

Dawson an early Shuswap explorer

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

As British Columbia's 150th year comes to an end, it is fitting to remember one of Canada's and one of Shuswap's great explorers, George Mercer Dawson. A most worthy and remarkable man, Dawson proved during his short lifetime that even then a person with physical disabilities can hike and canoe long distances, endure extreme hardships, and apply scientific methods to gain significant knowledge about geology, geography, botany and indigenous cultures.

Born in Pictou, Nova Scotia in 1849, George was the eldest son of Sir William Dawson who became the Principal of McGill University in 1855. At the age of eleven, he contracted Pott's disease or tuberculosis of the spine, which made him an invalid for seven years and left him permanently disfigured as a dwarfed hunchback. Despite this often painful deformity, George was a star student and thus received a full scholarship at the Royal School of Mines in London, England.

Dawson began his career surveying with the Boundary Commission in the prairies in 1873 and with his appointment to the Geological Survey of Canada in 1875, he began exploring British Columbia to determine its geological composition and assess its agricultural and mineral resource potential. His survey work over the next few decades provided an extraordinarily significant body of knowledge, influenced decisions on the route for the CPR, and helped develop the Klondike gold fields. From 1885 until his early death from bronchitis in 1901, Dawson was the Director of the Geological Survey.

The Shuswap region was surveyed three times by Dawson, in 1877, 1888 and 1894. These explorations resulted in the publications of two maps and detailed geological reports. As well, his explorations here and elsewhere included comprehensive ethnological and anthropological work and as a result he is also known as the Father of Canadian anthropology. His "Notes on the Shuswap People of British Columbia" was published in the 1891 Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada and thus provides the first written study of this indigenous culture.

Throughout his travels, Dawson also kept a detailed personal diary and the entries he made during his explorations here also provide one of the earliest written records of this region. Here are some brief summaries of just a few excerpts from these diaries that provide a few glimpses of what life was like here so long ago:

His first journey here began on July 27, 1877 when he borrowed a cracked dugout canoe from Whitfield Chase that they patched with tree gum, bits of blankets and tin. After making some paddles, they named the vessel, "Pseudomorph" and used it to explore the lake and rivers for the next two weeks. They encountered camps of Indians surviving on whitefish, kokanee and potatoes from their gardens while they waited for the salmon to return.

The Salmon River valley, although thickly timbered then, was assessed to be suitable for agriculture as well as the benchlands above White Lake Creek. In Mara Lake, Dawson found a boiling spring in four feet of water that the Indians called Pil-pil-poopil and say “if anyone goes near it in bad weather, wind or rain is sure to follow.” At the end of Anstey Arm Dawson noted a small stream which “Indians occasionally go up in small canoes to the little [Hunakwa] lake shown on the map.”

By August 11th Dawson had already returned to an old camp near Chase’s farm and he reported that a great many salmon are coming up, hundreds per hour in the Little River and the Indians were preparing “pitch-sticked spears for their fishery which will continue all night.”

In his 1888 diary, Dawson described their ascent up to the Adams Plateau in early September where his assistant, James McEvoy made a sketch of the landscape that would be used later to produce a map. On their way to Scotch Creek, their Indian guide showed them the entrance to an ancient cave in limestone that was too steep to enter without ropes and he explained there is a similar cave on the mountain [Squilax] across the lake. To my knowledge, no one has ever found these caves since then.

Although 1894 was the biggest flood year in recorded history, by the time Dawson arrived the region was in flames from massive forest fires and smoke filled nearly every valley. In August, while exploring the route between Chase Creek and Salmon Arm he encountered clouds of black flies and thus named the height of land, Fly Hills.

You can learn more about George Dawson’s Shuswap explorations by reading *Photographic Memory, Salmon Arm’s past in essays* and pictures and Volume 1 of the *Shuswap Chronicles*.