

A Short History of a Prairie Village

The Land & the People

First was the land. Then came the people. Climate and topography, water and dirt have always set their own limitations on human activity. Geography is destiny for this small prairie village.

Elbow's history grew out of its location. Even the name comes from the sharp turn the South Saskatchewan River makes here on its journey north and east from the Rocky Mountains to Lake Winnipeg. Aboriginal travelers and traders used the elbow of the swift-flowing river as a reference point, an established landmark. The sheltered valleys of the Saskatchewan and the Qu'Appelle met here at the Elbow. Those valleys were corridors for wildlife and humankind alike. There were trees, offering welcome respite from the windswept prairie. There were berry bushes and wild onions, fish and birds; herds of bison chose to cross the river here in their annual perambulation from summer to winter pasture. In the vast expanse of prairie and sky, these valleys promised shelter, food, and water - all of life's necessities.

The junction of the South Saskatchewan River with the Qu'Appelle valley dictated that ancient trails also met and intersected here. A peace trail, an old trading route between northern tribes and the Missouri village people, crossed the sandhills near the elbow. Two hundred years ago those trails were followed by Metis hunters and traders, and early in the last century, by settlers' wagons. The first homesteader arrived at the end of the 1800s. The ford once used by bison herds became a ferry crossing in 1905.

In 1909, the CN railway arrived. By 1911, Elbow boasted a population of 262 – not bad for a town only three years old. Most were young families, with a large percentage of young bachelors. Nearly every quarter-section in the area boasted a sod shack or tarpapered shanty. Elbow's wide dusty main street was lined with false-fronted buildings, businesses that served the needs of prairie homesteaders on both sides of the river. In the 1920s, the CNR built a dual-purpose bridge linking east and west by road and rail. Elbow grew to almost 600, with a corresponding increase in the number of businesses. There were three hotels, two restaurants, three livery barns, two banks, five implement dealers, a bowling alley, a drugstore, and four churches and a school. Elbow had a doctor and a

dentist, as well as a vet and a lawyer, a Chinese laundry, a movie theatre and an ice-cream parlour.

Boundary Lines

Throughout the early and mid-1800s, the South Saskatchewan River marked the southern limit of the area controlled by the Cree. Their allies, the people commonly known as Assiniboine, were based south of the river while their traditional enemies, the Blackfoot coalition, often sent war parties raiding from the west. The elbow was considered a dangerous place to visit.

It has been a century and a half since the Elbow saw its last bloody battle. But it still seems to be at the edge of every boundary, political or ideological or economic. Consider these facts:

Elbow is on the boundary line between Treaty 4 (1874, everything south and east) and Treaty 6 (1876, everything west and north).

It sits at the south-eastern limit of its school district, one that stretches all the way to the Alberta border, over 200 km away.

Elbow chose to go into the Moose Jaw Health Region, putting it at the northern edge of the File Hills Health District, while our neighbours just north of town were in the Heartland Health Region. In 2017 both were amalgamated into Saskatchewan Health Authority, but old allegiances remain.

Rural municipal boundaries meet here, too. Anyone farming north of Elbow pays taxes to the Loreburn RM; but go south, and you are in the RM of Maple Bush.

Provincial and Federal electoral districts show even more ambivalence. The boundaries have shifted several times. Elbow has sometimes been in a different provincial constituency than its nearest neighbour, Loreburn.

The landscape signals some of those boundaries: sandhills rise from river valleys, flat prairie stretches away from the sandhills. But most of these boundaries have no obvious geographical reason. It seems strange that governing bodies of 21st century Saskatchewan still identify this area as the edge, the last stop, the boundary, as readily as did all the hundreds of generations who lived closer to the land. Maybe we could catch other signals from the land, if we knew how to read them.

Outcomes

Occasionally the land speaks with a voice that forces us to pay attention. The drought of the 1930s that eroded fields into howling dust storms is a fine example. It fairly shouted, "Change your farming methods, or get out!" Many farmers did leave, and the population of the community dropped to less than half of its high point in the 1920s.

In response to the environmental and economic crisis of the 1930s, the federal government instituted the PFRA – the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration. Over the next few years, the PFRA formed community pastures out of marginal farmland; one of those pastures was south of Elbow, in the marginal farmland bordering the sand-hills. New farming methods were developed, better adapted to the almost desert-like climate of the area. Then came the 1940s, with better crops and improved prices; but these were war years. Everyone was just hanging on.

World War II ended. Veterans returned home and brought with them modest prosperity. Land prices rose, even at Elbow. The PFRA continued to look at water development projects and did preliminary drilling along the South Saskatchewan.

Then came the 1950s and talk of The Dam.

Ever since Palliser and Hind explored British North America in the mid-1800s and speculated about damming the South Saskatchewan River near the elbow, the idea had brewed in the brains of officialdom. Now the PFRA provided the agency and the justification: damming the rivers would guarantee a sure supply of water for agriculture, industry and recreation, as well as providing anticipated needs for hydroelectric power. Provincial officials signed the South Saskatchewan River Project agreement in 1958 and sent it off to Ottawa. Construction on Gardiner Dam started the next year, with Qu'Appelle Dam following close behind. The elbow, and the village of Elbow, would be bracketed by the two dams, like a digression enclosed in parenthesis.

Suddenly there were more jobs than workers, more workers than housing. The Village of Elbow was bursting at the seams. For seven heady years the boom continued. In 1956, Elbow's population was 281. By 1966, it was almost 500.

The village directory for 1963, while not as extensive as the one for 1923, is still impressive by today's standards. It still boasted four churches (Lutheran, Mennonite, United and Roman Catholic) and an elementary school. There were three grain

companies, four building contractors, four garage/service stations or farm implement dealers, five carpenters, and three merchants of groceries and/or hardware. And visitors needing a place to stay had three motel/hotel/cabins to choose from.

Of course, there were casualties. The hills and valleys so beloved by those who lived there would be flooded by the reservoir. A few watched in silent dismay as tree-lined coulees were bulldozed clear. A few wept to see their old farmsteads, with their spectacular views of the river, abandoned and torn down. But for most, it was a time of frenzied activity and buoyant optimism.

Then it ended as quickly as it had begun.

By 1967, construction of both dams was complete. The workers left. The bridge across the river was no more, and so, as the lake filled, Elbow's trading area shrank. Some businesses simply shrank along with it. Others closed up or moved away. Tourism opportunities always seemed to be just around the corner but were slow in developing. The lone cabin at the Mistusinne Cabin site a few kilometres south of Elbow seemed a mockery.

During all those years, from pioneer days on, the rural residents shared in the town's high hopes and bitter disappointments. Village-dweller and landowner alike depended upon agriculture. Anything affecting one segment of the population affected all. When dust storms and grasshoppers returned, coffee row banter reflected a black humour.

"Would be nice if it would rain, so my boys could see it once."

"Don't laugh, his boys are almost twenty."

In the 1970s, farmers lucky enough to have land bordering the lake had invested heavily in state-of-the-art irrigation equipment; then the dream of irrigation met the reality of alkali and sky-rocketing power bills. More farmers gave up, more businesses folded. In the financial crunch of the next decades, many farmers left for off-farm jobs. Their children chose careers in the city. Farms grew larger as farmers became fewer. The village of Elbow shrank again, down to 313 by 1981. Only one grocery store and two garages remained, but several small businesses sprang up to serve the summer tourist trade. Douglas Park was a big attraction, and Tuft's Bay at Elbow, which had been the town park since the late 1960s, grew in popularity for swimming and camping. The Mistusinne Resort Village amazed everyone with its rapid growth.

And then the provincial government built an 18-hole golf course and a marina at Elbow. For a short while in the 1980s this little town boasted 12 summer dining or snack establishments. Mayor Frank Gallant bragged that, for one month, Elbow had more housing starts than Saskatoon!

The age demographic of the community shifted upward, with retirees choosing the area for golfing and sailing. Provincial parks, cabin developments and businesses catering to tourists grew and increased. Tourism supplanted agriculture in the local economy.

By 1991, the permanent residents numbered 314. 45% of Elbow's population was between the ages of 30 and 64; but there were **almost** as many under 30 (25%) as there were over 65 (30%).

Since 1993 Elbow elementary school children have been bussed to Loreburn and the federal post office was downgraded to a postal outlet. Elbow's vacant school building was repurposed as a circuit-board assembly business (Commutron) that employed as many as 30 people.

Over the next decade the town lost its agricultural machinery dealerships. All Elbow's grain elevators were closed or demolished.

Where We Are Now

By 2009 Elbow's permanent population hovered around 300 but swelled to two or three times that every summer. Douglas and Danielson Provincial Parks filled up with campers and the Elbow Harbor Marina drew sailors from hundreds of miles around. Cabin sites appeared to be a gold-edged investment. Golf course, marina, craft stores, hamburger or chicken joints, artists and retired politicians, Elbow had it all.

The village has hung on through the first quarter of the 21st century. The town is still served by the k-12 school in Loreburn. Three churches in the village still hold worship services almost weekly.

In the 2021 census, Elbow's permanent population was 341, an increase of 1.6% since 2016. This number swells to over 800 during the summer months.

There are 246 private dwellings, 165 of which are occupied by permanent residents. 81 are vacant or seasonal dwellings. Almost 1/3 (30.3%) of the houses are occupied by only one person.

The average household consists of 2.1 people, whose median age is 58.4 years.

More retired couples than young families choose to live here, and that is a concern for all. Plans for improved health care, affordable childcare, and the amenities offered by the new community recreation centre may help remedy that imbalance. Accessible and well-groomed hiking and walking trails encourage appreciation of the natural world. The attraction of living in a small community offering a healthy outdoor lifestyle is gradually bringing more young families to Elbow.

The community of Elbow is far removed from the bison hunters of the 19th century or our pioneer ancestors of a hundred years ago. Yet, some things do not change. Farmers continue to plan their workday around the weather; travelers still must take into account the vastness of the prairies; and we are forever dependent upon markets, wars, and trade agreements determined in places far removed from us. Once, it was the demand for furs or pemmican that controlled commerce. Now the vagaries of global economics set commodity prices, and the insatiable thirst of agriculture, industry and recreation determines the fate of our lake.

Our only certainty is that this prairie town-on-the-lake will continue to face challenges. Elbow has a long history of facing hardship and prosperity, boom and bust. And it has always managed to come through.