

Eastern Parks

Pinawa Dam Provincial Heritage Park



Interior view of a Pinawa generator c. 1906

Courtesy of Manitoba Archives

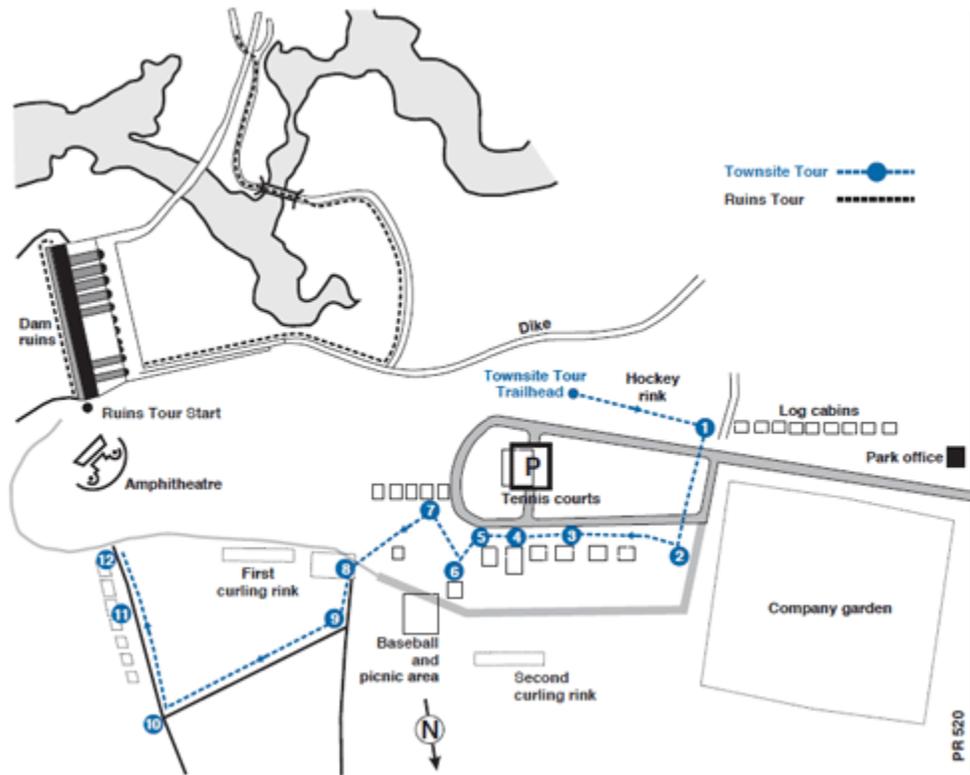
Introduction

Welcome to Old Pinawa. Come and explore the original town on the Old Pinawa Self-guiding Trail. The townsite tour trail is 0.7 km long and should take you about an hour to walk.

As you walk, refer to this pamphlet to find out what once existed at each of the granite trail markers. Discover the history of this isolated little company town that was self-sufficient and had great community spirit.

This was a pioneering town, but of a different sort. The people of Old Pinawa were pioneers of hydroelectricity. The residents constructed and operated the first hydroelectric plant of its kind. The power they provided enabled Winnipeg to grow from a prairie town to an industrial centre.

Old Pinawa Map



1. First Log Homes

In the early 1900s, the Winnipeg Electric Company set out to do something unique—build a yearround hydroelectric generating station in Manitoba's wilderness. Many people said it could not be done.

Construction started in 1903. Corduroy roads were built over muskeg to get to the site. New immigrants, many from Scandinavia and England, came to find work. They arrived in Lac du Bonnet by train, then walked or hitched a wagon ride, crossing the Winnipeg River on the ferry. At the time, the average labourer made ten cents an hour for a 10-hour day. For skilled workers, the pay was fifteen cents an hour. The work was hard, done by backbreaking labour and horsepower.

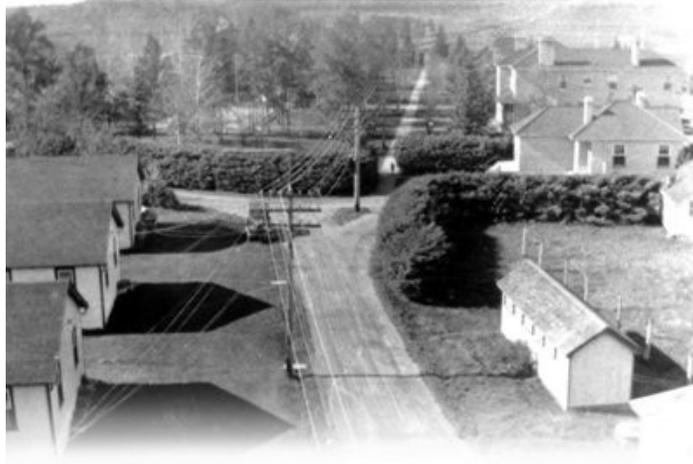
Tents and crude shanties sprang up around the construction site. As work progressed and men began to bring their families out, the first permanent houses were built.

A row of log houses ran from here to the park office. Some people called these first log houses Beehives. They had two bedrooms, a screened veranda, white pine floors, with a garden and outhouse in the back. Heat came from a wood stove, light from oil lamps, and water from a pail dipped in the river. The Beehives were used until about 1924.



Pinawa Channel School (on right) and log cottages of W. E. St. Rly. Co. at Pinawa, 1914.
Courtesy of Manitoba Archives; Water Survey Collection, 412.

2. Company Garden



In Old Pinawa, you would be standing at the far end of the sidewalk, 1920s.
Courtesy Jessie Erickson

Matt and Lucy Pearson came from England in 1904. Matt heard of work at Pinawa. He only had a little money, so he took the train from Winnipeg to Milner Ridge, then walked to Pinawa. He landed a job on the construction crew blasting the channel. Two years later, Lucy joined Matt and they moved into a log house.

When the plant began to operate, Matt took up the job he was trained for—gardening and landscaping. The Winnipeg Electric Company hired him to grow vegetables for the town and maintain the grounds.

The three-acre company garden, in the open area west towards the road, grew every kind of vegetable and some fruit. There was also a greenhouse. Vegetables were supplied to the staff house and sold at the company store in town. During the winter, they were kept in a root cellar behind the town hall.

Because of Matt's hard work and good planning, Pinawa became known as the "Jewel of the In Old Pinawa, you would be standing at the far end of the sidewalk, 1920s. Courtesy Jessie Erickson Wilderness." It was a very beautiful town. These spruce trees were once a hedge. Look at the trunks about 10 feet up and you will see where they were trimmed; the branches now grow in mass.

In winter, Matt tended the boilers that provided steam heat to the town and plant. He was very involved with town activities, including ordering the Saturday night movies, like those by Charlie Chaplin, and later the tkies. Matt worked for the company for 45 1/2 years, until he retired at age 69 in 1950, a year before the plant closed.

3. Four Brick Houses

Four brick houses stood in a row down this lane. Look for cement pads in the grass. These were the homes of people such as the superintendent and head foreman. The last house, farthest from the power house, was for visiting company executives.

The bricks for the houses were manufactured in Lac du Bonnet. The houses were built in 1906 and had steam heat piped from the plant. They each had a fireplace, dining room, indoor plumbing, and a veranda. It didn't take long for them to get electric lights. One or two even had a telephone.

Elling Texmo left his family's island off the Norwegian coast when he was 17. He arrived in Pinawa with wife Marie and children in 1910 and started work as a dynamite man. Later he became a foreman. Tex and his family lived in the second brick house from the end. Part of his job, his favourite part, was taking the visiting company dignitaries staying next door, on fishing trips with the company boat. They caught plenty of sturgeon and walleye.

Tex was a gregarious fellow who got along with everyone. Tragedy struck in 1929 when Marie died. The townspeople helped him cope and care for his eight children. Five years later, through the Ranch Romance Magazine, Tex started corresponding with a woman in Kentucky. They eventually met and married in 1935.



One of the brick houses, January 10, 1908. *Courtesy of Manitoba Electrical Museum*

4. Staff House

A large two-story brick staff house stood here. It was built in 1906 for single workers and visitors. There were 10 bedrooms, a smoking room, large dining room, kitchen, full basement with meeting rooms and a suite for the matron who ran the house. There was also a cook, and staff to care for the house. The company gardens, chickens, cows and sheep provided the food.

The staff house was busy in the early days because there were more single workers. Omer Bernard stayed at the staff house when he was a lineman. He was responsible for checking the transmission line from Pinawa to Lac du Bonnet.

Amy Dorland was the staff house matron in 1935. Her husband had died the year before while working at the Seven Sisters plant. The company found her a job so she could support her young son Bill.

One of Bill's chores included delivering the milk in town. The milk was brought to the staff house every morning after the company herd was milked. There, it was separated into cream and milk, then bottled. Bill delivered some; the rest was sold at the store. Amy and Bill left the staff house when she married Harry Nystedt who operated the ferry across the river to Lac du Bonnet.

The Winnipeg Electric Company took good care of its employees. At Christmas, there were turkeys for every family, and a toy for every child. The company supplied transportation to Lac du Bonnet and even ran the ferry. A doctor was supplied as needed and a room in the staff house was used as a doctor's office. When an influenza epidemic broke out, the company sent a nurse immediately, thus saving many lives.



Old Pinawa's staff house, c. 1908. *Courtesy of Manitoba Electrical Museum*



The company store, c. 1908. *Courtesy of Manitoba Electrical Museum*

5. Company Store

The company store was a busy place, especially on payday or when the mail arrived because it was also the post office. The accountant's office was around back. Bill Loveridge, described as "gentle goodness," was the storekeeper and postmaster for several years.

In the beginning, this tiny store had to carry all the staples because a trip to Lac du Bonnet was a journey by horse and wagon on corduroy roads. Staples included things like flour, sugar, salt and canned goods.

The company gardens and animals supplied a lot for the store. The cows provided meat, milk, butter and cheese; chickens provided meat, eggs and feathers for pillows; and sheep provided

meat and wool. As the community grew around Pinawa, local farmers also brought in produce and meat to sell at the store.

Clothing was not available at the store. A travelling salesperson stopped in town to sell fabric to the women, who made shirts, pants, and dresses with it. Later, with the arrival of the Eaton's catalogue, many things could be ordered and delivered to the post office. The catalogue served another purpose. When the new catalogue arrived, the old one was retired to the outhouse.

6. Town Hall

There were about 20 families and several single people living in Pinawa. The population was near 100 most of the time. By 1919, the school, also used as the town hall, was no longer big enough to hold events, so a warehouse was renovated into the town hall.



Out for a walk with three little ones: note the houses in the background, n.d. *Courtesy of S. Hobson*

The hall became the meeting place, movie theatre, church and dance hall. It even had a player piano that fascinated the children. In a time before cars, the town made its own entertainment. Everyone volunteered for something.

Victoria Day in May and Dominion Day on July 1 were big events, featuring picnics, hand-cranked ice cream and bonfires with roasted potatoes. At the Christmas concert, everyone, young and old, played a part. People who had moved away, came back to attend the Halloween Dance. Everyone in town brought home-cooked food from their country of origin. Even after cars were commonplace, allowing travel beyond the town, the residents continued to hold town events.

The Winnipeg Electric Company made sure there were many recreational facilities for the people of Pinawa. These included tennis courts, two hockey rinks, a baseball diamond and a curling

rink. The curling rink had one sheet of ice. Teams from Great Falls, Pointe du Bois, Seven Sisters and even the Granite Curling Club in Winnipeg, came to play.



Tennis courts, c. 1914. *Courtesy of E. Ehrlich*

7. Five Lumber Houses

In the late 1920s, things began to change in Pinawa. Cars were replacing the horse and wagon—making the trip to Lac du Bonnet, and even Winnipeg, a lot easier. Materials were brought in over better roads. Lumber houses replaced the log cabins.

This is the foundation for one of a set of five lumber houses, built of materials from the sawmill in Lac du Bonnet. Inspired by gardener Matt Pearson, people took pride in their homes and community, creating park-like yards and gardens.

There was a healthy competition established by the company among the "Jewel of the Wilderness" and her sister towns of Great Falls and Seven Sisters to see who had the most beautiful gardens. WE: Winnipeg Electric Employees Magazine, reported on the annual competition every year. Pinawa won its share of awards.

On your way to the barn, watch for the foundation of the former one-pump gas station, located in the clump of balsam or black poplar.



The Gibbons garden was one of many beautiful yards, c. 1940s. *Courtesy of F. Waite*

8. Horse Barn

From 1903 to 1907, when the dam was being built, horses were the most important part of the workforce. They did the heavy work, like pulling the generators into place and hauling turbines on sleighs from Lac du Bonnet to Pinawa. Horses were the bulldozers, tractors and dump trucks in those days.

Fifty to 75 teams of horses were used during the construction phase. Later, 12 teams were kept for daily work, and housed in the barn that stood here. A couple of fast pacers were always kept ready for emergencies like trips to get the doctor. The horses were treated well. They had hay and oats to eat, a steam-heated barn and several staff to take care of them. Some horses did die during construction due to accidents or from foot disease caused by working all day in mud.

The stable boss was in charge of the barn and horses. His job also included driving the company officials to Lac du Bonnet and back. In winter, sleighs were pulled by horses for the trip to town. Passengers were kept warm with heated bricks and piles of blankets and buffalo robes. In the early days, if you didn't have a horse to take you places, you walked or snowshoed.



Company teams did much of the work and provided transportation, c. 1908.

Courtesy of Manitoba Electrical Museum

9. School House Walk

The old schoolhouse was a 10-minute walk from town into the trees, over the bridge and up the hill.

The first school, built in 1913, was located by the park entrance. It was a one-room log structure with a big potbelly stove that the nine students gathered around for warmth on a cold day. This first school also served as the community hall for several years.

The second school was built farther from the town. Some say the reason was to keep the town quiet so shift workers could sleep during the day. The new location was also more accessible for children from the growing farm community around Pinawa. This was a one-room school as well. Grades one to eight were taught. The older children were often responsible for helping the younger ones with schoolwork.

School lessons included going to the movies. The children had to learn to read the subtitles of silent movies. Teachers took advantage of the outdoor classroom around them. There were plenty of field trips to identify trees, animal tracks and plants.

Children were an important part of the town. There were activities planned for them at every event. The children also found many other things to entertain themselves, such as swimming, skating, fishing or just exploring nature.



The second Pinawa school, 1940s. *Courtesy of L. Bruce*

10. Wood Pile Yard

Just up this road to the north was a huge woodpile. Several men were employed all winter to cut and haul wood to feed the two large boilers at the plant that supplied heat for the power house and the brick houses, staff house, store, and horse barn. Twenty cords of wood were needed just to heat the school in winter.

Hans Erickson immigrated to Canada from Norway in 1904. In summer, he blasted rock during the construction of the dam. In winter, he cut wood for the boilers.

Like many of the European immigrants, he was drawn to Canada, the “Land of Milk and Honey,” by the promise of free land. Immigrants were granted title to the land if they cleared and farmed it. While Hans worked for the Winnipeg Electric Company, he started clearing land just past the school. Hans was one of the first to receive a homestead grant of land in this area. His farm supplied the company store with milk and he continued to cut wood for the company in winter.

When Pinawa closed and the diversion dams were blasted, Hans would not leave the farm to witness the sight. His daughter said it broke his heart to know it was being torn down.



Wood was needed to heat the town of Pinawa, n.d. *Courtesy of F. Waite*

11. Last Seven Houses

Some people called Pinawa a quiet oasis. Perhaps this had to do with the atmosphere of the town, because the power plant would have made a continuous roar.

You have been walking down a little street here, where a row of houses—four small ones and three big ones—stood. The family gardens were in the field behind you.

There were always visitors coming out for holidays and former residents coming back to visit old friends. The residents enjoyed the rugged setting and everything nature provided. Many families ate venison all winter, fish all summer, grouse in fall and wild berries and preserves for dessert. The only drawback was the bugs. Girls, who still mostly wore dresses, put newspaper under their stockings to prevent mosquito bites.

On Sunday evenings after church service, families would stroll through the town. Often they found themselves up on the walkway of the dam looking out at the islands and quiet water.



Nature provided for the early residents of old Pinawa, n.d. *Unknown Photographer*

12. Looking into the future

On September 21, 1951, after 45 years of service, the first year-round hydroelectric plant in Manitoba switched off the power. By then the town of Pinawa was almost deserted. Only a few employees remained to take the power plant out of commission. Those who did not retire were moved to other plants—Great Falls, Seven Sisters and Pointe du Bois. To the end, the company took care of its people.

Mrs. Bernard, who wrote the monthly article “Pinawa Pointers” for the Winnipeg Electric Employees Magazine, submitted her last column over fifty years ago. In it she wrote:

I often wonder what it will be like here in years to come... if this place is ever a ghost town, I'll bet there will be nothing but friendly spirits here. If, years hence, someone comes to Pinawa on a summer's evening, I'm sure if one listens carefully, there will be strange sounds carried on the twilight breeze. The echo of the laughter of all the children who have played here from the beginning, the voices of the women discussing gardening and recipes and calling the small fry in at night and the raillery of the men coming home from work at five o'clock. Though Pinawa may be deserted, I'm sure it will never be lonely.

Other interpretive features you can explore in the park are the signs on the information kiosk, historic photographs in the park office, and the nature trail.



The Pinawa hydroelectric plant and town, c. 1920s.
Courtesy of Manitoba Archives: Pinawa Collection 1-1

Acknowledgement

The Friends of Old Pinawa and Manitoba Conservation wish to thank the many former residents who shared their stories, and those who generously donated to construction of the trail. Information on the Friends of Old Pinawa can be found on their Web site

www.pinawa.com/oldpinawa/



Pinawa Generating Station as it appears today, c. 1983.
Courtesy of Manitoba Archives; Pinawa Collection 1-1