

# **Chapter 1- Conditions Prior to Settlement**

## **The Land and Its Resources**

In 1870, just three years after Confederation, the government of Canada acquired the vast tract of land in Western Canada known as Rupert's Land. The exclusive commercial domain of Rupert's Land had been granted to the Hudson Bay Company by the English Crown some 200 years earlier. It had been governed by the Hudson's Bay Company solely for the benefit of the fur trade ever since. The amount of land acquired from the Hudson's Bay company, almost seven million acres, was seven times larger than Canada had been in 1867, and almost one third the size of present day Canada.<sup>1 23</sup> The idea behind this land transfer was that Rupert's Land would become the home for millions of immigrants from all corners of the world.

The government of Canada began a concerted effort to recruit people first from central and eastern Canada and later from Europe to settle its newly acquired lands in the west. Canada's initial attempts to attract settlers produced only meagre results primarily because the necessary infrastructure for settlement in western Canada was not yet in place and many of the prospective settlers were choosing not to stay in Canada, but instead, choosing to go to the United States. By the early 1890's several small communities had been established in east central Saskatchewan, and a growing number of people were settling in the area.

In order to understand and appreciate the lives of those who came to the Theodore area in the last decade of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century, it is necessary to have an idea of the conditions that existed in the area at that time and the effect those conditions had on the lives of those who first settled in or near Theodore. Two of the factors that must be

considered are the nature of the land around Theodore, and the natural resources that enabled the early settlers to survive and thrive at Theodore.

## **The Land Around Theodore**

There are only a few descriptions of the land around Theodore that date from the times of the earliest settlers. In 1886 and 1888 the Manitoba and North Western Railway (M&NWR) printed guide books in which the land that had been granted to it was described as, “some of the finest land in Manitoba and the North-West, and extends from the shores of Lake Manitoba to the Quill Lakes, a distance of some 300 miles.”<sup>4</sup> These guide books contained a general description of each township as far west of the second meridian and range six, just a few miles east of the village of Theodore.

It does not appear that land west of range six had been subdivided into sections when the handbooks were published. However, the guide books do refer to the region as Parkland and give a general description of the land as well wooded and watered with a heavy band of timber extending the whole distance from Minnedosa to Prince Albert.<sup>5</sup>

A second description appeared when *The Yorkton Enterprise* reprinted an article from *The Manitoba Free Press* which described the land around Theodore in 1910. Again, references were made to a park-like appearance of the district and the innumerable bluffs and clumps of young poplar trees that were common at the time. Mention was also made of the abundance of grasses of all kinds and the claim was made that the soil consisted of the black loam, averaging two feet in depth, with underlaying clay subsoil.<sup>6</sup> The claim that the black loam was two feet thick may be a bit of an exaggeration as the organic deposits in the soils in the Rural Municipality of Insinger are

generally considered to be about 40 cm. thick.<sup>7</sup> The *Free Press* article concluded by saying that the land was well adapted to mixed farming.

A third description of the land appeared in 1935 when J. S. Anderson, who had arrived in the area in 1894 and worked on the Insinger ranch under Mr. Thomas Garry, wrote a piece for the fiftieth anniversary of the Yorkton fair. In it he described the area as he found it at the time of his arrival. He described the land as a wilderness, a haunt of wild animals, and hunting ground for the aboriginal inhabitants who reaped an annual harvest of fur. Like the authors of the two previous descriptions, he mentions the extensive timber belt that covered the hundreds of thousands of acres that stretched from the Foam Lake area to the File Hills. He concluded his article by asserting that the land in the Theodore area produced some of the best crops in Saskatchewan, a popular sentiment that was often shared by those who lived there.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, there is a 1908 photograph of the Cussed Creek Valley which runs along the north side of Beaver Hills Forest Reserve just a few miles south and west of Theodore. In the early decades of Theodore's existence much of the land would have had a similar appearance. There is also an early photograph of a large slough with an island, locally known as as Theodore Lake.

From these descriptions it is possible for one to get an idea of what the earliest settlers found at Theodore upon their arrival. Equally important, it is possible for one to understand how the nature of the land itself aided in the success of so many of the homesteaders who came to the Theodore area, a subject that will be examined in a later chapter. Unlike many parts of southern Saskatchewan where there was a lack of such resources as wood or water, or those parts of the province where the land was at best marginal for agricultural purposes the land around Theodore not only provided the homesteaders with many of the resources that were needed either for

survival on the land but also several resources that could, with some labour, be converted into cash, thereby adding to the income and security of the family.



Early Photo of Cussed Creek in the Beaver Hills



Theodore Lake about 1910

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Waiser, Bill, *Saskatchewan: A New History*, Fifth House Ltd., Calgary 2005. p. 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Waiser, Bill, *Saskatchewan: A New History*, Fifth House Ltd., Calgary 2005. p. 3.
- <sup>3</sup> “Rupert’s Land,” *The Canadian encyclopedia*, Retrieved 13 March, 2015 from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ruperts-land>
- <sup>4</sup>. *Guide Book to The Lands of the Manitoba and North Western Railway*. 1886. p.3
- <sup>5</sup>. *Guide Book to The Lands of the Manitoba and North Western Railway*. 1886. p.3
- <sup>6</sup>. “Theodore,” *The Yorkton Enterprise*, Yorkton, Saskatchewan Canada. 8 September 1910
- <sup>7</sup> Saskatchewan Institute of Pedology, *The Soils of Insinger Rural Municipality No. 275 Saskatchewan 1993*. University of Saskatchewan. p. 2-2 Retrieved 25 November 2015 from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ruperts-land>
- <sup>8</sup> Anderson, J. S. “Theodore is Centre of Thriving Farming Area,” *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 4 July 1935.