

Cumberland House Two Hundred Years of History

by Mary Helen Richards

THE OLDEST continuously occupied settlement west of Ontario is Cumberland house, a small community in the Saskatchewan river delta. It was founded by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1774 as its first inland post.

The fort was built on the north-east shore of Cumberland Island, a flat stretch of marsh and rocky soil isolated by two channels that connect Cumberland Lake with the Saskatchewan River. With water routes extending from this point north to the Churchill and the Athabasca, west to the buffalo plains and the mountains, and east toward both Hudson Bay and Montreal, the fort was well placed to meet the competition of the fur traders from Quebec.

After considering the reports of some forty-four expeditions inland¹ and the recommendations of Andrew Graham, in charge at York Fort, the London Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company chose the approximate site. Samuel Hearne, back from his explorations of the Coppermine River, was appointed to lead a party inland and establish a house "at or near Basquiau"² (The Pas).

Handicapped by insufficient canoes to carry the twelve men and their supplies, the group was dispersed among six parties of Indians who were returning to the interior, these departing from York Fort on different days and by separate routes. Hearne's section left on the 23rd of June, in canoes so deeply laden that "56 lb. of shott and ball and 2 Pecks of Oatmeal" were sent back to the fort.³

Arriving on the Saskatchewan in August, Hearne spent four weeks while waiting for his men, in examining possible sites. On Saturday, September 3rd, he selected an area on the south shore of Pine Island (Cumberland) Lake that he believed to be "more comodious for Drawing the Indians to Trade as well as for Provisions than Basquiau, it laying in the Middle between three Tribes".⁴

The men worked twelve hours a day throughout the winter, despite short rations, to build a combination lodging and storehouse. The effort was more difficult because of the absence of the three more experienced servants, Matthew Cocking, Isaac Batt and Charles Isham, who had been taken by their Indian guides to Good Spirit Lake, 160 miles to the south. With them were all the medicines and the pitsaw.⁵

The shortage of food and supplies, of experienced men and their tools, and of Company boats and crew could have sabotaged the founding of this first island post. It did survive but remained nameless for its first year. The Company referred to it as "Basquea", and Hearne used "Pine Island Lake" until after his return from York Fort in August, 1775, when he named the post "Cumberland House".⁶ No reason for the choice was given; it probably was named with the same casualness as were later forts in the western interior.

No Indians lived on the island before the post was built. Bands of Swampy Cree were on the Sturgeon River, and in The Pas and Moose Lake region; Saulteaux dwelt to the south, near the Pasquia Hills. But once the post was established it became a gathering place for families from their wintering grounds, and a place to wait for the canoes to return from the bay. The Swampy Cree has long

been associated with the Company, living at the bay as Home Indians, trading there or being supplied by Indian middlemen with guns, ammunition and traps. The Company for many years were dependent on the Indians for food and fur, and for labourers and canoemen. In turn, the natives came to look on the fort "as a refuge in days of stress, and a place of shelter in sickness and old age."⁷

Such a refuge was Cumberland House when, in 1782, smallpox infected most of the Indians in the region. The factor, William Tomison, made the fort into a hospital, bringing in the sick, and assigning the healthy to cut wood, catch fish and bury the dead. The survivors, many of them women and children unable to fend for themselves, were given rations.

It was a disaster for the fur trade. "My Debtors are all Dead," reported Tomison, and he sent his men to the Indian tents to collect the beaver robes.⁸

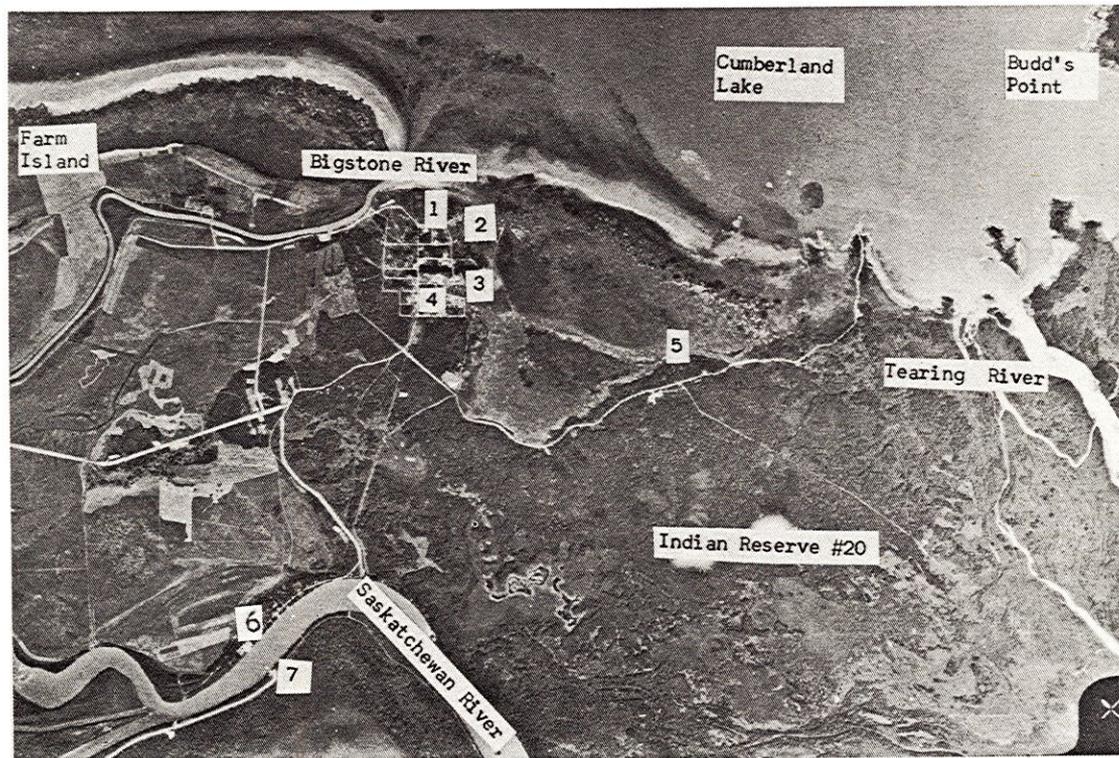
But the post continued in operation, growing into a vital storage and transshipment base. During its first twenty years, the site became bare of firewood, and periodically was subjected to flooding. At a more desirable location on high ground across the little bay, a fort was built of squared logs covered with boards. By May of 1794, the palisades were in place, the flagstaff set up, and the men moved onto the site where the Company buildings are today.⁹

A few yards to the west were the fort and garden of the rival North West Company, constructed about the same time, and also called Fort Cumberland, or The Depot. Used more for storage of goods than as a trading centre, there was little rivalry between the two houses until the period of open warfare in 1820. Captain John Franklin and his Arctic exploring party were careful to maintain a tactful neutrality while they enjoyed the hospitality of both forts during the winter of 1819-1820.¹⁰

After the union of the two factions in 1821, the Company post settled into its role as an administration and storage centre. As a part of the Saskatchewan District, it was expected to build boats, and procure snowshoes, portage straps, and pemmican for the passing brigades.¹¹ The boatbuilders lived with their families on the Saskatchewan River.¹² Here was the point at which bags of dried meat and pemmican from Fort Carlton and Edmonton were off-loaded and carried along a trail winding between the marshes to the warehouse at the fort. Fleming, in August of 1858, arriving there after having pushed his birchbark canoe over the wetlands beside the portage, described this warehouse as a very large edifice, containing extensive machinery for pressing and packing furs, and for making pemmican. The post's importance as a way station was pointed up by Fleming's observation of the arrival and departure of three brigades of boats within two days.¹³

The Church of England missions on the Saskatchewan provided other nuclei of settlement. Financed in part by the legacy of James Leith, in charge at Cumberland from 1822 to 1829, a chapel was built at The Pas in 1840, and later at the site of Hearne's post near the Indian camping grounds. In 1862, the Reverend Thomas Cook ministered to the twenty families of Christian Indians on the island, as well as to the Company servants and their dependents. Of the eighty-one persons living at the fort, twenty-three were of school age and studied in a house provided by the Company. A school was also taught by the missionary for the Indian children and their mothers, all learning the Cree Syllabics.¹⁴

After the Red River uprising of 1869, some of the Métis who moved west



Cumberland Island

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| 1. Site of North West Company fort | 5. Possible site of Hearne's post; former site of Anglican mission |
| 2. Hudson's Bay Company buildings | 6. Pemmican Portage |
| 3. Roman Catholic Church | 7. Ferry to Highway No. 123 |
| 4. Site of Revillon Freres | |

Note that embayment marked by sites 2 and 3 on the west, and site 5 on the east has been filled in with alluvium; indeed, the whole lake is shallowing. Thus Hearne's little bay is now a willow flat. Map adapted from an air photo of the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources. Scale approximately 1 inch = 4500 feet.

settled at Cumberland House.¹⁵ For those who were Roman Catholic, a mission was established in 1877 by Father M. Paquette, O.M.I. on a parcel of land at the south-east corner of Company property. After Father Ovide Charlebois (later the first Bishop of Keewatin) succeeded Father Paquette, he built a small log school and a large church in 1892; these are standing today. However, there were too few students to fill both mission schools and so the one public school was taught by both Protestant and Catholic missionaries and, later, by religious and lay teachers, a practice that has been continued.¹⁶

With the adherence of the Cumberland band to Treaty Number Five in 1876, most of the island area, with the exception of Company land, became part of the reserve. Included were the grounds of the Métis houses around the Catholic mission. A petition, submitted to the government by Father Charlebois and the settlers¹⁷ resulted in 640 acres adjacent to the church being withdrawn from the reserve, the Indians eventually being granted equivalent land at Budd's Point and Pine Bluff.

Inherent in the terms of the treaty was the turning away from hunting and trapping to a settled life as farmers; yet the low, wet acres on Cumberland Island were unsuitable for other than garden patches. Because there was a growing scarcity of fur and game animals, the Indians did make some attempt at farming but the crops were flooded out. They then petitioned for better agricultural land near Fort a la Corne:

If their request is not granted, they say the government must supply them with food, as long as the sun courses around the world, for they cannot endure to listen to their children crying with hunger.¹⁸

Land was subsequently allocated to the Cumberland band and the families wishing to farm moved to the new reserve.

The remaining Indians chose to live "almost entirely by means of the net, the trap and the gun",¹⁹ a precarious existence for as Factor Macfarlane reported in 1891, the collection of "country provisions" was the smallest on record. Because of low water, the muskrats were dispersed among the reeds and grasses, beyond reach of canoe and gun. The scarcities were accompanied by much sickness and death.²⁰

The coming of the steamboats on the Saskatchewan in 1875 provided an alternative to the hunting economy, undoubtedly a factor in stemming further Indian and Métis emigration. Men worked as porters and crew in the summer, and in winter cut the thousands of cords of wood needed to fire the boilers. The arrival of the railway at Prince Albert, and the shallowing of the steamboat channels west of Cumberland Lake, put an end to the carrying of supplies by the larger vessels, from Lake Winnipeg up-river to Carlton and Edmonton. River boats were operated as far north as Sturgeon Landing and west to Prince Albert until 1925.²¹ As well, a large quantity of freight for Pelican Narrows, Stanley, and Lac du Brochet was carried by canoe and York boat via the Sturgeon Weir route.²² Barges loaded with copper ore were floated down from Sturgeon Landing to the railhead at The Pas from 1917 to 1925. Thus, all through these years, there was work on boats for some Cumberland men.

The stability of the Cumberland population was maintained by a number of families who had resided there since the 1860's and before. The departure of those Métis and Indians who had taken money scrip and moved up-river was offset by an

influx of Métis from St. Laurent, Manitoba, who came in the early 1900's to work for the Armstrong-Gimli Fisheries.²³ After the end of the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly in 1869, independent traders also settled at Cumberland House; Shannon and Company of Winnipeg were in business there by 1886, and Revillon Freres of Paris maintained a store and warehouse south of the Catholic mission from 1906²⁴ to around 1923.

Revillon hired as clerk H. S. M. Kemp who later described the settlement as it was in 1912:²⁵

... the forest of slender spruce trees sheltering the native houses; the Company's post in the traditional open square; the low-growing juniper bushes; the soft grey of the caribou moss.

Luta Munday, the wife of the North West Mounted Police constable at Cumberland in 1907, also wrote about the fort with its old stockade still enclosing the grounds, the six o'clock bell signalling the shutting of the gates, and the two cannon beside the flagstaff that were fired, with some degree of caution, on state occasions.²⁶

It was Mrs. Munday and her friend Ruth Gray who returned to Cumberland during the winter of 1918-1919 to volunteer their services during the influenza epidemic. They worked in twelve-hour shifts, nursing the sick who were huddled, for warmth, two or three families to a house. Few escaped the illness and many died. Boards were torn from porches to make coffins which had to be stored in a warehouse for lack of grave-diggers.²⁷

Nor did Cumberland escape the effects of the Depression years and the drought. As river levels fell, the marshes dried up, destroying the muskrats' habitat. Other fur-bearing animals were wiped out by the invasion of White trappers from the drought-stricken prairies.²⁸ To restore the fur potential, the federal Department of Mines and Resources in 1939 began a conservation program in the 160,000 acre delta region, building canals, dams and dykes to regulate the water flow to the rat marshes. Waterfowl and beaver, as well as muskrat, showed a marked increase.²⁹

Trapping, however, declined steadily as a means of livelihood after World War II. J. E. M. Kew, in his report on Cumberland House in 1960, noted that the settlement realized only twenty-two per cent of its income from trapping and fishing, while forty-six per cent came from casual labour or self-employment, and the remainder from sources such as family allowances and social assistance. It was apparent that the population, as well as its needs, had outstripped the resource capacity of the region.³⁰

There had been a rapid increase in the birthrate matched by a declining infant and maternal mortality due to better health care. A public health nurse had been assigned to the community since 1929 and an outpost hospital, built with the assistance of the residents, was in operation in 1940. An intensified program of preventive medicine, including inoculations, resulted in the settlement at last being free of the periodic epidemics that had decimated the population.³¹

Migration of families into Cumberland House contributed to the growth as satellite settlements were being abandoned. Out of ten encampments and settlements occupied thirty years ago, including Pine Bluff, Budd's Point, Birch River,

the Barrier, and the reserve itself, only Pemmican Portage was still occupied in 1970.

A better school was one reason for consolidation of settlement. In 1944, the provincial government at last assumed full responsibility for the operation of Charlebois School. Until then it had been a problem of small government grants, reluctant local taxpayers, and inadequate facilities, along with teachers' complaints of unpaid salaries and poor attendance.³² Absenteeism dropped with the paying of family allowances which was conditional on school attendance, and with women and children remaining at home while the men visited traplines during the winter. The assigning of Treaty children to provincial schools in 1952³³ necessitated building a larger school, with classrooms added in later years to accommodate kindergarten to grade nine. The opening of an all-weather road to the west in 1966 allowed for busing the senior students to secondary schools in Nipawin and Prince Albert.

Better schools and a road were only part of the provincial government's belated contributions to Cumberland House. Immediately after World War II, a four-point program was proposed for the settlement: better educational facilities; a sawmill to produce lumber for houses; muskrat development; and the establishment of an agricultural economy.

The farm project began with the purchase of land across the Bigstone River together with a herd of beef and dairy cattle and ended when a major flood inundated Farm Island in 1948. The completion of the Squaw Rapids dam in 1963 has helped control the flooding and since then a large beef herd enterprise has employed up to thirty residents and trained several men who then have started their own livestock farms.³⁴ The marshes, however, were left for muskrat, game birds and moose, an attraction for hunters who in turn provide work for local outfitters and guides.

No program thus far has made the 1,000 residents self-sufficient and recently there has been an out-migration to better job opportunities.³⁵ Families, however, often return during the holidays to visit relatives, thus repeating the tradition of the summer encampments.

One uninterrupted enterprise has been the Hudson's Bay Company, in operation ever since Hearne pitched his tent beside the lake. Governor George Simpson accurately predicted its long life when, in 1828, he said it would continue despite low fur yields because of the "economical footing on which its business is conducted."³⁶ Sentiment was never a factor in its long association with the delta. This was evident in 1966 when it locked up the little white store near the seventy year old powder house, and moved into a new retail establishment called The Bay and situated on the main street across from the Canadian Legion and north of the Co-op store. Its business is assured as long as the residents remain.

As for the people of Cumberland House, they share with the rest of Northern Saskatchewan in the uncertain future of communities in transition. Meanwhile they can be justly proud of an unique and colorful history.

Footnotes

- ¹ Morton, A. S., *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*, Toronto, 1938, p. 272.
- ² Tyrrell, J. B. (ed.), *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor*, Toronto, 1934, p. 28.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ⁵ Hudson's Bay Company Archives, (H.B.C.A.), B. 239/a/72 "Journal of Matthew Cocking, 1774-5". Reference to this and other material in the Hudson's Bay Company records is made with the kind permission of the Company.
- ⁶ Tyrrell, *op. cit.*, p. 175.
- ⁷ Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 824.
- ⁸ Rich, E. E., (ed.), *Cumberland House Journals and Inland Journals*, 2nd Series, 1779-82, London, 1952, pp. 233-8.
- ⁹ H.B.C.A. B 49/a/25A.
- ¹⁰ Franklin, J., *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea*, London, 1823, pp. 51; 54; 96.
- ¹¹ Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 696.
- ¹² Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.), Church Missionary Society Records, A86, "Journal of Rev. T. Cook", 1862.
- ¹³ Hind, Henry Youle, *Report on the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, Toronto, 1859, Vol. 1, pp. 446-50.
- ¹⁴ P.A.C., Church Missionary Society records, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵ Archives of Saskatchewan (A.S.), School Histories, "Cumberland House", p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Marshall, Lionel, "Development of Education in Northern Saskatchewan", Unpublished Master of Education thesis, Univ. of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1966, p. 101.
- ¹⁷ A.S., Department of Agriculture, Lands Branch, Homestead Files, Cumberland House.
- ¹⁸ Canada, Sessional Papers (C.S.P.), 1883, No. 5 pp. 146-7; see also Raby, S. "Indian Treaty No. 5 . . ." *Saskatchewan History*, Autumn, 1972, pp. 92-114, and map, p. 96.
- ¹⁹ C.S.P., 1892, No. 14, p. 67.
- ²⁰ H.B.C.A., B.49/e/17, Cumberland House report for 1891.
- ²¹ Peel, Bruce, *Steamboats on the Saskatchewan*, Saskatoon, 1972, pp. 225-6.
- ²² H.B.C.A., B.332/b/f.8/Report for 1900-1901.
- ²³ Hlady, Walter M., "A Sociological Study of the Saskatchewan River Delta", Saskatchewan, Department of Natural Resources, 1967, p. 10.
- ²⁴ C.S.P., 1908, 25B, Appendix 36, "Report of J. F. Richard, DLS", pp. 158-9.
- ²⁵ Kemp, H.S.M., *Northern Trader*, Toronto, 1956, p. 50.
- ²⁶ Munday, Luta, *A Mounties Wife*, Toronto, 1930, p. 56.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116; School Histories, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-7.
- ²⁸ Denmark, Donald, "Conservation at Cumberland", *The Beaver*, March 1940, p. 47.
- ²⁹ Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1939, p. 228.
- ³⁰ Kew, J. E. M., *Cumberland House in 1960*, Centre for Community Studies, Saskatoon, 1962, p. 28.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ³² Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- ³³ Saskatchewan, Department of Education Annual Report, 1952-3, p. 29.
- ³⁴ Saskatchewan Indian and Métis Department, "The Indian and Métis in Saskatchewan", 1970, p. 16.
- ³⁵ Hlady, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
- ³⁶ Rich, E. E. (ed.), *Simpson's 1828 Journey to the Columbia*, Toronto, 1947, pp. 4-5.