

The Victoria Trail

By Jars Balan for Kalyna Country

The Victoria Trail was the name commonly given to the last segment of the Carlton Trail, which stretched west from Fort Garry, at Winnipeg, all the way to Fort Edmonton at the present-day provincial capital. A southern branch of the trail also led from the Victoria Settlement through Lamont County to Fort Saskatchewan, but its traces have been largely erased by more than a century of agricultural development.

The Historic Victoria District

Situated at the very heart of the Kalyna Country Ecomuseum is the historic Victoria District, extending along the north shore of the North Saskatchewan River from Fort White Earth, at the mouth of the White Earth Creek, to the Pine Creek District near the mouth of Waskatenau Creek. The area embraces the Victoria and Lobstick Settlements, as well as Pakan and Fort Victoria, all of which can be accessed by means of the Victoria Trail.

A partial list of the historic resources found in the Victoria District includes the site of Fort White Earth, or Lower Terre Blanche House (1810-1813); the Clerk's Quarters at Fort Victoria (1862), the oldest building in Alberta still on its original foundation; Pakan Methodist Church (1906); the Free Traders House (c. 1873); the Victoria Mission (1862); and the Pine Creek Post Office (1910). Several early cemeteries and old farm buildings built by Ukrainian pioneers are also found within this important heritage corridor in south Smoky Lake County.

The North West Mounted Police passed through the district on their famed trek west in 1874, and the longest-running and oldest ferry in Kalyna Country operated for eighty years at Pakan between 1892-1972. Earlier, steam paddlewheelers could be seen plying the fast-flowing North Saskatchewan River as they made their way from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan to Edmonton, while the ancestors of today's inhabitants of the Saddle Lake and Whitefish Lake First Nations Reserves freely roamed the region, hunting, fishing, and trapping.

Fort Victoria, 1864-1873, 1887-1897

The last of the outposts built in Kalyna Country reflects how much the fur trade changed over the course of the nineteenth century. Faced with dwindling stocks, the Hudson's Bay Company used the effective monopoly that it had gained through amalgamation with the North West Company in 1821 to close redundant posts, reduce the size of its work force, eliminate costly supply routes, curb alcohol abuse and initiate measures that attempted to conserve the fur-bearing resources that were the staple of the trade. Still, with the appearance of a growing number of free traders in the Saskatchewan River country in the second half of the century, the Hudson's Bay Company was prompted to respond by constructing posts at Turtle Lake and the Victoria Mission (at the same time dropping their conservation policies) in an effort to meet the competition.

Victoria, which was situated on the North Saskatchewan River southeast of the present-day town of Smoky Lake, was a logical place to start a trading post for a variety of reasons. To begin with, it was already the site of a small Methodist Mission, which had been founded in 1862 by George McDougall. The location of the mission was probably chosen not only because of the natural transportation route provided by the North Saskatchewan River, but because it was at the intersection of a trail that led to the previously-established Smoking Lake mission to the north, and a trail to the south running parallel to Egg Creek. More importantly, the site was associated with large, twice-yearly gatherings of Woods and Plains Indians, providing a familiar and easily accessible place to do business.

Construction of a trading post began in 1864, the Clerk's House being completed by October of the following year. (This house has survived to the present day, and enjoys the distinction of being the oldest building in Alberta still on its original foundation.) A storehouse was added in 1866, and by 1874 at least seven structures formed part of the complex, which by then was also surrounded by a palisade. The post was almost shut down in 1873, then closed between 1883 and 1887, before being reopened as an outpost of Lac La Biche. Upgraded to a post in 1889, with outposts of its own at Saddle and Whitefish Lakes, Victoria was almost closed again just two years later, indicating its tenuous existence. Never a particularly vital or lucrative centre for trade, Victoria Post was finally abandoned for good in the winter of 1897-1898.

Partially restored for interpretive use after archaeological work was initiated in the 1970s, Fort Victoria opened to the public in 1981 as a provincial historic site. It is situated 10 kilometers south of Smoky Lake off Secondary Highway 855, and 6 kilometers east along the Victoria Trail. It is also now possible to reach the post and other landmarks within the historic Victoria Settlement via the scenic Victoria Trail, which can be accessed off Highway 38, southeast of Redwater, 3.2 kilometers from where the Vinca Bridge crosses the North Saskatchewan River.

The Victoria / Pakan Ferry (1863/1875, 1892-1972). The ferry crossing at the Victoria settlement is probably the oldest in Alberta and the longest-running in the Kalyna Country Ecomuseum. By 1863, a scow was being used at the Victoria Mission to shuttle people and goods across the North Saskatchewan River. Although not operated as a full-fledged ferry service, the scow nevertheless represented a distinct improvement over forging the river on foot or horseback. The next reference to a ferry at the Victoria settlement dates from 1875, when Samuel Whitford is said to have established a crossing method that was similarly rudimentary. Apparently his craft had to be pushed with some difficulty half a mile upstream after each run, so that it could then be negotiated across the current to the landing on the opposite side. A more sophisticated and permanent service was finally established at the site of Fort Victoria in 1892, when Superintendent A.H. Griesbach of the NWMP approvingly noted that "It is a great convenience to settlers at Victoria and Egg [i.e., Whitford] Lake, and also to the travelling public." Initiated and run by Louis Thompson for the first thirteen years, Samuel Whitford is identified as the ferryman for 1906, after which there is a seventeen-year gap in the registry of operators. During its final years the ferry service was maintained by three local residents, Metro Krawchuk, Nick Repchuk and George Alexandiruk. In 1962, it was listed as operating between 25 April to 6 November, from 7 am to midnight. It is possible to see two of the former Pakan ferries: one at the Smoky Lake Museum, which was restored in 1999; and the other at the Historical Village and Museum at Shandro, which had been originally built at Pakan.