

A Short History of Mara

The initial permanent European settlers in the Mara district were largely from an area in Austria called Kaernten, a region around Budapest, Hungary. They came shortly after the CPR railway crossed to Vancouver in 1885 and followed railway workers involved with the construction of the railway. All were excited by what they found in this part of the North Okanagan: a wide river valley, fertile soil, timber and water. They stayed, applied for a homestead and shared their discovery with friends and family. The Mara valley soon filled with migrants from Canada, Italy, Ireland, Austria, Germany, Finland, Belgium, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the United States.

One migrant from Ontario was John Andrew Mara, a very energetic man, born in Toronto in 1840, who in his early twenties walked halfway across Canada after hearing of the Cariboo gold fields. He followed gold mining for a couple of seasons and then opened a store at Seymour Arm. Later, he operated a fleet of steamers on the interior lakes and rivers. John Andrew Mara was a shareholder in the Shuswap and Okanagan Railway built in 1891-1892 from Sicamous to Okanagan Landing. The railway facilitated development, including the area around the first major stop on the line, called "Mara" after Mr. Mara.

By 1913 there were houses and farms on both sides of the Shuswap River and fields in various states of cultivation. There was a post office, a general store next to the new swing bridge, community hall, church, and a one room school. Mixed farming and logging were the chief activities of these settlers.

Immigration slowed with the Great War and Depression. After the Second World War more families arrived to clear more land and build homes. They worked together and dedicated their talents toward making the community vibrant and welcoming.

In the last part of the 20th century, activity of all kinds moved to the highway on the east side of the valley. Extensive tourist accommodations were developed, the store and post office moved there. Farms consolidated focusing on dairy. Many smaller parcels became hobby, specialty farms or retirement homes - a trend that continues to this day.

The material above was extracted from "Mara Reflections", published by the Mara Musical and Athletics Association with the assistance of the Enderby and District Museum in 2011 to mark the Centennial of the Association and the building of the Mara Hall.

For many years, the association focused on community events, including celebrations, plays, musicals, and the support of athletic activities, while operating and maintaining the community hall and cemetery. With the creation of Putula Park in 1986 at the location of the (second, larger) school site the Association took responsibility for that facility, initially marked by a skating rink/tennis court and a gazebo.

More recent upgrades to the park include a playground, a baseball diamond, and a soccer pitch, facilitating community celebrations and athletics. Current Association activities include operation and maintenance of our facilities, largely funded by the Regional District. A telephone help line, post secondary scholarships, and a Christmas hamper program, are paid for through donations, fund raising events and Association membership fees.