

STEEL COMES TO HYTHE, ALBERTA

BY

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The coming of steel into the Peace River Country of Alberta, Canada, has brought about many changes. After resting for four years at Wembley, 28 miles away, the railroad was extended to the Hythe area. By August, 1929, seven months after its completion, two marked effects were in evidence: first, a rapidly growing town had been established; and, second, the tributary area had turned its interest to commercial grain growing.

When plans for this extension were formed, the railroad company purposely avoided Old Hythe with its low, poorly drained, site and lack of a street pattern. Instead it purchased for \$4,000 the adjoining, higher, better drained, largely untilled, quarter-section to the northeast and laid out the new town of Hythe.

Business started in this new town before the railroad was completed. The Frontier Lumber Company, first to occupy land, was open for business on August 3, 1928, although the first train did not arrive until January 15, 1929. All of their lumber was hauled from the end of steel at Wembley. The houses for the carpenters and the draymen were erected and the work on the four elevators was pushed so the 1928 grain crop could be handled. Mr. Donald, the owner of several hotels in towns along this railroad, realizing the necessity of a hotel in this newest "end of steel" town, bought a choice site as soon as the town was platted and, hauling materials from Wembley, erected the 38-room Hotel Donald, which was ready for occupancy 15 days before the first train arrived. This is a two-story, brick-front, steam-heated building with hot and cold water in each room. Since there were no masons or plumbers in this part of the country, they had to be brought from Edmonton, 445 miles away.

The town continued to grow rapidly until by August 12, 1929, 7 months after the railroad was completed, there were 56 business houses and 67 dwellings. Twelve of the buildings had been moved from the old town of Hythe. With the exception of the hotel, all of the structures were frame, most of them one-story and, as yet, unpainted. The population on that date was estimated to be 250.

The interest of the surrounding country in commercial grain growing was reflected in the amount of the townsite used by implement dealers with their offices, storage sheds, and vacant lots strewn with their belongings. One firm was setting up 12 new binders. Tractors, drills, discs, and threshers were in evidence. Because much of the surrounding country is being farmed for the first time, a number of single-bottomed brush breakers were also in stock. A complete outfit of machinery for a section of land sold here for \$5,000.

Since the railroad now ends at Hythe, there is quite a volume of freight moving to and from this town. Most of it is handled by trucks, but there is still quite a little winter hauling of grain by horses. The five garages and the one filling station meet the needs of owners of trucks and cars. Barrels of gasoline are trucked from the storage tanks to filling stations as far as Ft. St. John, 105 miles away. The price of gasoline at Hythe last August was 45 cents per imperial gallon, while at Ft. St. John it was 60 cents. It was estimated that \$100,000 worth of oil and gasoline had been sold at retail and wholesale in Hythe during the six months preceding August, 1929. The two livery stables house the horses while in town during the cold winter weather.

There are four general stores, two hardware stores, a drug store, several real estate offices and a bank. A millinery and ladies ready-to-wear shop was being erected. The butcher handled meat produced in the area and slaughtered in an establishment in Old Hythe. The baker, supplying not only Hythe but towns as much as 60 miles away, produced 3,000 loaves of bread a week.

Services, interdenominational in character, are held in the little log church which was moved from two miles out in the country. A two-story school building was being erected so the children from the town would not have to walk two miles out in the country. One of the largest buildings is used for moving pictures twice a week and for dances once a week.

Since steel ends here, it is not surprising to find a part of the land used for the Y, the roundhouse, and the coal storage bins of the railroad.

One wonders why, even though land is cheap, the railroad laid out 100-foot streets, but the townspeople declare that they are scarcely wide enough when the grain is being hauled. With the exception of the two little strips of concrete, there are wide board walks through the business streets.

The residences are small, two-room or three-room, frame buildings without modern conveniences. Although Hythe, with the possibility of flowing wells, is very fortunate in the matter of water supply as compared with many other places in this part of Alberta, most of the resi-

dents at present are buying their water for 35 cents a barrel from the drayman who hauls it in a water wagon from the railroad well.

There is no sewage disposal system in the town. At the hotel there is a cess-pool, but with the clay subsoil it is necessary to pump the sewage from the cess-pool into tank wagons and haul it several miles away.

Most of the homes were without electric lights, although some of the business houses were supplied by two small local plants and the hotel by a private plant. At a mass meeting of representative business men held August 13, 1929, it was decided to petition the Midwest Utilities Company to extend their line to Hythe and give the town 24-hour service.

The people of the community are interested in forms of recreation other than those already mentioned. The railroad company has dedicated a considerable tract of land to sports programs. A track for horse racing has already been laid out, and corrals for animals for an annual rodeo have been made. Inside the racing track is a baseball diamond, and there were two tennis courts in the town. Tennis matches and baseball games are played by natural light until 10:30 during the evenings of mid-summer. Plans were on foot for the erecting of a building for curling this past winter.

The railroad yard is a busy place, for Hythe has become a distributing and collecting point for a relatively large tributary area extending for 12 to 15 miles to the south and east and for about 60 miles to the northwest. There is much trucking from the freight trains at Hythe directly to the consumer in outlying districts or to the stores in towns off of steel. General merchandise, including groceries, machinery, gasoline, and liquor, make up the bulk of this out-going freight. During August, September, and October, 28 cars of fresh fruits and vegetables were expected to arrive from British Columbia. During August these were shipped in stock cars which gave enough circulation of cool air. During September they were to be shipped in box cars, and during October in refrigerator cars heated by charcoal burners. This later scheme is also used for the winter handling of citrus fruits from California.

The rate for hauling to Pouce Coupé, 46 miles away, is 50 cents per 100 pounds for all freight excepting the liquor. The rate on it is 75 cents per 100 pounds, for it is necessary to have guards to protect the order of three tons which goes to the liquor vendor there every three weeks. A number of the farmers in the Pouce Coupé and Rolla districts plan to pay for their trucks by hauling freight to and from Hythe.

They have an advantage over farmers in the other areas tributary to Hythe. Since the coming of the railroad into the area, the British Columbia Government keeps the road from Pouce Coupé and Rolla to Hythe open all year with the exception of about ten days in the spring when the frost is coming out of the ground. A part of the road is in Alberta, but British Columbia meets all of the expense, so that the citizens will be sure to have an outlet to steel. It keeps a snowplow on this road all winter and a grader all summer. A fully equipped trailer is provided, as the operator lives on the road all the time.

The passenger train arrives in Hythe twice a week. Its arrival is still so much of a novelty that at "train time" a large percentage of the population is to be seen at the little station.

Before the railroad was extended to Hythe, most of the land in this area was allowed to remain idle or was used for subsistence farming and ranching. Ranching was not profitable, for it was necessary to provide an average winter food supply of three tons per animal. A marked change was noted last summer, for the land was rapidly becoming a commercial grain-growing area. The climate is favorable for the raising of wheat, oats, and barley. A 12-year average at the Beaverlodge Experiment Station shows an average January temperature of 7.3° F. and an average July temperature of 59.7° F. The average annual rainfall for that period has been 16.5 inches, with most of it coming during June, July, and August. There is some frost danger, especially near the brush areas and the low areas, but grain has ripened on the higher parts of the Experiment Station for the last 14 years. The gently rolling topography makes possible the use of machinery. The predominating soil formation is a deep black loam with a clay subsoil. These heavy soils retain the moisture for crop growth and make the district quite resistant to drought.

Much land was being broken for the first time. The native vegetation is park-like, with the white spruce and aspen poplar prevalent in the brush areas. This land is broken in the main by the use of tractors and single-bottomed brush breakers. If there are large trees, they are chopped down, and they, with the roots of the smaller trees, at the present time furnish the winter fuel supply. Some of the large ones are also used for ice houses and some of the sheds. One man was using his two tractors day and night in order to break 1,000 acres. Out of another holding of 3,200 acres, 2,000 were being broken last summer. It was estimated that 30,000 acres were being broken in the immediate Hythe area.

Quite a little land had been broken in the preceding two summers, for the coming of the railroad was assured. The grain produced on

that land was either hauled to Wembly, taken out by the construction gang, or held in the elevators at Hythe until the railroad was completed. So great is the interest in grain growing that 25% of the farmers use canned milk rather than bother with a cow. It was estimated that 800,000 bushels of grain would be handled at the four local elevators during the winter of 1929-30.

At present the farmer's program for the year is as follows: from April 15 to May 15 seeding wheat, oats, and barley; from May 15 to June 1 summer fallow; from June 1 to July 15 breaking; from July 15 to August 7-15 making hay; August 15 to September 15 harvesting, first barley then either wheat or oats; from September 15 to October 1 stook thrashing; from October 1 to October 15 fall plowing, which may continue until freezing; from October 15 until snow falls in November cutting wood; during the rest of the year hauling grain to the elevators, hauling the wood which had previously been cut, putting up ice, repairing the equipment, and doing the chores.

In the area near Hythe about twice as much land is in oats as is in wheat because there is greater danger from early frosts. In the outlying districts, however, there is much more land in wheat than in oats.

Although the Pouce Coupé area is 46 miles from the end of steel, there is much interest in commercial grain growing, for the splendid condition of the Provincial Road makes it possible to haul the grain for from 15 to 20 cents per bushel. A part of the crop of this area is marketed in the form of bacon hogs. One trucking concern handles 30 trucks of hogs every two weeks during October, November and December. The rate is 75 cents per 100 pounds for hauling to Hythe, where there are stock pens, feed racks, and loading chutes.

Cleared land near Hythe with its railroad was valued at \$25 per acre while equally good land in the Pouce Coupé area 46 miles from the railroad was valued at \$18 per acre.

Thus it is evident that the coming of steel to the Hythe area has resulted in two major changes, namely, the establishment of a rapidly growing town and the development of commercial grain growing in the tributary areas.