

For many hundreds of years, the large fresh water lake in the middle of the southwestern part of Cape Breton Island knew the comings and goings of the First Nations people. They fished on the lake itself and in the many streams which flow into the lake from the surrounding hills. They speared eels where the waters of the lake emptied out into a river which flowed north and then west to the ocean.

Seen from above, the lake would be very evident as a hollow with low and moderately hill surrounding, but it would be evident that people journeying from the large salt water lakes called Bras d'Or to the salt water Gulf of St. Lawrence would have used the lake as a convenient roadway- by canoe in the summer and by ice in the winter.

The aboriginal people would have been well aware of the salmon coming up the river from the ocean and also the small bone-filled alewives or gеспereaux. A good supply of hardwood provide birch for canoes and for the making of shelters and the maple trees were useful for utensils. But no major settlement of First Nations people along the shores of the lake- just the comings and goings as the seasons dictated.

First known as Qospemk or Quspenk (at the lake) in the Mi'kmaw language and Lake Marguerite from the river of the same name (now shortened to Margaree) which flows out of the lake, the half to three quarters of a mile shelf of relatively flat land attracted incoming Gaelic-speaking Scots at the end of the second decade of the 1800s- starting in the 1816 period.

As the people settled around the western side of the Lake, they looked for land grants from the government of Cape Breton, then located in Sydney. The then Lt. Governor of the Island, Major-General Ainslie, as almost his last act in office, determined that the lake would be called for him and assigned land grants as well as petitioners.

As Cape Breton was returned to the governance of Nova Scotia in 1820, increasing numbers of people heard about the good land adjacent to the lake and the availability of land grants, mostly by word of mouth. With very few exceptions (such as the Hamiltons from the Lowlands of Scotland) the incoming settlers were Gaelic-speaking from the various islands off the west coast of Scotland and from the adjacent sections of mainland Scotland.

Coming often in extended family groups, sometimes from Prince Edward Island across the Gulf of St. Lawrence and sometimes from Pictou on mainland Nova Scotia, and some having disembarked on Cape Breton soil directly from Scotland, these MacDonalds and MacIssacs, MacLeans and Campbells, MacKinnons and MacCormacks, MacDougalls and MacDeans, Dunbars and Walkers applied for and were granted lots of land extending from the shoreline to the rear surveyed lands of the hillside, with 100 or 200 acres assigned, a quarter of a mile wide and nearly a mile deep.

As people who had lived for time immemorial in Scotland on lands owned by clan chieftains and hugely powerful regional overlords, were gratified to find that they could own their own land and plot their own futures.

The learning-curve in the first twenty years was very steep: a much harsher climate with longer winters and deeper frost than they were accustomed to; new plants to be understood as being helpful or to be dangerous if consumed; many, many trees (only remnants of the old forests remain deep in the interior today) which provided a new kind of shelter, fuel for cooking and warmth as compared to the peat in the "old country" and sweetening for tea by boiling the maple sap to make sugar and syrup.

But people were free to fish where they wished, hunt as they could; plough and plant where and what seemed best-an entirely new kind of economy and way of life. Huge tracts of land were cleared of woods and log houses built- and even log schools constructed within the first decade and a half. Almost as though planned, the lake provided a separation between the two major Christian denominations. The Roman Catholics lived on the western and some of the northern end or Kenloch (head of the lake in Gaelic) while the eastern and northeastern and southern portions of the land were almost entirely Presbyterian.

The people were united, however, by their common Gaelic culture of language and song and by a long tradition of hospitality and caring for one another. The sharing of work to build barns to shelter animals and to construct grinding mills for the grain (oats, wheat, barely, buckwheat) brought people together.

Little by little place names began to be assigned mostly by common practice- East Lake, and West Lake, North Lake and South Lake; head of the lake in English at one end (the southern part) and Kenloch (with the same meaning of head of the Lake) at the other end; the Twin Rock Valley for a geological formation and Glenmore for the “big Glen”, Outlet for the place where the lake began its long journey to the sea (later known as Scotsville); Trout Brook for ample fish supply and so on.

Traveling ministers and priests in the days before congregations and parishes were established baptized children- sometimes of faiths other than their own; married people who had confirmed their relationships by “handfasting” and said prayers over the graves of those who had died with clergy present.

School teachers were appointed after 1826 by the MPs of the County and at least one skilled Irish teacher Thomas Burke came to Cape Breton from Newfoundland and set up a school at the lower end of West Lake.

Pipers and fiddlers and dancing teachers could be found as could people who wrote tunes and composed songs. In many houses people were accustomed to sitting around the fireplace and singing songs in Gaelic and in English as well as either step dancing to a family member’s tune or “jigging the tune” by a group of people singing it. Many tasks such as milking, weaving, fulling cloth were accompanied by singing appropriate work songs.

The community around the lake developed ways of being quite self-sufficient as weavers wove not only for themselves but for other people and shoemakers made boots particularly for winter-wear and tailors (both men and women) developed a craft.

Looking down from overhead in the 1840s and 1850s, one would have seen a great change in the appearance of the countryside around Lake Ainslie: three congregations had raised their first churches: two near the shore at East Lake and at West Lake and one just over a small hill at Strathlorne (or Broad Cove Intervale as it was called then).

Log houses with their chimneys either in the middle or at one end and in a few cases with chimneys at both ends were giving way to frame houses built on the style of New England “Cape Cod Style” with symmetrically arranged openings for doors and windows and with large centre chimneys with two or three fireplaces downstairs and sometimes one upstairs.

From land was being developed back from the shoreline and in the rear of the first farms along the shore additional house sites could be seen. Oxen were being replaced by horses, mostly small “French style” horses, and some farms would be seen to have as many as a dozen head of cattle and perhaps twenty sheep along with pigs and chickens. One or two stone houses as well might be seen at East Lake.

Small fishing boats were common all around the lake- vessels operated by one or two people; with pointed ends so that they were called pinkies as though they had been cut out with pinking shears and they had generally a large sail in the stern and a small sail in the bow. Hand fishing and night catching might both be seen.

In a generation and a half from the time of settlement many changes were taking place and the people who had been young when they had arrived as immigrants were middle-aged and elderly. A few pictures survive from the 1860s and 1870s of these pioneers.

By the 1860s, people had grown accustomed to the rhythm of the seasons and in many cases had begun to prosper from their hard work, the fertility of the soil, their previous experience as stone masons and millers and carpenters or from opening small stores where the necessities and a few luxuries could be obtained, generally by barter.

Rail fences were replacing brush fences or stone piles as ways of keeping cattle and sheep in separate plots and away from fields of grain and hay. Larger "English-style" barns were starting to replace several smaller barns- the new style permitted the storage of hay inside the building rather than under sliding roofs on piles in a construction known as "barracks". All animals could as well be housed inside the one structure.

In some houses, new stoves were replacing the old-fashioned fireplaces which were boarded up or taken out altogether.

The census returns for 1861 suggest that Lake Ainslie had a large population with over 1200 people. The productivity of the people was apparently very high as in the year reporting there were more than four thousand yards of home-woven cloth taken from looms; more than nine tons of butter churned (much of it bartered at the seven stores in the community or in Whycomagh or Port Hood and Mabou). The coopers had been busy with preparation of more than two thousand barrel staves. There were nearly five thousand acres under cultivation with large crops of hay, wheat, barley, oats (13, 000 bushels), seven thousand bushels of potatoes.

Education was important as gradually log schools gave way to frame buildings with more than a dozen districts around the lake. With the first post office opening at East Lake Ainslie in 1851, communication with other places and the regular receiving of newspapers was possible. Shortly more than half a dozen other outlets for postal services would open.

Many young people were encouraged by their families and teachers to continue their education beyond the local schools. In the second half of the 1800s fifteen ministers who were natives of the Lake Ainslie area and several priests and other professional men can be identified. They went away to other places and so began the out-migration which is so much a part of the history of the second half of the 1800s and of the 1900s.

The beauty of the lake was much appreciated by the poetry and tunes and songs extolling its scenes were composed.