

CHAPTER SEVEN

Postwar Urbanism



The First World War drew many soldiers away from the Edmonton area but did not precipitate any substantial economic growth in the city. This was not the case during the Second World War. The city's population grew from some 90,000 in 1939 to over 113,000 in 1945. Much of this growth was driven by war industries, particularly in aviation and air training. Aviation was built on the base of regional industries that had taken root in Winnipeg and Edmonton before 1930, oriented towards serving the north. Another factor was the push for construction of a wartime transportation corridor from Edmonton to Alaska to counter a potential threat from Japan. A substantial military and engineering presence in Edmonton induced a boom in home construction.¹

As in the rest of Canada, the immediate postwar years were a time of economic restraint in Alberta. Non-essential government expenditures were held in check, including those associated with recreational roads and tourism. The countryside still remained distinct from the city, although Edmonton was on the eve of a great transformation. In 1947, oil was discovered at Leduc, a few miles south of the city. This event transformed the province, changing the

economic base of many communities into a mix of agriculture and industrial resource extraction. It marked the beginning of Edmonton's rise to prominence in the oil industry. In addition, the Redwater field north-east of Edmonton soon came into play, a development that transformed the small community of Fort Saskatchewan and which would eventually outdistance the Leduc field in terms of production. On the western edge of the hills, the quiet rural hamlet of Clover Bar was suddenly graced with a refinery while, by 1951, the Hay Lakes area found itself at the centre of the Joarcam oil field. There were at least twenty-one oil fields in production in the Edmonton region by 1953. These postwar finds merely confirmed what had been known for some time about the general possibilities for petroleum in central Alberta. As early as 1912, Tofield experienced a short-lived gas boom. The Viking gas field east of the hills had seen minor development as early as 1923.² Petroleum was on the way to becoming the substance of Alberta's future. Its accessibility, combined with the rising popularity of the automobile, assured that the relative isolation of the Beaver Hills would soon end.

Agriculture was also poised for a revival after the Second World War. Mixed farming, grazing and the maintenance of wood lots continued to be seen as the best way to balance the effects of unpredictable soils and weather patterns. Unlike practices on the open prairies, where large land units had long been in favour, subdivision into smaller holdings was the trend in the hills after 1945.³ In order to foster employment for returning servicemen, the Federal Government had passed the Veteran Lands Act as an inducement to soldiers to take up land. This well-intentioned legislation had mixed results, for much of the land made available was either in the north, or was otherwise marginal, such as the Beaver Hills. Also, the legislation was offensive to many in suggesting that established Indian reserves should, as in 1919, be thrown open to soldier settlers.⁴ From an economic perspective, the northern and rural areas could not compete with the growing cities in their ability to offer the support facilities needed by many veterans or

by the young and unemployed. The fledgling oil industry was a stronger lure than farming for the ambitious job-seeker. Nevertheless, the traditional advantages provided by relatively low-investment grazing remained strong in the hills. At the C.J. Kallal Ranch, on the southeast side of Beaverhills Lake, the nucleus for a highly successful commercial herd was developed in the 1940s, based on registered Herefords.⁵

Postwar economic circumstances led to revival of the Blackfoot Grazing Reserve, even though the quality of the fenced-in grazing land had declined with the growth of trees. In 1947, Jack Gray and his associates, having taken over the old Dominion Forest Administration Buildings as headquarters, coordinated many improvements over the next 20 years. The Blackfoot Grazing Association became the vector by which local grazing herds made adjustments to the landscape, and in which communal and leased landholdings played a role.⁶



Jack Gray at work, c. 1967

Increased demand for recreational use of the hills in the later 1970s led to discussions between the association and provincial land officials on defining a new multiple-use resource area. Under subsequent arrangements “a part of the area was cleared, broken and seeded with a mixture of forage plants” and the remainder “left forested.” Thus, the revamped Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Grazing, Wildlife and Provincial Recreation Area officially opened in 1988. A system of fences now surrounded the area to enclose both game animals and cattle grazing areas. A network of recreational trails was added, some of which link up with Elk Island National Park directly to the north. The process by which a working landscape was reconfigured into one with connections to the growing city of Edmonton dovetailed well with other ongoing assessments of land use in the hills.⁷

Science and History in the Beaver Hills

It has already been noticed how conflicts growing out of the initial designation of the “Elk Park” as a game preserve led to its incorporation within the growing system of National Parks in 1913. This inclusion meant that Elk Island came to be administered with a view to fulfilling the various mandates outlined in Dominion Park legislation. In response to public expectations that the Dominion Parks represented “pleasure grounds,” recreational improvements were authorized, both after the First World War and during the Depression. The tandem pursuit of conservation and recreation objectives was not viewed as particularly anomalous. Consider the words of National Park historian, W.F. Lothian, in a popular article from 1940:⁸

As one of the older units in the great system of public reservations... of Canada... Elk Island National Park, for more than a quarter of a century has been fulfilling a dual purpose. As a sanctuary for wild-life it has not only helped to save for posterity the buffalo...but it is preserving in their natural surroundings

other interesting big-game species and wild birds. As a public resort it is also providing opportunities for outdoor life and recreation amid the unspoiled beauties of a beneficent Nature, and as time goes on it will continue to render an increasingly useful service as one of Canada's National Playgrounds.

The quieter and less-congested world described here has long since vanished. In the hills, encroachment came about incrementally, but steadily, as happened on the peripheries of so many other urban centres of North America. In the immediate postwar years, National Parks officials adopted a policy of caution with respect to new in-park developments, just as they had during the late 1920s and 1930s.⁹ Despite previous unprofitable ventures in the commercial concession sector, managers did respond to demand for accommodation facilities, but by 1968 these efforts also succumbed to the economics of seasonal demand. Other ventures considered appropriate were approved, including church recreation camps, tent rental operations, a facility built by the Canadian Youth Hostel Association, refreshment booths, the Wapiti Inn, and boating concessions. Many of these agreements were cancelled between 1960 and 1970 owing to lack of sufficient use, changing public tastes or as responses by administrators to changing policy directions.¹⁰

New conceptions of park management and of the conservation and heritage mandate came up for debate in the 1960s, along with formal revisions to public policy. One student of Elk Island history commented that previous arrangements for the park were "tolerable until after the Second World War when a more sophisticated and professional view of the role of national parks as islands of relatively intact ecosystems" started to surface. These new environmentalist points of view had to mesh with the reality of more "intensified recreational use of these same areas." The need to cater to these diverse demands came to complicate administrative, professional and lay perceptions of desirable land use. Seeking the right balance between "conservation and use" was one of the main tasks facing park managers across North America after 1970.¹¹

Increased demand for access from an expanding regional population caused managers at Elk Island to re-evaluate the role of the park. At one level, the conflicts between conservation and human use were seen to be rather minimal. The areas of most intense use were well known, localized, controllable, and seasonal. Of more interest to park managers after 1970 was the definition of the park's ideal character and its proper conservation role. Debates about the nature of Elk Island's ecology had commenced shortly after the retirement of longtime superintendent, Dr. B.I. Love, in 1959. In the first half-century of park administration only three men had held sway, but the next eighteen years saw no less than six superintendents come and go, each attempting to alter policy and prepare a suitable park management plan.¹² In doing so, they had to pay much more attention than their predecessors to the claims of science and their application.



Bison processing facility, Elk Island National Park in 1992 These corrals were built in the 1930s to assist in rounding up bison for slaughter, for disease inspections, and for transporting to other centres.

Love's successor, H.R. Webster, quickly demonstrated a keen interest in gaining accurate estimates of the big-game population and utilizing academic research in the interests of policy. The ethos concerning animal reduction methods inherited by Webster is interesting to note in retrospect and may be taken as a measure of how frequently public attitudes have altered since 1907. Initially, the park was a kind of holding tank for threatened species, in which numbers were encouraged. The policy was all too successful. A shift in attitude came in the mid-1930s. Dr. Love saw the need to reduce animal numbers to a much lower figure than those common in the 1920s. Elaborate control facilities were built to assist in the monitoring of the health of bison. The notion that the park was, in some respects, a ranch, persisted during his time, making acceptable methods of animal reduction quite straightforward.

The purpose of a ranch is to raise and then sell meat on the hoof. So it was at Elk Island during the 1950s and early 1960s. Large contracts were let by tender to major meat-packing houses, calling on them to look after the animal reduction problem in ways which would generate revenue.¹³ Often the slaughter would be conducted at the park, but the companies clearly would have preferred to carry out such activities at their own well-equipped facilities. In 1961 Webster noted that Canada Packers "have again raised the question of the possibility of shipping the buffalo to their city plant where they could handle the complete kill of about 200 animals in one morning. That suggestion has been turned down by the Health of Animals Division in the past."¹⁴ The next year the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development took a very business-like attitude to the entire situation. One of its news releases declared that "Sweetgrass buffalo steaks will soon be adding northern sizzle to Canadian menus" for "250,000 pounds of top quality meat" from Wood Buffalo National Park were "to go on sale from coast to coast on January 17." Not only would the supply come from the northern herds, but "Buffalo meat from Elk Island National Park" would be "on sale this year with the sweetgrass variety." There would be everything "from streamlined hind quarters to packaged buffalo

burgers” all prepared “to give jaded after Christmas appetites a lift.” The number of beasts culled for these purposes was by no means negligible and indicates how quickly the populations could burgeon under conditions of protection and winter feeding. Webster reported that 337 animals were slaughtered in 1964, mainly for meat.¹⁵

The identity of Elk Island National Park had become a curious amalgam of game ranch, zoo, recreation centre, and nature area. Such were the operational necessities of the day and such was the flexibility of the National Parks Act. For the future, however, Webster was anxious to identify more lasting forms of control through applied ecology and a consideration of carrying capacity. He facilitated research and aerial surveys of animal populations in 1959. The contemporary reports of W.N. Holdsworth became the subject of some confusion between Webster and the Canadian Wildlife Service. Chief Mammalogist W.E. Stevens took the view that Holdsworth’s work indicated that ungulates (elk, bison, moose, deer) were tending to reduce the plant variety of the park landscape. In the long term, these grazers might prevent new deciduous growth, perhaps reducing northern areas of the park to a meadow-like condition in due course. Webster himself interpreted the scientific reports as questioning the very idea that Elk Island was a suitable place for a bison sanctuary. In his opinion, the park, as with much of the Beaver Hills of old, constituted a spruce forest, one which had been home only to moose and elk. Any bison in the area were likely only passing through on the more open fringes of the hills. The present vegetation, according to Webster, resulted mainly from fires during the homestead period, while subsequent animal use had prevented regeneration of the natural spruce forest. The Superintendent found support from another student of the landscape, who suggested that the bison were the main factor in reducing the natural succession from aspen to spruce, for bison tended to eat young planted spruce. Such considerations helped explain the “mistaken premise” which had “guided the general philosophy of the park for a number of years.”¹⁶

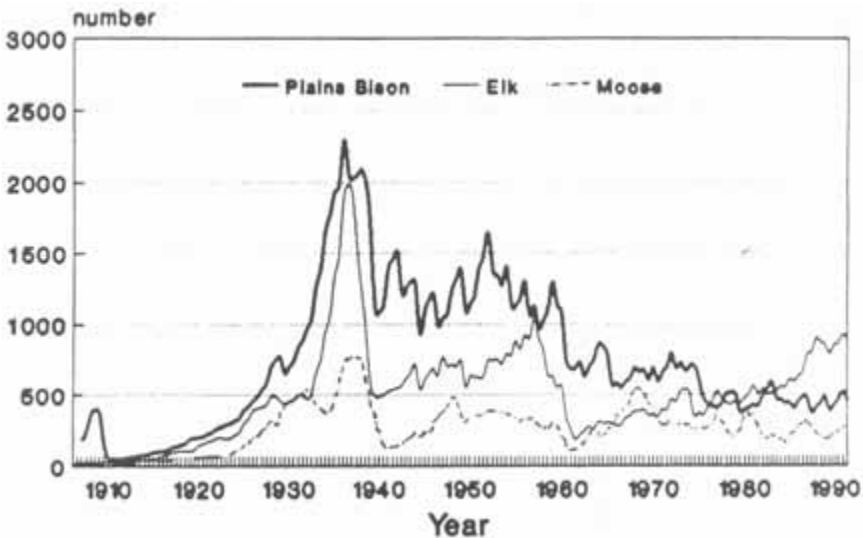
Webster's was a compelling historical thesis, but we have seen in previous chapters, bison were not just "passing through" in pre-settlement times, but were using the Beaver Hills in ways that the Aspen Parkland was normally used by such animals – as a sheltered seasonal wintering ground. The parallel result was that the hills provided good hunting range for Native peoples. In fur trade days, evidence has been cited for the presence of traditional bison pounds in the Beaver Hills, and that the hills remained a dependable source for bison into the late 1850s. It was true that bison, in their wild state, range widely and do not confine themselves to one area; but it was also true that during certain seasons, they may be more or less resident in a given locality.

Holdsworth may not have totally disagreed with Webster, but he and others were less concerned about the ideal character of Elk Island as bison range, and more with notions of suitable carrying capacity. Holdsworth contended that in much of the park, grass and shrub meadows had been maintained where forest should have succeeded. This, he thought, was due to nothing more mysterious than severe overgrazing in the past 20 years. The result had been to modify the original floral composition of the park. In some parts agricultural species had flourished by one means or another, not least of which was the presence of the regularly broken farm land in the park, traditionally used to produce winter feed. Here was the old "ranch" factor once again. Holdsworth recommended that bison be held at 400, elk at 400, and moose at 100. This would presumably lead to a revitalization of shrub and tree growth and to a higher percentage of rabbits and deer.¹⁷

In the end, the two parties agreed to disagree on the larger policy questions. Webster continued to argue that Elk Island was less than ideal bison landscape and that its small size could only increase its capacity to become a harbour of disease. The Canadian Wildlife Service scientists maintained that, whatever the limitations at Elk Island, it played an important role in the larger scheme of bison conservation sanctuaries. Webster was certainly successful in making the scope of bison management the main question for

future management. He had clearly seen the financial implications of the wildlife administration costs incurred over the years. Staff had spent an extraordinary amount of time monitoring herd numbers, round-up activities related to slaughter and shipment to other centres, and to disease inspections. Webster had most success with his population recommendations. These were accepted and a new slaughter reduced the ungulate density by over 45 per cent, bringing numbers to their lowest since the 1920s.¹⁸ Webster also managed to place biological considerations on the table by posing questions: what should be the relationship of bison with other large ungulates? In the absence of natural controls and feeding programmes, how were numbers to be controlled? These were important questions with which students of wildlife management had been struggling for some time.¹⁹

Webster was succeeded in 1965 by G.H. Ashley. The park administration now embraced a new “ecological” policy in which human influences were to be reduced, in the management sense. An example of change in this direction can be seen in 1967 when systematic production of feed crops in the park was suspended,



Ungulate Populations Chart, 1920s–1980s

thus bringing to a close a long-standing practice. The farm facility remained in place, however. In language beloved of planners, one park officer summarized the contradictions: “Although we are in the ‘Buffalo Ranching Business’ the hay farm does remain a non-conforming park use.” The implication was that in a “natural setting,” animal numbers should now achieve a balance based on their ability to feed themselves year round without human intervention.²⁰ With the adoption of such policies, the Parks Branch made a start on redressing an old bias in favour of large ungulates at Elk Island. The weight of years of accumulated practice however, determined that pursuit of this new direction would have to remain on hold for some time. History was about to repeat itself.

The singular event of the first year of Ashley’s term was the introduction of 22 head of Wood Bison from vast Wood Buffalo National Park into a newly constructed Canadian Wildlife Service



Wood Bison With the establishment of a Wood Bison population in the southern reaches of Elk Island in the 1960s, history appeared to be repeating itself. Issues of ecology drove this second initiative in bison conservation.

isolation area in the south-western portion of the park. The rationale for the introduction of a number of the larger and darker coloured cousins of the Plains Bison was the endangered status of the Wood Bison, owing to the disease-compromised nature of much of the herd in Wood Buffalo Park. "The intention was to create pockets of disease-free herds in locations separate from the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary, which at that time hosted the only relatively pure Wood Bison herd."²¹

When these animals were shipped south, they were considered to be free of disease, but testing in 1966 revealed that this was not so. By 1969 all had been slaughtered except a few calves, which were then hand-reared by wardens. This surviving group of young provided the basis for the current herd of Wood Bison in the park. Despite Webster's attempts to downplay the bison sanctuary aspects of Elk Island, by 1970 the park was right back in the thick of single species conservation, and in a new and interesting way. Efforts to establish other pockets of bison across the prairies had begun a year earlier when 50 bison taken from the Elk Island prairie population were released in the Thunder Hills, north of Prince Albert National Park, in order to improve the subsistence hunt for resident Native peoples.²²

The various ecological balls were tossed even higher in the air in 1972 when radical reductions of the park herds were proposed by Superintendent Don MacMillan. He suggested that the Plains Bison herd should be removed entirely and be replaced by a small display herd. While this suggestion was not accepted, it was representative of the thinking displayed in a number of contemporary studies, which sought to define the optimum carrying capacity for the park and to better understand the general relationships between ungulate populations and other aspects of the park.²³

The notion that all the Wood Bison should now be removed from the park became the occasion for more controversy in the mid-1970s. Policies on behalf of single species were clearly under assault, for the fly of ecology had been let out of the bottle by prominent headquarters staff back in the 1940s. Recent Ottawa

policies indicated that the Parks Branch had been soundly infected with the new thinking and were considering its broader applications. The shift in thinking extended to a greater respect for the role of all species in a given ecosystem. The coyote, for example, consistently hunted down in the hills in the 1920s, might now find defenders such as Elk Island naturalist Ross Chapman, who wrote of its utilitarian value and adaptability.²⁴

A comprehensive and progressive management plan was approved for Elk Island in 1978. The “island anomaly” idea was played up, in which the park was recognized as an “outlier” of the northern boreal forest. It was a “transitional” landscape, as described earlier. If there was a ghost in this plan, it was surely that of Webster. At the same time, room was still made for the recent preoccupation with the fate of the great northern herds of Wood Bison. Elk Island, having played an important role in the conservation of the Plains Bison, was now being asked to contribute to salvaging its cousins.²⁵

After 1980, the bison programme at Elk Island became one of “purification” and shipping out of healthy specimens to other centres of conservation to further establish healthy gene pools outside of the widely infected home territory of the Wood Bison.²⁶ Population surveys done in 1999 revealed that Elk Island sheltered 600 Plains Bison, 350 Wood Bison, and sizable numbers of elk, deer and moose. There was now a special area set aside for monitoring and treating elk as well as bison. Wildlife populations were highly controlled populations and the word “natural” no longer had a self-evident meaning at Elk Island.²⁷

Vanishing Waters

At a gathering in 1971, Alberta legislator Walter Buck recalled a parade in New Sarepta in which he noticed a Community Association float proclaiming: “Save the lowering water levels in Cooking Lake.”²⁸ This episode was symptomatic of the reverse side of postwar trends towards land use in the Beaver Hills. What should be the approach taken to the extensive mosaic of lakes, ponds and

streams in those parts? Specific designations had been given to some of these wetlands early in the century, such as Ministik Lake being recognized as a bird sanctuary in 1911. By 1971, however, there was a widespread concern that the water regimes of the hills were in trouble. There was a broadly held sentiment that over the previous 70 years forces had been at work favouring a select number of species, increased uniformity in the vegetation cover, and a lowering of water levels, with attendant decline in aquatic species and recreational opportunities. A variety of reasons for these fluctuations in the water tables have been offered over the years. A 1976 planning report made special mention of the narrow watersheds surrounding most of the individual lakes, suggesting that “the lake levels are sensitive to small variations in climatic patterns” and these influence precipitation, evaporation and runoff. Miquelon, Beaverhills, and Cooking Lakes presented the most visible measures of these environmental events.²⁹

The first record of a Beaverhills Lake water level dates from 1865 “when a traveller saw bison mired in the mud of the exposed lake bottom.” Edo Nyland documented the rise and fall of the levels from that early date until 1970, offering his views on the reasons for the shifts. These included fluctuations brought on by wet and dry seasons, the general clearing of the land, and human engineering modifications such as the 1926 canal which took water south from Miquelon Lake to Camrose for that city’s municipal needs. An authority on Beaverhills Lake, Dick Dekker, acknowledged these influences as adversely affecting “nature’s water regulatory system.” Water, snow-melt and summer rains, instead of “percolating through a mossy forest floor, now cascade across cleared ground or are wasted by increased evaporation in surface pools and puddles.” Even in its current diminished state, this wetland presents a dramatic visual aspect. Dekker observed that looking across its 18-kilometre expanse it becomes “the closest thing to an ocean view in land-locked Alberta.”³⁰

From the standpoint of waterfowl habitat, a certain amount of fluctuation in the levels of a large wetland is desirable, but too

much unpredictability is naturally a frustration to local farmers at the wetland's edge. It is also a frustration to nesting birds. As early as 1917, proposals were being made to construct engineering works on the lake to help control radical rises of water in wet years, although these ideas were not carried out. Ever since, local agriculturalists have adopted an ambiguous attitude to the lake's movements. Proposals for outright stabilization of water levels, or for total drainage, have come and gone with some regularity. These proposals have been supplemented by other ideas, such as mining the coal seams beneath the lake, conversion of the drained lake into more community pasture, or establishment of a shooting range for the Air Force.³¹ All of these developmental proposals were passed over in favour of more environmentally pleasing ideas.

By the end of the 1960s, concern about the steady decline in lake levels in the Beaver Hills moved a body of citizens to submit a pointed petition: "The undersigned are petitioning for Alberta Government action on the reclamation of the Beaverhill Watershed (Miquelon, Ministik, Hastings, Cooking and Beaverhill Lakes). Let's get some water back in our lakes."³² An extensive and interesting body of information grew out of the subsequent commission and its hearings. If opinions expressed were wide ranging, with much disagreement on specifics, it was nevertheless an important example of intelligent citizen engagement and civility.³³

The scientific poles of the debate were defined by two distinct views. At one end was Edo Nyland's contention that the essential dynamic of the disappearing water involved the sustained burning and clearing of the forest cover after 1880. This view was opposed by University of Alberta hydrographer Aleigh Laycock, who argued "that climatic patterns have been more than adequate explanations for water level declines, and it is likely that man has inadvertently reduced the rate of decline rather than accelerated it." This assertion was based on his claim that, in the parkland, trees actually returned more moisture to the atmosphere, in most years, than did open grassland and cultivated land. Forests represented a kind of long term drain on groundwater rather than a support for it.³⁴ Suffice

to say, this was not a conclusion that many veterans of the land were prepared to accept.

Regardless of the lack of consensus on the actual causes of water decline, there was a general agreement reached that massive expenditures on water diversions for the limited purpose of raising Cooking and Hastings Lake levels was not a sound strategy. A broader proposal in the tabled consultant's report was favoured. This alternative argued that any substantial engineering actions taken should be oriented to the overall problems of the several linked watersheds of the Cooking Lake Moraine area. The formidable costs projected and the tentative nature of long-term effects assured that the plans for piping in water to Cooking Lake remained on the shelf.³⁵

Exercises such as the Cooking-Hastings Lakes hearings helped usher in a more rigorous effort at integrated land use planning by the various Crown and municipal agencies. Such an exercise was subsequently taken for the Beaverhills lake area.³⁶ Special status was also achieved at this location when the lake was recognized



Trumpeter Swans This once acutely endangered species has come back in the Beaver Hills owing to active conservation programmes sponsored by public and private bodies.

in 1982 as a National Nature Viewpoint, following much joint advocacy by the Canadian Nature Federation, the Edmonton Bird Club and the Federation of Alberta Naturalists. Two provincially designated natural areas at Beaver Hills Lake were added in 1987, through the nomination of Pelican Island and Dekker Island. In 1987, under the Ramsar Convention, Beaverhills Lake was included on the world list of Wetlands of International Importance.³⁷ By the late 1980s, returns on these investments were noticeable. The threatened Trumpeter Swans, a species that was almost wiped out by 1900, were again seen on the lake, as they were at Elk Island. Also returning were Tundra Swans and Sandhill Cranes. In the view of naturalist Peter Dunn, we “probably had more birds at Beaverhills Lake than any other area in Alberta.”³⁸

Successes in the conservation of avian and large game species were not the only wildlife stories in the Beaver Hills in the postwar years. Images of the historic commercial character of the region, as understood in fur trade days, were visible once again by the mid-1970s. By virtue of a certain stabilization of water bodies and the regeneration of the aspen forest through long-term fire suppression, the namesake animal of this region, the beaver, was back in numbers, with much attendant flooding. This was no doubt noticed with some pleasure by those who had argued in 1971 that the return of the beaver would do much to help restore low lake levels. Their appearance now necessitated control on occasion and sometimes this “was dealt with by shooting beavers.” By the early 1990s there were several hundred active beaver lodges in Elk Island Park alone, a terrain well suited to them owing to the rolling nature of the land and frequency of small ponds.³⁹

South of Cooking Lake, the Reirson homestead was purchased by the Lion’s Club of Camrose and then donated to the province in 1958, providing the core land for Miquelon Lake Provincial Park. Other lakes, such as Oliver and Joseph, both notable in earlier years as fish and wildlife areas, have lost much of their character owing to local industrial activities and redirected watershed flows.⁴⁰

The Architectural and Landscape Heritage of the Beaver Hills

By 1950 the conditions of postwar civilian financial restraint were coming to an end. A decline in rail travel, occasioned by increased automobile ownership, initiated a great blurring of the boundaries between town and country. The automobile and long-distance trucking slowly started to transform social and working arrangements in Alberta. The farm itself was mechanizing at a great rate, with labour being replaced by expensive machinery. The founding of Sherwood Park as a community in 1951 and the construction of a refinery at Clover Bar brought Edmonton to the very western edge of the hills. Group outings by train to Cooking Lake or Elk Island or Hay Lakes had been replaced by more frequent and predictable journeys by car.⁴¹

These trends did not go unnoticed by the older generation of Beaver Hills residents. We have already seen that in the late 1940s, Dr. A.C. Archer and his associates were aware that the old agricultural world of the pioneer was rapidly disappearing. Through



Restored Superintendent's Residence, Elk Island National Park, 1985 The growing community interest in preserving the pioneer heritage extended to long serving public buildings.

community effort, they worked to see that the values of the local pioneer community gained some recognition at Elk Island. Their achievement was a harbinger of the establishment of the ambitious Ukrainian Heritage Cultural Village, a few miles east of the park, for which planning commenced in the mid-1970s.⁴² Similarly, federal agencies began to look to their own properties and undertake appropriate restorations and designations.

Interest in the built heritage of the hills was fostered by the mounting economic dominance of cities such as Edmonton, Red Deer and Calgary, which came at a price with respect to smaller communities. The main street of many rural Alberta towns came to display signs of lost economic vibrancy. The occasion of the public hearings on Cooking and Hastings Lakes Water Levels in 1971 provided a stimulus for a limited assessment of some of the older stock of pioneer buildings and commercial structures in the hills, revealing how few and fragile were the reminders of the



Ukrainian Heritage Cultural Village In the early 1980s the Alberta Government helped further local initiatives aimed at establishing an outdoor museum between Elk Island and Mundare.

pre-1920 period.⁴³ What commercial migration to larger centres had not quite destroyed through abandonment was too often completed by the appearance of a new mall on the edge of a town. The outward migration of the young to the cities and changing social values resulted in declining memberships in churches, causing some striking older church structures to be boarded up. This trend was already noticeable in the 1960s.

In 1971, the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village Society was formed, to salvage and relocate regional heritage buildings to an architectural sanctuary near Elk Island National Park.⁴⁴ In 1975, the Province of Alberta purchased the site of some 320 acres, and continued the effort to rescue some of the best examples of vernacular and sacred architecture from the Ukrainian bloc settlements.⁴⁵ With a view to illustrating the pre-1930 heritage of Ukrainian town and farm life, a substantial number of structures were moved and professionally restored. The objectives went beyond mere architectural rescue. The structures were furnished and made the focus of museum treatments and first-person interpretation of the ways of life.⁴⁶ The village provides a kaleidoscopic view of the various aspects of early twentieth-century rural life in east central Alberta's Ukrainian bloc settlement and is today an important tourist attraction and educational resource.

The initiative was timely, for in recent years, North American urban planners have come to speak of "rurbanization" as a developing phenomenon. The term describes a trend visible around many cities in which urban forms, values and expectations extend into the countryside. In some cases, cities have merged into a larger "conurbation," such as the Toronto-Hamilton area.⁴⁷

In less congested regions, the "back to the land" movement of the 1960s, which appealed to a mix of the romantic, retired, wealthy, and environmentally sensitive, transformed itself substantially in the 1990s. The original impulses, if not totally absent, had been replaced on a grander scale by a greyer, gentrified version of the countryside in which large estates and a demand for urban service facilities prevailed, as though there were no logical inconsistencies

in expecting of the countryside what only the city can provide economically. In some extreme cases, golf courses encroach imprudently upon grizzly habitat. Many a quiet village outside of the normal range of the nearest city suddenly became “a bedroom community.” Thus Tofield, long a quiet agricultural service centre beyond the reach of Edmonton’s daily life, has undergone a rapid housing expansion and revitalization. Similarly, the small cottage community of Antler Lake, a short distance south-west of the boundary of Elk Island National Park, has become a year-round outreach of Edmonton. “Acreages” became the cry of the new North American urban pioneer, indicating that the last frontier to be subdued was the old countryside.

With this phenomenon came mounting pressures on special land reserves or traditional resource use areas. The Beaver Hills have not been immune. Local land administrators have had to adjust to new land use conflicts within the rural-urban fringe portions of the continent. The proximity of Elk Island to Edmonton supported this trend and led one sportsman to refer to it as a “Wilderness



Beaverhills Lake near Tofield One of the largest freshwater bodies in Central and Southern Alberta, the lake flanks the eastern side of the hills and remains an important focus of wildlife conservation.

Park in the Suburbs.”⁴⁸ Recognizing a need to reassess the pressures on the boundaries of Elk Island, park officers prepared a new management plan in the early 1990s, one which sought to facilitate greater integration with regional patterns of land use.⁴⁹ Other parties, such as the Beaver Hills Initiative group and independent scholars, have made substantial contributions to assessing the extent of long-term “fragmentation” of the forest communities and habitat in the Beaver Hills.⁵⁰ Similarly, the guardians and clients of the Blackfoot Community Pasture completed a comprehensive management plan in 1997. Elk Island, Miquelon Lake, the Parkland Natural Area, and other local land use areas now form a patchwork of special areas.⁵¹

Since the initial establishment of a forest reserve in the Beaver Hills in the 1890s, there has been a certain stumbling towards a pattern of land use similar to that recently advocated as “biosphere reserves,” an approach to landscape conservation first defined in 1968 through the United Nations with its “Man and the Biosphere” programme, and by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. A network of such reserves is slowly being established around the globe.⁵² In the late 1970s, the model was adopted at Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba and at Waterton and Glacier, the large international peace park on the border of Alberta and Montana.⁵³ A biosphere reserve usually has three main components: a central core area of land considered worthy of conservation for its landscape values and biological diversity; a surrounding “buffer area” of natural resource use areas; and a third outer ring constituting a “transition zone” in which a fuller range of industrial and civic facilities are accommodated.⁵⁴ The core zone often provides for the fundamental protection of regional headwaters, an aspect shared with many national and provincial parks. Looking at the Beaver Hills as a biosphere, Elk Island is the core zone. Several other phases of the old Cooking Lake Forest Reserve, now under new identities, represent aspects of a surrounding buffer zone. The fringe farm lands and smaller communities may be taken as the transition zone, which hosts open land and normal working enterprises.

The prospect of controlling encroaching land use and subdivision in favour of a “land ethic,” to use Aldo Leopold’s memorable term, requires broad civic commitment toward allowing land to serve its best purpose.⁵⁵ The difficulties often come at the boundaries of land classification where land may be considered, from some points of view, as marginal. Where pressures are strong, as in the Niagara fruit belt, the best use may be completely overlooked. Norman Conrad has suggested that in the early 1990s, it was suddenly convenient for politicians to promote the abstractions of “green plans,” “vision statements,” notions of “ecological integrity” and other high-sounding procedures as foils for carrying on business as usual rather than budgeting and dealing with the hard work of legislated land-use planning.⁵⁶ At the same time, a too-rigid understanding is a disadvantage in matters where nature is often the hidden player at the table. In the crucible of legislative tinkering, allowance needs to be made for trial and error and for the unexpected, and for what Kevin Lynch called “rooted information” – that great reservoir of local, but not necessarily uniform, knowledge.⁵⁷ As we have seen in the case of the water levels issue of the early 1970s, there are collective traditions of land use reform in the Beaver Hills to draw upon. It found its early reflection when Native peoples cooperated in the construction and operation of a buffalo pound; and it had a more recent manifestation when an early twentieth-century politician listened to what some of his constituents were saying about a threatened group of elk, took up the matter, and then had the courage to change his mind.