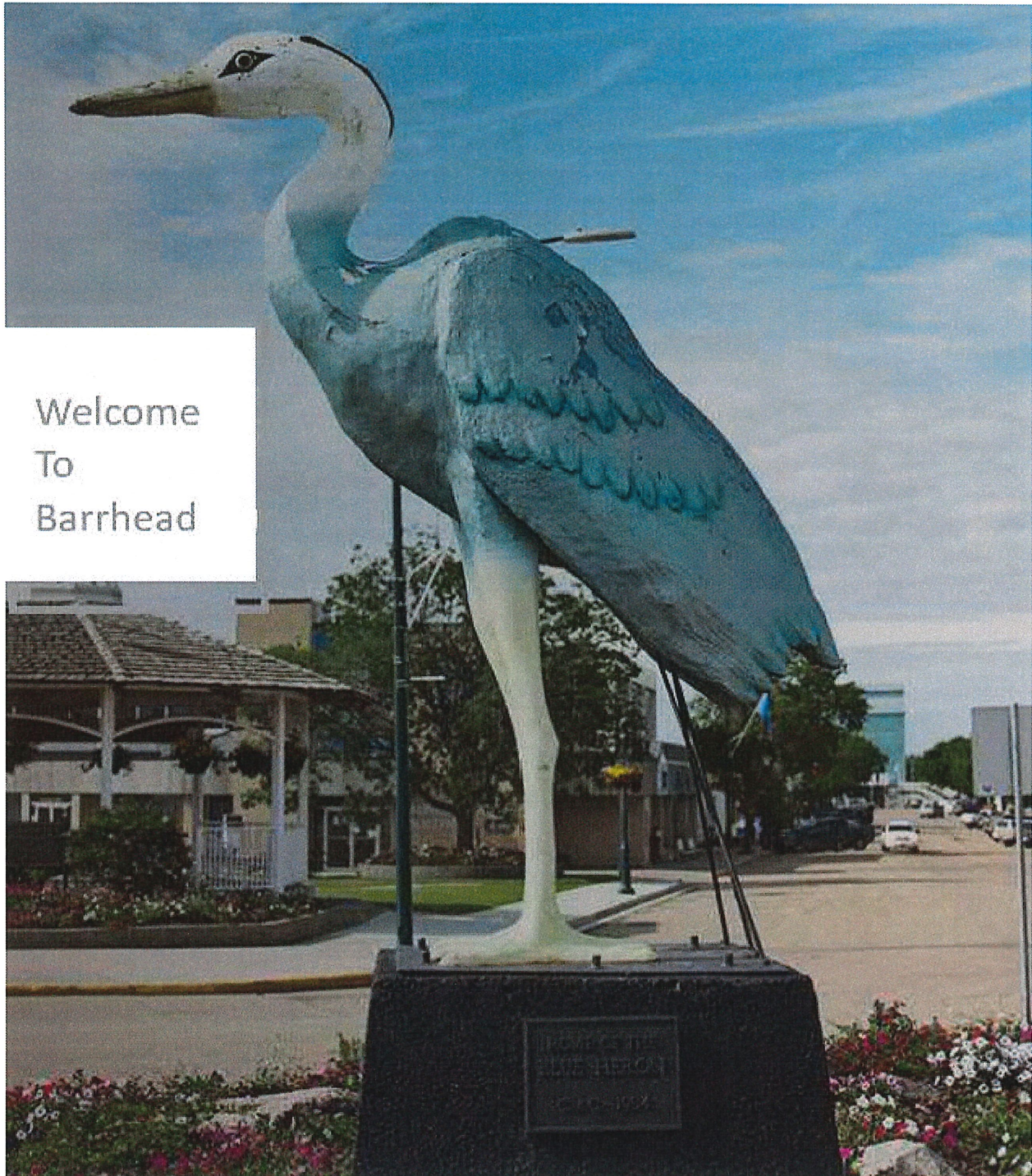




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History of Barrhead

Klondike Trail

During the late 1800's and the early 1900's, Barrhead played an important role in the settlement of north-western Alberta. Highway 33, known as the Grizzly Trail, follows the original Klondike Trail, which was the shortest route to the Yukon during the Gold Rush years. Once established, this route was key to the settlement of the Peace River region. The old Barrhead town site, 3 km north of the present Town Centre, was a frequent stop over for the Klondikers and others who needed supplies for the rigorous journey north.

Originally established in 1906, Barr head's position as a major trade centre on the historic Klondike Trail gave it a significant role in the settlement of north-western Alberta. It was a vital link in the trade route from Fort Edmonton to the Yukon.

James McGuire, one of the first settlers in the area, named Barrhead after his hometown in Scotland. Today, the community's rich history can be revisited through a captivating collection of artifacts at the Barrhead and District Museum. The museum also houses the third largest display of African exhibits in Canada, as well as the Barrhead Visitor Information Centre, which is open from May to September. The Great Blue Heron is another prominent figure in local lore. The elegant, long-legged bird, often spotted along the shores of local lakes, is the Town's official mascot. A statue of the bird is situated next to the Community Gazebo that marks the Town centre and miniatures of the bird adorn the street posts.



The Way It Was

This was a quiet land of rolling hills well covered with stands of poplar, birch and spruce trees on the higher ground with the low areas filled with willows and tamarack. A few natural open areas of meadow grass were interspersed here and there.

In 1824 a pack horse trail was cut from Fort Assiniboine to Fort Edmonton passing one mile east of our present town. Some of the larger pack trains had over a hundred head of horses.

The Cree natives and trappers moved across the area as they went about their business.

Then came the gold rush of 1898 in the Yukon. The pack-trail was widened to allow teams of horses and wagons, loaded high with provisions, to carry gold seekers north.

The homesteaders soon followed. Surveys of the land took place in 1906 and 1907, and the pioneers applied for quarters (160 acres) of land.

Trading posts were busy on both the Pembina and Athabasca rivers. A small store in the log home of Percy and Mary Johnstone (2 miles north and 1 mile east of town) was in operation. Andy Tuttle lived 1.5 miles to the south and helped many settlers as they arrived.

When We Were Paddle River

A post office named Paddle River was opened on Ted Speck's farm, one mile southeast of town on the south side of the river in 1907. A store in Josh Cason's house, south and west of town, was operating in 1908 and a lean-to on the side provided a room for a school. Hugh Critchlow had taken land a mile north of Specks', along the Klondike Trail in 1907. Soon the Speck brothers (Ted and Fred) had built a bridge across the river and a sawmill was in operation on the north side. Cason and Critchlow partnered to build a store at Critchlow's in 1910 and the post office was moved there. A hall had been built just across the trail where school was held from 1909 to 1911. A blacksmith shop and a merry-go-round type swing completed the busy centre where nearly a hundred people attended the picnic in 1909. Rev. Seymour Dallas applied for a ten-acre cemetery plot (which is currently East Lawn Community Cemetery) and in 1913 the Anglican Church was built there. The church was subsequently moved to town in 1928 and then moved to Thunder Lake in 1967.

When We Became Barrhead (Barrhead Village 1913-1927)

The Paddle River Co-operative Society was formed in 1912 and opened a store in the old Johnstone building northeast of Barrhead in 1913. They immediately began construction on a new two-story building that would have room for community gatherings upstairs. Application was made for a post office, which required that they choose a name. The McGuire family suggested the name of their hometown in Scotland and soon the Barrhead, Alberta post office opened in the store on January 1, 1914.

The Finch family built a stopping house which still stands nearby. The Northwest Mounted Police built a barracks, and the hall was moved over from the southern location (2.5 miles). A blacksmith shop and a garage were built on the other corner of the intersection and various families bought lots and built homes. The bus service to Edmonton was started in 1926 and the Toronto Dominion/TD Canada Trust bank was opened in the stopping house. The children went to school at Glenreagh, two miles west. The community applied to have the railway brought here from Busby and landowners hoped to sell right-of-way.

The Coming of the Railroad

In 1907, Albert Shelton and family homesteaded the quarter that Barrhead's main street is on. He builds a house, barn, dug a well and did some fencing, mostly in the northeast corner of the quarter, the highest area of land.

The Shelton's moved away in 1912 leaving the quarter vacant and by 1927 the land was cheap, so the Northern Alberta Railroad agreed to bring the Pembina Valley branch line to this quarter. The Barrhead people then scrambled to move their homes, the garage and the store to this new location, where four elevators were already being built.

The pattern of the streets and lots were carefully laid in relation to the railway tracks and buildings went up in rapid succession. The pattern chosen for the lots is still used today.

And How We Grew

In no time at all, businesses were in operation; from grocery and hardware stores, a drug store, restaurant, hotel, real estate office, butcher shop, livery barn, etc. to the first church, which was the United Church.



Ted Hooper supplied electric lights. The incorporation of the village took place on November 14, 1927, and the First Election in Barrhead was December 12, 1927. A seven or eight bed hospital opened that fall on the corner of 49A Street and Railroad Avenue. A new hospital was built across the main road (Highway 33) in 1934.

The school was built and opened in 1928; a two-room building that needed another building for the High School by 1929. Our town newspaper, the Barrhead News was printing in 1927 and soon was called the Barrhead Leader - our present-day newspaper.

In 1936, the curling rink was established plus William Johnson became the village constable. The movie theatre opened in 1939.

In 1946, the village borrowed money to install water and sewer and that year on November 26th we became a town.

Barrhead became a separate school division in 1947 with school centralization taking place in 1948, hailing the arrival of the yellow school bus.

Some cement sidewalks were poured in 1950, and the library began in the new Steeling School, which stood where the Elementary School now stands. The streets and houses were numbered. A large, indoor ice arena was built in 1951 by the Agricultural Society of the day.

A home for seniors, Hillcrest Lodge was built in 1960 and has grown to include three additions to the complex, the latest being Klondike Place in 2001, as well as major upgrading to the lodge itself.

The first nursing home opened its doors in January 1966 and operated until patients were moved to the new Keir Care facility in August 1985.

In 1967, the Barrhead Historical Society built the museum, and the first historical book "Trails Northwest" was published. "Fifty Golden Years" followed in 1977.

Town Council set the prices for the lots in the newly purchased Industrial Park (1967) north of the Sportsgrounds (which had been purchased in 1945) with the water and sewer lines all installed. The Barrhead Neighbourhood Inn was built in the mid 1970's, and the current Provincial building was built in 1979-1980 in the north end of the Industrial Park. Farm implement dealerships and services soon filled the entire area.

In 1968, the Kinsmen Club built and opened the swimming pool, and it was covered by the early 1980's.

Main street was first paved in the mid 1960's and had a major upgrading in 1995 complete with brick inlays, bronze, blue heron statues, banners and planters' courtesy of the Pride in Barrhead Committee.

The Alberta Distance Learning Centre (formally called the Correspondence School) was built in 1983 by the Provincial Government, a portion of which; Distance Learning, was incorporated in the School Division of Pembina Hills in 2000. The Learning Technology branch which develops the curriculum for Alberta schools and the Print Resources branch, remain under the direction of the Provincial Government. Pembina Hills offers education for kindergarten through grade twelve with approximately 40 buses operating throughout the Town and County.

A small town with big heart, Barrhead stands proudly in north central Alberta. With its roots set in Agriculture, farm fresh culinary experiences aren't just a luxury, they're the gold standard. On our shop-filled streets where people say, "good morning" and mean it, you will experience the friendly small-town way of life with many things to do.