
Gateway to the Last Best West

The Edson Trail, 1911-
1916

Amanda Schultz

For the last century, the Edson Trail has received a negative and undeserved historical reputation. Little thanks were given for the upstart efforts of regional entrepreneurs, Edson's Board of Trade, and the relatively new provincial government, which were all instrumental in providing Grande Prairie settlers with a shorter, more direct route to their new homes. Inexperienced and pessimistic settlers with overly optimistic expectations and heavy loads were quick to fault the six year old provincial government for the poor condition of the trail in a time well before dozers, excavators and other road-building machines were widely available. In spite of the negative reception from the settlers, the Edson Trail provided experienced trail goers with the opportunity to shorten their trips in and out of the Grande Prairie region by days and even weeks. Less experienced settlers had the option of purchasing safe passage via the twice weekly stage which also transported post and parcels - a vital service that did much to diminish the isolation of the region. This paper will provide a contextual discussion of the lure of the Grande Prairie region - despite the traveling hardships in getting to the area - before illustrating the ambitious efforts of Edson area residents who constructed the trail. Next, the paper suggests that overloaded and inexperienced travelers were quick to blame the trail builders rather than their lack of knowledge while experienced and moderately loaded settlers and freighters appreciated the quick passage the trail provided. Finally the paper argues that in addition to opening up the Grande Prairie region for settlement, the Edson Trail provided quick and regular mail and parcel delivery - an essential service for the area's settlers.

Shortly before the 1911 completion of the Edson to Grande Prairie Trail, the Grande Prairie and Greater Peace River Region were in the midst of a settlement rush. Considered the 'last best west' or the 'last great west,' settlers saved up ten dollars - little more than the average weekly male wage - for the entry fee for one free quarter section of land.¹ In addition to federal advertising, promotion for the "Canaan of the West" also came from Edmonton's newspapers.² Seeking to create a hinterland around the capital city, Minister of the Interior and Edmonton promoter Frank Oliver's *Edmonton Bulletin* reported that "(t)he crop conditions are much further advanced in the Peace River district than further south."³ The *Bulletin* also stated that "...the Grande Prairie country ... is undoubtedly the finest mixed farming country in the world ... [and]... these districts have no draw backs. Small rivers and lakes make abundant water and the luxuriant grass affords abundant pasturage as well and gives some evidence of the richness of the soil."⁴ The *Bulletin* also quoted a recent visitor who was impressed with "the magnificent

¹ *Mundy's Pocket Guide to the Peace River Country and the Far North*, (Edmonton: Mundy Map & Blue Print Co., 1913) <http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/bibliography/3928.html> (accessed July 29, 2011), 36. Mundy's Guide discusses homestead regulations, which limited filing to a male head of household who was eighteen years or older. The regulations omitted women unless they were widowed with dependents. Homesteaders were required to build a habitable house and reside on the homestead six out of every twelve months. They were also to break thirty acres, of which twenty had to be cropped to 'prove up' or gain title.

² David W. Leonard, "The Grande Prairie Land Rush of 1910," *Alberta History*, September 22, 2003, [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The Grande Prairie land rush of 1910.-a0109578880](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Grande+Prairie+land+rush+of+1910.-a0109578880).

³ Leonard, "The Grande Prairie Land Rush of 1910.," Quote from DeBolt & District Pioneer Museum Society (DDPMS), *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail: Commemorative Edition Celebrating 100 Years*, (DeBolt: DeBolt & District Pioneer Museum Society, 2008), 1.

⁴ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 2.

garden products, potatoes, lettuce, radish and corn being all of phenomenal growth.”⁵ *The Edmonton Capital* had glowing reports about the region as well. In 1910 the paper reported that “[t]he banner crops around this district and the upper country will be a big inducement to incoming settlers.”⁶ In June of the same year, *The Edmonton Capital* reported that the crops “are showing above ground, a heavy fall of snow in the Lesser Slave Lake district had furnished sufficient moisture, while at Grande Prairie they were exceptionally promising.”⁷

The lure of the region was obvious, but there was no easy access to the ‘last best west.’ Prior to the 1911 opening of the Edson trail, the main route was an arduous 800 to 965 km journey - partially overland and partially by water - that took several weeks or even months to travel. The primary wagon trail into the region was the Athabasca Trail, a 160 km road stretching from Fort Saskatchewan to Athabasca Landing.⁸ From this point settlers had three options. They could continue overland to Lesser Slave Lake, or take the *Athabasca* - an HBC steamer – 120 km down the Athabasca River to Mirror Landing, located at the mouth of the Lesser Slave River. At this point they would then hire canoes, York boats, or build a raft, then head 88 km northwest using the river, save for a difficult portage due to a 24 km stretch of rapids, before reaching Lesser Slave Lake.⁹ Then - prior to the 1906 introduction of the Slave Lake steamer - they would have to wait for wind to push them across the one hundred twenty kilometers of the lake to the settlement of Grouard on the northwestern edge of the lake. Alternatively settlers could also wait for winter and travel the frozen waters of the Athabasca, Lesser Slave River and Lesser Slave Lake by sleigh.¹⁰ From Grouard, settlers had two options: they could travel the 144 km Grouard Trail to Peace River Crossing where they might wait for as long as a month for *The Peace River* (a steamer with expensive fares) to return and take them and their belongings 96 km upriver to Dunvegan. Once in Dunvegan, they would continue south 120 km by overland trail. The second option from Grouard was the less familiar overland trail south of the Peace River through Snipe Lake, westward to Sturgeon Lake, and then past the later town-site of Bezanson. A portion of this trail would later be used by those traveling the Edson Trail.¹¹

In spite of the difficult travel conditions, the promotional campaign spread world-wide and the ‘land rush’ to the last best west kicked off at a frenzied pace.¹² Over two 2500 homestead entries were filed in the region between 1909 and 1914. This meant that each male head of household and his family

⁵ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 2.

⁶ *The Edmonton Capital*, October 13, 1910, (in Peel Prairie Provinces, online collection).

⁷ *The Edmonton Capital*, June 23, 1910, (in Peel Prairie Provinces, online collection).

⁸ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 7; David W. Leonard, and Victoria Lemieux, *A Fostered Dream : The Lure of the Peace River Country, 1872-1914*, (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1992), 68. Leonard and Lemieux argue that an alternative and not widely used option was the Assiniboine Trail, a Hudson Bay Company overland route from Edmonton to Fort Assiniboine. From there was the option of continuing northward to Lesser Slave Lake on the Grizzly Trail, an old Indian trail, or to head northeast on the Athabasca River and turn northwest taking the Lesser Slave River to Lesser Slave Lake, where one could continue overland to Dunvegan.

⁹ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 111.

¹⁰ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 7; Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 68 & 104.

¹¹ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 126-127; DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 7.

¹² Pauline Urquhart & Shawn Ratke, "The Edson to Grande Prairie Trail," in association with The Edson Trail Historical Society, DVD.

along with their personal effects, farming implements, heirlooms, supplies and other commodities (which for at least one family - included a piano¹³) had to be carted, rafted, ferried, paddled or sleighed in.¹⁴ Once their homes had been built and land broke, seeded, and harvested, settlers in the 'Canaan of the West' were once again thwarted by the lack of affordable transit. Their profit margins were hit hard by the huge expense of carting their crops to market and expensive re-supply runs to the nearest urban centre. Several rail transit schemes were dreamt about, promoted, and then abandoned, leaving residing farmers isolated with no easy access in or out.¹⁵ As early as 1908, it was evident to Grande Prairie residents that of the Grand Trunk Pacific, the Canadian Northern, and the provincially backed Edmonton, Dunvegan, and British Columbia Railway, none would be entering the region any time soon.¹⁶

Realising that railroader's promises were little more than fantasy, Grande Prairie settlers put their energies toward demanding better wagon passage to markets. At least 116 signatures were collected for a 1908 petition which insisted on a shorter direct, year-round wagon road from Edmonton to the region.¹⁷ The petition forwarded to the Public Works Minister, W.H. Cushing, stated that the five to six hundred mile (800-965 km) long, expensive, dangerous and tedious trail was unacceptable.¹⁸ Still taken up by the promises of rail magnates, the Deputy Minister of Public Works, John Stocks, told the petitioners that "...there was not funds available to go on with such an undertaking this season, and that [he] was in hope that some of the Railway companies [would be] pushing into that country in the near future."¹⁹

Evidently, the near future carried different meaning for settlers than for government officials. By the following year the closest rail was the westward extension of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway through the Yellowhead Pass. Pressure mounted for the construction of a direct wagon trail from Grande Prairie to some point along the line. In hopes of facilitating government sponsorship of such a trail, Grande Prairie residents cut out a more passable portion of the Snipe Lake to Grouard overland route between Flyingshot and Sturgeon Lake.²⁰ The pressure was carried over to the legislature floor during the spring session of 1910 when Jim Cornwall and W.H. McKenny, respectively the Peace River and St. Albert representatives, supported a Grande Prairie Road bill.²¹ Cushing reminded his colleagues that "[i]t was not the duty of this government to build colonization roads, that was the duty of the Dominion

¹³ Urquhart, "The Edson to Grande Prairie Trail."

¹⁴ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 41.

¹⁵ Leonard and Lemieux contend that the Canadian Northern, although bonded by the Alberta government, was overextended and decided not to go to the region. Similarly, the Grand Trunk Pacific had advertised a branch line to the region, but also backed out. Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 49 & 99.

¹⁶ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 49.

¹⁷ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 153

¹⁸ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 153.

¹⁹ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 153.

²⁰ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 153.

²¹ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 154.

government, who owned the land being opened up.”²² J.R. Boyle, the member for Pembina through which the Athabasca Trail ran, unsurprisingly agreed with Cushing and the motion failed.²³

Meanwhile, Maurice Kimpe - a Dominion Land Surveyor turned land speculator – and a group of investors had established a new town site (along the Grand Trunk Pacific rail line) at Medicine Lodge. Located 45 km west of Edson, they planned to cash-in on the Grande Prairie land rush.²⁴ Regardless of the goings-on of legislature, Kimpe and company persuaded Deputy Minister John Stocks that a road north of Medicine Lodge would be “easy to open [and] through park like country.”²⁵ Stocks, trusting Kimpe’s expertise as a surveyor, agreed that the road “would seem the shortest possible out to railway [sic],” and granted five thousand dollars to Kimpe and his consortium for “opening [the] piece of road themselves.”²⁶ The *Edmonton Bulletin*, set on promoting a proto farming colony reliant on Edmonton markets, reported that the road from Medicine Lodge to Grande Prairie was only 225 km north-westerly extension to the Slave Lake-Grande Prairie trail at Sturgeon Lake.²⁷ Once at Sturgeon Lake, settlers found that the travel was relatively easy since it was on the open prairie.²⁸

Department of Public Works engineer A.H. McQuarrie was assigned to inspect the new trail. He recalled that “it was the worst road [he] had ever seen.”²⁹ McQuarrie admitted he was disappointed because the trail he had inspected, surveyed and cut from Whitecourt to the Little Smokey River would not be used and all his efforts had been wasted. He went on to note that his report to Deputy Minister Stocks “was written with the hope that it would stop further work being done on that route. It is probable that the officials in charge thought that my lack of knowledge of such work had much to do with my attitude. In any case, I was notified that the railway then building towards Whitecourt would reach Grande Prairie in a year and in the meantime the trail would serve those who wished to go through with saddle horses or lightly loaded wagons.”³⁰

Meanwhile, in Edson, on the eve of becoming a booming railroad community, the ambitious members of the Board of Trade took it upon themselves to build a road north to Athabasca River, where it joined the Medicine Lodge route.³¹ The *Edmonton Bulletin* spotlighted the community with the following article quoted in its entirety:

A still shorter route to Grande Prairie than the road from Medicine Lodge flats is being cut through from Edson the first divisional point on the Grand Trunk Pacific west of Edmonton.

²² DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 9.

²³ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 154.

²⁴ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 157.

²⁵ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 157. Leonard and Lemieux use secondary correspondence created more than forty years after the opening of the Medicine Lodge Trail.

²⁶ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 157.

²⁷ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 54-55.

²⁸ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 157.

²⁹ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 157.

³⁰ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 157.

³¹ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 157-158.

The Board of Trade of the new town petitioned the government two months ago to construct this road, but failing to secure immediate assistance undertook the work themselves. The result is that in three weeks since the first tree was felled, over twenty miles of road has been cleared. Four road contractors have been engaged from the start and some twenty men are now employed.

The new road follows a ridge northwest to the Athabasca River, where it will cross at the mouth of the Baptiste River. There is not a single muskeg throughout the entire length of the road, according to the statement of the president of the Edson Board of Trade.

The road from Medicine Lodge is some 20 miles longer in reaching the same crossing to the Athabasca although the distance from Medicine Lodge to the mouth of the Baptiste River is practically the same as from Edson as the crow flies.

The Edson Board of Trade claims as an additional advantage for the road from their town the fact that Edson is 23 miles east of Medicine Lodge.³²

The enterprising efforts of Edson's Board of Trade paid off. Stocks noted that the Edson stretch to the Athabasca River was much better than the one from Medicine Lodge, and he decided that it would be the southerly part of the trail. Stock's decision was made official on February 11, 1911. By March 24, the local newspaper, *The Edson Leader*, commented on the impact the Edson Trail had on the community. In an article titled "The Spread of the Landlust," *The Leader* reported that "[t]he sale of stamps, money orders, etc., at the Edson post office runs from \$300 to \$700 a day...On Tuesday last 1215 letters were mailed. Not a bad showing for a seven months' old town. How about that daily mail service?"³³ Although Edson was not officially incorporated as a town until September 21, 1911, a significant chunk of the community's growth was due to the Edson Trail giving way for Edson's proud claim as the "Gateway to the Last Great West."³⁴

In spite of positive news coverage, many settlers had less than glowing reports about the short-cut route to Grande Prairie. Some thought summer travel on the Edson Trail was a torturous, steeply hilled, mud-choked, heavily timbered, and mosquito infested trip.³⁵ Even the road inspector and engineer A.H. McQuarrie recalled that the first thirty two kilometers north from Edson were reasonable, but after that things took a turn for the worst:

The timber was larger and the ground rougher in the ascent to the top of the range (Break-neck Hill) where the elevation is 4600 feet (one thousand four hundred meters). The roughest country was in the next eleven miles where there was a drop in elevation of 2000 feet (six hundred nine meters) to the valley of the Athabasca. It was not until summer that any attempt could be made to make the ascent and descent of the hill any easier...In the next eleven miles (nearly eighteen kilometers) the Baptiste River was crossed and the ascent made up the rising ground still ahead. From there on the country leveled out, but there still were hills and creeks to cross. The largest timber was also ahead...Everywhere there were

³² DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 55.

³³ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 57.

³⁴ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 159; DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 55.

³⁵ Linda Horyn, "The Edson-Grande Prairie Trail," *Reflections: A History of Fox Creek*, ed. Fox Creek Historical Association (Fox Creek Historical Association, 1992), 9-11.

large trees on the ground among which there was later growth, some of which were 10 inches in diameter (over twenty-five centimeters)...Much of what was called muskeg by the incoming settlers was not muskeg but was simply stirred up mud after a few wagons went over it in rainy time. The only practical way of repairing it was with corduroy and, therefore, there were actual miles of it before the road was abandoned.³⁶

Mrs. George Jebb also remembered that the Edson Trail:

...[the trail was] so bad that she walked to Sturgeon Lake and they had to 'block and tackle' out of many mud holes, once for a stretch of a mile and a half. Often when the oxen were tired they would just bog down in a mud hole. The Jebbs would unhitch there and camp for the night, perhaps walking up the trail a piece to get beyond the smell of dead carcasses. They slept on the wagon or on spruce boughs on the ground.³⁷

The carcasses mentioned by Mrs. Jebb were the remains of overworked horses and oxen which attracted timber wolves along the trail. Settlers found they needed a good fire every night to ward off the unwelcome advances of the wolves.³⁸

Lena Blonksi's family also experienced difficult travel north along the Edson Trail in 1913. She recalled that there were "rivers, slews and water everywhere," and that "sometimes four oxen, sometimes six [had] to pull out stuck teams." Blonksi said it was "very scary" and that her "grandma [was] praying all the time that we would make it through."³⁹ On a similar note, Methodist Student Minister Harry Coats recalled a portion of the Edson Trail between House River and Tony River stating that "...at times it was over eighteen inches deep with mud...Tree stumps were at times sticking up about a foot high. It seemed almost inhuman to compel a horse to draw a wagon over such a beastly trail."⁴⁰

Many settlers chose to avoid the mud, mosquitoes and stink of carcasses by travelling in the winter. The mainstay in winter trail travel was the caboose, a canvas covered sleigh that served as a sleeping, cooking and storage compartment. But, as Margaret Saul related, winter travel had its own set of problems:

Sleeping facilities were unique: two rolls of 'blanket felt' which during the day served as seats, were unrolled at night to serve as mattresses. Several upsets occurred during the trip, the worst when descending Breakneck Hill in morning. The caboose tipped, sending water, flour, coffee and ashes from the stove cascading over the interior. Although the young children had just started to dress, they had to go outside while the sleigh was righted... Extreme cold struck when they left the Little Smoky River to cross Sturgeon Lake. Sixteen of

³⁶ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 164.

³⁷ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 166.

³⁸ Urquhart, "The Edson to Grande Prairie Trail."

³⁹ Urquhart, "The Edson to Grande Prairie Trail."

⁴⁰ Harry Coates, "On The Edson Trail," *Alberta History*, March 22, 1999, http://www.thefreelibrary.com/On_the_Edson_Trail.-a030266859.

their chickens and a thirty-seven pound gobbler froze. But another party lost a team of horses which died in harness from the severe cold in their lungs.⁴¹

Clean drinking water was also hard to produce along the trail in the winter. Norma Talbot remembered that "...a couple of freighters comparing the snow water in their tea pails to see which pail contained the greatest number of rabbit pellets. The surrounding bush was over-run with snowshoes rabbits and the pellets which had to be skimmed out of the melted snow were unavoidable."⁴² Likewise, John Switzer remembers his father Harvey, (one-time freighting partner of the first company to haul goods over the trail in 1911) telling him that he had to skim off the "rabbit berries in the snow" for clean drinking water.⁴³

The Edson Trail, no doubt an arduous journey, has elements of any good pioneer story, which always begins with 'we had to walk in forty below weather, uphill both ways.' Some of the remembrances cited above are likely overinflated by early pioneers who recalled their hardships as children on the trail many years later. As George B. Currey, a pioneer of the Oregon Trail – which crossed a continental divide and was over ten times longer than the Edson trail - stated in 1887, "every genuine old pioneer is honor bound to have had the hardest time on the plains of any other person living or dead."⁴⁴ An explanation for the many accounts of difficult passage on the Edson Trail is that only fifty-five percent of settlers were actual farmers.⁴⁵ Large percentages were inexperienced on wagon trails and too overloaded with farming implements and a year's supply of groceries, clothing and hardware.⁴⁶ In line with this, even A.H. McQuarrie commented that "it was a heartbreaking trip for people who had never travelled on a bush before. Much of their trouble was because of their lack of know how. One time I remarked to a settler that he did not appear to be having much trouble. He relayed that most of the people coming in were stuck before their teams were."⁴⁷

For experienced and lightly loaded travellers, the Edson Trail was a satisfactory and even pleasant trip. John Allan, who walked the trail, told his story to a reporter at the *Edmonton Bulletin*:

I set out from Edson on May 20. I kept pegging away for 10 or 12 hours a day and made 35 to 40 miles before quitting at night. There were stopping places all along the way, so that I did not have to carry much with me. I knew that I was not travelling too slow, for I passed the stage and people going in on ponies on the way. The heavy loads tired the horses and they had to be given frequent rests. One fellow had to call a halt for a day because his pony had played out. The people living in the country were most hospitable. I

⁴¹ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 166.

⁴² Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 172.

⁴³ John Switzer, and Hazel Switzer, interview by Kelly Johnston, "Interview With Switzers," record, July 6, 2011. Harvey Switzer and his freighting partners started their journey north on the trail with the understanding that the road was completed. Partway through their journey, they were compelled to help the work crew in cutting the trail.

⁴⁴ John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 4 & 11.

⁴⁵ Urquhart, "The Edson to Grande Prairie Trail."

⁴⁶ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 43.

⁴⁷ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 164.

nowhere had to pay more than a half dollar for a meal, and was provided with places to spread out my blankets free of cost.⁴⁸

More success on the trail was noted by the *Edmonton Capital* reporting that an “Edson road team and wagon made [the trip] in seven days. Stopping places well stocked. Many successful trips this season already. One man drove 10 animals.”⁴⁹ In addition to the one terrible stretch of trail encountered by Methodist minister Harry Coats (quoted above), the preacher also recalled several stretches of good trail. He commented in his diary that the trail between Beaverlodge and the Smoky River was “in magnificent condition.” Near Sturgeon Lake, Coats noted that “we went at a rapid rate, walking and riding, and passed no less than five different rigs.”⁵⁰ Despite being in a more wooded section in the southern part of the trail, Coats was able to travel 64 km in a single day. Although he encountered some difficulty ascending the infamous Athabasca Hill (commonly known as Breakneck Hill) Coats commented on the beauty of the area - “...natural creeks, lovely valleys, trees of all sizes and kinds, birch, spruce, jack pine, poplar and balsam and many of them are changing their colors.”⁵¹ Coats’ 1912 “enjoyable trip” from Beaverlodge to Edson took him only nine days.⁵² Later that same year, Constable Donovan C. Saul of the Edson Division reported of his 29 December patrol from Edson to the Athabasca River, that “the trail [was] in good condition for a wagon most of the way.” He went on to note that the “Athabaska [sic] River is frozen over solid and in good condition for teams to cross it.”⁵³

On an anecdotal note, others like ex-Montana cowboy Dan ‘Two Gun’ McMillar also had enjoyable trips for altogether different reasons. P.A. ‘Baldy’ Robb, a ‘matchless story-teller’ recounted Two Gun’s adventure on the Edson Trail. One day, while Two Gun was driving the Caywood and Robb mail stage he had a “rather sexy young lady with him [and] got romantic ideas.”⁵⁴ According to Robb, Two Gun figured “the big gravelly flat halfway up the hill was a good spot to rest ones [sic] horses; a good place to pick berries, and a nice place to do something else.”⁵⁵ Unknown to the couple, a grizzly bear was actually picking berries and became angered by their intrusion. Apparently Two Gun forgot he had replaced his right holstered Montana six-gun shooter at the US-Canada border with a snuff box so he “did the best thing he could do—threw the ‘snooze’ box with such deadly accuracy that it hit the grizzly between the eyes. The box flew open, spilling its load of salty snuff into the bear’s eyes and nostrils, sending it into a paroxysm of violent sneezing and coughing, and blinding it temporarily. Taking advantage of the grizzly’s

⁴⁸ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 170.

⁴⁹ “Trail Ready by Next Winter: Grande Prairie Settlers Will be Able to Use the Edson Trail,” *The Edmonton Capital*, August 10, 1911, (Peel Prairie Provinces, online collection).

⁵⁰ Coates, “On The Edson Trail.”

⁵¹ Coates, “On The Edson Trail.”

⁵² Coates, “On The Edson Trail.”

⁵³ Royal North West Mounted Police, Edson Detachment: Patrol Report 3/1/13, in National Archives Canada (NAC) R196-48-2-E. Online collection: http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=874121&rec_nbr_list=3391291,874121,1685252,1562718,866410 (accessed July 25, 2011).

⁵⁴ 175.016 “Two Gun” McMillar 1914-1916, *Valleyview and District Chamber of Commerce Millenium Photograph Collection*, in the South Peace Regional Archives, <http://southpeacearchives.org/valleyview-photograph-collection/> (accessed July 27, 2011).

⁵⁵ 175.016 “Two Gun” McMillar, <http://southpeacearchives.org/valleyview-photograph-collection/>.

helpless condition, the young lady and McMillar ran to their horses and lit out for Grande Prairie on the run, all thoughts of love now forgotten.”⁵⁶

Aside from a potential space to find affection, the Edson-Grande Prairie Trail also afforded regular post delivery. The mail stage Two-Gun McMillar was driving provided a vital service for Grande Prairie residents and had been in operation since the opening of the trail. It was initially owned and operated by J.B. Taft. Mundy’s 1913 *Pocket Guide to the Peace*, a travel guidebook, informed prospective travelers that \$25.00 bought a one-way passage and \$40.00 bought a return fare on the stage which departed Edson every Tuesday and Friday. The guide book also reported that Taft drove the stage as far north as possible until trail conditions dictated that passengers and their provisions had to be transported by pack horse.⁵⁷ Like many other Grande Prairie residents, John Wilson complained that Taft “[charged] exorbitant prices for transportation...and that his service [was] far from being as punctual as it might.”⁵⁸ Magnus Gudlaugson, one of Taft’s first passengers grumbled as he had to pay “forty dollars for the privilege of accompanying the party but most of the time we had to walk.”⁵⁹ Road inspector A.H. McQuarrie humorously recalled one disgruntled passenger/walker:

...[he] broke into his (Taft’s) store-house at Marshead Creek and posted a notice to the effect that a reward of \$25.00 would be paid for information that would lead to the arrest of the person who had done it. Some posted another notice, I saw both of them stating in lieu of cash he would give a walking passage to Grande Prairie.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, Taft, followed by Henry Church and later succeeded by Caywood and Robb,⁶¹ provided an important service. Although fares on the stages were expensive, they safely and quickly took inexperienced trail travelers to and from the Grande Prairie region. Even Magnus Gudlaugson admitted a one way passage on the stage only took eight days.⁶² Grande Prairie area residents also benefited from regular mail, an essential communication link in the early twentieth century. They also counted on quickly delivered catalogue ordered parcels from retailers like Eaton’s. The Edson Trail provided mail carriers with the opportunity to significantly reduce transit time of the post.

Still, others were beyond frustrated with the condition of the Edson Trail and expensive stage rates. Some settlers like John Wilson (quoted above) had “...something besides roses to hand out to both Federal and Provincial governments.” Wilson felt that the “work accomplished [was] a disgrace” because “[s]tumps [were] left several inches high in the trail and the state of mind of the travelling homesteader when he gets hung up on these obstacles may readily be imagined.” Wilson, in capital city for business,

⁵⁶ 175.016 “Two Gun” McMillar, <http://southpeacearchives.org/valleyview-photograph-collection/>.

⁵⁷ For departure days see *Mundy’s Pocket Guide to the Peace*, 28; For Taft stage transport means see *The Edmonton Capital*, May 22, 1911, (in Peel Prairie Provinces, online collection).

⁵⁸ *The Edmonton Capital*, December 23, 1911, (in Peel Prairie Provinces, online collection).

⁵⁹ Urquhart, “The Edson to Grande Prairie Trail.”; two years after the maiden voyage of Taft’s stage, a return fare on was \$45 and a one-way ticket was \$25. See *Mundy’s Pocket Guide to the Peace*, 28.

⁶⁰ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 130.

⁶¹ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 130.

⁶² DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 151.

told the *Edmonton Capital* that he “[would] not attempt to return by the short cut route, but [would] travel in via the Smoky River valley.”⁶³

It seems many Edson Trail travelers, like Wilson, were quick to forget the difficult stretches on the old long route. For instance, Leonard and Lemieux recount I.E. Gaudin’s May 3, 1909 remembrance of the Grouard Trail as “the hilliest muddiest hell hole I ever got into. The hot sun melted the snow and the springs just oozed out of the side hills, making the worst kind of mire in sand that strongly resembled quick-sand.”⁶⁴ Of his 1910 journey on the long route Philip Godsell said that “[t]he trail was simply terrible, a mere gash through the primeval forest dotted with ragged stumps and interspersed with patches of quacking [sic] muskeg into which a wagon would sink right up to the hubs.”⁶⁵ Jennie Cochrane, who spent forty-two days on the long route during the winter of recalled that “[w]e just made it...Our oxen could never have gone another fifty miles.”⁶⁶ Hubert Footner thought that the Grouard-Peace River section of the long trail was not “quite the worst road in America, but well down the list.” Footner also noted that after the midday thaw in the fall of 1911, he found it easier to walk in the ditch.⁶⁷ Like the old adage regarding green grass on the other side of the fence, the ground on the long route was not necessarily any firmer, just longer.

Many historians and trail pioneers choose not to recognize the positive aspects of the Edson Trail and its original trail-blazers. They forget that the initial construction to the Athabasca River was undertaken by a volunteer board of merchants from the newly developed community of Edson. They also fail to applaud the fact that all construction was done by labourers with axes, shovels, oxen, and horses, well before the introduction of modern-day heavy equipment. Many also overlook the accomplishments of Dominion land surveyor Maurice Kimpe and his group of investors, who built the original trail from Medicine Lodge to Sturgeon Lake through uncharted bush all without the promise of financial recompense. Historians and pioneer accounts are quick to blame the six-year-old provincial government for its inaction, and then for the less than desirable condition of the Edson trail. Although myopic in their optimism about railroad promises, the relatively new provincial government deserves an honourable mention for its work on the Edson Trail. The ministry of Public Works stepped out of its jurisdictional responsibilities by building and maintaining the Edson Trail, one of the first public roadwork programs in the new province. These early government and entrepreneurial pioneers brought people and economic opportunities to the region, which helped the new community of Edson to grow. The Edson Trail also provided Grande Prairie residents with efficient mail service, quelling real and imagined isolation. The trail significantly shortened the route to the closest market (Edmonton) for experienced and moderately loaded trail farers. Those without experience had the option for safe, albeit expensive, passage to and from the region by stage. Although the road was bumpy and they had to walk a great deal, a \$25.00 one-way ticket in, a \$10.00 entry fee, and hard work bought a settler one free quarter section for less than one month’s wages - a cost we can only dream about today.

⁶³ *The Edmonton Capital*, December 23, 1911, (Peel Prairie Provinces, online collection).

⁶⁴ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 130.

⁶⁵ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 132.

⁶⁶ Leonard, *A Fostered Dream*, 134.

⁶⁷ DDPMS, *Edson to Grande Prairie Trail*, 139.

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