>; Big River History Book Committee, “Freight Swing Era,” in *Timber Trails: History of Big River and District* (Big River, SK: Big River Historical Society, 1979), accessed 14 January 2015, <http://www.jkcc.com/bfrfreight.html>.
- 17 Anne-Marie DiLilla, “Freighting,” in *A Look at the Past: A History of Dore Lake, Saskatchewan* (Dore Lake, SK: Dore Lake Historical Society, 1983), accessed 14 January 2015, <http://www.jkcc.com/dlffreight.html>.
- 18 Ibid. See also the family entry “Hale—Stanley and Millie,” in Paddockwood Historical Society, *Cordwood and Courage: 1911–1982* (Paddockwood, SK: Paddockwood and District Historical Society, 1983), 242.

- 19 Piper, *Industrial Transformation*, 48–50.
- 20 Gary Seymour, “A Geographical Study of the Commercial Fishing Industry in Northern Saskatchewan: An Example of Resource Development” (MA thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1971), 15–19.
- 21 Local and General (column), *Prince Albert Daily Herald* (hereafter *Daily Herald*), 15 January 1919.
- 22 Local and General, *Daily Herald*, 28 April 1919; 4 June 1919; and 12 June 1919. See also Bateman, “Northern Saskatchewan Holiday.”
- 23 M.D. McCloskey to E.E. Deville, 30 March 1921, R-183 I.290, Department of the Interior fonds, SAB.
- 24 “Report of Township 51, Range 25, West of the 2nd Mer.,” n.d., and “Report of Township 53, Range 25 West of 2nd Mer.,” n.d., both at R-183 I.290, SAB.
- 25 “To Montreal Lake,” *Daily Herald*, 12 October 1920.
- 26 “Report of Township 51”; “Report of Township 53.”
- 27 See Cummins Map Company, 1922 and 1930, map no. Sask. 258, SAB.
- 28 “Northside,” *Daily Herald*, 11 September 1920.
- 29 “Paddockwood,” *Daily Herald*, 8 August 1925. See also J. Hardouin General Report, 15 April 1921, R-183 I.222, SAB.
- 30 G.A. Crowley to Department of the Interior, 20 April 1925, file 27107-4, part 1, vol. 7766, RG 10, LAC.
- 31 *Daily Herald*, 7 August 1931.
- 32 On the rise of motor tourism in North America, see Amy Larin, “A Rough Ride: Automobiles in Banff National Park, 1905–1918,” *Alberta History* 56, no. 1 (2008): 2–9; Michael Dawson, “Taking the ‘D’ out of Depression: The Promise of Tourism in British Columbia, 1935–1939,” *BC Studies*, no. 132 (2001): 31–59; Alisa Apostle, “Canada, Vacations Unlimited” (Ph.D. diss., Queen’s University, 2003); and David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness: Cars, Roads and Nature in Washington’s National Parks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).
- 33 “Report of the Commissioner J.B. Harkin, Canadian National Parks,” in Canada, Department of the Interior, *Annual Report* (Ottawa, 1922).
- 34 Aaron Shapiro, “Up North on Vacation: Tourism and Resorts in Wisconsin’s North Woods,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 29, no. 4 (2006), 8. See also John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990); and Mimi Sheller and John Urry, eds., *Tourism Mobilities: Places to Play, Places in Play* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 35 “Forestry Division,” in Canada, Department of the Interior, *Annual Report* (Ottawa, 1924).
- 36 The Department of the Interior was largely responsible for tourism literature on a national level. The National Resources Intelligence Service compiled and created tourist information for both the National Parks and Forestry Branch. See Canada, Department of the Interior, *Annual Report* (Ottawa, 1926), 23–25.

- 37 See Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005), 498, table ("Urban and Rural Population of Saskatchewan").
- 38 See "Speech delivered by Mr. T.C. Davis, MLA Prince Albert in the Debate on the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne in the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, 7 December 1925," in Saskatchewan, Legislative Assembly, *Sessional Papers*, 1925.
- 39 The Dominion government established the Sturgeon River Forest Reserve in 1914, on lands east of the Sturgeon River to the Third Meridian, south including much of Township 53, and north to Township 57.
- 40 The forestry department laid out resort areas at Clear Lake in Manitoba and at points in British Columbia in the early 1920s; similar work was carried out in Saskatchewan between 1922 and 1925.
- 41 "Report by C. MacFadyen, District Forest Inspector, Dominion Forests in Saskatchewan," in Canada, Department of the Interior, *Annual Report* (Ottawa, 1926), 75–78.
- 42 "Roads Wanted," *Daily Herald*, 4 March 1916; Local and General, *Daily Herald*, 28 August 1919; "Bittern Creek," *Daily Herald*, 5 July 1923.
- 43 "Ideal Site for a Saskatchewan Banff," *Daily Herald*, 4 July 1925.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 The overview is drawn from Waiser, *Saskatchewan's Playground*, 25–35.
- 46 F.H. Peters to J.B. Harkin, 27 October 1926, memorandum to file, vol. 1726, Parks Canada fonds, LAC.
- 47 J.B. Harkin, 26 April 1926, quoted in John Webb, "Forward: Legal Surveys of Prince Albert National Park, Waskesiu, Saskatchewan" (unpublished document, n.d.), S2000-51, S-Q80, SAB.
- 48 "Message from W.J. Patterson," *Daily Herald*, 2 August 1928. For a discussion of mental maps, see Peter Gould and Rodney White, *Mental Maps* (New York: Penguin, 1974).
- 49 Piper, *Industrial Transformation*, 81.
- 50 John A. Brooks, *Strange Hunters: Life and Adventures in Northern Saskatchewan during the 1920s and 30s* (Port Alberni, BC: Coast Printers, 1982), 9.
- 51 Saskatchewan, Department of the Environment, *A Study of Land and Water Use at Emma and Christopher Lakes* (Regina, 1976), 45.
- 52 Waiser, *Saskatchewan's Playground*, 42.
- 53 National Parks Branch reports, in Canada, Department of the Interior, *Annual Report* (Ottawa, 1928–1935).
- 54 Air travel was also increasing post-1920. See advertisement for Brooks Airways, *Daily Herald*, 9 July 1929.
- 55 J. Uhrich quoted in *Daily Herald*, 2 August 1928.
- 56 Canada, Department of the Interior, *Vacations in Canada: A Handbook of Information for Tourists and Sportsmen*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa, 1929).

- 57 Special Dispatch from Prince Albert, *Winnipeg Free Press*, 16 January 1934; "Road from PA National Park to La Ronge," n.d., file 23107-12, vol. 7732, RG 10, LAC.
- 58 Indian Residential School Commission of the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada to Department of Indian Affairs, 27 January 1934, file 23107-12, vol. 7732, RG 10, LAC.
- 59 See *The Alaska Highway: A Yukon Perspective* (website), accessed 14 January 2015, <http://www.alaskahighwayarchives.ca>.
- 60 Bill Waiser, *Park Prisoners: The Untold Story of Western Canada's National Parks, 1915–1946* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1995), 129–74.