Birlin' Down and Down the Erith River

Two Historic Forestry Sites | Coal Branch, Alberta

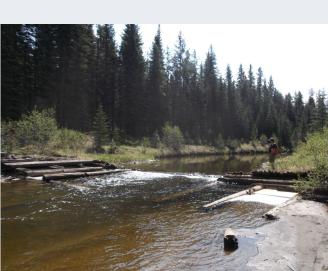
Jason Roe, Derrick Foster, Joshua Read | Lifeways of Canada

:The Erith River Splash Dam

FhQd-9, The Erith River Splash Dam was identified and recorded while conducting an HRIA for Hinton Wood Products in the summer of 2015. The site was revisited in April 2016 as part of an ongoing research project associated with this site and FhQd-3. We were interested in finding out how and where the dam was accessed, as a definite access route was not identified. The most likely way to access the site was from the south side of the Erith River where the topography is less dramatic.

The splash dam is 20m across the river where large boulders of sandstone have been placed along the bank. These same sandstone boulders appear to have been buried into the bank or built up along the bank as part of the foundation for the dam. The wooden portion of the dam is 12.7m across the river and stands approximately 65cm above the water line. The eastern portion of the dam is 5.3m wide and consists of vertical milled boards and de-barked young trees. The western portion of the dam is of a similar construction, and is 4.9m wide. The chute through the middle of the dam is 5.7m wide and has large parallel beams running along both sides of the chute. The maximum width of the dam is 9.3m and the largest support beam in the river is 7.1m in length. Most of the larger support beams are made from sawn and de-barked logs less than 40cm in diametre. The beams have been nailed together with large metal spikes, large nails, and at least one length of metal chain was used. An unknown amount of the dam has possibly been removed, as some of the larger metal spikes have cut heads and some of the vertical beams and logs appear to have been sawn. Along the east side of the dam and into the bank, an area approximately 12-15m in diametre has been down cut approximately 0.5-1m into the terrace.









:The Erith River Logging Camp

FhQd-3 was identified and recorded while conducting an HRIA for Hinton Wood Products in the summer of 2015. A total of 10 Historic Period features were recorded. Overall, the site is 390m north-south by 300 m east-west.

FEATURE 1

Towards the northeast end of the site, is a possible storage shed, cold storage, or other small structure. The partially standing structure is square shaped at 2.5 m by 2.5 m and stands approximately 80 cm high.

FEATURE 2

To the south of F1, is a cabin. The square structure is 4 m by 4 m by 80 cm high. **FEATURE 3**

A large wooden strcuture 8 m to the west of F2, is likely a workshop, bunk house or social

building. The partially standing building is 8 m north-south by 10 m east-west.

is most likely similar to that of F3. The building is approximately 8 m north-south by 10 m east-

FEATURE 4

west and 50 cm high. **FEATURE 5** 20 m south of F4 past a pile of logs, is the third large structure at FgQd-3. The partially

collapsed building is 8 m north-south by 10 m east-west and stands approximately 40 cm high.

FEATURE 6

15 m to the south of F5, is a 4 m by 4 m cabin with an attached smaller structure. **FEATURE 7**

was noted, this is the most likely spot for this kind of feature at a logging camp.

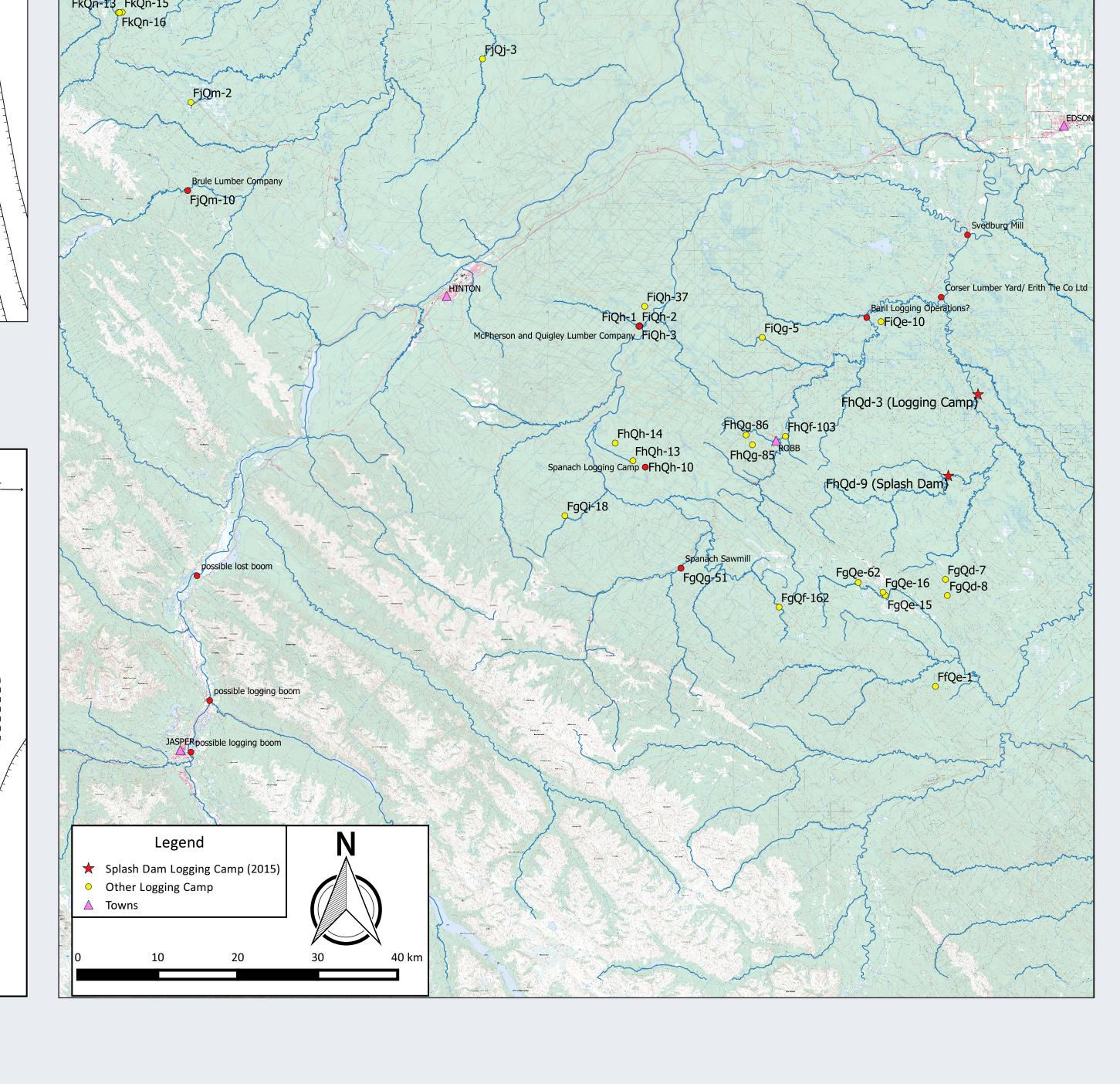
FEATURE 8

28 m to the west of F4 on the opposite side of the southern end of the open grassy area, is a

Another large partially standing wooden strucutre 5 m south of F3. The purpose of the building 23 m north of F3 at the very northeast end of the site, is the dirt mounding associated with the base of a structure. The building is no longer present and all that remains is the dirt mounding. The features is approximately 5 m north-south by 10 m east-west and 20-30 cm high.

Features 3, 4, and 5 are the three largest features at FgQd-3. These three buildings could have served a similar purpose or were used and occupied for different reasons. The most likely purposes for the buildings was as workspaces since there are smaller residential buildings (i.e. cabins). Alternatively, they were clearly insulated so one or more could have served as a cookhouse, community hall, office, bunkhouse, or any number of purposes. Some other observations about the site include such as no obvious garbage dumps were noted. There were • no obvious trails or access routes were noted to or from the site. The most exciting observation has been that this logging camp is very likely an associated feature to FhQd-9 (The Erith River 6 m to the south of F6, is a pit or a depression. The pit is 3.5 m east-west by 1.5 m north-south • Splash Dam), which is 30 km up the Erith River. We surveyed a significant portion of the Erith • River between these two sites in 2015, and we did not find any other Historic Period logging

• is the open grassy area along the western portion of FgQd-3. Even though no sawdust pile The southernmost feature at FhQd-3, is a 2 inch by 6 inch by 8 foot milled board leaning in a • cabin. The cabin is 5 m northeast-southwest by 4 m northwest-southeast.



□ negative shovel test

positive shovel test
x artifact

Feature 11

1. Beckham, Dow. 1990. Swift Flows the River. Arago Books, Coos Bay, OR. 2. Edmonton Journal. 2007. Richard Corser Obituary. 3. Government of the Province and Alberta Department of Sustainable Resource Development, edited by Mueller, Robert, Murphy, Peter, and Udell, Bob with Mayer, Bruce and Stevenson, Bob. 5. Huestis, Eric S. 1972. Early Days in Forestry. Lecture delivered at the Forest Technology School, Hinton, Alberta. 6. Kryzanowski, Tony. 2007. Fighting the Labour Crunch. In Logging and Sawmilling Journal, July/August 2007. 7. Murphy, Peter J., with Udell, Robert W., Stevenson, Robert E., and Peterson, Thomas W. 2007. A Hard Road to Travel. Foothills Model Forest and Forest History Society. 8. Phelps, Jessica D. 2011. The Geomorphic Legacy of Splash Dams in the Southern Oregon Coast Range. Master of Science Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Oregon, Eugene. 9. Rutherford, Ralph L. 1926. Geology of the Area Between Athabaska and Embarras Rivers, Alberta. W.D. McLean, Acting King's Printer, Edmonton. 10. Sedell, James R., Leone, F. N. and Duval, W. S., 1991. Water Transportation and Storage of Logs, American Fisheries Society Special Publication 19:325-368. 11. Vyse, Alan, Dendickson, Dennis, Hannam, Kirsten, Cuzner, Davide M., and Bladon, Kevin D. 2010. Forest Practices, Compendium of Forest Hydrology and Geomorphology in British Columbia pp 111-131, edited by Pike, Robin G., Redding, Todd E., Moore, R.D., Winkler, Rita D., and Bladon, Kevin D. Historic photographs courtesy of Yellowhead Wood Products, Edson, Alberta and the Archives Society of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta.

: History and Usage of Splash Dams in Western Canada and USA

Splash dams were used by the lumber trade in Western Canada and the Northwestern United States from the late 1800's to the mid-1950's (Phelps 2011). These dams were constructed along smaller creeks and rivers where seasonal snow melt and heavy rains collected. Once enough water had been built up behind the dam, it would be released, turning these small waterways into raging torrents that carried logs downstream to waiting lumber mills. Splash dams were built from log cribbing and ranged in size, from 2-10 meters high, with widths that spanned the river channel (Phelps 2011).

While the larger dams were used for years at a time, the smaller dams, much like the one found at FhQd-9, were used for a single year, often being dynamited to release the water and logs (Beckham

Splash dams were introduced into the industry largely due to extended distances from sawmills that loggers had to travel to find suitable trees for felling (Sedell et al 1991). As resources were depleted along the major rivers in an area, loggers began searching for virgin forest along the smaller creeks and tributaries. While rich in harvestable trees, these creeks were often too shallow to facilitate the transportation of logs back to the mills, and required the overflow of water from behind the splash dams to carry the timber downstream (Sedell et al 1991).

Unfortunately, the early logging practice of using splash dams was highly destructive to the environment. The violent rush of water and logs that was released when a dam was opened or destroyed intensified natural erosion; streambeds were scoured, and gravel spawning grounds for salmon and other fish were wiped out (Vyse et al 2010). In Western Canada and the United States, this destruction of animal habitat was the driving force behind the banning of the use of splash dams, and organizations such as the International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Commission in British Columbia, along with the Canada Department of Fisheries, were instrumental in the changing of policies regarding log driving in the mid-1950's, leading to the eventual banning of splash dams (Phelps 2011, Sedell et al 1991). Few dams are left along these once bustling waterways, and those that remain are usually nothing more than fragments of timber left to rot along the creek banks.

: History of Logging in the Athabasca and Brazeau Forests

Logging operations in the Coal Branch region of Alberta began in the late 1800s as timber demand increased for construction of railways, coal mines, and towns. The federal Dominion Forest Service was established in 1898 to manage forest harvesting in what is now Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and a small strip of land along the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway in British Columbia. In 1906, further control was placed on Alberta's forests by the passing of the Forest Reserves Act (FRA), protecting lands that could not be homesteaded and conserving timber in the upper watershed to preserve water levels. The Dominion further amended the FRA in 1908 to require a survey on timber berths prior to sale (Alberta Forest Report 1960).

The Rocky Mountains Forestry Reserve was formally established in 1911 and segmented into 5 divisions: Crowsnest, Bow River, Clearwater, Brazeau, and Athabasca. Forest Rangers were established in each of the forests and construction of trails, roads, telephone lines, and cabins began (Alberta Forest Report 1960). While Coalspur was officially the headquarters of the Brazeau forest, Entrance acted as the headquarters for both the Athabasca and Brazeau forests as it was located near the boundary of the two forests and Jasper National Park, and many of the main regional trails intersected there (Glen 2008). Starting in 1911, Hinton began to outgrow Entrance as the major urban centre in the area due to railway construction and increased access.

In 1930, the federal government transferred management of forestry lands to Alberta, and the headquarters moved to Edson. The Brazeau and Athabasca forestry reserves were combined in 1932 to reduce staff levels and associated costs (Alberta Forest Report 1960). From 1932 to 1943, most rangers were employed only seasonally and often worked for logging companies through the winter. In the early years, logging was primarily conducted during the winter months when the soft ground was frozen and snow cover allowed for skidding of cut timber to the mills. Sawmills tended to be small, temporary, and mobile. Select examples include The Brule Lumber Company, The McPherson and Quigley Lumber Company, and The Spanach Sawmill, represented now by archaeological sites: FjQm-10, FiQh-1, FiQh-2, FiQh-3, FhQh-10, and FgQg-51. As the primary consumers of lumber were coal mines and railroads, sawmills were frequently located near active coal operations and along railroads. Into the 1940s and 50s, as roads were constructed and trucks gained popularity, it was increasingly economical to centralize sawmills by hauling timber longer distances. The construction of the Hinton Pulp Mill in 1955 by North Western Pulp & Power marked the end of small "in the bush" sawmills and the beginning of year-round harvest activities.

While river driving was not as common in western Canada as it had been in the east, there were a few occasions in which Alberta-based logging operations used rivers to move timber to the sawmills. The Eau Claire Lumber Company, operating out of Calgary, cut timber in Kananaskis and ran it down the Bow River to the mill. The Bawtinheimer family-owned sawmill in Red Deer ran timber down the Red Deer River. The most successful log drives in Alberta were on the Athabasca River, where logs were run from the Whitecourt area down to the Swanson Mill in Chisholm. Most log drives in Alberta took place prior to the Great Depression, and typically only ran one or two seasons before excessive flooding caused boom breaches and significant loss of lumber (Huestis Talk, 1972).

In the Brazeau and Athabasca forests, historic records show log drives occurring on only a couple occasions. The Brule Lumber Company tried at least twice to float logs down the Wildhay River to the mill near the mouth of Moosehorn Creek; this site is possibly represented archaeologically by FjQm-10. The logs were stacked on ice over the winter and floated down to the mill during spring thaw, where they would be caught by a boom constructed of log and chain. However, as with the drives in southern Alberta, the booms failed and caused significant losses of the winter harvest (Murphy et al, 2007). A second attempted river drive is mentioned as taking place on the Embarras River in the early 1900s by an operation later bought out by the Corser brothers. As with the Brule Lumber Company, the boom failed and the winter's harvest was lost down the river (Murphy et al, 2007). This site, at the confluence of the Erith and Embarras rivers, has yet to be recorded but is known colloquially as the Corser

There is some historical evidence to suggest that all three sites (The Corser Lumberyard, the Erith Logging Camp, and The Erith Splash Dam) are related. In a 1926 geological report, Rutherford states that "the Embarras River branches into two streams of about equal size in section 12, township 51, range 19. The west branch is shown on some maps as the 'West Embarras'" (Rutherford 1926). This implies that the east branch was historically referred to as the Embarras River; and later was renamed to the Erith River. Rutherford continues, "Another company operated for several years at the mouth of Lambert Creek near Weald. This company has moved its mill to the confluence of the two branches of the Embarras river in section 12, township 51, range 19. Its raw material, however, will be obtained from areas to the south on the east branch of the Embarras" (Rutherford 1926). Again, this refers to the Erith River, in the direction of FgQd-3 and FhQd-9.

Rutherford suggests that a sawmill moved to the location at the confluence of the Erith River and the Embarras River in 1926 or slightly earlier. It is probable that this is the Baril Logging Operation, which was later bought out by Arthur and Frank Corser in 1933. Between 1933 and 1949 the mill moved slightly and was renamed the Erith Site, which may correspond with the renaming of the Embarras River to the Erith River. In 1949, the sawmill was again sold and incorporated into the Erith Tie Co Ltd, which remained in operation at the confluence location until 1988 (Dick Corser Obituary, Murphy et al 2007). At that time, a new mill was constructed in Edson, the company was renamed Sundance Forest Industries Ltd., and the Corser family was bought out (Logging and Sawmilling Journal 2007). Sundance Forest Industries Ltd. was bought out by West Fraser Mills Ltd. in 2012, becoming Edson Forest Products – the client that hired Lifeways to do the survey in 2015.





