

Fishing Industry Structures

Initial attempts at fishing by the Icelandic settlers during the 1870s were largely unsuccessful due primarily to the poorly suited nets and other equipment brought from Iceland. Within a few years however, more successful techniques and equipment were developed and fishing became the main source of food in the colony. Small, two-masted sailboats were used during these early years and the catch was either dried, smoked or preserved in salt for winter consumption.

Very little winter fishing occurred during the 1870s, and only small amounts of preserved fish were sold to markets in Winnipeg. The delivery of fresh fish to Winnipeg merchants became possible when the railroad connection between Winnipeg and Selkirk was completed in 1883. Prior to this time, rapids on the Red River near St. Andrews had prevented direct water transport of goods between Winnipeg and the colony. By the mid 1880s, however, the fishing industry on Lake Winnipeg was growing rapidly and soon a number of foreign-backed companies were established. Steam-powered fish tugs, barges, boats and other equipment were brought in, and a number of fish packing stations were constructed on both sides of the lakeshore as each company strove to gain control over the industry. Local Icelandic-backed interests could not compete with these large operations and soon most of the local fishermen were either employed by these companies or were selling their catches to them.

Catches increased after the turn of the century reaching a high of 31/2 million kilograms (71/2 million pounds) in 1906. After 1910, however, the numbers decreased steadily and the industry began to decline. Companies either ceased operations or were absorbed by the others. The last major fish packing plant, the British Columbia Fish Packers in Gimli, ceased operations in 1969. Presently the industry is controlled by the Freshwater Marketing Corporation.

Few of the fish packing stations constructed during the early years of the industry were situated on the shoreline between Gimli and Riverton because of poor natural harbours. Selkirk and several locations on the west shore were the main plan locations. However, after government wharfs were constructed at these locations. The Hanusa facility no longer exists and the one in Gimli is now a local museum (Figure 40).

Two smaller fish stations were found along the shoreline in the planning district, one at Drunken Point and the other near Arnes (Figure 41). Both appear to be of recent construction, although neither is currently in use.

A number of temporary log fish stations were constructed along the shores of the north basin of Lake Winnipeg and were occupied during the winter fishing season. One such structure from a camp at Loon Straits still stands, now used as a garage and storage shed (Figure 42).



Figure 40

Portions of this structure date back to 1919 when Robbins Incorporated, a Chicago based company, established the first large scale fish processing station in the Eastern Interlake. Since that time the facility has changed hands several times and received a number of additions.



Figure 41

This small fish processing station, located near Arnes, and a similar one near Hnausa, were owned by local Icelandic fishermen, and only recently ceased operations.



Figure 42
Log building from a former fish camp at
Loon Straits on the northern shores of Lake
Winnipeg.

Many of the local fishermen constructed their own small woodframe, shed-roofed equipment storage sheds, ice and smoke houses. Only a few of these still exist. A building constructed in 1934 for drying and storing nets and other equipment is near Hnusa (Figure 43). Two other small storage structures are located in Riverton (Figure 44). These buildings were apparently constructed prior to the turn of the century and still contain a number of nets and other articles from the early years of fishing on Lake Winnipeg.



Figure 43
Net and equipment storage shed near Hnusa.



Figure 44
This small storage shed, located in Riverton, is still used for storing nets and equipment after nearly 80 years.