

HISTORY OF THE FISHING LAKE MÉTIS SETTLEMENT⁸

There are many stories that connect to the Fishing Lake Métis Settlement, some go back over 200 years, from the First Nations people who have long traveled the land to the establishment of Hudson's Bay trading posts to Louis Riel's battle for freedom for the Métis people.

People were drawn to Fishing Lake for jumbo whitefish – which is how it got the name Packedawanis or Puktawhanis, meaning “a small place for netting”. The area, with its wooded uplands dotted with bogs, also had a good reputation for hunting, trapping and gathering.

As with many western settlements, it was the fur trade that lured new people to the area. Trading posts for the Hudson's Bay company and the North West Company had been established on the North Saskatchewan River as early as 1792. As is well known of the Métis people, many played important roles in the economies and livelihoods that evolved in and around these hubs. By 1895 a community of about 150 Métis people had formed in the Fishing Lake area (“in the country between Moose Lake and Frog Lake”) – living off the land. The years that followed included the establishment and closing of the St. Paul des Métis settlement and a long period where Métis people in Alberta moved around the fringes and in-betweens of land that was becoming increasingly owned by white settlers.

A collection of families including Felix Calliou, Joe Deschamps and Tom Poitras, Bill Daniels, Jack Desjarlais, Isadore Mason, Francis Gladue, Joe Nadeau, Simon Morin, Bill Price and Charlie Delorme were living in the Fishing Lake area around the time of the beginning of the Second World War. Neighbours helped each other build the first log homes from the straightest spruce and pine trees they could find. Logging and lumber cutting programs were held each winter to generate the lumber needed for homes – including hand-cut planks for doors, floors and roofs. Much of the men's time in these days was spent hunting and trapping for food while the women performed the hard labour involved in preserving and storing food and preparing hides and furs.

Those in the area had been trying to secure land since about 1922. It is reported that in about 1930 a meeting was held to discuss strategies for negotiating with government to obtain land. This launched a series of meeting and negotiations that would span the next 20 years. Throughout the thirties, work was scarce and many took on long trips to search for jobs. Drought conditions made things worse, causing hardships especially to those trying to make a living as farmers and ranchers. When, in 1938, the area where the Fishing Lake Métis families came into consideration for a settlement, local farmers petitioned for it to remain as an open grazing reserve. This conflict was settled when Métis representative agreed to limit their request to township #57. After continuous lobbying to maintain ownership of this parcel and to obtain adjacent lands throughout the 40s, the Fishing Lake settlement, in 1949, was finally given title to the boundaries it has today.

Today, Fishing Lake is home to just over 400 people. The entire territory includes four townships and the townsite of Sputnikow borders on Frog Lake with beautiful views across rolling hills.

⁸ Based on extracts from “Tired of Rambling: A History of Fishing Lake Métis Settlement”