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The early history of what is now known as the McKernan district is part of the history of the city of Strathcona. James McKernan was a member of a North West Mounted Police troop that came west in 1874. He liked what he saw on the south bank of the North Saskatchewan river so much that when he returned east, he persuaded his brother to bring his family here to settle. Robert McKernan, his wife and four children made the long journey by covered wagon along with James three years later. Robert and James both worked on the construction of a telegraph line between the Red River and Hay Lakes, Alberta. Then Robert moved, first to Hay Lakes and then west to the Blackmud Creek, where he bought land bordering on a lake that would henceforth bear his name.

Both of the McKernan brothers contributed to the growth of the new community of South Edmonton. James settled for awhile in Hay Lakes, the nearest telegraph station to the Edmonton area, and sent the first message on the line to Red River on November 20, 1877. He later farmed on land by the river, east of Mill Creek.

It is Robert, however, who gave his name to the McKernan district. McKernan was the northernmost of two "relic lakes" each of which had an area of about 30 acres. (McKernan and Lendrum lakes are sometimes referred to collectively as the "McKernan Lakes.") The first train from Calgary reached South Edmonton in 1891, and the railway brought about the community's growth into a town and then a city, of which Robert McKernan and his family were a part. Historian John Gilpin has described the development of South Edmonton's social life during this time. One event of which Robert McKernan was a part was the building of the Methodist church, in 1892.

It was built primarily to serve the needs of Strathcona's Methodists but was also used by Presbyterians and Baptists prior to their procurement of separate structures. Citizens of Strathcona who were involved in the establishment of this church included Robert McKernan, John Shield and Frand Wheatly.  
(Gilpin, p. 33)

Robert's involvement in the social life of his community wasn't confined to his church, however. One organization in which he took an active



part was the Orange Lodge, which once again made an important contribution to the social life of South Edmonton (as it was then called) almost from its beginning.

Another important part of Strathcona's social life which also dates from the early 1890's was the fraternal society. The first of these organizations to be created was Lodge 1654 of the Loyal Orange Order which was formed in Sept., 1894. (Gilpin, p.42)

The main event of the Orange Lodge's calendar was "the Glorious Twelfth" (of July), and the South Edmonton News spoke in glowing terms of the festivities in both 1895 and 1896, including a parade beginning "near Robt. McKernan's Lake" and a program of speeches by many dignitaries, including McKernan himself, Worshipful Master of the Lodge in those years.

Similarly, the Strathcona Agricultural Society was established at a meeting on March 24th, 1894, and Robert McKernan was elected President. Gilpin says: "This organization played an important role in promoting the agricultural interests of the district which were of obvious economic value to the town". (Gilpin, p.46)

#### A FURTHER NOTE

Robert McKernan expanded his own interests with the expansion of the town. In 1903, he built the Dominion Hotel (now the Dominion Block) on Whyte Avenue, and ran the hotel for awhile. His son John ventured even further into business, having been given the original homestead on reaching manhood. He sold this land at a profit. This led him to other such transactions, and his real estate holdings were later described as "extensive". John built the Princess Theatre, not far from the Dominion Hotel, in 1914.

Descendents of the original McKernans can be found in the vicinity to the present day. Annie McKernan (later Mrs. Robert Turnbull) was one of the four children who made the long trip west in 1877 and she entertained many people with her stories about the past, partly through newspaper articles, until her death in 1967.

Mrs Myrna Ratledge is descended from Robert's son John and has taken an active interest in her family's history.



All of the modern district of McKernan lay inside the boundaries of Strathcona by 1907, but development was very slow in the area, largely because of the two lakes. A study of the dates of construction of houses in the area shows that well over half were built between 1946 and 1950, most after the draining of the lakes. The district was famous for at least one reason before this time, however: the McKernan Lake streetcar, which travelled to what is now Belgravia. James MacGregor has this to say about the "Toonerville Trolley", as it was called:

If downtown Edmonton was a crossword puzzle half filled in, its outlying suburbs were a puzzle barely started. ...heading west along a sketchy forest-wrapped trail and skirting McKernan Lake, the haven of nesting ducks, 76 Avenue led to the little settlement high above the silvery Saskatchewan near where the the Whitemud Creek Road started down the hill. While estimates of the population of this hamlet varied from a pessimistic fourteen to a wildly inflated thirty -- not houses, but people-- it was nevertheless served by a streetcar line. (MacGregor, p.226)

Tony Cashman also has a storey about this streetcar line in The Best of Edmonton Stories. He recounts the many attempts by City officials to stop the McKernan Lake run because it lost so much money, all of which attempts were foiled by the citizens. On Saskatchewan Drive, Cashman also says that the presence of the lake was always felt; as each summer wore on, the streetcar tracks would normally spread farther apart because of the soft ground until they were no longer able to hold the streetcar on course. The laborious task of raising the car back onto the tracks became routine.

Eventually, of course, the somewhat idyllic existence around the lake of largely undeveloped farm land had to end. Many of the lots north of University Ave, were developed by the end of the 1920's and building gradually spread southward. The period just after World War II was a time of tremendous change all over the city, and McKernan Lake was one of the areas that changed most dramatically during this time. For one thing, streetcars were phased out of use in the city; as MacGregor puts it, "the change to trolley buses saw the end of the McKernan Lake line which in 1948 fell before the march of progress". (p.282) The growth in



new housing had a dramatic impact as well: "Many new homes were going up in King Edward Park, Rithie and Bonnie Doon, and promoters were beginning to talk of draining the McKernan Lakes". (p.280)

The lakes were drained and homes built, but the city was somewhat slow about building adequate storm sewers, probably figuring (with some justification) that the chances of a heavy rainfall were slight. Not slight enough, however, as it turns out, for one weekend in 1953, the "ghost" of McKernan Lake -- as the Edmonton Journal put it -- returned. Many homes were flooded and when a similar rainfall brought similar results (but on a smaller scale) this summer, residents had occasion to remember the disaster of 25 years before: property damage, residents literally "boating to their homes etc. The Journal looked back in time in 1953 as well -- back to 1914, when residents of the land around the lake claimed the water level had risen 12 feet in one spring. When a water-logged delegation appeared at an Edmonton City Council meeting to demand action, one alderman said such an occurrence was impossible. Many residents of Beau Park and Parkallen, both former lake bottoms, have had reason since to wish it were so.

Except for the flooding problem, McKernan has developed since the war much like many areas of the city. Although most of the development in the area is fairly recent, its history is important and should be preserved. Many homes built from 1910 to 1915 are still standing, and in its way, the McKernan district has been an important part of Edmonton's south side since pioneer days.

Lloyd W. Robertson

Reprinted from the study of the McKernan Community done under Dr. B.Y. Card's direction.