

*Nearly forgotten in Canadian history is the 1919 wildfire that swept through Canada's Prairie Provinces and consumed nearly five million acres. The fire permanently altered lives and the landscape but left behind many unanswered questions.*

# THE GREAT FIRE OF 1919

*PEOPLE AND A SHARED FIRESTORM  
IN ALBERTA AND SASKATCHEWAN, CANADA*

**B**y 1919, most of the homesteads on the best land on the open plains of western Canada had been claimed. Small, isolated villages like the growing community of Lac La Biche, population 300, dotted the map. But mixed farming on good soils in the forest-prairie edge had attracted settlers for more than a decade

who supplemented their incomes by working in logging camps and sawmills and by hunting, trapping, and fishing. Roads and trails were primitive, and travel by team and wagon was slow and difficult. The presence of a rail line was a portent of impending modernity. Then everything changed in Lac La Biche on May 19, 1919.

*Swept away in the maelstrom of a raging forest fire which descended upon the place like a furnace blast on Monday afternoon, the little village of Lac La Biche is today a mere smouldering mass of ruin and desolation, and its entire population is homeless and bereft of all personal effects, save scant articles of clothing which could be worn through the nerve-wracking struggle the people were forced to make to preserve their lives.*

*The absence of a death toll in the catastrophe is due to the heroic measures taken by the citizens, who rushed into the waters of the lake and defied suffocating heat and smoke by means of wet blankets. Only such measures saved many of the women and little children, the intensity of the fire being shown by the burning of the very reeds along the shore and surface of the lake.<sup>1</sup>*

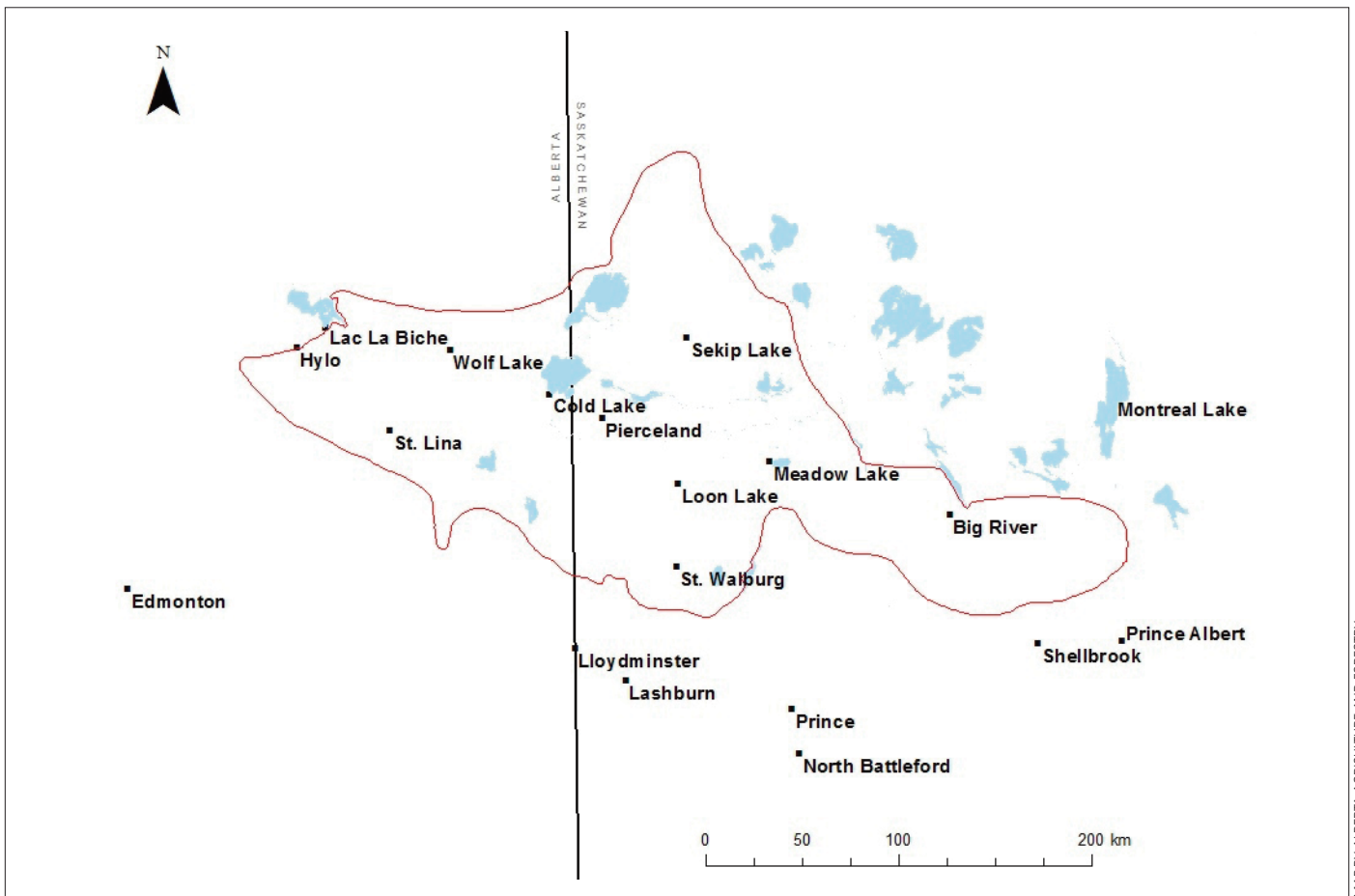
Strong, dry winds created a firestorm on May 19 that over the

following nine days swept through the boreal forest of the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. It ravaged about two million hectares (nearly five million acres) at and beyond the forest edge, north of the Great Plains of North America. In its path were homesteads, hunting and trapping camps, timber berths and lumber camps, and communities, including the village of Lac La Biche.

The Great Fire of 1919, which was actually a complex of many fires, was not reported in Alberta until the evening edition of the *Edmonton Journal* on May 20. The news was delayed because the fire had burned the telegraph lines. Blackened villagers sent a delegation 200 km (120 miles) southwest to the provincial capital at Edmonton. Their train from Lac La Biche inched along the scorched tracks for about 30 km (18 miles) the morning after the fire until it reached a station with a working telegraph line. The delegation sent a telegram to Edmonton and upon arriving there in the afternoon, "half dead from weariness," learned that relief efforts were already under way.

Despite the substantial loss of property and life, the story of the Great Fire of 1919 has all but disappeared from Canadian

**BY PETER J. MURPHY, CORDY TYMSTRA, AND MERLE MASSIE**



MAP BY ALBERTA AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

The location of the settlements discussed in the article. The area within the perimeter is about 11 million acres (4.5 million ha), of which approximately 5 million acres burned.

cultural memory. Provincial and national history books pay it scant attention even though fire researchers and historians consider it one of the 10 largest and most devastating fires in Canadian history.<sup>2</sup> In Canada’s Prairie Provinces, it was the first major fire at the wildland-urban interface—a term that had not yet been coined. It arrived during a spring when Canadians’ thoughts were elsewhere. The Great War had just ended six months before and the soldiers were returning. The preceding winter the Spanish influenza epidemic had killed nearly as many Canadians as had the war. Four days before the fire, a general strike had crippled Winnipeg, when nearly the entire working population of the city walked off the job. Overshadowed by such other landmark events and situated not in the prairie itself but on the boreal forest edge, the fire faded from memory.

Based on archived newspapers, local history books, and the memories of residents who lived through it or grew up with its tales, this article revisits the story of the Great Fire of 1919 to document its breadth and consequences. Although it led to the use of new firefighting equipment and eventually to policy change, its importance can best be measured through the changes to the landscape and to local people, who largely abandoned lumbering and biomass extraction and turned to nature-based tourism.

**LAC LA BICHE IN 1919**

The community of Lac La Biche is on the south shore of the eponymous lake. European settlement on the site began when fur trader and surveyor David Thompson established a trading

post during the winter of 1798–99. In 1853, a Roman Catholic mission was established in Lac La Biche. By the time the Alberta and Great Western Railway (A&GWR) arrived in 1914, the village’s economy was largely natural resources-based: farming, commercial fishing, fur ranching, fur trapping, logging, and sawmilling. Railway builder John Duncan McArthur built the Lac La Biche Inn, hoping to attract tourists to the beaches and fishing. This venture failed, but logging operations supporting his large sawmill in north Edmonton provided important employment during the winter.

Low snowfall in the winter of 1919 gave way to an early spring drought that dried out grass and timber. Then, in May, the village experienced hot, dry winds that desiccated the surrounding region and created a tinder-dry powder keg. On the 19th, fire raced through the village carried “by a terrific wind storm.”<sup>3</sup> Two days later, the *Edmonton Bulletin* reported, “Although the fire which wiped out the town of Lac La Biche Monday came in the middle of the afternoon, it was as black as midnight and the only illumination was from the fire itself.” The report, from the local Catholic priest, noted, “The wind was blowing a terrible gale... trees were bent level with the ground with its force and the air was so hot as to be insufferable for miles back.”

*From noon, the men of the village were out trying to hold the fire on the south side of the track. It is thick brush all through there and the roar of the fire as it swept through the great Spruce, and the green Poplars was terrific. The bush comes right to the town,*

and with the gale that was blowing, the fire carried for miles. When the fire was still a mile and a half away, the flames carried over and set the town afire. At that time the heat was so intense it was searing their faces. It came on first towards the church and then as suddenly as a miracle, the wind changed, and the church and priest's house were saved, and the fire raged on to the little town. The women picked up their children and ran for the lake and there the men kept them covered with wet blankets. Nothing was saved, but their lives, absolutely no bit of furniture, no money, clothes, or food, they simply had to fight for their lives.<sup>4</sup>

right-of-way he cleared passed through stands of timber of sawlog quality. In October 1914 he incorporated the North West Lumber Company (NWLC) and built a large, steam-powered sawmill at the Dunvegan Yards in north Edmonton, which ran until 1933. He also acquired timber berths in the Hylo-Dewar area, about 20 km (12 miles) southeast of Lac La Biche. The NWLC used a Shay logging locomotive to haul logs on spur lines for delivery to his Edmonton mill on the A&GWR. McArthur intended to extend the line 100 km (62 miles) from Dewar southeast to the provincial boundary with Saskatchewan, to draw on the timber and serve the settlements along the way. According to local historian Tom



A steam tractor hauls logs from the Sturgeon River Forest Reserve in Saskatchewan. Large-scale logging on the forest reserve ended after the fire of 1919.

Provincial Police Constable Fred Moses entered a terse note in his journal for May 19: “Cold, fine, Eclipse of the Sun. High wind. Thunder and Lightning. Fires all over. Lac La Biche burnt out. Dark in afternoon.”<sup>5</sup> There was no eclipse—although Fred Moses was not the only one who thought there was. Many references and recollections in local history books and memoirs declare an eclipse that day, as if Armageddon arrived on the wings of fire and wind. The eerie light and red sun that frightened so many came from the dense smoke bellowing from Lac La Biche and east across much of the boreal plain. Once the fire raced through Lac La Biche, little remained. With property damage estimates at over \$200,000, including the loss of most of the local traders’ and stores’ supplies, the people were in desperate need of clothing and food. The Red Cross, fresh off its Great War efforts and with supplies on hand, swung into action and provided nurses and health services.

A few buildings still stood: McArthur’s Lac La Biche Inn, the Roman Catholic Church, the railway station, and several dwellings.<sup>6</sup> The women and children stayed in the inn, while the men resided in a tent camp set up by the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps.

### J. D. MCARTHUR’S LOGGING RAILWAY

John Duncan McArthur had begun construction of the A&GWR in January 1914. The track reached beyond Lac La Biche by the end of the year. McArthur was astute enough to realize that the

Maccagno, the company employed a thousand loggers to work out of five camps during the winter of 1918–19. But “bustling activities came to an abrupt end when the great fire of 1919 swept through the region. . . . McArthur lost 14 cars of green logs and 42 ballast cars.”<sup>7</sup>

The first report from NWLC’s Edmonton operations was that “as far as they had heard the damage to the standing timber had not been excessive” and they did “not expect to have to suspend operations for more than a few days at the outside.”<sup>8</sup> However, most of the spruce timber on which they relied had burned, which ended the logging. Parts of the railway grade to St. Lina are still evident, but the tracks were removed after the timber was gone. McArthur acquired new timber berths around Lesser Slave Lake, located northwest of Edmonton. The Great Fire not only wiped out the village of Lac La Biche but took away much of its local logging operations and ended the railway building to the southeast.

### ABORIGINAL PEOPLE OVERTAKEN

The citizens of Lac La Biche were not aware that their calamity was just one of many during the month of May, or that their fire was part of a complex of fires burning as far east as Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, about 380 km away—or that the losses they suffered were surpassed elsewhere.

Part of the Great Fire burned across Wolf Mountain, southwest of Wolf Lake. Two Cree brothers, Moniyas and Sakimes, were



on Wolf Mountain hunting bears for their fur, which was still in prime winter-coat condition. As their nephew Isadore Desjarlais explained, “That’s where they met this fire. When the fire came, they both burned down—them two—these two guys that burned up.” The fire spread so fast it could not be outrun, nor was there any place to escape the intense flames. Their brother Paul found their bodies after the fire subsided. He protected the bodies from scavengers, and went back that fall to recover and move them, packing the bones in two small boxes, to the family graveyard at the north end of Wolf Lake.<sup>9</sup>

At Sekip Lake, north of Meadow Lake, about 300 kilometers

and surrounded with no escape, outstripped the simple loss of buildings and chattels at Lac La Biche.<sup>10</sup>

## THE POLICY BACKGROUND

When Alberta and Saskatchewan became provinces in 1905, they were nominally created equal to the established provinces, with one major exception: the Government of Canada retained ownership of the natural resources, including oil, gas, coal, and forests. Control of forest fires was therefore the responsibility of the Dominion Forestry Branch (DFB) of the federal Department of the Interior.



PRINCE ALBERT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, BILL SMILEY ARCHIVES, PAHS JUL 152

(186 miles) east of Lac La Biche, 23 Cree were camped by the edge of the lake while searching for new areas to hunt and trap. The fire swept their camp very quickly. Theresa Desjarlais, then 10 years old, explained it was about the middle of the afternoon when her father yelled “Fire,” grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her out of the tent.

*It was pitch dark but there was a yellow glow which seemed to reach to the sky...balls of fire were falling all around us; the jack pine trees had become ignited and were like big torches. By the time we reached the lake the heat was terrific. Mother had managed to grab a blanket and a horsehide robe from the tent; these Father threw in the water and covered three of us with the blanket.... Firebrands were falling all around us. Some fell on our blanket and we had to keep it dipped in the water constantly to prevent it from burning over us.... We were all badly burned, especially my father. The horsehide which he had thrown over my mother and little sister had burned to a crisp on Mother’s back.*

Theresa’s father died the next day of burns sustained while keeping the blankets wet. The survivors spent “two miserable nights” without food or shelter before help arrived and an additional five days before wagons reached them. The trip out took five more days of rough travel and claimed several more lives along the way. In all, 11 died; the 12 survivors “bore the marks of their burns for life.” The Red Cross set up hospital tents in the Meadow Lake area and treated the many burn victims into the fall of 1919. The loss of so many First Nations people, overtaken

In the years before 1919, most of DFB’s effort focused on establishing forest reserves and national parks in the Rocky Mountains. It also issued timber berths and licenses across the forest fringe, such as those operating near Lac La Biche in Alberta and around Prince Albert and Big River in Saskatchewan. By 1919, the established forest reserves in Saskatchewan, including the Sturgeon River Forest Reserve north of Prince Albert, provided timber for the sawmilling industry. The only forest reserve in the boreal forest of Alberta was Lesser Slave, created in 1914. Within the forest reserves, the federal government had a greater measure of control over lumbering activity; despite nominal control outside the reserves, rangers were too few to be effective.

In 1911, timber inspector Letellier O’Connor was commissioned to study the forest protection needs in Alberta’s northern forests. He recommended appointing a chief fire ranger “whose duties would consist of laying out the different districts of the fire rangers in these districts, travelling all over the different patrols and thus keeping an eye on the way in which the different fire-rangers are doing their work...and making any alterations he would consider necessary for the better protection of the timber in question.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1912, DFB designated the Edmonton Fire Ranging District, an immense area stretching north from the Red Deer River to “as far north as it is practicable.” A chief fire ranger based in Edmonton would be solely responsible for managing fires in all of northern Alberta. The first chief, Robert H. Palmer, began work in May 1912 but served in the Great War until his discharge in April 1919, returning to his job only weeks before the Great Fire. By then



*The meager remains from burned homes in Lac La Biche after the fire of 1919.*

about 50 seasonal fire rangers each patrolled about 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> in northern Alberta. Coverage in Saskatchewan's fire ranging districts was similarly sparse. Fire Ranger J. W. Thompson at Prince Albert stated in March 31, 1919, that the fire rangers in his district would be "patrolling their usual beats" in about two weeks. Some of them were old hands but many were just-returned soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

With so few rangers spread over this vast region, there were not enough eyes watching for what was about to come.

### **SAWMILLS IN SASKATCHEWAN**

In Saskatchewan, the Canadian Northern Railway had pushed through to Lloydminster, Battleford, and Prince Albert by 1919. A spur line from Prince Albert to Big River served the sawmilling industry as well as early settlers, many of whom worked in the lumber camps in winter.<sup>13</sup>

In the eastern portion of what would become the 1919 fire area, both large and small sawmills depended on timber from the forest fringe region, including the federal Sturgeon River Forest Reserve, northwest of Prince Albert. The Big River Lumber Company sawmill, known locally as Cowan's Mill, opened in 1908 and had grown to become the largest sawmill in the British Empire by 1911. It could produce one million board feet per day and employed 1,000 men in the forest and the mill. After a mill fire in the winter of 1913–14, the operation was purchased by the Wintons, an American lumbering family from Minnesota, and renamed the Ladder Lake Lumber Company. Their larger Prince Albert Lumber Company sawmill, located farther east on the Saskatchewan River at Prince Albert, could produce 1.5 million board feet per day. It supported 400 employees at the mill and 1,000 employees in the forest.

The Ladder Lake sawmill at Big River was directly in the path of the fire complex of May 1919. Those women and children not evacuated by train were taken by Ernest Gamache to his scow on Ladder Lake while the men stayed behind to fight the fire. An estimated 400 men fought this fire. Heroic efforts over several days saved the town and sawmill, but not the forest. Virtually all the merchantable timber was destroyed,<sup>14</sup> and the lumbering business died from lack of timber supplies: "The forest had disappeared."<sup>15</sup>

Although the Prince Albert Lumber Company mill itself was not directly threatened by fire, the company lost most of its timber on the Sturgeon River Forest Reserve. Both companies operated for an additional year using salvaged timber and green timber from unburned patches. The Wintons moved the Prince Albert sawmill downriver to The Pas in Manitoba and renamed it The Pas Lumber Company; the Ladder Lake sawmill also moved to The Pas and then to Lumberton and Giscombe in British Columbia.<sup>16</sup>

Smaller operations, including those owned by local homesteaders and First Nations reserves, also experienced heavy losses from the fire. As the mills moved, so did the employees and economy, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the Prince Albert Chamber of Commerce and its many business owners, who had built success on the backs of lumbermen, mill workers, and log drivers through many years of timber harvest. The fire was an abrupt and almost complete blow to the local economy, as local merchants searched for new retail customers. Afterward, though, soldiers continued returning from Europe, ready to accept the federal government's offer of a double-sized farm: a free homestead *and* a soldier grant. They took much of this land along the forest fringe.<sup>17</sup>





GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-1502-1

Wet sacks and flails were used for backfiring and fighting fires in grassland meadows.

## SETTLEMENT AND SETTLERS

Mixed farming in the forested areas required clearing the land to plant crops and establish pastures. Settlers cut and piled the brush for burning; the fires and smoke signaled progress.

The settlers were aware of the risk of wildfire. Experienced settlers burned off open patches and sloughs to remove the dead grass and mitigate potential fire spread as part of their fire-prevention practices in early spring. If a fire threatened, some residents, like Bert Nichols of the Meadow Lake area, saved their property by back-firing. Unfortunately, some of those back-fires could join with the main fire, enlarging it.<sup>18</sup>

Most homes were built of logs and roofed with poles and bark or sod—all highly flammable materials. Many settlers cleared the fuels from around their buildings, but a forest fire could drop burning embers on roofs. Grass and peat would extend a fire's reach deep into the earth, while winds spread the conflagration.<sup>19</sup>

Wildfires could therefore be devastating. Ivan Nichols of Loon Lake, Saskatchewan, stated it clearly: "In 1919 came the 'FIRE.' It was a blazing inferno that burned settlers' homes, livestock, [and] poultry and ruined many crops. Those settlers who had suffered the least damage helped those who had lost. There were many 'good neighbours' at this time of crisis. It meant starting all over again. Our new house was a 2-story log house, the barn was built with poplar logs. Neighbours helped us get our logs for the house."<sup>20</sup>

## FIRE CAUSES AND BEHAVIOUR

The main cause of the Great Fire is disputed. Constable Fred Moses, who laconically recorded the Lac La Biche fire and the

"eclipse," had also noted spring thunderstorms. However, most springtime fires in this region were of human origin. What was not in question was the availability of fuel. The *Prince Albert Daily Herald* pointed to the massive logging operations, with their slash and debris dried by that spring's hot winds, as the source of the conflagration. Throughout the area dried vegetation and drought-stressed conifers enabled easy ignition and rapid spread. The early arrival of "SPRING!!" as proclaimed the front page of the *Prince Albert Daily Herald* on April 2, 1919, must have looked like an auspicious time to burn.

A. J. Brooks, a homesteader near the Loon Lake, Saskatchewan, remarked on the pleasant spring of 1919: the snow disappeared by mid-March, and he burned his meadows for a distance of a half-mile to reduce fire hazard. In mid-May he and his wife took a trip south by wagon to Lashburn for supplies. He remarked that "plumes of smoke had been rising in all directions for many days, but they were in the distance and we got used to them." Continuing on their southward journey, he wrote, "The next night we stayed with friends on the south side of the Saskatchewan River, and looking north could see that conditions had deteriorated, there was a solid glow to the north, the fire had formed a front. The next day was very windy, and by afternoon the whole northern horizon seemed to have exploded into billowing flames and smoke, high in the sky. In late afternoon the wind increased even more, and swung to the north. That night the Lashburn street lights were obscured by smoke."<sup>21</sup>

This description is consistent with that of the Dominion Forestry Branch district inspector, who wrote that "during the winter there was very little snow and when spring opened up,



*The fires of 1919 were typically characterized by dense clouds of smoke frequently described by observers as turning day into night.*

the ground was drier and the rivers and lakes lower than they have been for many years in the memory of the older settlers. Very little rain fell in northern Saskatchewan until the first week in June. The month of May was a month of extreme heat and high changeable wind, the temperature for days at a time ranged between 70° and 90°, and the winds, first in one direction and then in another, blew almost [like] a hurricane.”<sup>22</sup>

Near the end of April a very large number of clearing fires set by settlers were apparently running at will through the district between the settlement and the timbered areas. From May 19 to 28 these fires spread north in almost a solid line into the forest reserves and fire ranging districts, and given the extreme weather conditions and post-logging debris at the time, efforts to combat them were futile. Early June rains eventually extinguished the fires, and people began to breathe—both in relief, and in clean air—again.<sup>23</sup>

These observations in local histories are supported by weather records. Low winter snowfall, early snowmelt, and the lack of precipitation in May contributed to create a widespread spring drought. For example, St. Walburg, Saskatchewan, a small settlement situated midway on the south edge of the fire area, received only 2.9 mm of rain on May 12, a week before the Great Fire. The reported observations from the St. Walburg weather station included remarks of “sand storms” on May 22, “bush fires” on May 23, and “smoky” on May 24.<sup>24</sup> Similar conditions occurred throughout the fire area.

A review of the archived daily synoptic weather maps for the Northern Hemisphere for May 10 to May 28 indicates the fire area was under the influence of a combination of dry Arctic air masses with dry cold fronts moving eastward across the provinces. Cold fronts that produce no rain are a threat to firefighters because the winds typically increase and become gusty as the front passes. The winds then suddenly change direction from south to west

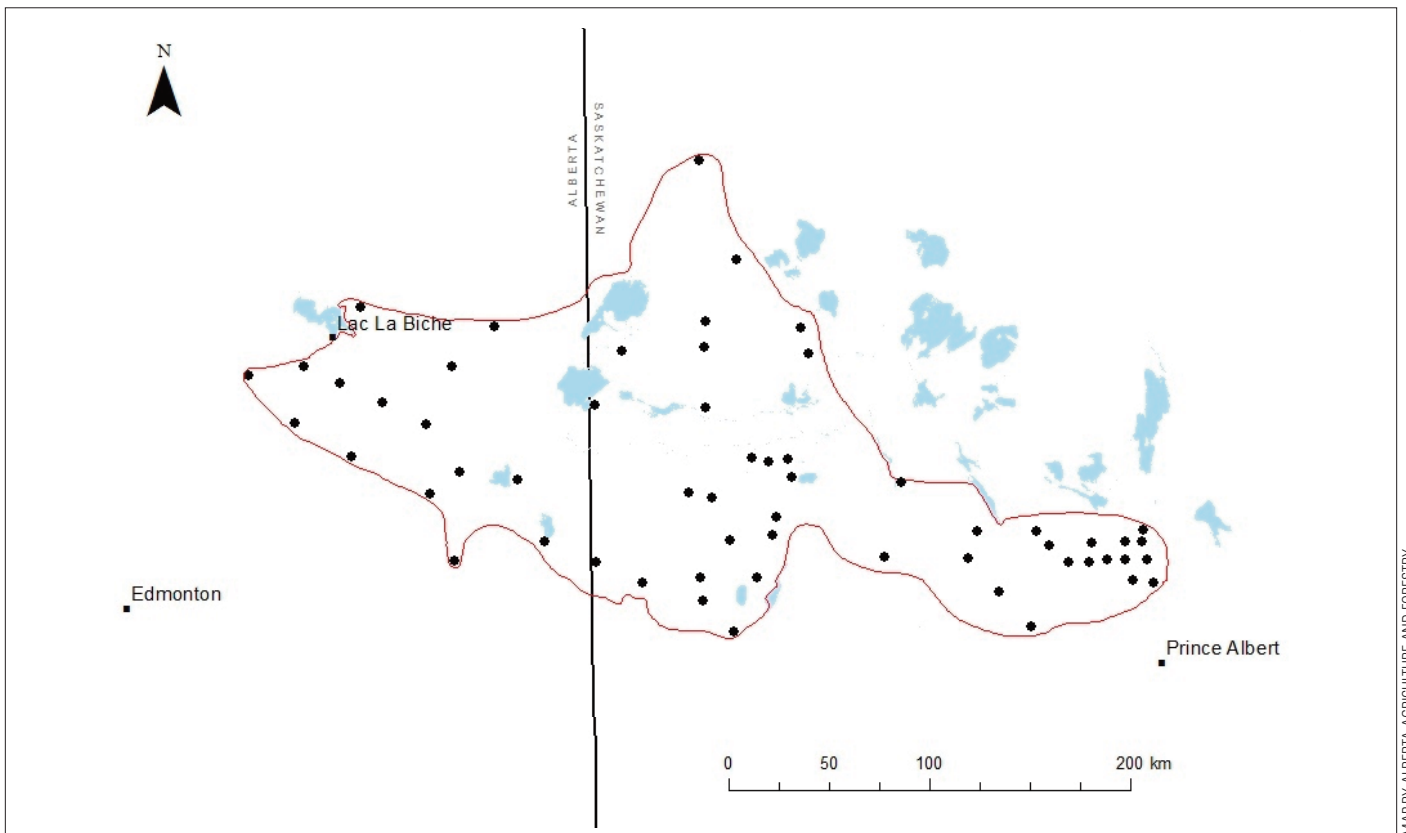
and then northwest. Cold air from the Arctic in spring is very dry because the moisture at the source is frozen. In 1919, the spring drought reduced plant transpiration, further limiting the amount of moisture in the atmosphere. Three fast-moving cold fronts moved through on May 19–20, May 22–23, and May 26–27, creating the days of greatest fire spread.

The lowest observed relative humidity value (5 percent) occurred on May 25 at Battleford. On May 28, the Buildup Index, a measure of the amount of fuel available for burning, climbed to 115—values over 90 are considered extreme and usually do not occur until later in the fire season. During the period of May 19 to 28, the Fire Weather Index, a rating of the potential fire intensity, exceeded 29.5 (extreme) on most days; the highest value, 68.1, was attained on May 26.

It is difficult to plot precisely where the fires actually burned—or where they started. The fire perimeter was estimated by plotting the distribution of points where fire was reported in district histories, fire reports, or interpreted from satellite imagery and forest age-class data. However, as described by a survivor of the fire, Ivan C. Nichols of the Loon Lake area, “It did not burn all the area, but merely patches, then jumped several miles. It would often travel in one direction and then would shift heading in another direction.”<sup>25</sup> The result was a mosaic of burned and unburned patches: some fires burned together, a few fires were controlled, and some areas did not burn at all. We estimate that the total area actually burned may have been as much as two million hectares.

### THE FIRE'S LASTING IMPACT

The Great Fire of 1919 had lasting effects besides the evident destruction and disruption. DFB introduced aircraft for fire patrols the next year, as advocated in an editorial on June 4, 1919: “The whole northern territory could be patrolled by an aviation



The points of origin and fire activity are estimated from references.

squadron or two and any outbreak of fire would be detected within a few hours of its start.”<sup>26</sup> Float planes were assigned to Saskatchewan to take advantage of its lakes, and ground-based planes were used in Alberta. DFB also requested funding for additional field staff, but staffing levels remained essentially the same.

The *Edmonton Bulletin* of July 15, 1919, reported that Lac La Biche was “rapidly rising from the ashes.” The mayor commented that they were creating a new town far and away ahead in the number of modern buildings that existed before.<sup>27</sup>

For new homesteaders, the burned areas on good soil were a welcome sight. As one homesteader exclaimed: “It was a beautiful sight for a land seeker. The peavine and vetch were waist high, bunches gathering on the end of the buggy pole.”<sup>28</sup> With the big timber and brush cleared by fire, it was much easier to open the land for crops. A later homesteader, John S. Rule, remarked poignantly: “When I homesteaded here [in Pierceland] in 1936 my place was littered with enormous spruce deadfalls 36 inches in diameter, the debris of that fire, and many great snags were still standing, broken off thirty or forty feet up.”<sup>29</sup>

Robert H. Campbell, DFB director of forestry, commenting about 1919, said: “Undoubtedly, the origin of these fires was due in large part to the unregulated use of fire by settlers in clearing their land. Although the province of Saskatchewan [and Alberta] has excellent provisions in its Prairie and Forest Fires Act for the control of settlers’ fires, our [Dominion] rangers have not yet been given sufficient authority under the [provincial] act to enable them to take full advantage of its provisions.”<sup>30</sup> This federal-provincial authority gap was closed in 1921 by making Dominion forest rangers and fire rangers *ex officio* fire guardians under the provincial acts.<sup>31</sup>

An interesting outcome from the 1919 fires was the establishment in 1928 of Prince Albert National Park, which essentially replaced the old Sturgeon River Forest Reserve. With the Prince Albert chamber of commerce promising political support and a “tame” riding for Prime Minister Mackenzie King, the federal Department of the Interior converted the old forest reserve, whose timber value was much diminished, into a national park. As the chamber of commerce had hoped, what was once managed for biomass extraction in winter became a landscape of summertime fun for automobile tourists.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the most profound consequence of the 1919 fire season was the transfer of federal dominion lands to provincial jurisdiction. Federal land management had never been an easy fit—particularly from the perspective of the provinces. With firefighting and administrative costs soaring, in 1921, Prime Minister King determined to rid the federal government of the responsibility and cost for the federal forests in the western provinces. As forest historian Kenneth Johnstone explained, “The federal government could save at least \$1 million per year by turning over the national forests to the western provinces.”<sup>33</sup> Transfer agreements were signed with the western provinces in 1929 for the return of their natural resources, including the forests. The transfer took effect in 1930—right when the two provinces faced far worse disasters than fire: the devastating drought of the Dirty Thirties and Great Depression.

## CONCLUSION

Coming as it did in a year when news stories crowded each other off the world’s newspapers, the Great Fire of 1919 not surprisingly all but disappeared from history—despite its ferocity, its range, and its sad deaths. As it did for those who lived through it, who



forever after marked their lives as “before the fire” and “after the fire,” the Great Fire made a clear mark on the land and how it was (and continues to be) used and managed. The two million-plus hectares of forest, the homesteads, and the village of Lac La Biche all recovered but were never the same. The fire marked a turning point for the broader region as well: its economy shifted from extraction to tourism, and from lumbering to farming; fire prevention advanced from too-few foot patrols to aerial fire surveillance; federal-provincial relations changed from wrangling to working together; and governing moved from federal dominion to provincial jurisdiction. The Great Fire’s historical imprint deserves reconsideration and should take its rightful place alongside the other big events of 1919 in Canadian history.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is dedicated to the late Tom Maccagno, who was raised in Lac La Biche and became a lawyer, ardent historian, and conservationist. It was Tom who asked me, when we met in the early 1980s, if I knew the village of Lac La Biche burned down on May 19, 1919. I did not. This led to a number of collaborative studies, including this one. Concurrently, Merle Massie was independently researching the Great Fire as part of her recent doctoral studies at the University of Saskatchewan. We combined our efforts for this paper. PJM □

*Peter J. Murphy is Professor Emeritus, University of Alberta; Cordy Tymstra is Wildfire Science Coordinator, Alberta Agriculture and Forestry, in Edmonton; and Merle Massie is an adjunct professor at the School of Environment and Sustainability, University of Saskatchewan.*

## NOTES

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