

Historic Athabasca



Ferry across the Athabasca River at Athabasca Landing, c. 1925
AA-00743



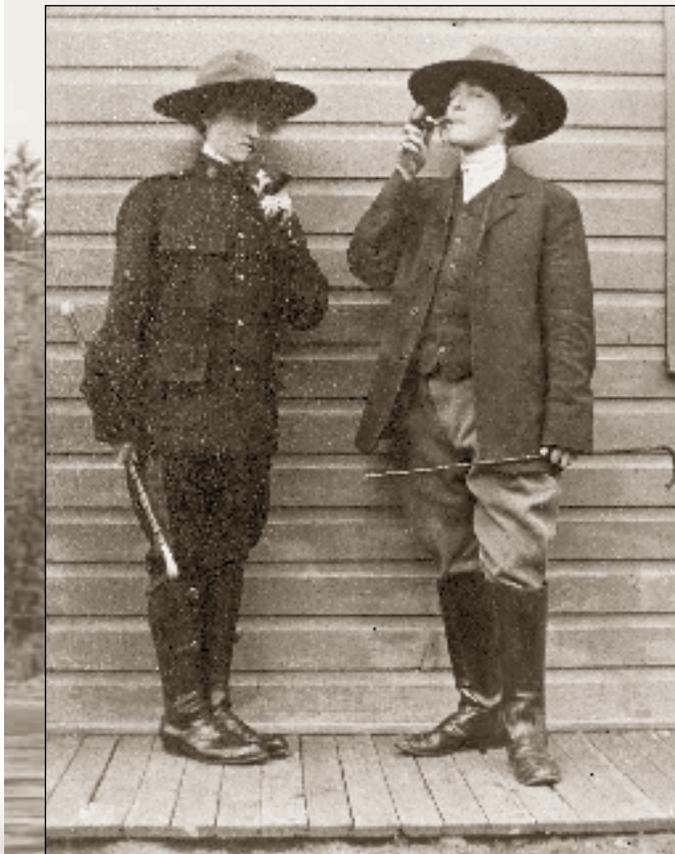
Grand Union Hotel, 1913, AA-00218



United Church, B. Preece, AA-05101



Northland Sun, Athabasca Landing c. 1919, AA-00695



*Jen Cummings and Constance Sanders, July 1911
Glenbow Archives, na-2788-15*

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Photos courtesy Athabasca Archives unless otherwise noted.

References: *Why Athabasca*, 2011

Athabasca Historical Walking Tour, 2017

Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History, 1986

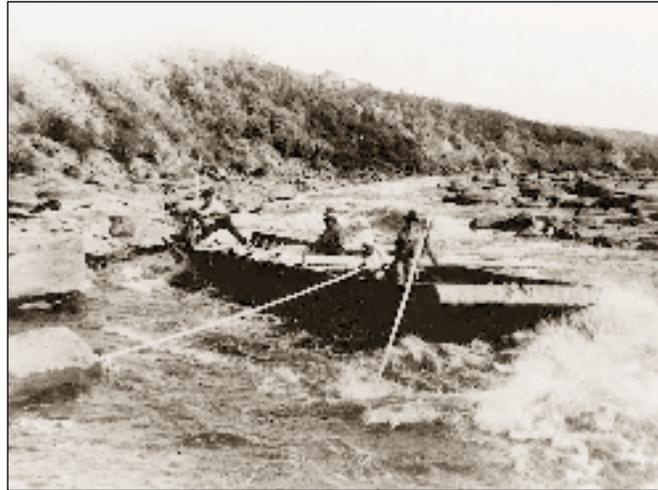
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The natural landing on the south shore of the “elbow” of the Athabasca River was part of the impetus for the origin and development of the town of Athabasca.

In 1856, the Oblate missionary, Monseigneur Alexandre Tache, organized an expedition down the Athabasca River via the La Biche River. His aim was to find a new and quicker transportation route and to lessen dependence on the Hudson’s Bay Company for transport. Accordingly, in 1867 he hired Metis boatman Louison Fosseneuve, aka “Captain Shot,” to take a group of Grey Nuns down the Athabasca River from Lac La Biche to Fort Providence on the Mackenzie River. The trip was successful. Captain Shot demonstrated that the series of rapids along the Athabasca River could be overcome and that the river could be used as a trade route.

The Hudson’s Bay Company was quick to recognize the value of a shorter route and in 1876 the company built the Landing Trail to carry goods between Edmonton and what was called Athabasca Landing. Although the “Landing” became a beehive of trading and boat building activity, it was seasonal in nature. There was little in the way of permanent development and settlement.

That began to change after 1910, when one of the last great waves of the Anglo colonial settler revolution began to hit the region and Athabasca became part of the frontier known as “The Last Best West.” As homesteaders, business people and land speculators began flooding into the area, the population grew from a few dozen to more than 2000 by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.



A scow on the back channel of the Grand Rapids, Athabasca River, AA-11187

The Town of Athabasca was incorporated in 1911 and many of the landmark buildings, including the Athabasca United Church, the Brick School, the Canadian Northern Railway train station and the Grand Union Hotel were constructed during the boom.

Although high hopes had been placed on continued commercial expansion and growth, especially after the Canadian Northern Railway arrived, the boom did not last. By the end of 1914 much of Western Canada had descended into a depression. Athabasca became a railway terminus instead of a major thoroughfare and river transport all but came to an end. The population declined to a little over 400 and would not reach the 1000 mark again until after the Second World War.



Gateway to the Last Best West, Athabasca Landing, 1911, AA-735



Athabasca Public School built 1912, AA-86.39



Loaded scows at Athabasca Landing, AA-00688



Canadian Northern Railway train and depot, AA-00679



Athabaska (sic) River, October 5, 1879. George Mercer Dawson, Library and Archives Canada, PA-051139