

my lee river of the 1960s

History buff Gerald Sarapu takes us back in time to when the Lee River community was much different than it is today.

MANY of my elders may add to this article with a different account, but I would like to relate to you my perceptions and experiences as I remember them as a youngster from the 1960s west side of the Lee River.

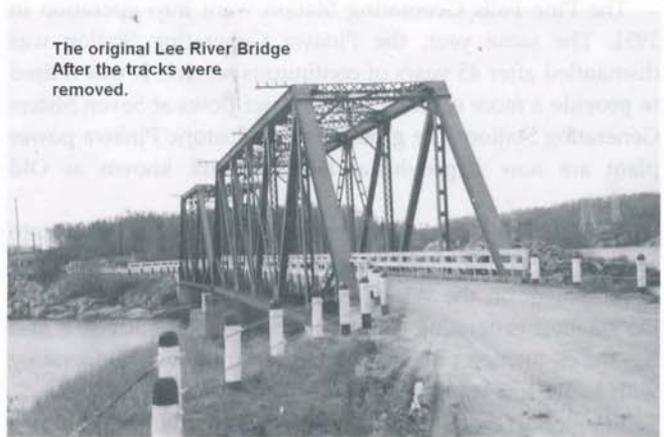
I don't consider myself that old and it does not seem that terribly long ago, but the Lee River that I lived in as a child back in the 1960s was a very different place than it is today. Looking back, it seems that it was a time when things were in the process of changing and starting to evolve from a rural farm community of the past into what it is now.

The population largely lived on small mixed farms, with the cattle population outnumbering people. Cottage subdivisions were only just on the horizon. The only lights visible after dark came from this scattering of farms with maybe a few from some camper trailers that were just starting to frequent the area in the summer. Winter nights were very dark indeed.

At that time, everybody knew everybody. You would see a vehicle driving down the road and know exactly who it was. "Yep, there's so and so, going to town today." That also applied to the river traffic, except that you got a longer look at them since the boats didn't move that terribly fast back then. One boat had an 80-hp motor on it and it was considered a real powerhouse performer.

Many of today's conveniences were just starting to trickle in, even though they seemed to exist everywhere else — conveniences like telephones and TVs. Telephone poles had to be set and the overhead wire had to be run in order for us to get phone service. We finally could call the outside world, even if it was prone to outages and we had to share a party line.

Our phone number was 636 and our ring was one long, one short. I believe there were six residences on our party line,



The original Lee River Bridge
After the tracks were removed.

each having their own ring. All parties could pick up the receiver and listen in on other peoples' conversations, but most people didn't out of courtesy, although you still had to watch what you said, just in case.

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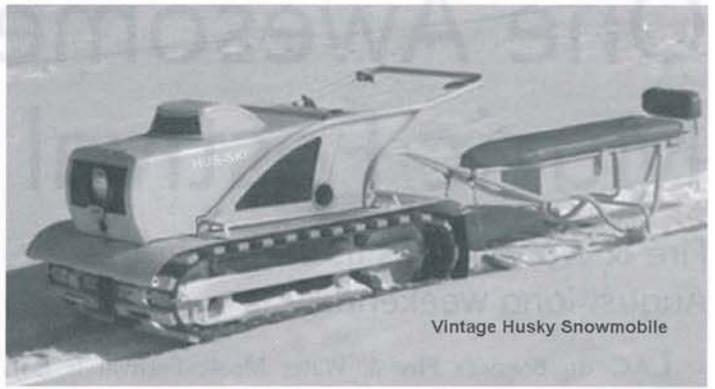
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Just before I came of school age, most of the country schools had consolidated into the Agassiz School Division and they began busing the country students into Lac du Bonnet. As it was, for a short period of time I had to walk up to a mile to catch the school bus.

In the early 1960s, I was a little young to care about the daily condition of the roads. They were what they were and everybody lived with it. In winter, if we were snowed-in, we would have to wait for the red municipal grader to open the way. The roads all the way into Lac du Bonnet itself were all gravel and could get pretty sloppy in the rain. The gravel road between the Winnipeg River bridge and the Lee River bridge still exists today, and parallels the existing highway to the north. It is now called Old Pointe Road.

The Winnipeg River bridge was narrower than it is today and had train tracks down the centre. When driving across you also had to watch not to run over the anglers fishing from along its span. Wouldn't that have made things interesting today with the boat traffic and lines hanging down? The Lee River bridge was just a modified trestle train bridge and had to be crossed slowly. The concrete pillars still stand to the north of the one now used.

Snowmobiles were just barely being heard of around here. In winter, any impassable roads or off-road travel had to be done with tractors outfitted with chains. The odd Bombardier and snow plane was around, but they were rare. My first ride on a snowmobile was a machine called a Husky. It had a track



Vintage Husky Snowmobile

with wooden cleats driven by an engine mounted above it. This pulled a sled that the operator and maybe a passenger sat on. You steered it by swinging the drive unit left or right. Not that fast, but fun. It then became really interesting when once the sleigh accidentally came unhitched.

Large home freezers were just starting to come about, so for long-term food storage people still canned at home as much as they could. Many had root cellars and ice houses. For the ice houses, ice blocks were taken from the river in winter and dumped in a pit in the ice house. The ice was then covered with sawdust and the ice could last all summer.

About that time, the Lee River Hall was in its final gasps. The place was built in the late 1920s as a community gathering place and a social centre for the area by local resident volunteers and was operated by the Lee River Farmers Co-op. It held functions such as wedding receptions, socials, dances and funerals.

Alas, times were changing and a meeting was held to determine the fate of the building. It seems that regulations were coming about that demanded indoor plumbing and washroom facilities in order to receive occasional permits. The building was sold and the kitchen section eventually removed, but it still stands at the corner of the Lee River Road turn-off.

All this is only a little more than 50 years ago. Now I watch TV from a satellite dish, browse the Internet on my computer and talk to a friend in Australia via Facebook on my smartphone. Go figure. Gerald Sarapu on behalf of the Lac du Bonnet and District Historical Society

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