

A Brief History of Deer Lake

The Town of Deer Lake derives its name from the lake beside which it is situated. The first Europeans who came here, not having seen caribou before, called them "deer". Caribou could be seen crossing the lake from north to south in great numbers, hence the name Deer Lake.

The Early Years

The first settlers to the area came in 1864 from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada, under the leadership of George Aaron Nichols. At that time Newfoundland and Labrador was an independent country. They settled on the west bank of the Humber River, not far from where it flows into Deer Lake. They were loggers and trappers, who subsequently became farmers. Their community became known as Nicholville and remained a separate community until 1994 when it and the adjoining village of Spillway became part of the Town of Deer Lake.

When the Newfoundland Railway was completed as far as Humbermouth (now Corner Brook) in 1895 it passed along the south shore of Deer Lake and was located at a place called Lake Siding. The only structures in what is now the Town of Deer Lake were a way station, shed, and water tower for passing trains. Access to Nicholville was by boat and canoe.

A Company Town

In 1922 the Newfoundland Power and Paper Co. Ltd. made a decision to establish a pulp and paper mill on the west coast of the island. Originally, Deer Lake was to be the site for the proposed mill. However, due to advancements in technology making it more feasible to transmit electricity over long distances, and the mill site was changed to Corner Brook. The power plant would be built in Deer Lake.

Deer Lake itself was started as a construction camp, set up in 1922, for the building of the hydro electric power plant. Concurrent with this project was the construction of the Main Dam at Junction Brook and the diversion of water from Grand Lake. Construction work began during the winter of 1922. Water was diverted from Grand Lake to the power plant by digging a nine mile-long canal from Grand Lake to a point just above Deer Lake. This phase of construction took place between 1922 and 1925.

Townsite Constructed

By 1925 a townsite was constructed, together with a railroad terminal, freight sheds, maintenance depots, staff houses, churches, numerous businesses and a small hospital. Housing for company staff was electrically heated and serviced by water and sewer, as was the Amalgamated School and Roman Catholic School.

Main Dam, Canal and Power Plant

It is estimated that some 3,000 men were employed by the N.P. & P. during the years 1923-25. The firm of W.I. Bishop built the Main Dam. Northern Construction Co. did the excavation for both the power house and the Humber Canal. They used huge steam-powered drag lines which had also been used to build the Panama Canal. These are said to have been the largest in the world at that time. Fraser-Brace Construction Co. built the power house and forebay works. The main contractors, the Armstrong-Whitworth Co. erected the transmission lines and installed the penstocks. The construction was completed and the power plant opened in 1925. Apart from a couple of machines, it was mostly manual labor that built this huge complex.

With the buildup of Deer Lake, the train station phased out in Lake Siding and around 1923 was moved to a location on lower Main Street. People moved into the Deer Lake area from all over Newfoundland to get work. After the completion of the power plant, the men had more time to set down permanent roots. The town began to spread out and new houses were built and Deer Lake became a logging town. The men would go into the woods camps and often stay for weeks on end.

Commerce

The first store in the area was a company store, but around 1925 private businesses began to develop. There were various stores, two bowling alleys and an ice cream parlor. There was even a tennis court set up on Nicholville Road. There were seventeen businesses in 1935. The International Pulp and Paper Company employed 300 loggers. The canal system aided in the transportation of pulpwood, causing an escalation of woods operations. The town became a divisional headquarters for woods operation for the Humber Valley and eventually for the whole of the Northern Peninsula.

Religion

With the area developing so rapidly, the need for religious and educational facilities became necessary. With such a varied population, there were also varied denominations. At first, the different ministers would just visit but eventually the parishes were set up with ministers stationed to serve them. The Church of England and the Salvation Army were the first in 1924. The United Church was built in 1925, the Pentecostal Assemblies came in 1926 and the Roman Catholic in 1927. The Jehovah's Witnesses established themselves in the late 1930's.

Education

Schools were built in the outlying communities of St. Jude's, Reidville and Junction Brook. The first school was a one room tar paper shack near the power house, built in 1923, with an attendance of 18 for the year. Due to the increase in population, it was decided to build a one-room school on the corner of Spruce and Crescent Streets. This later expanded to include a log cabin across the street. In 1929, this school burned. It was replaced by a four-room, two story building in 1932. This was the first electrically heated school in the province.

Incorporation

Deer Lake became an important maintenance center for Bonne Bay and the Northern Peninsula areas. The town was incorporated in 1951, with Phil Hodder as its first mayor.

Airport

In 1955, a permanent airstrip was built near Deer Lake at Junction Brook, east of the town. The people of that area were resettled at Deer Lake. A site survey was done by the Department of Transport in 1953. Preliminary construction began in 1954. In the fall of 1955, a gravel strip 200 feet by 4,000 feet was in use by small aircraft. In the beginning, it had flights to Buchans, Frenchman's Cove and St. John's, and was community-owned. The Department of Transport paved the runway and constructed a terminal in 1963. Despite its small size, it is one of the town's largest employers, both directly and indirectly, and is a vital link to surrounding areas within the province and the rest of Canada.

Service Center

The logging industry has declined over the years, but various other industries have been developed to counteract this. In all, Deer Lake has grown and continues to grow. The town has changed from a resource center to a service center, with employment ranging from construction to service and sales.