



NATURAL RICHES

BY PAULA ARAB, CALGARY HERALD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT BLACK, CALGARY HERALD

northern treasures

Alberta's booms have been fuelled by fur, trees and now bitumen

The incandescent sun sits low in the northern Alberta sky, illuminating the dirty mud flats below on this warm spring morning. Parks Canada manager Mike Keizer stands in front of a lonely mound of white salt that glistens amid fields of brown. "It's bubbling out of the ground, right here at my feet," says the Wood Buffalo National Park guide. "That's the spring."

Keizer is referring to the mineral that gushes generously from this ecological splendour hiding deep in the heart of the world's second-largest national park.

Herein lies the salt of the earth, precious to humans and once traded for gold. It symbolizes the geographical story of the North, exemplifying how the land bubbles its riches to the surface and freely gives that which man taketh away.

Agriculture, fur and oil are among the resources that have contributed to the economic prosperity of northern Alberta. Explorer Alexander Mackenzie first noted what has become today's bounty — bitumen — seeping from the sandy banks of the Peace River in the 1790s, although he didn't recognize its value at the time. In his journals, he described how the natives used the tar-like goo: "The bitumen is in a fluid state, and when mixed . . . serves to gum the canoes."

Oil was again found oozing out of the gravel in 1912 along the Pouce Coupe River — in the western portion of Peace River Country — where gas was also detected lingering between the stones. Similar reports followed from other locations along the Peace River, which begins in B.C. and winds its way through northern Alberta.

But petro-riches would come later. The early gifts of the land were beaver pelts and grain. In the 1870s, surveyor Charles Horetzky and botanist John Macoun were sent on a quest to explore the agricultural potential of Peace River Country. They described a "veritable garden of Eden," leading the Canadian government to encourage large-scale farm settlements.

