

History of Lake Country

Carr's Landing, Okanagan Centre, Oyama, Winfield

Duane Thomson, PhD



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The District of Lake Country is located on the Interior Plateau of British Columbia, bounded by mountains on all sides, making it, until recently, a very isolated part of the world. The region receives insufficient precipitation to successfully engage in agriculture — large-scale irrigation projects tapping water from the plateau are necessary. It is not surprising that transportation infrastructure and outside capital have been critical factors in the development of Lake Country.

The Okanagan Valley is the homeland of the indigenous Okanagan peoples who used the north-south waterways to transport bulk goods to winter villages at Penticton and the Head of the Lake. In the latter part of the 18th century the Okanagan people acquired horses, vastly improving their transport capability and allowed for easy east-west traffic. On the basis of horse technology the Okanagan people began exploiting the plateau region to the west, expanding their territory at the expense of their Secwepemc neighbours.

The first Europeans to enter the interior of BC were fur traders who arrived in 1811. Because of mountain barriers and wild rivers, these fur traders could not utilize their normal modes of transport and so they turned to the indigenous method — pack trains. The Okanagan Valley became the Hudson's Bay Company supply route for the New Caledonia and Thompson River Districts with heavily laden horse brigades traveling south along the west side of Okanagan Lake delivering bales of furs to a depot on the Columbia River and then packing their annual outfits north.

The California gold mining frontier advanced to the Fraser and Thompson rivers in 1858. One legacy of the gold rush was improved transportation links connecting the Okanagan to the Lower Mainland. The main artery over which supplies were packed into the region was the Dewdney Trail running from Hope to Rock Creek. Following completion of the Cariboo Road in 1864, steamers operated on Shuswap Lake and the Spallumcheen River as far as Fortune's Landing (Enderby), which was connected by wagon road to Priest's Valley (Vernon). Northern access was enhanced by a wagon road, constructed from Kamloops to Priest's Valley in 1871 and extended through Lake Country to the Okanagan Mission in 1875. The pre-railway economy developed within the context of this horse and buggy transportation system. The region developed a significant cattle industry, producing a product that could walk itself to Hope and thus to markets in New Westminster and Victoria. A gristmill at the Brent ranch on Mill Creek and a sawmill at the Postill ranch supplied the local market. Garden produce, fruit and grapes were grown on a small scale because the market was limited. Mail service was provided twice weekly by the Vernon to Okanagan Mission stagecoach.



Figure 1: Vernon-Okanagan Mission Road

The pioneer ranchers in Lake Country were Thomas Wood, George Simpson, the Postill brothers and Kelowna rancher, Arthur B. Knox. Their ranches were initially small holdings, 160 or 320 acres taken by pre-emption on good bottomland. Ranchers' cattle grazed freely on adjoining Crown lands, which by 1880 were fully stocked, just in time for the CPR construction contractors to begin purchasing beef. With money from these sales in their pockets and noting that railway construction was stimulating outside interest in land, local ranchers purchased their ranges. For example, by 1892 Wood held title to 3800 acres which included extensive meadowland and most of the rangeland on the east side of Wood Lake.

The building of the mainline CPR stimulated transportation projects, land development and agriculture in the Okanagan. In 1892 the branch line Shuswap & Okanagan was completed to Okanagan Landing and CPR steamboats, beginning with the launching of the SS Aberdeen, extended the railway's reach from Okanagan Landing to Penticton. Wharves at Carr's Landing, the Rainbow Ranche and Okanagan Centre received daily mail delivery and enjoyed rail access to the markets of the world.

The Commonage, a grazing range set aside for the cattle of both Indians and settlers, was thrown open to settlement in 1893. This large tract of land lying between Okanagan and

Long Lake (Kalamalka and Wood lakes) and extending from Okanagan Landing to Okanagan Centre attracted speculators, developers and farmers to locations on Okanagan Lake. A small farming community, Sunnywold, developed on the Commonage. Development of The Railroad (Oyama) was also spurred by the Commonage land sales as individuals acquired most of the isthmus and land on the shores of Long Lake.

Agricultural development of Lake Country awaited the sale of the large cattle ranches and outside investment in infrastructure, both of which were advanced in 1908. Properties in Okanagan Centre had been accumulated by the Maddock brothers who sold to the Okanagan Valley Land Company and the Okanagan Centre Irrigation and Power Company Ltd. which, in turn, completed the irrigation system and began selling orchard lands and Okanagan Centre town lots. By 1911 Okanagan Centre featured two hotels, two stores, a packinghouse, cannery, church, wharf and various small businesses and homes. At Oyama a navigation canal between Wood and Kalamalka lakes was constructed in 1908 allowing for logs,



Figure 2: SS Sicamous landing at Okanagan Centre

passengers and freight to be transported to and from Vernon. The Wood Lake Fruitlands Company purchased the Wood range, subdivided it and sold orchard land to prospective settlers. Water was delivered by flume from Oyama Lake to the east side in 1908 and by a wire-wrapped, syphon pipeline to the west side in 1909. By 1914 Oyama boasted an elementary school, two packinghouses, a community hall, store and gas station and community organizations such as the Kalamalka Agricultural Association and the Kalamalka Women's Institute.

Winfield's agricultural development was delayed somewhat by the prolonged existence of cattle ranches on the east side of the valley, those of M.P. Williams

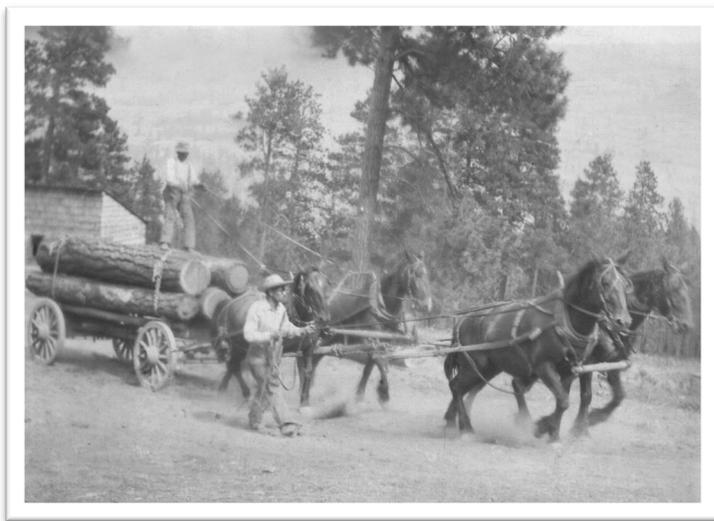


Figure 3: McCarthy's logging operation

and Price Ellison. Logging began on the "flat" and progressed to the Okanagan Land Company property on the west and to Fir Valley on the east. Logs were dragged to Wood Lake and towed to a mill at the north end of Kalamalka Lake. Orchards were established on the west side on the Okanagan Valley Land Company subdivision. By 1911 Winfield was settled by a few families and had the necessary community amenities.

The economy and population of Lake Country remained stable in the next few decades. With the completion of the CNR railway from Vernon to Kelowna in 1925 and the subsequent abandonment of the CPR boats on Okanagan Lake in 1935, Okanagan Centre and Carr's Landing lost their transportation advantage relative to Winfield and Oyama. Access from outside the region was still primitive but two highway construction projects changed that – the Hope Princeton Highway opened in 1949 and the Rogers Pass portion of the Trans-Canada Highway opened in 1962, providing good access to both Vancouver and Calgary. The expansion of the Kelowna Airport in 1960 provided much improved connections to the outside world. Local highway improvements and opening of the Kelowna bridge in 1958

fostered growth in the Central Okanagan. Tourism and retirement living became important industries in Lake Country.

Lake Country retains its mostly rural character today. Its economy is based on fruit growing, light manufacturing, all-season tourism, viticulture and retirement living. With the University of British Columbia Okanagan on its doorstep, university-oriented activities will become more significant over time.

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Photograph Sources

Title page. Moore, C. (c. 1914). Wood Lake rock cut.

Figure 1. Smith, Bill. (c. 1905). Vernon-Okanagan Mission Road.

Figure 2. Gleed, Jim. (c. 1915). SS Sicamous landing at Okanagan Centre.

Figure 3. McCarthy Family. (c. 1915). McCarthy logging operation.