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# A Brief History of Early Edson and Area

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Galloway Station Museum

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When the Grand Trunk Pacific (GTP) was winding its steel ribbon westward toward the Canadian Rockies in 1909, the question arose of where the divisional point on that leg of the Alberta railway should be. Many predicted its placement would be in Wolf Creek, about 200 km west of Edmonton.<sup>1</sup> As this rumour spread, 'land boomers' bought up all the real estate surrounding Wolf Creek. They had hoped to make an easy profit off of GTP, as much land would be needed for the creation of a divisional point. Faced with an expensive and difficult situation, the GTP chose to move the divisional point eight miles west, planning for a station complete with roundhouse and rail yards for shipping coal.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, residents of Wolf Creek who relied on railway related work moved west with the track. Within a few weeks, a simple wooden trestle bridge was built over Wolf Creek, to help get supplies to the construction site of a larger steel bridge over the McLeod River. Despite their size difference, both bridges required engineered explosions to reduce the rocky embankments. The combined cost of the two finished structures was \$500,000.<sup>3</sup>

Although built to accommodate the soon arriving track, the railway station was also used as a starting point for the future development of roads. Main Street, which ran south to north beginning at the station, was built 80 feet wide - 20 feet more than other streets.<sup>4</sup> By the time the first passenger train arrived in August of 1910, the population had reached 15 and a square mile of land had been surveyed into 50 by 100 feet lots.<sup>5</sup>

Primarily used by the Hudson's Bay Company, the original Yellowhead Trail avoided the future town site of Edson by miles due to the thick forest and deep muskeg. Survey crews hired by the Grand Trunk Pacific dug ditches to try and drain water, while fill was brought in for roads and the railway grade on the Tote Road between Wolf Creek and the area that would become Edson.<sup>6</sup>

Since the train station was situated at the end of Main Street, all water ran down toward the building and often caused the train tracks to be flooded. Usually the first sight of Edson for travellers was the station surrounded by a mess of mud and water.<sup>7</sup> Although the station sat at the lowest point in the community geographically, it was a source of pride for residents of the town. Over the 60+ years of its existence, the station greeted King George VI, Queen Elizabeth II, the outspoken Nellie McClung, and many more from across the globe.<sup>8</sup>

The first building in Edson was built by J.H. Lloyd, who bought two plots of land on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. It was a simple two storey shack that was lined with tarred felt. This building was later bought by Johnny

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<sup>1</sup> Marguerite Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, (Winnipeg: Jostens Publications, 1986), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> F. A. Tallot, *The New Garden Of Canada By Packhorse And Canoe Through Undeveloped New British Columbia (1912)*, (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1912), 32; Toni Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, (Edmonton: D.W. Friesen and Sons Ltd., 1976), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 62-63; Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 55.

Bonniface, who had recently emigrated from China. He started a hotel in the building and it soon became the meeting place for men coming to the area to purchase land.<sup>9</sup>

Heatherwood was the name of the first post office for almost a year, until the town petitioned the Postmaster General to change the name to honor the General Manager of the GTP, Edson J. Chamberlain. The Postmaster explained that confusion in the mail would arise with the new name as another small town in central Alberta was named Edison. The town disregarded these concerns and Heatherwood was officially declared the village of Edson in January of 1911.<sup>10</sup> Shortly afterwards, Edison had its name changed to Clyde.<sup>11</sup>

The population of Edson ballooned from 15 to 800 by the fall of 1911 with the development of several coal mines in the Coal Branch 40 miles south, a large cement factory west of town in Marlboro and logging camps in the surrounding area.<sup>12</sup> This rapid growth created too much work for the village committee, and it was suggested that Edson become a town with elected officials. The idea became a reality when census results confirmed that the village had enough people to incorporate as a town. On September 21, 1911, Edson was officially declared a town and Gilbert Lawrence was elected its first mayor.<sup>13</sup>

During the rush in 1911 to the 'Last Best West' in the Grande Prairie Region, the Edson Board of Trade – along with the newly formed Alberta Provincial Government - created a trail joining Grande Prairie to Edson. This trail was to cut out days, and potentially weeks, of travel time for pioneers settling in the Grande Prairie region. However, the path was an incredibly difficult one to traverse, as the muskeg was deep, the rivers wide, and the hills steep.<sup>14</sup> The trail was only in service for four years, at which point the E.D. and B.C. Railroad reached Spirit River – near Grande Prairie – from Edmonton.<sup>15</sup>

As the steel track pushed farther west toward the Rockies and established a Coal Branch line, horse and ox camps were set up outside of Edson to haul timber to the build site of one of the largest wooden trestle bridges in Canada, 'The Big Eddy'. When it was first built in 1910, it was 1000 feet long and 80 feet high, spanning the valley created by the confluence of the Sundance Creek into the McLeod River about, seven miles west of Edson.<sup>16</sup> In the following years, more 'Big Eddy' bridges were built to span the gorge, the largest being in 1939. It boasted 1,000,000 board feet of timber and 100,000 pounds of bolts and washers in its 1221 foot length.<sup>17</sup>

As a 'boom town', Edson attracted a wide variety of entrepreneurs. In 1913, the Edson Board of Trade recorded some 67 businesses in the area. At the time, many said it would be considered the 'Pittsburg

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<sup>9</sup> Tallot, *The New Garden Of Canada*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> For more information see the *Gateway to the Last Best West* report.

<sup>15</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 180-181.

<sup>16</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 25.

of Canada' or the 'Calgary of the GTP'.<sup>18</sup> The vast amount of wealth in resources from the Coal Branch would ensure the town's future. Since the Board of Trade was newly formed and wanted to promote its services, it came up with an unusual and intriguing motto: "Boosting Edson is like making love to a widow, it can't be overdone."<sup>19</sup>

While Edson was turning into an economic hub in 1912, two miles south the town of Tollerton was just beginning. The town was designed as the divisional point for the GTP's rival railway company, Canadian Northern Railway (CNR). Situated along the McLeod River and on high ground, Tollerton had what seemed to be a solid future and construction of the town site was nearly completed even before the tracks had arrived.<sup>20</sup> This was possible because all supplies for the town were drayed (hauled by horse) from the nearest station, Ansel. Regardless, Tollerton was to remain stagnant, as Canadian Northern Railways was financially ruined by the time it reached the future divisional point.<sup>21</sup>

A difficult decision had to be made when CNR and GTP merged to create Canadian National: Which set of tracks would be kept, and what would be the resulting fate of each town? In 1917, the Board of Railway Commissioners had to decide if either Edson or Tollerton would become the divisional point for the new Canadian National Railways. Edson's town council asked all the townspeople to come onto Main Street to make the town look like it 'had potential' - more than 2,000 people were in attendance.<sup>22</sup> It was decided after many months of deliberation that Edson would become the divisional point. As the population of Tollerton moved to Edson, many businesses followed, having their buildings drayed to the chosen town. Seven of them would eventually be located on Edson's main street.<sup>23</sup>

Since its inception Edson was a true frontier town, with people from all walks of life. This had some negative consequences since many transient workers came through town, fueling up on liquor and feminine company.<sup>24</sup> The venues around town that catered to these workers were stripped of their liquor licenses by the government - the law stated there was to be a certain 'alcohol-free' distance around all government funded work, and this included the railways.<sup>25</sup> As a result, about 15 blind pigs – speakeasys that sold liquor illegally - sprung into business in and around the town. Second Avenue was especially notorious and it was suggested by locals that it was best avoided, due to frequent robbing and doping incidences.<sup>26</sup>

In an attempt to keep order, locals were hired as patrolmen. After only two weeks of service, they resigned due to the unruliness of the local citizens.<sup>27</sup> Town Council finally decided to hire the North

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<sup>18</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Tallot, *The New Garden Of Canada*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 15.

West Mounted Police to patrol the streets on horseback for a fee of 100 dollars a month.<sup>28</sup> However, despite the presence of law enforcement, Edson was often referred to as a blot on the map of Canada.<sup>29</sup>

To try and encourage people from across North America to move to Edson, the Board of Trade carried out a huge advertisement campaign showcasing the promising future of the new 'boom town'.<sup>30</sup> However, these utopian models of Edson were not true to the rough life that was reality. Many news reporters came to the town to give reports on their experiences in the 'Pittsburg of Canada'.<sup>31</sup> As one Mr. Canon Matheson said, "it would appear that according to Eastern newspapers and street talk, not only is the condition of morals a blot on the town but Edson itself on this account a blot on Canada."<sup>32</sup> Bob Edwards from the *Calgary Eye Opener* wrote that "Edson is a little burg of one short straggling street, all a muskeg, [go west] if only to have a hearty laugh at the Edson town lots."<sup>33</sup> The editor of the *Edson Leader* replied: "Well one can only surmise that he must have had a heavy jag if he couldn't tell the difference between a whisky keg and muskeg."<sup>34</sup>

Over the next century, Edson remained an industry town. The vast amount of resources which started the creation of the town will ensure that town's future. The once important railway has now dwindled to a sidenote in the everyday lives of Edsonites. Landmarks of Canadian National's presence here - the coal chutes, the station, and the rail yards - have since disappeared, leaving behind a distant memory of their importance.

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<sup>28</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ahlf, *Edson: 75 Years*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 23.

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Ahlf, Marguerite. *Edson: 75 Years*. Winnipeg: Jostens Publications, 1986.

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