

Chapter 1- Conditions Prior to Settlement

Resources with Commercial Value - Fur

Cash was always scarce during the early years of Theodore's history. Most of the local merchants were more than willing to accept such farm produce as butter, milk, and eggs in exchange for their merchandise. However, their suppliers only wanted cash, no matter how scarce it might be locally. This need for cash meant the bartering of farm produce for merchandise from the local stores had to be supplemented with some other means of acquiring cash and those local resources that had any kind of commercial value such as furs, Seneca root, and cordwood quickly became important items for sale or trade.

One of the first natural resources to be exploited was, of course, fur. Aboriginal people had been supplying furs long before the first homesteaders arrived. According to the history of Good Spirit Provincial Park, the First Nations people had used the lake and surrounding area for many generations for hunting, fishing and berry collecting. As a result, the region became a major transportation hub which, in turn, attracted the fur traders.¹

It wasn't until the late 1880's and early 1890's that a few adventurous settlers moved into the area west of Yorkton to establish cattle operations. At that time there was still an abundance of fur bearing animals in the district and one of the first to engage in the fur business was Donald Gunn, who had settled on the south shore of what was then called Devil's Lake, now Good Spirit Provincial Park.

According to his granddaughter, Joyce Anaka, Donald Gunn opened a trading post in 1889 to serve the incoming settlers and the First Nations People who still hunted and trapped in

the area.² Gunn's ledgers for 1890 show the following average prices for furs bought and goods sold: The same record shows that a Hudson's Bay Company three-point blanket sold for \$3.25 while beef sold in the trading post at six cents a pound.³

Furs	Trade Goods
Wolverine \$3.50	Tea 25 cents per pound
Fox \$1.00	Bacon 20 cents per pound
Lynx \$1.75	Flour 1½ cents per pound
Wolf \$1.25	Cotton Print 12 cents per yard
Fisher \$4.00	Cotton Drill 30 cents per yard
Mink50	Fork Handle 25 cents
Badger35	Fancy Shawl 60 cents

Historically, wolves and coyotes, which were sometimes referred to as wolves, inhabited all of Saskatchewan and local correspondents to newspapers in Regina, Winnipeg and Yorkton often commented on the abundance of wolves in their areas. One such reference appeared in *The Yorkton Enterprise* when the Beaverdale correspondent wrote, "Wolves are plentiful this winter, as many as five or six having been seen in one hand occasionally."⁴ One of the earliest accounts of wolf hunting at Theodore appeared in *The Leader* when the Theodore correspondent wrote, "D. Furney and A. McGuily spent a week in these parts hunting wolves, and secured six."⁵

Occasionally a local settler would shoot a wolf if it wandered onto the settler's property as wolves were considered a threat to both people and livestock. In her biography of her parents, John and Louise Hooe, Louise Merriman, their daughter, recounted an incident when her mother, Louise, shot a wolf while her husband, John, was in Theodore on business. According to the story, John would not believe that Louise had shot the wolf until she dragged it to the house and dropped it at his feet. The wolf's hide was stretched and sold.⁶ Mrs. Hooe's wolf may have been the inspiration for the following items in the Springside news column.

A lady who lives near Springside.
 Espied a wolf at noontide,
 She went out with a gun,
 Which the wolf thought no fun.
 It is now a corpse near Springside.⁷

Although Gunn's trading post closed in the late 1890's, homesteaders in the Theodore area were still able to market their furs to travelling buyers such as W. C. Davis of Springside who bought furs in Theodore and other locations.⁸ Items in the Theodore news columns of the various newspapers indicate that some of the local merchants were doing a good business buying furs. In 1912 W. C. Davis advertized that he was willing to pay the following prices for furs that were delivered to him:⁹

Winter Muskrats, large, each	\$0.40
No. 1 large cased Wolf	\$4.50
No. 1 Large Weasel	\$0.80
No. 1 Large Mink	\$5.50
No. 1 Large Red Fox	\$8.00

To understand how important the fur harvest was to Theodore's economy, it is important to note that according to one report; 25,000 muskrat skins together with large quantities of other furs were shipped from Theodore in 1912.¹⁰ Assuming that each skin was worth forty cents each, a total of \$10,000 was pumped into the Theodore economy just from muskrats alone. According to the Bank of Canada's inflation calculator "A basket of goods and services that cost:\$100 in 1914 (the earliest date available) would cost \$2,509.86 in 2022."¹¹ Those muskrat skins sold in 1912 would have had a purchasing power in excess of \$250,983.61 in 2022. Other furs would have been an added boost to Theodore's economy.

A brief item appeared on 20 November, 1913 in *The Yorkton Enterprise* under the heading "Big Money in Trapping Fur Bearers" in which the author wrote:

The mink, a menace to the chicken coop, the muskrat, weasel, and other fur bearing animals, classed as “varmints” and considered a nuisance to the crops, all have their intrinsic value, and it would do well for many to forget the nuisance end of the story and look at the profit side.

The author then went on to say that the present value of a black skunk skin was between four and five dollars, a prime mink skin between six and ten dollars, and fifty to sixty cents for each spring muskrat.¹² At the end of the 1914 trapping season the claim was made that larger quantities of fur had been shipped from Theodore than ever before.¹³

During the recession that followed World War I trapping, particularly muskrats, proved to be an important economic resource for many of Theodore’s residents. For example, a news report from Theodore in November 1919 stated that the boys are dividing their attention between school and trapping muskrats.¹⁴ In the early 1920's several fur buyers including John Gunn (son of Donald Gunn), G. Farbacher, and W. Davis of Springside visited Theodore in search of furs.

During the 1920's the fur trade at Theodore gradually declined. In 1923 it was reported that muskrats were not as numerous as they had been the previous year, and in 1924 a report stated that fur was very scarce.¹⁵ ¹⁶ In January 1925 indications were that muskrat pelts which has once been shipped from Theodore by the thousands were being shipped out by the hundreds.¹⁷ by the United States into Canadian territory.

Notes:

1. *Good Spirit Lake Provincial Park*, Retrieved 8 March 2015 from <http://www.saskparks.net/Default.aspx?DN=6308bcb2-3dcb-45b9-96f8-ae9c6e950c6c&subDN=5b132963-7570-4f00-9f4b-2115b03eb9ff>
2. Anaka, Joyce (Gunn), *Donald Gunn Family History*, Canora, Saskatchewan, 1996. Retrieved 3 September 2014 from: https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE1022096
3. Anaka, Joyce (Gunn), *Donald Gunn Family History*, Canora, Saskatchewan,
4. "Beaverdale," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. Yorkton, Assiniboia, Canada. 25 December, 1902.
5. "Theodore," *The Leader*. Regina, Assiniboia, Canada. 6 January, 1898.
6. Merriman, Louise, "Hooge, John and Louise (Jensen)," Theodore Historical Society, *Theodore and District History*, Focus Publishing, Regina, 1987. p. 278
7. "Springside," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 17 March, 1904.
8. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 21 January, 1909.
9. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 15 February, 1912.
10. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 September, 1913.
11. "Inflation Calculator," *Bank of Canada*. Retrieved 10 January, 2022 from <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/>
12. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 20 November, 1913.
13. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*,. 12 March, 1914.
14. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 6 November, 1919.
15. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 6 November, 1923.
16. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 25 November, 1924.
17. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 9 January, 1925.