

Chapter 1- Conditions Prior to Settlement

Natural Resources With Little or No Commercial Value

For the purposes of this chapter wild game will be considered to be those animals such as fish, deer, and rabbits that were used primarily for food as opposed to those animals that were primarily harvested for their fur. These resources sustained many of the homesteaders when no other food was available or when eating their own livestock was not a viable option. An item in the Theodore news column from the fall of 1913 stated that, "Since the opening of the shooting season on the 15th, everyone in the town and country has been enjoying roast wild duck and chicken. This is an excellent point for game, the sloughs and lakes being so numerous."¹ When given the choice between eating a cow or a pig, which could be sold for cash or bred to increase the herd, and eating wild game, which could be obtained with a little effort and the price of a rifle bullet or a shotgun shell, a cash-strapped homesteader would often choose to eat the wild game for the main course and make a desert out of the wild berries that were abundant in the area.

There are numerous accounts in both *The Leader* and *The Yorkton Enterprise* that tell of successful hunting and fishing efforts by the settlers. One news article contains an account of two settlers who bagged three deer and 300 fish, and goes on to tell of another settler who sold six bags of fish in Yorkton.² Although some of the news stories talk of people selling wild meat and fish to supplement their income, it does not appear that this was a widespread practice or that the selling of wild game was of significant commercial value to the settlers.

Wild fish and game not only sustained the early settlers, but continued to be an important part of the local diet for several generations. In the early 1950's for example, there were reports of

local hunters going as far north as Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan in search of moose and elk. In the same way, Chris Hansen, a former resident of Theodore recalls members of his family travelling to that same area to pick and preserve wild raspberries.³

When a late frost destroyed that blossoms on the wild fruit bushes in the spring of 1953 people in the Theodore area had the choice of either going without wild fruit or going further afield for it. A. E. Gregory, who was the caretaker of Good Spirit Provincial Park at that time, was able to pick wild berries by the water pailful which he sold in Theodore for the price of two dollars for a two-gallon pail.

Although wild game was plentiful in most of Saskatchewan during the late nineteenth century, it was not allowed to be wasted. In the fall of 1888, several years before there were many settlers at Theodore, the Territorial government established a set of hunting regulations which were summarized as follows:

No elk, moose, caribou, antelope, deer or their fawn, mountain sheep or goat, or hare, shall be killed between February 1 and September 1.
 Plover and snipe are protected from May 1 to August 15; grouse, partridge or prairie chicken from February 1 to Sept. 1; and wild ducks from May 15 to August 15.
 No person shall gather eggs of the above named birds. The prohibition extends to Indians as well as others.
 Geese and hares are the only game that may be trapped or snared.
 The closed season for fur-bearing animals is as follows: Mink and marten from April 1 to November 1; otter, beaver and fisher, from May 1 to October 1; muskrats from May 15 to November 1.
 Travelers are permitted to take game at any season, or to gather eggs, for the purpose of supplying their immediate wants; and Indians may at any time kill game for their own use, but not for the purpose of sale or traffic.
 Confiscated game becomes the property of the Game Guardian seizing it.⁴

The abundance of wild game in general and bears in particular in the Theodore area resulted in many occasions in which a settler encountered a bear. These encounters between the

newly arrived settlers with the local wildlife were often reported by the local correspondents to various newspapers. One of the first stories dates from 1893 and was recounted by Mrs. Gladys McVey in an article published in *The Yorkton Enterprise* many years after it happened. According to McVey one of the employees on the Seeman ranch, Scotty MacDonald, lassoed a brown bear some five miles from home. "Much excitement followed during the attempt to lead him home alive. About one half miles from the cookhouse the horse had to give up the endurance contest and the bear seemed content to climb a tall poplar tree, to which the rope was securely tied. On being informed of the big game, Mr. R. Seeman hurried to the spot and shot the bear."⁵ This unusual encounter was also reported by *The Winnipeg Tribune* at the time it happened but with much less detail stating only that: "The cowboys on R. Seeman's ranch at White Sand River shot a bear last week weighing 200 pounds. The bear was first caught by a lasso by a cowboy on horseback and afterwards dispatched with a rifle."⁶

Two more bear stories were recounted by the Theodore correspondent to *The Leader* in 1897, and in each case the correspondent attempted to add a little humour to what might otherwise have been a very serious situation.

There has been quite a bear excitement this past week. One of the settlers was making hay in a slough when a bear, attracted possibly by the peculiar antics of hay making, walked in on the one side, but the hay maker, not being of a friendly turn to bears, would not teach bruin the art of haymaking, but took his team and left as fast as horsepower could carry him. We believe he has stopped, however, by this time, and has fairly well recovered from the shock he received by the advent of such a haymaker. Two days ago a black bear whether the same referred to or another, we are unable to say, dared to challenge "Theodore Nimrod." Mr. Bear came sniffing round the stables at Williston Park when Nimrods espied him and at once doffed boots, cap, etc., seized the rifle and gave chases and in about 200 yards reached his game. The bear rose as if to fight; a ball through the chest started him for the bush but ere he reached it a ball through the backbone laid him low, with the result that there is lots of bear meat at Williston Park and a skin on the barn.⁷

Kittle Thorsteinson a few days ago had a narrow escape from a bearish hug. As he was leaving the hay meadow with a mower and team passing through a bluff a bear pounced out upon him but fortunately missed him but started the horses into a runaway, however, breaking the mower so badly that it is at present useless, but Mr. Thorsteinson escaped unhurt.⁸

Bears, it seems, were also frequently encountered in the early twentieth century as well, and in some cases were captured and kept as pets or curiosities. A 1913 report in the Theodore news column of *The Yorkton Enterprise* stated that three bears cubs that had been captured west of the village were completing their second summer in captivity, and had grown to an immense size.⁹ Apparently the individual who owned them kept them tethered near the CPR tracks and kept there as a kind of tourist attraction, and had refused to sell them.

Although there are no large deposits of limestone near Theodore, every farmer in the area has picked huge quantities of the white, chalky stone off his or her fields. These stones, when properly heated in a kiln, became the source of quick lime, an essential ingredient in the making of the mortar, plaster, stucco, and white wash that the early settlers used in building. The process of producing quick lime was not difficult and lime kilns were a common feature on many farms in Saskatchewan. Quick lime was produced by heating the ordinary limestone in a kiln to drive off the carbon dioxide. It was then mixed with sand, water, and sometimes horse hair to produce the stucco and plaster. This mixture covered both the interior and exterior walls of most homes and other buildings both on the farms and in the towns. The last descriptions of a person operating a lime kiln at Theodore occurred in 1936 and was recorded as follows.

Mr. A. E. Gregory burned a kiln of lime on his block last week and each night found a crowd of boys and girls gathered around the blazing fire till a late hour. Once a common sight, a burning kiln of lime is now a matter of great interest to the younger generation and its flame at night never fails to draw a crowd.¹⁰

The lime produced in this particular kiln was used to make the plaster and stucco in the house that was being built on the property for Tom Gregory. Twenty-four years later, the site of the lime kiln, together with a quantity of horse hair, and unburnt limestone was rediscovered when a trench for the new water and sewer lines was dug on the property.

In her unpublished manuscript, former Theodore resident Perl Guest, recounts her reaction to discovering an old limekiln in the Theodore district

...I began to ascend a small, steep hill that rose abruptly from the land . . . Then, quite unexpectedly, I came upon an opening in the side of this hill, and realized that I had discovered an old lime kiln.

Through [sic] overgrown with weeds, I saw that the space leading to the kiln had once been cleared, and was strewn with small, broken stones. I walked to the base of the kiln. A low wall formed the foundation of the large opening, and on either side of this gap, the earthen sides rose up and curving in at the top, used to feed wood into the kiln. A large bowl had been excavated out of the side of the hill, and on the floor of this once fiery furnace, there still remained pieces of charred wood and limestone which had been burned to a white powdery lime. At the back and upper part of this furnace bowl, another opening had been cut which served as a flue for the escaping smoke.

Contemplating this scene of former activity, I thought of the days and nights the young farmer had tended his fire, a length of time extending from ten days to two weeks, in order that his pioneer home in this new land, might also be one of beauty.

And as I turned and walked slowly away, I thought too of how, even at this changing season, the affairs of men change with commercial progress of the world. Lime kilns, such as this, are now but mute relics of a brave and adventurous past.¹¹

Although limestone had little or no commercial value in Theodore, it did have some commercial value in other communities. John Smith's limekiln in nearby Yorkton is often credited with being

Yorkton's first industry. A photograph of the kiln taken in 1900, together with Guest's description above will give the reader some idea of what the lime kiln looked like. Lime kilns on a farm would, of course, be smaller, but would have followed the same basic principles in design and construction.



John Smith burning Limestone Near Yorkton

Notes:

- ¹ “Theodore,” *The Yorkton Enterprise*. Yorkton, Saskatchewan. 22 September, 1913.
- ² “Theodore,” *The Leader*, Regina, Assiniboia, Canada. 6 January 1898.
- ³ Hansen, Chris, Personal e-mail to the author. 16 November, 2015.
- ⁴ “Important to Nimrods,” *The Regina Leader*, Regina Assiniboia, North West Territories, Canada. 27 March, 1888
- ⁵ McVey, Gladys C., “Chronicles of Theodore and District,” *The Yorkton Enterprise*, Yorkton Saskatchewan, Canada. 8 August, 1941.
- ⁶ “The Reportorial Round,” *The Winnipeg Tribune*. Winnipeg Manitoba. 17 June, 1893
- ⁷ “Theodore,” *The Leader*. 9 September, 1897.
- ⁸ “Theodore,” *The Leader*. 14 October, 1897.
- ⁹ “Theodore,” *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 September, 1913.
- ¹⁰ *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 18 May, 1939.
- ¹¹ Guest, Perl, “Theodore, Saskatchewan. The farm on Clay creek,” cited in Stokalko, Lindsay April, *lime kilns in Saskatchewan* A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology University of Saskatchewan Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. April 2014.