

## GEOGRAPHICAL RECORD

### FORT McMURRAY: FUTURE CITY OF THE FAR NORTH\*

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In the far north of Canada, above the prairie lands of Alberta, lies Fort McMurray, the urban center of the Athabasca oil-sands region. Intriguing *New York Times* articles about one of “the fastest growing cities” of Canada—population 42,000—sparked my curiosity about this frontier of urban settlement (Brooke 2001a, 2001b). With a summer trip to Vancouver as a base, the Alberta volume of *Moon Handbooks* (Hemstead 2001) for orientation, and a local history, *The Place We Call Home* (Huberman 2001), for background data, the objective of my August 2002 visit to Fort McMurray was to assess its urban structure and understand its significance as a North American city.

#### THE ATHABASCAN OIL SANDS

The rapid growth of Fort McMurray is founded on the extraction of the Athabasca oil-tar sands that underlie the area known as “Wood Buffalo.” These are the imbedded petroleum tars, bituminous sands of the Cretaceous period, that form the vast petroleum deposits of northern Alberta. Their recovery, both difficult and expensive, uses hydroextraction by washing out the overburden to obtain the 12 percent petroleum residual solution. The current estimate of potential oil reserves is 175 billion barrels, an amount calculated by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (Gerth 2003). These impressive statistics reflect a strategic resource of obvious interest to oil investors in the United States and other nations. The oil sands have literally fueled the growth of Fort McMurray, from an obscure Hudson’s Bay Company fur-trading post at the junction of the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers to its present status as a significant urban center of the Far North (Figure 1).

The oil-sands potential was recognized as early as 1719, when Cree Indian traders told Hudson’s Bay Company officials about the use of sand tars on the Athabasca River for repairing canoes (Bott 2000; Huberman 2001). Modern excavation of the oil sands can be dated to 1927, when an experimental extraction plant was established at Fort McMurray to wash the petroleum tars from exposed sediments on the Athabasca River bluff (Bott 2000, 8–9; O’Donnell n.d.). Such experiments proved frustrating until 1964, when steam-heated hydropressure cracking plants were installed at the Suncor site 30 kilometers north of town that is now, along with the Syncrude and Albian Sands reserves along the Athabasca River, the center of the oil-sands complex (Bott 2000; Daymond 2002). These oil-sands sites have spurred ur-

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