About a lake

The village of Alberta Beach sits on the shores of Lac Ste. Anne, about 60 kilometres west of Edmonton. The Nakota Sioux and Cree Indians once called the lake Manito Sakahigan, meaning the lake with a spirit. This was because they believed a large monster lived in the lake, and as it moved it would create dangerous and unpredictable currents, which could easily capsize a canoe.

In the mid-1800s, a Roman Catholic mission was built near the shores of Manito Sakahigan and the priests translated the name of the lake as “Devil’s Lake.” Originally just a simple building with no windows or doors, the mission would soon move to a newly constructed church. Father Jean-Baptiste Thibault changed the name of the lake to Lac Ste. Anne, fulfilling a promise to name his first mission after Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary and the grandmother of Jesus Christ. Saint Anne embodies a grandmother figure and is attributed with bestowing miraculous cures upon the faithful. It is believed that the lake is an instrument of healing, and as far back as 1889 there were church reports of the waters of Lac Ste. Anne curing a variety of ailments from tuberculosis to paralysis.

This mission was the first permanent Catholic mission west of Winnipeg. At its height it was bigger than Fort Edmonton, boasting a Hudson’s Bay store, a school, a North-West Mounted Police barracks, a post office and hotels. One of the most important events at the mission site was the Feast of Saint Anne, held in late July. This event coincided with traditional Aboriginal summer gatherings and offered participants cultural, spiritual and social rejuvenation. But in 1861, Father Thibault decided to build a new mission at St. Albert. When he left, the Lac Ste. Anne mission was almost deserted.

Thirty years later the pilgrimage to Lac Ste. Anne was started by Father Lestanc, who built a shrine to Saint Anne on the mission site. Pilgrims began to come to the site every year to receive spiritual help and to honour Saint Anne. To this day, pilgrims still come to pray, to celebrate Saint Anne and to experience the healing qualities of the lake. Today as many as 40,000 people converge on the lake every year, making it the largest annual Catholic gathering in western Canada. Testimony of the healing miracles can be seen in the shrine, where people have left crutches and canes they no longer needed, thanks to the miraculous healing abilities of the waters of Lac Ste. Anne. The site of the Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage was declared a National Historic Site of Canada in 2004 for its social and cultural importance.
The DVD collection

A village grows

The village of Alberta Beach was originally developed as a railway community. The Canadian Northern Railway line, built in 1912, ran from Edmonton to Vancouver through Alberta Beach, chosen by the railway as a spot to hold company picnics and holidays. As well as a station house, CNR built recreational facilities, which included a boardwalk that stretched from the station platform toward the town site and down toward the beach.

Thanks to the beauty and tranquility of the lake and surrounding area, Alberta Beach soon became a popular summer retreat. Other companies began to bring their employees to the village to experience the relaxed atmosphere. In 1920 the area was incorporated into a summer village, and eventually a dance pavilion, pier and several cabins were built. The village's growing popularity also led to the creation of the Moonlight Express, a train service that picked people up in Edmonton on Saturday morning, brought them to Alberta Beach, and returned on Sunday night. People would come for the weekend and stay at the Alberta Beach Hotel and Cabins for as little as $2 per night.

The escape and tranquility that Alberta Beach offered became so popular that soon people began to build cabins of their own, and small businesses sprouted up to cater to the visiting tourists. Primarily used for recreation, the lake and its sandy beach and shallow waters still draw many from the surrounding communities, including Edmonton. In fact, over the years Alberta Beach has become one of Alberta’s main weekend retreats, with numerous businesses, a school, a hotel, and a heritage village.

Specializing in service

The public library in Alberta Beach is located on the main street in the old community hall. The library serves about 3,100 people from the surrounding county of Lac Ste. Anne and the neighbouring summer villages of Val Quentin and Sunset Point, and it hosts about 6,000 visits per year. Being located in a village where the population rises dramatically during the summer months has meant unique challenges for library manager Cathy Brennan. One such challenge comes in the form of borrowing privileges for temporary non-residents.

While the library offers library memberships to everyone, it restricts those who do not have a permanent address in Alberta Beach or the surrounding county to items that are physically located within the library. For Cathy, this is a way to reduce the library’s risk of being charged for another library’s items that are not returned, and no one seems to mind the restriction. In fact, Cathy says that during the
summer months, it's the library’s DVD collection and eight computer terminals that are most in demand.

Cathy has worked at the library for the last four years and lives in nearby Gunn. She came to work at the library after seeing a posting for a library manager. Being an avid reader who loves libraries, the job seemed the perfect fit. One of the most rewarding aspects of Cathy's job is being able to connect with people through books, as she is often able to suggest books or authors that she is familiar with. Staff at the library pride themselves on personal service, and they often go out of their way to help patrons, for instance by delivering books to those who are at home sick and unable to make it to the library. Cathy says that the library is a social space too, a place where people come not only for the books. One village resident likes to come for coffee every Wednesday.

### Community support

Alberta Beach library is a member of the Yellowhead Regional Library system, which provides technical, purchasing and cataloguing support. There are two full-time staff members as well as numerous people who volunteer for everything from providing computer help to assisting with the library’s casino night and other fundraisers. Cathy says that whenever the library needs something, they put a call out into the community and they always get a response.

Fundraisers organized by the Friends of the Library group are very important for the library; all funds raised go toward purchasing new items for the collection. Events like silent auctions, raffles and the annual book sale on the long weekend in August are all important revenue generators. Throughout the year, nearly new paperbacks are for sale by donation and are popular with people going on vacation who need a good read but don’t want to worry about bringing the book home and returning it to the library.

Another important element of the library is its board, of which Sylvia McGinley is a long-standing member. Sylvia first began visiting Alberta Beach as a child and later moved here permanently after she and her husband retired. She has served on the library board for 18 years. She is very passionate about libraries and makes good use of her library card, borrowing items from all over the province.

For Sylvia and other library patrons, one way to get the latest bestsellers is through the library’s TRAC (The Regional Automation Consortium) system, which allows them to request books from libraries across most of Alberta. It can take anywhere from a few days to a couple of weeks for items to arrive at the Alberta Beach library. Mysteries, westerns and historical fiction are some of the popular items. Technology can be a challenge for the library, but with the addition of e-Books and audio books to the catalogue, the library is able to provide materials to those who prefer alternatives to print books.

The one aspect that Cathy would like the library to be known for is its service. From assistance with photocopying to paying bills online, she sees the library as a resource centre that is vital to the community. The library offers beginner computer lessons for those who want to learn more about computers and how to use email, and staff are always on hand to help others with computer queries.

So if it's relaxation, recreation or spiritual renewal you seek, come to Alberta Beach, located on the shores of Lac Ste. Anne. Come and experience the beauty and tranquility of the lake and surrounding area, and don’t forget to get a good book from the library to read at the beach!

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Historical references are taken from “A Brief History of Our Area” by the Alberta Beach and District Museum & Archives Society.

Ernie Ingles is the Vice-Provost and Chief Librarian at the University of Alberta.

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