

I. HISTORY

The “country beyond the height of land” was the description of the Atikokan area by its first settlers, the Ojibwa Indians. The Natives supported themselves on land that was characterized as having an abundance of forests, lakes and rivers, small game and woodland caribou. The Natives that inhabited the Atikokan area, Oschekamega Wenenewak - The People of the Crossridges, - lived in peace and harmony with nature.

In 1688, Jacques de Noyon was the first white man to travel through the “country beyond the height of land”. After de Noyon travelled through the area, a rush of exploration and expansion took place and within 200 years the Ojibwa population had greatly diminished. The remaining natives signed the Northwest Angle Treaty, Treaty No. 3, covering the Atikokan-Quetico area in 1873. With the signing of the Treaty some natives retired to reserves, while some remained to live the lifestyle of hunting and trapping in the area.

While the Ojibwa natives struggled to maintain their harmonious lifestyle, the fur trade was becoming a major industry. Due to boundary disputes between Canada and the United States, fur brigades travelled extensively through the heart of the Atikokan-Quetico area. However, in the 1850’s the fur trade ceased in this area due to other means of transportation, namely the railroad.

Confederation in 1867 brought with it a need to improve communication with the west. This demand triggered the construction of the Dawson Trail, which began at Prince Arthur’s Landing and went through to Winnipeg. When the Dawson Trail was completed in 1874, the route west could be travelled for \$15.00. This reasonably priced trip included riding in open wagons, and crossing lakes and rivers in an open rowboat. Accommodation was a large platform raised off the ground, on which everyone slept. However, in 1882, the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway resulted in the closure of the Dawson Trail.

After the fur trade in the 1850’s, gold was discovered approximately 45 miles southeast of Atikokan. This finding, in the winter of 1870, started a boom of mineral exploration. Demands for an effective means of communication and transportation in 1886 resulted in the incorporation of the Ontario and Rainy River Railroad to be built from Port Arthur to Fort Frances and westward. In addition, roads were being built in the region to assist in developing the mining areas.

Active mining operations commenced in the Atikokan area in 1899. That same year, Tom Rawn settled in the Atikokan area after the completion of the Canadian Northern Railroad, which included Atikokan. Tom Rawn, Atikokan’s first settler, was one of the first to stake claims for iron ore in the Steep Rock area. In 1940, Tom Rawn sold 109 mining claims to the Midwest Iron Mining Corporation. With the sixty claims that still remained he formed Rawn Iron Mines Ltd. Unfortunately, shortly after the

formation of his mining company, Tom set out to do some prospecting in the Sapawe area and was never to be seen again.

Julian Cross, a mining professor and prospector, discovered the vast amount of iron ore that lay under Steep Rock Lake. Cross' discovery in 1930 sparked the interest of Joe Errington and Major General D. M. Hogarth. Errington and Hogarth, along with Cross, funded the project and hired a brilliant young engineer named M. S. (Pop) Fotheringham. The team of four men began to probe Steep Rock Lake for iron ore in 1938. However, problems arose with the idea of mining the iron ore that lay beneath the Lake. The ore was buried under 100 feet of water and 300 feet of silt, which made it very difficult to salvage. In addition, Steep Rock Lake was part of the Seine River System, a major waterway. Impossible as it may have seemed to mine Steep Rock Lake, Pop Fotheringham produced a method to mine the Lake because of the ore demands of the war effort in the early 1940's. The Seine River System which flowed through Marmion Lake and then into Steep Rock Lake was dammed and diverted. The water was diverted around the East End of Steep Rock Lake through Finlayson Lake and drained back into the west arm of Steep Rock Lake to continue its flow through the Seine River System. The West End of what was once Steep Rock Lake was drained and dredged. While many consultants thought that the plan was ridiculous, Cyrus Eaton, a financial genius, thought that the mining of iron ore in Steep Rock Lake was a worthy project and raised \$3,500,000.00 for the project. The determination and perseverance of five men, Cross, Errington, Hogarth, Fotheringham and Eaton, has made Steep Rock unique in Canadian history. The massive engineering project is known as "one of the great Canadian engineering triumphs of all time."¹ Steep Rock Iron Mines was a great success, producing 1,400,000 tons of high-grade pellets annually. However, new technologies that improved the quality of steel made from taconite ore, forced Steep Rock Iron Mines to announce its closure in 1972. Steep Rock Iron Mines could not compete economically and they officially closed in August 1979.

Three ore bodies were discovered during the probing of Steep Rock Lake. Each ore body was initially labelled, A, B and C, but later were named after the founders of the Steep Rock ore bodies. The first ore body was named Hogarth Mine, the second was named Errington Mine and the third ore body was leased to the Caland Ore Company Limited. Caland was a subsidiary of the Inland Steel Company of Chicago. Caland Ore Company Limited was formed in 1949, and in 1959 it initiated its open pit mining operation in the Falls Bay ore body. Similar to Steep Rock Lake, Caland Ore Company was quite successful, producing 25 million tons of iron ore in 14 years of operation. However, in 1980, Caland Ore Company was also forced to close because of new and improved technologies in steel production.

When the mines were in full gear, much attention was also given to the forestry industry because of the large quantities of timber that were being utilized by the mines. In the early 1900's there were numerous lumber mills in the surrounding area of Atikokan. Many lumber companies logged the Quetico area extensively before it was announced that there was no longer to be any commercial logging in Quetico Park. In

¹ Tris Coffin, *Pay Dirt at Steep Rock* (Published by: Hudson's Bay Company, 1957), 2

1942, the Ontario-Minnesota Pulp and Paper Company Limited situated themselves north of Atikokan and began logging operations. All wood from the plant was driven down the Seine River and Little Turtle River Systems until a road was completed in 1950.

In 1945, the first stationary mill was constructed at Sapawe Lake. The mill was constructed and operated under the direction of J.A. Mathieu Limited company. In 1958, J.A.'s grandson Jim incorporated Jim Mathieu Lumber Limited and took over the Sapawe mill. Jim Mathieu completely renovated and updated the mill. Sawmill and planing mill equipment was renovated, a dry kiln was erected and new equipment to strip the bark from logs and convert slabs and edging to pulpwood chips was installed. Unfortunately, the plant was destroyed in a fire and the Company was out of business for a year before they could resume production. Initially, things went well for the Jim Mathieu Company following the rebuilding of the mill, however, hard times set in and the company eventually went into receivership. In 1967, Domtar Woodlands Limited took over the J.A. Mathieu Lumber Company. Domtar modernized and rebuilt the mill and logging camp facilities.

At this time, controversy started over the question of commercial logging in Quetico Provincial Park. The issue of logging in Quetico Provincial Park along with the depressed lumber markets caused much uncertainty about the fate of Domtar. In 1971, it was confirmed that commercial logging in Quetico Provincial Park was to cease. However, at the same time, it was announced that the lumber mill was to be preserved.

Domtar Woodlands Limited continued to thrive and contribute to the economic stability of Atikokan. In 1981, the lumber company changed hands once again from Domtar Woodlands Limited to Atikokan Forest Products. Atikokan Forest Products continues to operate under the direction of Buchanan Forest Products.

Pluswood Manufacturing Ltd. – later named Proboard Ltd. (1991) began construction in 1974 and commenced operations in January 1976. Originally a U.S. company, it is 100% Canadian-owned since Tom Plouffe purchased it in 1991. Fibratex Manufacturing Ltd. (2004), operated by Dan Warren, is now one of North America's innovative engineered wood producers manufacturing and designing quality orientated fibreboard panels. The panels are customized and manufactured in a variety of sizes and densities. Their premium pine and aspen flooring underlayments with high performance binders are the preferred choice of builders and installers.

While the mining and lumber industries were developing and taking off into full production, Atikokan was expanding at a rapid rate. Within three years of Tom Rawn settling in Atikokan, the Pioneer Hotel was built, a general store opened, the post office was installed and the Atikokan School Section No. 1 was formed. As the years rolled on, the people of Atikokan continued to develop and establish the town. In 1911, Tom built the first bridge across the Atikokan River (O'Brien's Bridge) and Rawn's Road. In 1935, the Pioneer Hotel that Tom built to house passing explorers, loggers, trappers and fishermen caught fire and burned to the ground. To replace the Pioneer Hotel, The Atikokan Hotel was constructed on the same site and still remains in business today.

Shortly after this time Steep Rock was starting to launch into production and Atikokan's population grew. In 1944, Steep Rock Iron Mines began the construction of roads for the formation of a new town site in Don Park. Although Atikokan was developing at a great rate, there was still limited access and communication with the surrounding areas. It was not until 1949, that an Agreement was signed by the Improvement District with the Northern Telephone Company and a phone system was established. It was in 1950, when the population of Atikokan reached 3,000 people, that Atikokan experienced first hand the result of having only the railroad as access to and from Atikokan. The Canadian National Railway went on strike and caused food shortages in Atikokan. The town went without meat, milk, sugar or green vegetables until a "Mercy Train" from the Lakehead and a seaplane came with some supplies for the hospital and for children. There were numerous demands on the Provincial Government to construct a highway linking Atikokan to Fort Frances and Fort William. In 1954, the Lakehead-Atikokan Highway was officially opened, making access by automobile to Atikokan possible. Nearly 10 years later, a highway linking Atikokan to the west was opened.

The little town that started with Tom Rawn and a dream blossomed into a productive town, where people flocked to establish themselves and their families. In 1954, the municipality of Atikokan was incorporated into a Township.

"In 1958, a group of citizens from Northwestern Ontario created Quetico Centre. The Centre was designed to be an educational institution designed to improve and stimulate the cultural and economic growth of Northwestern Ontario".² Many organizations hold seminars at Quetico Centre so that they can escape the bustle of the city and surround themselves in a natural and peaceful setting.

In 1973, the Atikokan Industrial Development Committee was formed by Town Council to investigate new business opportunities for the community. The two mines, Steep Rock Iron Mines and Caland Ore Company Limited, had announced their pending closures and new industries and services had to be investigated if Atikokan was to continue. Their efforts resulted in industries such as Pluswood (now Fibratech), Ontario Hydro Thermal Generating Plant and the Ministry of Natural Resources Area Office to situate in Atikokan. The committee was also instrumental in the construction of a swimming pool, nine-hole golf course, curling rink, airport and a new hospital. In 1986, the Atikokan Industrial Development Committee turned its mandate over to the Atikokan Economic Development Corporation.

The Atikokan Economic Development Corporation is responsible for the creation and preservation of permanent employment in Atikokan. Funded by Industry Canada/FedNor, the AEDC provides technical counseling and advice to businesses in the Atikokan catchment area. They also provide access to capital through their Community Investment Fund. Many additional services are provided to community organizations through the efforts of the Atikokan Economic Development Corporation. Some of the

² 75th Anniversary Booklet Committee. *A History of Atikokan - 75th Anniversary Edition* (Atikokan, 1974), 40.

organizations that have benefited include: Atikokan Mining Attraction Inc., Atikokan Sportsmen's Conservation Club, Downtown Atikokan Renewal Committee, Atikokan Chamber of Commerce and the list goes on.

Since Atikokan was first settled in 1899 by Tom Rawn, the town and its people have overcome great odds. When most towns would have failed, Atikokan continued to strive for bigger and better things.

“I had never seen a community so determined
to persevere despite tremendous odds as when
I visited Atikokan.”³

- Peter Mansbridge -

³ Paulson, Warren, *The Little Town That Could* (Atikokan, 1993), 37.