

Chapter 1- Conditions Prior to Settlement

Resources with Commercial Value - Cord Wood

Probably the resources that had the greatest impact on the homesteaders were the trees that grew on his land. Under the Dominion Lands Act, anyone who wished to acquire land for a homestead had three years after the date of his application to clear, break, and cultivate at least 40 acres of land, and to build a permanent dwelling. The process of clearing the land of trees for crops and other agricultural purposes produced a huge amount of unwanted wood. Some of the wood, of course, was used as building material and fuel on the homestead.

Wood that was not used on the homestead had to be disposed of in some other manner, and the best way of getting rid of it was to sell it. Wood for building and fuel was in great demand in all parts of the prairies, and especially in those parts of the west where trees were scarce. The cutting and selling of cordwood for fuel became an important source of cash for almost every farm family in the district.

As was the case with so many farm activities at the turn of the twentieth century, the production of cordwood was very labour intensive. During the earliest years of settlement the trees were felled and trimmed with an axe and then cut to the desired length by a hand-held buck saw. It was not unusual for people in the Theodore area to get together to form a wood sawing bee as neighbour helped neighbour with difficult or labour intensive tasks.¹

Many people in the Theodore area secured their wood from the Beaver Hills, an unsettled area of about 100 sections south and west of Theodore that was used by the Federal Government as a forest reserve. People from the Theodore area could go to the Beaver Hills with a team and

sleigh, cut a load of white poplar tree (aspen) logs and be home by dark.² An unidentified photograph dated about 1912 shows a load of logs brought into the farm yard. Although the individual in the picture was not a resident of Theodore, this scene that would have been very familiar to the early residents of Theodore and surrounding areas

Once the logs were in the farm yard they were cut into stove-length pieces if they were to be used on the homestead, or four-foot lengths if they were to be sold as cordwood. A cord of wood measures 8 feet by 4 feet by 4 feet or 128 cubic feet. Whether the wood was cut into stove-length pieces or sold as cordwood a great deal of the work was done by hand in all sorts of weather. Although they were not residents of Theodore, the picture of Thomas Howard and his grandson cutting wood with a cross cut saw at thirty-five degrees below zero illustrates a very common occurrence of the time.

Power driven saws made their appearance shortly after the turn of the century, and sometimes people in the Theodore area would make their own wood splitting devices. A wedge would be welded to a large wheel which would be turned by a stationary engine. Two men, one holding the wood on the splitter, the other handing the wood could split a large amount of wood in very little time.³

In 1902 a settler named Reed bought one of the first circular saws in the Theodore district and offered his services as a sawyer to those settlers who had ten loads of wood or more to cut.⁴ A few years later, in 1904, H. J. Gregory purchased a gasoline engine, a crusher, and a saw, with the expectation of doing a large business during the winter.⁵ By February 1905 it was reported that he had been busy with his sawing outfit, and that four-foot wood was scarce.⁶ Finally, in 1907 it was reported that Herman Fritski had all he could do cutting firewood and grinding grain with

his gasoline engine.⁷ Eventually steam tractor provided the power for most of the sawing done in the Theodore area.

The strong demand for good quality fire wood in Theodore during the first half of the twentieth century meant that not only could many of early settlers in the Theodore earn extra cash during the winter as well as the summer, but it also meant that there was at least a little cash income for farmers when the market prices for farm products were down. It is difficult to grasp the amount of cordwood that was cut and sold in the Theodore area during these early years. In 1907 the Beaverdale correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* wrote that it was not an unusual thing for him to see twenty or twenty-five loads of cordwood pass his homestead in a day, and this was just one homestead on just one of the many roads between Theodore and Yorkton.⁸ In January 1916 the Theodore correspondent to the Yorkton Press reported that, “Levi Beck has half a dozen teams hauling wood from his farm a few miles east of town and shipping [it] to Yorkton.”⁹ In November 1920 it was estimated that there were still thousands of cords of green timber that could be cut for cordwood.

There were several standard practices that ensured good quality firewood and the higher prices paid for it. First, cordwood was usually cut during the winter months for several reasons. In winter there was no sap in the trees, and the wood was dryer than wood cut in the summer. Logs cut in the winter were easier to haul out of the bush in the winter, because of the snow on the ground. Summers were always a very busy time on the homestead and there was less time to cut cordwood than in the winter. Scenes such as those shown in the illustrations would have been very familiar to Theodore’s homesteaders.

A second standard practice was that the firewood was almost always seasoned before it was burned. Seasoning meant that the cordwood that was cut in the winter was left to dry out, or season, until the following summer when it was cut to stove length pieces, split, and stacked. In most cases it was almost a full year between the time the wood was cut, and the time it was used for fuel. Seasoned fire wood almost always sold for a higher price than green, unseasoned wood. A few families had sheds in which they stored their firewood, but most did not, and the stacked wood was left out in the open where the sun and wind further dried it out. Even the coldest winter day did not interrupt the cordwood harvest.

For many years any untended woodpile was a strong temptation to many Hallowe'en pranksters who thought it was great fun to tip one over. A well-stacked woodpile, however, was very difficult to tip over, and the pranksters soon learned which woodpiles could be easily tipped and which woodpiles to leave alone because it took too much effort to pull off the prank.

The third standard practice was that the preferred wood was trembling aspen or white poplar. Not only was this because it was one of the most common tree in the area, but also because dry, seasoned, white poplar produced more heat than any other local tree. A similar tree, the black poplar produced so very little heat that it was generally considered to be a weed and useless as fire wood.

Finally, homesteaders that wanted a good price for their cordwood rejected any trees that had died naturally and had fallen down. The wood from such trees was often so wet or rotted, that it was so unsuitable for firewood that it was next to impossible to sell. It appears that some of the newly arrived immigrants would sometimes think that gathering fallen timber an easy way to clear their land and earn some cash. However, they were usually disappointed when they had

trouble selling it. On at least one occasion the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* warned his readers about poor quality firewood, stating that, “A great portion of the wood marketed this season has not been A1 in quality as the Galicians have been picking up mostly fallen timber, thereby clearing up their farms and preparing for increased acreage and crop.”¹⁰

Prior to the inauguration of regular weekly rail service in 1904 individual settlers wanting to sell cordwood would have to transport it to Yorkton by horse or ox teams simply because there were few, if any, merchants in Theodore to buy it. One wood yard operator in Yorkton advertised that he was prepared to sell fire wood by the single cord or by the carload.¹¹ (A typical flatcar of the period measured about 40 feet long and, therefore, could carry about twenty cords of wood.) One of the first people in the local area to deal in cordwood was J. S. Anderson, who at that time was living in the Beaverdale area.¹²

On reaching Yorkton with their cordwood, the early homesteaders from the Theodore area were able to sell it for a dollar per load.¹³ While a dollar per load for cordwood does not seem like much money when one considers the amount of work required to get a load to market, it was considerably more money than some people got for their cordwood. For example, a group of Doukhobors who were cutting wood north of Yorkton signed a contract in which they received only seventy-five cents per cord.¹⁴

Several advertisements for cordwood appeared in *The Yorkton Enterprise* in the fall of 1900. One of them simply stated that someone wanted “twenty cords of good dry wood.” A second advertisement stated that the buyer would buy both green and dry wood and as an incentive to homesteaders offered stable room and hay for any number of teams.¹⁵

The offer to accommodate the homesteaders team in the advertisement would have been a great incentive to sell to that particular merchant because a trip to Yorkton could require several days to complete. It has been estimated that a team of horses pulling a wagon might be able to travel fifteen to twenty-five miles in a day while a team of oxen only travelled at about half that speed.¹⁶ So, a trip to Yorkton from Theodore and back again would probably take at least two days with a team of horses and four days with a team of oxen if everything went well. Winter storms and cold weather pretty much guaranteed that everything would not always go well for the travelling homesteader. Moreover, the early trails did not always go in a straight line. Even though the road allowances were laid out in a grid and road construction in the Yorkton area had been going on since the early 1890's, there were still many places where the roads wound their way around obstacles such as sloughs, thick bush, and steep grades at rivers and creeks. This made the trip even longer in terms of miles travelled and days needed.

After the arrival of the railway, a great deal of cordwood was brought to Theodore, purchased by local merchants, and either sold locally or shipped out to other points where fire wood was scarce. In the winter of 1906 the Insinger correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* mentioned that the “sales of wood to Theodore merchants seems to be decreasing,” thereby giving an indication that some of the merchants in Insinger were also buying cordwood.¹⁷

Of course, the price a homesteader received for his cordwood was subject to the laws of supply and demand, and rose or fell accordingly. One example of how the price fluctuated occurred in 1914, when a report in *The Yorkton Enterprise* stated that, “In order to raise money farmers in the Theodore, Sheho and Insinger districts have marketed large supplies at these points and wood that sold at \$6.50 per cord last winter is now selling in Yorkton at \$4.50.”¹⁸

Theodore's cordwood industry remained strong until the 1950's, and there were frequent reports in the Theodore news column on the availability of firewood. In 1918 it was reported that "Large quantities of wood are coming into town. No fear of freezing here."¹⁹ There were also frequent reports on the shipping of cordwood from Theodore. A 1917 report, for example, stated that, "Shipping wood seems a fairly lively business these days."²⁰

In 1920, however, the first shortage of cordwood is mentioned in the Theodore news column of *The Yorkton Enterprise*:

Theodore, known in years gone by as "Cordwood Town," can scarcely secure sufficient wood today to fill its own stoves. This is no evidence of scarcity of wood, but rather of the improved financial condition of those who formerly depended on the sale of wood to provide their families with the necessities of life.²¹

The second time a shortage of a cordwood is mentioned in the Theodore news column did not occur until the winter of 1936. This time it was stated that extremely cold weather of the previous few weeks combined with deep snow had prevented local farmers from bringing their usual high number of cordwood loads to the village.²²

Significant changes occurred in the way cordwood was handled and shipped. As indicated above, the earliest shipments of cordwood from Theodore were hauled to Yorkton by teams of horses or oxen, later thousands of cords of fire wood were brought to Theodore and the great piles of cordwood that surrounded the town prompted some of the CPR employees to dub the village "cord wood town."²³ This practice seems to have died out because when more than one hundred stacks of cordwood reappeared on CPR property in the early years of the depression J. S. Anderson said that it reminded him of how things were twenty-five years earlier.²⁴

Although the demand for cordwood remained strong in Theodore until the fall of 1944, supplies were becoming scarce, and at a price of only \$5.25 per cord, there was very little incentive for anyone to produce it.²⁵ In the following spring it was reported that while some wood was being marketed by a few farmers, there was still very little wood for sale in the district, and that most of the bush land of the previous generation had been cleared and was at the time under cultivation.²⁶

During the early 1950's there were several shortages of cordwood and coal in Theodore, and in the fall of year the 1952 the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* advised the local producers to bring their cordwood into town while roads were good, and there was a good demand for fuel.²⁷ In 1953 the Theodore correspondent again warned that winter fuel supplies would soon be a major concern.²⁸

The scarcity of cordwood in the early 1950's resulted in relatively high prices and can be seen as the primary reason that people began installing oil burning stoves and heaters.²⁹ One of the last news items concerning cordwood appeared in the fall of 1954 when the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* wrote:

So many of our citizens are now burning oil in place of wood or coal that very little wood is cut for marketing any more. Coal sales have also dropped off from what they were three or four years ago. Theodore, once referred to as "Cordwood Town" by railroad men who hauled so many car loads of the bush product for fuel in Yorkton and other towns, is now as bereft of woodpiles as the average prairie town, and for what little we do get we pay four times as much as we did 40 years ago.³⁰

The third economically important wood product exported from Theodore was the tens of thousands of willow fence pickets that were cut, brought to town, and sold to local merchants. In 1911 one merchant shipped 60,000 fence pickets to the outside market.³¹ Like the cordwood,

most of the fence pickets were shipped to those parts of Saskatchewan where suitable wood were scarce. This commodity was so important to the overall economy of Theodore that in 1910 local citizens pressured the railway to lower the freight rate on locally produced fenceposts.

Finally, there was an attempt by Robert Reid to make shingles from local materials in 1903.³² It was expected that a number of settlers would use the locally made shingles on their newly erected buildings. Because only one reference to this venture has been found it can be assumed that the shingle making venture had a relatively short life.

In December 1930, J. S. Anderson, the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* recalled the bygone days when the natural resources around Theodore provided such a significant portion of the farmer's income.

Some change has taken place in this town in the past twenty years, and one notable change is the manner of doing business. For those who have spent twenty years here, will vouch for the fact that business in those days was chiefly a matter of trading general merchandise, implements, or what have you, for cord wood, furs, Seneca root, butter, eggs, hides and other lines - and at one time, a person entering the town in the winter, from almost any quarter of the compass, had to pick his way carefully between long piles of cordwood that surrounded the village like a palisade. Today we can scarcely secure more than enough fuel to supply the local demand, while twenty years ago, one dealer would purchase in a single day more Seneca roots than is shipped from Theodore now in a whole season, while thousands of pelts, of muskrat, weasel, wolf, mink and other fur bearing animals were annually marketed here. These commodities are almost unknown on the local markets now. We hope the change from these lines to grain is a healthy sign but there are many who would again like the opportunity to enjoy the Hudson Bay style of barter, that prevailed in the good old days when we traded cordwood for flour and flour for more cordwood and so on. "Maybe you buy muskrats Meester?" This coming from the lips of a foreign trapper in the old days, way the signal for business in any and all of our stores and this town and district owes much to the trade in the articles mentioned.³³



Big Load of Poplar Poles on a Horse Drawn Sleigh
Saskatchewan Archives Board Reference #R-A6147



Thomas Howard and Grandson Cutting Wood With Crodd-Cur Saw, "35 Degrees Below Zero"
Saskatchewan Archives Board Reference #R-A6196



Cutting Wood on the Seeman Ranch at Theodore
Courtesy Bruce Frederickson



Team Pulling Large Wagon Load of Wood, With Man in Fur Coat Perched on Top
Saskatchewan Archives Board Reference #: R-A4671



Sleigh Load of Logs With Team Alongside Box Car
Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan - Reference code R-A7093



Men Unloading What Looks Like Fence Pickets in Estevan, Saskatchewan.
Source unknown

Notes:

1. Hansen, Chris, Personal e-mail to the author. 23 March, 2016.
2. Hansen, Chris, Personal e-mail to the author. 16 November 2015.
3. Hansen, Chris, Personal e-mail to the author. 24 March, 2016.
4. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 4 April, 1902.
5. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 28 December, 1904.
6. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 February, 1905.
7. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 14 March, 1907.
8. "Beaverdale," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. on 7 February, 1901.
9. "Theodore" *The Yorkton Press*. Yorkton Saskatchewan, Canada. 18 January, 1916.
10. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*,. 8 Mar 1905
11. "Wood Yard," *The Yorkton Enterprise* 22 March 1910
12. "Beaverdale," *The Yorkton Enterprise*,, 19 March 1903.
13. Profit, Dorothy, " Village of Theodore History," *Theodore and District History*, p. 6
14. *The Friend A Religious and Literary Journal* vol LXXIII Philadelphia 1900. p. 266
Retrieved 18 March 2015 from AewADgKps://books.google.com/books
15. " Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise* 8 November, 1900.
16. Burns, Terry, "How fast could they travel?" Retrieved 19 March 2015 from:
http://www.terryburns.net/How_fast_could_they_travel.htm
17. "Insinger," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 1 February, 1906.
18. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 10 December, 1914.
19. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 21 February. 1918.
20. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 15 February, 1917.

21. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 18 November, 1920.
22. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 27 February, 1936.
23. Anderson, J. S., "The Theodore Pioneers" *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 26 July, 1940.
24. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 8 November, 1900.
25. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 12 October, 1944.
26. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 February, 1945.
27. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 30 October, 1952.
28. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 October, 1953.
29. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 30 October, 1952.
30. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 11 November, 1954.
31. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 11 November, 1954.
32. "Beaverdale," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 19 March, 1903.
33. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 9 December, 1930.