

A History of the Moose Jaw River Valley  
Prepared by Leith Knight for the  
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The Moose Jaw Creek has been a geographic feature of this region since the glaciers melted away, and a Black Spruce forest covered the land. When grassland suddenly replaced the spruce forest in southern Saskatchewan about 10,000 years ago, our area became the prairie land we know today.

Wildlife changed, too. Gone were the camel, sloth, mastodon, mammoth, several species of small horses and now the bison became the principal game animal of the prairie – a role it would maintain through 330 generations of plains hunters. Generation after generation of bison hunters knew Moose Jaw Creek as a campsite which provided shelter, wood, fresh water, pottery clay, clam shells for adornment, and food like fish, berries, roots, and sweet syrup from the Manitoba Maple.

Gradually we are beginning to learn about these prehistoric peoples who lived here – thanks to sites like the Garrat site in Kingsway Park, which was excavated a few years back. They were called the Besant people – the first small band, probably a family group, numbering about 50 souls first camped in the river valley about 40 BC. They lived in hide-covered conical tents, some measuring 9 meters in diameter, and they hunted with light spear or dart, for the bow-and-arrow had not yet been devised.

The Besant people with their knowledge of corral building, were masters of the pound-hunting technique – and they also used bison jumps. Their pottery, the oldest pottery found in Saskatchewan, was uncovered at the Garrat site. They didn't have kilns – they simply stood the newly-made pots in an open hearth and covered them with very hot ashes. Life was not easy for these prehistoric people. They had to travel everywhere on foot in pursuit of the ever-moving bison, for the horse had not yet come to the prairies – and wouldn't for another thousand years. They were happy to rest and refresh themselves in the shelter of the Moose Jaw River valley.

A little over 200 years ago, Indians brought the first horses to drink at the Moose Jaw Creek; and about this time they began to acquire European trade goods, particularly the gun.

Soon after 1800, the Moose Jaw valley saw a new breed of people: the white and half-white hunters and traders. They came by way of the great western trail – called the Plain Hunters' trail – which led to the Cypress Hills. The trail crossed the Moose Jaw Creek at a natural ford located at a big bend known throughout the buffalo plains as The Turn. In the 1850s, the trail was used by the Métis hunters of the Red River as they traveled further and further west on their annual hunts. The Turn was the first point on the Creek where their long brigades of carts loaded with buffalo meat and hides could safely cross the valley.

At this time, the tribal boundary of the Cree and Blackfoot extended from the North Saskatchewan River, to the Elbow on the South Saskatchewan River. From the Elbow it extended southeasterly passing a few kilometers west of the Turn and continuing on to the Missouri River. The Cree held all the plains east of this line, from which the buffalo had disappeared. The Blackfoot held the plains to the west where the buffalo was still fairly plentiful. The intrusion of Cree and Métis hunters beyond this boundary was viewed with alarm by the Blackfoot – and open warfare raged until there were no more buffalo. During this period, The Turn was the western terminus of the trail – and no Métis hunter in his right mind was keen to venture beyond the Moose Jaw Creek unless he traveled in a well-organized, strongly armed band.

The Turn on the Moose Jaw Creek was the birthplace of Moose Jaw. The first buildings on the site of the city were two log cabins erected here in the last 1860s by Métis hunters and their families who were wintering over on the plains. Both cabins consisted of one room with a fireplace for cooking and warmth; a buffalo robe served as a door, and parchment covered the window hole in lieu of glass. Since the Métis loved to sing and dance, there would be plenty of jigging and reeling, interspersed with songs of the voyageurs, while they wintered at The Turn.

The settlement of Moose Jaw took its name from the Creek, known originally as Moose Jaw Bone Creek. The name was probably used by white hunters and traders who first ventured into the area in the early 1800s. Certainly the name – Moose Jaw Bone Creek – appeared on the Arrowsmith map published in London in 1852, and used by Palliser’s prairie expedition on 1857.

The name is probably Cree in origin, and certainly the creek was in the hunting territory of this tribe. The Cree language has many words continuing the syllables *moos* and *aw*. In the Cree dictionary we find:

*Moose pitaw* meaning “he is uncovered”

*Moosehtaw* meaning “he feels something”

*Moosihaw* meaning “he senses someone is around”

Maybe the original Cree name sounded like Moose Jaw to white man’s ear, and that was the way he wrote it down.

In the late 1870s, a strange quietness had settled over Moose Jaw Creek. The buffalo herds were no more. Gone were the fur traders, buffalo hunters, and whiskey peddlers. Even the Indians – or most of them – had been herded on to reservations far from this area. Now only the occasional Mounted Police patrol stopped at The Turn.

The way had been cleaned for the building of the great transcontinental railway and the coming of the settlers. In the summer of 1881, when railway construction west of Winnipeg was just getting underway, James Ross and a friend, Hector Sutherland, both of Winnipeg, climbed into a democrat and rode westward, following the old fur trade trail which eventually brought them to The Turn. The purpose of the jaunt was to try to figure

out the exact route of the new rail line, where a rail centre or town was likely to be established, and then to take up homestead land as close to the townsite as possible. (Land next to the townsite was more valuable, especially if the town grew into a city.)

After studying the Moose Jaw River valley, Ross concluded that there was only one place for a railway to cross the valley with the minimum of engineering difficulty and expense. That place was in the broad, flat valley where Thunder Creek joined the Moose Jaw Creek. Ross also reasoned that since there was a good water supply here (an essential for steam locomotives) and the site was midway between Winnipeg and the Rockies, there was a good chance the spot would become a divisional point on the new rail line. A year later railway construction arrived at the Moose Jaw Creek, and crossed the valley exactly where Ross had predicted it would – and where it does today.

The next aboriginal inhabitants of the valley were the Sioux – a remnant band of thousands who fled to Canada after defeating General George Custer and his seventh cavalry in 1876. Probably the band first ventured into the area in search of food. When the railway arrived here in 1882, the Sioux set up a semi-permanent camp at The Turn and earned money by working for white settlers and selling polished buffalo horns to rail passengers. These were the Indians the first settlers met.

There was a great to-do at The Turn in December 1892 when an Indian woman gave birth to a two-headed stillborn child. The Indians looked upon the event as an omen of impending disaster, and the next day the staged a “dog feast” to counteract the evil.

When two little Indian children played near the swollen river in May 1891, they fell into the ice-cold water and were drowned, the Moose Jaw Times prefaced a report of the tragedy with the heading “Two Good Indians”, implying that the only good Indians were dead ones. This is a prime example of racism prevalent at this time.

One settler remembered when an Indian perished in a spring flood at The Turn, and was not found for two or three weeks, when the settlers spotted the body near what is now Konopaki’s property in River Park. During that period, the Indians walked up and down the river wailing, and only when the body was found, did the wailing cease.

Moose Jaw’s first industries were located along the river. The first industry, of course, was the CPR, which relied on river water. About 1885, Enoch Colpitts constructed a gristmill – a wooden structure on a stone foundation and probably operated by waterpower. During a violent windstorm in early November 1886, the mill toppled over into the river.

There was ice harvesting as early as March 1883. One outfit took out 500 tons of ice, and the CPR harvested 500 tons for its own use.

In the early 1890s, Jim Brass was making bricks in a kiln on the riverbank just south of the old powerhouse building. Later, Wellington White established a brick plant on the site of the present tourist camp, and built his home on top of the hill overlooking

the plant. It was White who also built the first bridge over the river at this point so his children, who attended old Victoria School, would not have to cross the CPR mainline at the dangerous 9<sup>th</sup> Ave. S.E. crossing where the trains use to come barreling down the hill into the valley.

In the early years of this century, Hugh Ferguson, a local butcher, operated a slaughterhouse in the river valley at The Turn. In 1890, a piggery, probably located in what is now Churchill Park, was responsible for polluting the river. The Moose Jaw Times lamented: “If this matter is not attended to, our beautiful river...will be transformed into a cesspool emitting death dealing malaria germs...”.

In 1889, R.H. Holt purchased the quarter section of land that is now Churchill Park for a market garden and pig ranch. The river crossing by the present-day Moose Jaw Greenhouses was known as Holt’s Crossing. In 1906, on this same quarter section, the Moose Jaw Nursery was established and at that time it was the only nursery in Saskatchewan. Its greenhouses nestled against the north wall of the valley, on the big bend in the river almost directly south of the International Bible College. No penny ante operation, the nursery grew. In 1906 there were 250,000 cottonwoods, 100,000 Manitoba Maples and ash trees, as well as 100,000 cabbage plants and the same number of celery plants. Without a doubt, the cottonwoods and maples growing today on the site were saplings from the nursery.

Early Moose Jaw settlers talked about a river teeming with fish. In 1884, after the CPR built its first dam at the site of the present Manitoba Street dam, citizens were concerned over the large number of pike slaughtered as they attempted to get over the dam, and reported that fish were being speared, caught in scoop nets and even knocked down with sticks. During periods of high water, fish swam up stream for miles. When waters receded they became land locked and were harvested by the settlers to supplement rather meager diets.

I like to think about all the notables and non-notables whose journeys brought them to the Moose Jaw valley during the fur trade and early settlement periods:

- There was Dr. James Hector, the brilliant young geologist/naturalist of Captain Palliser’s expedition, and the discoverer of the Kicking Horse Pass (1857).
- Accompanying Hector was Big Jim McKay, one of the best Métis guides and buffalo hunters in the West, who would later become The Hon. James McKay, prominent Manitoba legislator and minister of agriculture.
- There was Dr. John Rae (later Sir John Rae), the Arctic explorer, who in 1854 discovered the remains of the ill-fated Franklin expedition. Rae camped at The Turn in 1861 as a member of the big game hunting expedition of Henry Chaplin and Sir Frederick Johnstone on its way to the

foothills of the Rockies. Sir Frederick was a minor, and Rae was acting as his guardian.

- Then there was Henry Chaplin's black cook, whose name is unrecorded, who was probably the first black person to set eyes on the Moose Jaw valley. The expedition's Métis guides and buffalo runners, who were fearful about venturing into Blackfoot territory beyond Moose Jaw Creek, believed that if the Blackfoot caught sight of this black man, they would pursue the expedition until they captured him. Several days past the Moose Jaw Creek the guides refused to go on and Chaplin and Johnstone abandoned the expedition.
- No stranger to the Moose Jaw River valley was John McNab Ballenden McKay, the part Indian, part Scottish interpreter of the Hudson's Bay Qu'Appelle post. Known as Jerry, he descended from three generations of chief factors of the Hudson's Bay Company. He was an amazing runner and skilled equestrian, whose feats astonished even the Indians.
- And there was William Tupper, son of Sir Charles Tupper, a prime minister and Father of Confederation. William was stationed here during the Northwest Rebellion – and liked to spend his off-duty hours visiting with the Sioux at The Turn. “They are plucky Indians and hate the Americans,” he wrote to his mother, “and they draw their knives across their throats to express their kindly feeling towards Americans.”
- There was John Macoun, the Canadian naturalist/explorer, who camped at The Turn in 1880. He probably knew more about the Creek and the surrounding prairie land than any other person.
- There was Father Lestanc (pronounced Les-Tang), a missionary to the Métis buffalo hunters and their families scattered across the prairies, who confirmed 12 people at Moose Jaw Creek in 1872.
- A Father Hugonard, another well known missionary of the prairies, and his companion, the old Métis buffalo hunter, Joseph Delorme, who spotted a small remnant of buffalo grazing near The Turn in 1881.
- And last, but not least – David Sinclair, a smart, good-looking, part-native, part-Scottish dandy who came to The Turn to trade liquor for furs and hides, with Métis hunters.

Leith Knight – November 1994

## Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan



Photo Credit –  
Moose Jaw Times Herald

Leith Knight (*née* Docherty) is credited with preserving and popularizing Moose Jaw's history. Her weekly column has appeared in the local newspaper since 1969, and she was the city's first archivist at the Moose Jaw Public Library. Born in Moose Jaw in 1924 and educated there, she personally knew some of the city's old-timers. Her mother, the night telephone operator for local calls during Prohibition, also told her daughter some colourful tales. Knight's interest in history became more official in the early 1950s. Working at City Hall, she took minutes for the museum committee. A few years later, the Moose Jaw Public Library hired her; in 1968 she initiated a local history collection; and in 1969 she began her weekly column for the *Moose Jaw Times-Herald*. Knight retired from the Moose Jaw Public Library in 1983, but she still writes newspaper columns, and remains an active local historian. Knight is also an accomplished musician, and has served as organist and bell-ringer at several Moose Jaw churches. Her publications include *Birds of the Moose Jaw Area* (1967) and *All the Moose, All the Jaw* (1982), a local history.

*Martha Tracey*