



## Alberta, Canada: Frontiers and Fusions in North America's "Last Best West"

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Alberta, Canada! Sunny, beautiful, brash, and rich. Home to over three million people, Alberta is Canada's fourth largest province, larger than California and almost as big as Texas. It straddles the eastern slopes of the Great Divide and extends south to the American border and north nearly to the Arctic. Though one of the youngest of Canada's provinces it is perhaps the most dynamic, with a rich heritage and a promising future. Successive waves of frontiers—some physical, some economic, some occupational, and some cultural—have defined its character and forged a distinct identity.

Nature has richly endowed Alberta. Breathtakingly beautiful in its wide variety of landscapes, Alberta is a land of contrasts, where mountains give way to foothills and prairie, where desert meets parkland, and where agriculture yields to vast boreal forests. Though hundreds of miles from the sea, it is a land defined by water. Several impressive rivers, headed by the mighty Peace, flow through rich farming country and semi-arid rangelands, linking the province with the Arctic Ocean,

Hudson's Bay, and the Gulf of Mexico. Their harnessed strength gives life to dry soil, and power to towns and cities. But below the fields of grain and prairie sod, beneath the stands of poplar, spruce, and pine, are the resources that support Alberta's rise to global prominence. Fossil fuel deposits in the form of coal, oil, and natural gas are the forces driving Alberta's economic engine and enticing people from around the world to this "last best West."

Human activity in Alberta dates back at least twelve thousand years. Surviving teepee rings, pictograph art, and medicine wheels give evidence of several distinct nomadic hunting societies. Alberta's European heritage was first shaped by the fur trade frontier. Beginning in the late-eighteenth century, fur traders from the Hudson's Bay and North-West Companies traveled the northern river highways seeking prime beaver pelts for a thriving European hat-making industry. From their fortified river-based posts, they established trading partnerships with the Woodland Cree. The fur trade had seen its best days by the mid-nineteenth century, but its legacy can still be seen in the settlement patterns of many northern communities, the most outstanding example being Edmonton, the province's capital.



(Top) Rosebud is typical of small prairie towns established along the route of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Photo by Nancy Groce, Smithsonian Institution

(Left) Coal was the earliest of Alberta's energy resources to be exploited. The Atlas Coal Mine in the Drumheller Valley is now a National Historic Site. Photo by Nancy Groce, Smithsonian Institution



Southern Alberta was subject to a very different frontier. Too far south to enable a profitable fur trade, it was inhabited by the Blackfoot Confederacy, whose nomadic lifestyle was sustained by the buffalo (plains bison). By the mid-nineteenth century, a lucrative trade in buffalo robes had produced the hunting patterns that ultimately led to the near extinction of the “monarch of the prairies.” Smallpox, a whisky trade, and starvation contributed further to the decimation of the Blackfoot. The arrival in Alberta of the North-West Mounted Police in 1874 ended some of the worst abuses of Aboriginal peoples by European incomers. The “Mounties” established a network of forts, including one at Calgary, that became a nucleus of pre-urban activity. Most important, their stabilizing presence ensured a peaceable frontier and paved the way for future European settlement.

The disappearance of the buffalo led to an open range ranching frontier in the Alberta foothills in the early 1880s. Characterized by sprawling ranch leaseholds financed in part by British capital, and augmented by cowboy know-how from the United States, the early ranching experience laid the foundations of a Canadian “western” tradition, and provided the impetus for the world-famous Calgary Exhibition & Stampede. In time the ranching

industry transformed itself into a billion dollar diversified mixed-enterprise industry. The popular term, “good Alberta beef,” is an enduring tribute to this legacy.

The construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway across Canada in the mid 1880s enabled both the urban development and agricultural settlement of Alberta. Many towns and cities in the province owe their very existence to Canada’s railroad. Beginning around 1900 and culminating in 1913, successive waves of immigrants from the British Isles and Europe established homesteads across the province. One early result was the achievement of provincial status in 1905. The new agricultural frontier defied climate. Aided by extensive irrigation projects and by early ripening wheat strains, it occupied marginal dry lands in the south and east, and opened up Alberta’s Peace River country. It was the continent’s most northerly and last settled agricultural frontier. In this new order, wheat was the dominant crop. In spite of droughts and other soil and climatic variables, Alberta farmers were inspired by the lure of “King Wheat.” This was further evidenced between the World Wars by extensive railroad and elevator construction, the creation of small town Alberta, and the consolidation of a rural order based around wheat that lasted until the 1960s.

Farmhouse and barn built by early settlers stand amid canola fields in northern Alberta. Photo courtesy Travel Alberta



Mining began in the late nineteenth century. In the late 1880s, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company opened up Alberta's vast coal reserves around Lethbridge and in the Crowsnest Pass in the southwest corner of the province. Though the potential for oil in Alberta had been long recognized, it was not until 1914 that an important discovery was made in Turner Valley, southwest of Calgary. This modest oil field was superseded in 1947 by the major discovery at Leduc near Edmonton that signaled the beginnings of the modern oil era. Since then, sizable discoveries of both oil and natural gas elsewhere in the province have propelled Alberta into national economic prominence. Alberta's oil industry today has a global reach, reinforced recently by the commercial development of the petroleum-rich oil sands near Fort McMurray, where reserves are unrivaled globally in terms of potential production. The renaissance of coal as an energy source is a complementary current trend.

The discovery and exploitation of Alberta's natural resources, which in recent years have also included an increasingly far-reaching forestry industry, help explain development and human habitation within a historical context. They have also engendered fusions and imbalances, both of which offer insights into Alberta's character and identity.

One can see the peculiar nature of Alberta's longstanding political conservatism as a fusion of sorts. The fur trade was an important centralizing force and an agent of imperial power. The powerful Hudson's Bay Company was directed from England. Similarly the North-West Mounted Police was another highly centralized institution in a country that still maintained powerful imperial connections. On the other hand, Alberta has always reflected a significant American influence, via the Mormon movement from Utah into southern Alberta in the late 1880s and through the wave of American settlers into central Alberta between 1909 and 1912. This

Not all early towns thrived. Dorothy, in the badlands of southern Alberta, is today largely a ghost town. Photo by Nancy Groce, Smithsonian Institution



strong connection to the United States was consolidated by the many American oil executives who lived in the province after 1947. The fusion of various influences is illuminating. British sentiment prevailed through an historic attachment to the Mother Country and to British institutions. Conversely, the province's historic protest mentality and its reputation as a right-wing political maverick have their roots in Midwestern American populism.

Alberta's rise to agricultural prominence within Canada came through a fusion of agriculture and livestock raising. There was a belated realization that wheat could never be "King" in Alberta as it had been in more easterly Canadian provinces and the American Great Plains. Instead, optimum land-use practices were tied to mixed farming based on specialty crops, oilseeds, and intensive swine and cattle production. This realization changed the nature of Alberta's agribusiness. The large number of what are now termed "cattle farms," many on soils unsuitable for wheat, reflects this transformation. Another fusion is evident in a growing awareness of the importance of heritage and heterogeneity. An enduring commitment to progress amid social orthodoxy is complemented by world-class heritage sites and a proliferation of festivals that celebrate both past achievements and diversity.

Today, thanks to thriving agricultural, energy, and technology industries, Alberta is enjoying an economic boom. However, with wealth has come disequilibrium. One imbalance is an over reliance on the export of raw materials. Current attempts at economic diversification through tourism, high-tech, and information and knowledge-based industries, are measured responses. Another is the changing demography created by widespread immigration. Around two-thirds of Alberta's population

live in Edmonton and Calgary, where more than one in five residents were born outside of Canada. This new ethnic diversity has yet to be widely reflected in Alberta's smaller towns and villages, but change is coming.

Alberta is at a crossroads. As its economy grows by leaps and bounds, so do the challenges and opportunities created by affluence. As waves of newcomers continue to arrive, Alberta's historic, unswerving adherence to individualism and free enterprise may become increasingly contestable. For the present, Alberta is a beckoning promised land. Those seeking growth and prosperity will find a palpable energy in its urban places, on the drilling rigs, and in the mines and forests where the tasks of tapping resources never cease. Yet, there is another Alberta, in many ways serene and unsullied. One can find it in the quietude of a parkland poplar woods, in the sweeping rolling grasslands of the Milk River ridge, in the clarity of an alpine meadow, in the eerie magic of a northern lake at sunset, in the silent timelessness of the badlands, and in the haunting call of the loon and cheery trill of the black-capped chickadee. Future leaders in pursuing "the Alberta way" will want to value the serenity as much as the energy.

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