

River's Edge



River's Edge Camp and Conference Centre Extended History

A
Natural
Setting
For A
Supernatural
Experience

River's Edge Camp and Conference Centre

River's
Edge



River's Edge Camp and Conference Centre

A new chapter in a camping legacy.

The love of camp meetings migrated with the pioneers to the West. As early as 1906 the Evangelicals held a camp meeting near Neudorf, Saskatchewan, and churches in Alberta organized camps of their own. The lack of lakes and rivers did not curb their zeal. They chose a farmer's field or a church property, put up a large tent, and preached the gospel each afternoon and evening for two or three weeks. People came daily from miles



Elkton Valley Camp

around to partake of the inspiration, and many of the early member were converts from these camps.

The murmur of open water, however, did have a special appeal and in 1929 the Evangelical congregation in Didsbury conducted a ten-day "Holiday Camp School" at Sylvan Lake. The morning was devoted to Bible study, music and teaching, while the afternoons were taken up with recreation. A campfire crowned the activities of each evening; hearty singing, interspersed with testimonies, inspired the youth as they watched the sparks drift upward.

Elkton Valley Camp

When Echo Lake Camp (in Saskatchewan) proved to be such a success, the Alberta churches also wanted a camp of their own. It was too far to go to Saskatchewan in 1938, so Conference approved their request. A search was made, and a rented site on the Little Red Deer River was chosen. Enthusiasm soared. Men came from different churches to set up the camp. They pitched the old white tent that belonged to the conference to use it again for services. Campers had to pitch their own. There were no conveniences at the camp, but being hardy souls, they didn't mind roughing it for seven or eight days. Meals had to be cooked on open fires; even water had to be hauled in from a nearby farm.

The following year they purchased their own campground. It was on the same river, but this site spread across 18 acres of space. Plans were made to erect buildings during that winter, so preachers and laymen alike endured days of unaccustomed exercise in cutting down spruce trees in minus 30 degrees Celsius weather. They built a 40'x60' tabernacle, a five-room dormitory, and two small cottages for speaker and workers. Three years later they also provided spruce benches (pitch oozing out was a dubious bonus), and much later, a dining hall, more dorms, and heated cabins. They also had plenty of space for trailers and motor homes. Over the years, powerful messages from bishops, evangelists, and missionaries made Elkton Valley Camp dear to the hearts of many Albertans. In 1999 it was exchanged for a much more spacious facility.

Didsbury and Gull Lake Camps

Almost all camp meetings of the Missionary Church had moved from place to place before a permanent site was chosen. Didsbury Camp was a notable exception. Not long after the settlers arrived in the west, they began planning for a camp program. The first step was the acquisition in 1905 of five acres of land right in the centre of Didsbury. Next was a tent large enough to hold services for the throngs who



Elkton Valley Camp

Camp History
Taken From:

Lageer,
Eileen.
*Common
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2002.



**First Camp Meeting
Canada West, Didsbury, AB**

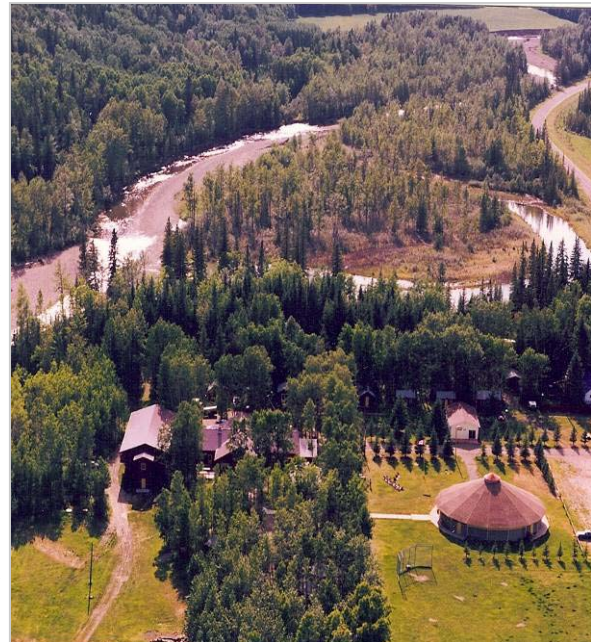
would attend. How excited the young people were when they saw a huge tent slowly billowing outwards as men tugged at the ropes and pushed on the poles to get it upright! The youngsters had never been in a “tent church” before. Small family tents dotted the grounds on all sides—reminiscent of the 12 tribes of Israel encamped around God’s tabernacle in the wilderness.

Since campers could always expect “a real soaker” (therefore lots of mud!) during the week, the farmers brought in loads of wheat and oat straw and scattered it throughout the aisles, between the seat (backless planks) and around the “mourners’ bench” at the front. Old rocking chairs were found for the comfort of creaky

bones, especially those of aged grandmas and aunts.

Another essential accessory was the Amen Corner where the “patriarchs” sat. Many were the vocal responses from saints in this corner as well as from the rest of the congregation. “AMEN!” was to encourage the preacher as he expounded the Word of God. For that first camp, the evangelists came from Ontario; Rev. Samuel Goudie, speaker, and Peter Shupe, song leader. It took real talent to lead a large congregation in singing with no musical instrument (taboo at that time). No matter; Peter had a “pitch pipe” and after he found the key, all the people joined in heartily, to the extent that the whole town benefited from their efforts.

So successful was this camp meeting that it left no doubt they must convene one every summer after that. This continued for over 60 years. It was only to be however, that changes would take place. One of the first additions was a huge gleaming white tent that could be seen for miles around. Later a brown tent was purchased, but by 1940 it too had had its day, and a 60' x 90' wooden tabernacle was constructed for the next year's camp. A unique feature of this building was its steam heat equipment, no doubt because Alberta could expect snow even in July. Since the late 1920s, Mountain View Bible College was located on the same grounds, and those who weren't keen on outdoor camping had the option of renting a room in the dorm. When a dining hall was built, meals were served free. Farmers greatly increased provisions by donating cream, eggs, vegetables and an occasional side of beef. Expenses were met mainly on the last Sunday afternoon when a “Grand March” was held. And all filed up to the front singing, “We’re Marching to Zion,” hoping to fill the large containers placed there for monetary contributions.



James River Bible Camp

Every day there were special services for children and young people, but in the evening all were expected to be under the big canvas to hear the evangelist preach. Church members recognized the value of this ministry; though it was a busy time of year, farmers took time off to bring their teenagers and children to camp. It was here that many were converted. Christian work in later years reaped the benefit of these changed lives both at home and abroad.



James River Bible Camp

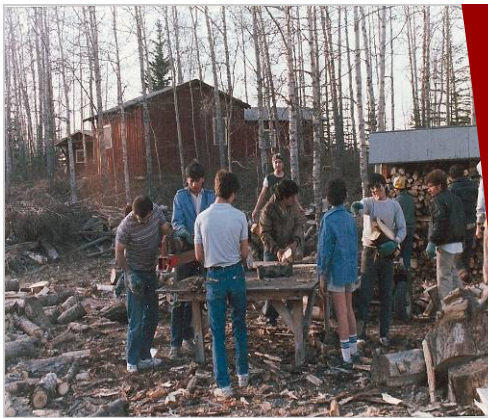
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A new program was added in 1945. The Canadian Sunday School Mission's Gull Lake Camp was procured for the first week of August and youth activities were planned. Those who couldn't pay their way could go anyway. Free registration was offered to those who learned Bible verses – 50 were required of the youngest children and more



James River Bible Camp

for older ones. In this way, no one was deprived of a camping opportunity. For many prairie children, Gull Lake provided the only opportunity to go swimming each year, and the place became so popular that in 1958 a second week was booked in order to add a Junior camp. For 20 years, this camping program proved to the district how important it was to care for the spiritual well-being of their children.

James River Bible Camp

In the early 1960s Missionary Church leaders in Alberta began to look for a campsite to attract their youth. Even adults wanted to worship and relax amidst God's beautiful creation, not in the middle of town. A 20-acre piece of land on James River, ten miles northwest of Sundre, and near the foothills proved to be the ideal spot. Here James River Bible Camp came into being (the adult camp also moved there in 1967). Miss Enith Hunsperger described the vision that the camp committee had for the new location:

"This camp with a Christ-centered program for juniors and teenagers is for the youth of all denominations. We hope to have an outdoor chapel this year which will mean clearing a terraced area for this purpose, The leadership will be provided by various churches in

Alberta. The program will include swimming, horseback riding, nature lore, and crafts, cookouts, hikes, overnight camping, sports, Bible study and worship."

What more could one want? Nevertheless, seven years after the union of the Missionary and Evangelical Churches in 1993, the Camp Board felt it best to sell both James River and Elkton Valley ground in order to join their programs and operate one large camp adequate enough to accommodate hundreds. A miracle would be needed to bring this about.



James River Bible Camp

Elkton Valley

1939-1999

"Meals had to be cooked on open fires; even water had to be hauled in from a nearby farm..."

...Over the years, powerful messages from bishops, evangelists, and missionaries made Elkton Valley Camp dear to the hearts of many Albertans. In 1999 it was exchanged for a much more spacious facility."

Didsbury & Gull Lake

1905-1958

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James River Bible Camp

1960-2005

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River's Edge Camp & Conference Centre



River's Edge Camp and Conference Centre

It was a miracle that gave the District their River's Edge Camp. When the decision was made to sell the former two sites, the Board began to look around for another appropriate property. In the Cremona EMCC Church were Roy and Jean Luyendyk, a couple who had been operating a children's home for troubled youths for a number of years. By 1996 when the home was closed, they had ministered to over 2000 children, ages 9-16, parenting 32-34 of them each year. Besides this, the Luyendyks had five children of their own plus 22 more that were adopted from such countries as Columbia and Thailand. Koinonia Christian School, grades one to high school, was then built on their property where the children were taught by Christian staff. A special feature of this caring community was the dozen riding horses and one-and-a-half-hour trails throughout its 320 acres. Others might get their exercise from the 20-minute walk through the trees down to the river at the bottom of the hill.

If beauty could heal the children's pain, the scenery on the property ought to do it - large green fields sloping gently down toward the Little Red Deer River with its stance of spruce, aspen and poplar trees as its border. Up beyond on the other bank stretches more breathtaking beauty, and on the distant horizon are the gleaming white peaks of the Rocky Mountains. River's Edge Campground is a site of God's special handiwork!

When news reached the churches that the District was seeking a camp site, the Luyendyk's offered this property with its two homes, school, dorm, 18-room lodge, horses, barns, machine shop, and rifle range to the District in return for a new permanent home built for them east of the current site. Located one hour northwest of Calgary, it was an ideal situation. In fact, it was a **miracle!**

The one thing urgently needed was a tabernacle coupled with a dining hall and kitchen. What would it cost to build such a structure? Over in Saskatchewan, some board members heard of a large bowling alley that was up for sale. The Board checked it out. Unbelievable! A 115' x 115' steel frame building could be bought for \$38,000 including trucking to Alberta! The steel frame of the building was worth \$242,000 alone! Thank you, thank you, Father! The frame was dismantled and hauled to the new property, then rebuilt, outfitted with platform, pews, and chairs-and River's Edge Camp tabernacle was the result.

Since the structure had been a bowling alley, a kitchen and its accessories were lacking, so a kitchen/washroom/laundry and maintenance areas were added at the back, stainless steel equipment was acquired, and pots and pans, dishes, tables chairs, and other necessities were brought from James River and Elkton Valley camps to be set up in "The Palace." It provided a place to receive food for the body and food for the soul. All this took place in the spring of 1999.

The next blessing was a director to run the camp. God had this planned as well. On

June 26, Dr. Dennis Punter resigned his position as Superintendent of Christian Schools, and he and his wife moved from their split-level home into a small camp house that as yet had no hot water or natural gas. "I haven't been so happy in years," grinned Director Punter. "I've lost 26 lbs and feel better than I have for ages. I'm here because God wants me here!"

But one couldn't have a camp without cabins. So the Board challenged the 30 churches supporting River's Edge to build one each. Many of them took up the challenge, came to the camp, built and paid for its cabin at \$2,100 each - leaving 16 cabins nestled among the trees. Washrooms, staff housing, plus 27 RV sites among the aspens have also been provided since it became the district camp. At its dedication on



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July 1, 1999, 770 people attended the ceremony. Torrents of rain fell on the event, but spirits were good and most stayed for the celebration feast. "It's a miracle!" they all agreed.

The first full retreat to be held at the camp was for pastors and their wives in September 1999. Fifty-two registered, and wonderful days of inspiration and fellowship followed. A special time of closeness came on the Tuesday night when pastors prayed one for another. One by one they came to the front indicating their need for a new spirit for service. Many were burned out or "tired in serving"; all needed a new touch from the Lord. Many tears were shed as fellow pastors and then wives, who only too well understood the burdens carried, gathered round, placed their hands on a brother, and prayed for "the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." Couples went from that retreat sensing that they could again "run and not be weary ... walk and not faint." (Isaiah 61:3 and 48:31 NKJ)

Every year since then, Children's camps, Youth camps, and Family camps are held each summer. The district's own pastors are used as leaders, speakers, and musicians. While parents are enjoying their spiritual feast in what was formerly called "The Palace", (now referred to as Frontier Hall) the children have their little nook, and the youth crowd into a large round tent across the field where their high-

decibel music ascends to the heights of heaven. Horseback riding, wall climbing, high ropes, paintball, and other sports are very popular. The other activities throughout the summer and on weekends throughout the school year offer happy times and opportunities for



River's Edge Camp and Conference Centre

Truly their
Heavenly
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miraculous.



**River's Edge Camp and
Conference Centre**

many to come to know Christ as Saviour.

"More happens in the two months of summer at River's Edge than all year round in many of the churches back home," leaders say.

When the first Keenagers camp was announced, 212 registered; even though the cabins were cold and other comforts lacking, these older campers were so enthusiastic about their new property that they donated \$12,000 toward building development. Some of this was used for insulation, wallboard, and electric wiring in the auditorium. Slowly the huge building was becoming a real "tabernacle."

Truly their Heavenly Father had proven Himself the God of the miraculous. One more miracle was needed, however; by the summer of 2002, James River Camp site had not yet sold. The mortgage on the \$700,000 that was borrowed on the strength of the two camps selling quickly was a heavy burden to carry. But surely "He who began a good work among you will carry it on to completion. (Philippians 1:6) Our God has not yet run short of miracles.

In 1932 Thomas Kelly wrote; "The caliber of a man is found in his ability to meet disappointment successfully, enriched rather than narrowed by it." The same can be said for organizations and ministries.

The optimism that had filled the 2002 season slowly started to erode as much took place that significantly altered and in many ways changed optimism into despair. Many questioned the choice to sell the old camps and move as River's Edge went into a time of increasing operational debt that started to cripple the development and dreams of the churches. Through the leadership of several Executive Directors, and with regular changes in the Board, it became a great concern as to the viability of the new ministry.

A significant factor was the 'sold' and then 'not sold' stories relating to the James River site. A conditional offer would be accepted and then the 'buyer' would be unable to acquire the financing or other circumstances ended the purchase proceedings. The Board and camp staff found themselves trying to manage both year round camping facilities and that became increasingly difficult to operate both with staffing and finances.

By the spring of 2004 River's Edge found itself in a critical financial position with liabilities totalling close to \$1.2 million dollars and a dramatic decline in the potential summer children's camp enrolments. To address the harsh realities of their situation, the Board and then Executive Director, Blaine Attaway, made the difficult decision to cancel the summer camp children's programs and only run the 2 traditional family camps. The rest of the summer would be offered to guest groups to rent the remaining weeks of summer for their activities. Meanwhile, efforts continued to try and find a buyer for James River and all non-essential projects were cancelled.

But God had been doing a work that in many ways was not as anyone imagined. His timing and His plans were unfolding but in a way that would require even greater faith and a willingness to consider significant changes and new directions for the camp to effectively minister to the next generation of campers, staff and guests. It was as if God was looking to establish a new future, a new camp that would be built on the legacy of its predecessors but a camp with its own identity, distinctives, and direction. For that to happen, like a grain of wheat that is planted into the ground and must first die to bring forth a bountiful harvest, so the new camp would need to have a death to it's old self and then arise to have an even more bountiful harvest than could have ever been envisioned.



River's Edge Camp and Conference Centre

In the fall of 2004 a buyer was found for the James River site and the Alberta Foster Parents Association purchased the property for \$730,000, a significantly lower price than the appraised \$1.8 to \$2.1 million dollars that the Board and everyone else had been anticipating. But now there was no way to go back and only the possibilities of what the River's Edge site could offer.

New excitement was being rekindled and a new passion was starting to surface. Most of the long standing debts were paid off and in the summer of 2005, children's camps were again started with 249 kids attending. It was a small beginning but a new start for a new generation. Then in December Blaine resigned and yet again another search was implemented for an Executive Director.

In May of 2006, Harold Cooper became the new Executive Director and he and the new board started the process of redefining, rebuilding, reconnecting and reengaging the churches and constituency with the camp. Significant expansion improvements and renovations were made to the Inn and the RV sites making more room for more people to experience the camp's ministry intent of loving and leading people in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Financial investments were made into expanding and building programming options which included, an indoor climbing wall, high ropes challenge course, archery, mountain bikes, paintball, outdoor riding arena, and development of adventure camp sites. There was also an intentional focus on expanding the Guest Group ministries by seeking more partner agencies and schools that would start to use the facilities on a weekly as well as weekend basis.

A significant campaign was mobilized in 2007 to eliminate the long term debt to the EMCC Canada West Corporation and just over \$400,000 was identified to eliminate that financial obligation. However the camp has continued to operate under significant financial realities and balancing the Operational costs and the Capital development needs continues to be a faith and prayer priority to see how God will provide for the camp's future through His people and churches.

The camp continues to grow and plan its future! It will be a wonderful process seeing how God will raise up the resources, staffing and ministry partners to help ensure that River's Edge Camp and Conference Centre continues to be a place for Christ-centred life change in a natural setting for a supernatural experience.



River's Edge Camp and Conference Centre

River's Edge Camp

1998-Present

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Evangelical Missionary Church
of Canada HIS MISSION - OUR MISSION



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