History - ALBERTA

The area now known as Alberta has been inhabited by various Native American (First Nations) groups for at least 10,000 years. European explorers first appeared in the 1750s as the fur trade expanded across western North America. Two rivals, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, began building trading posts in the last quarter of the 18th century along the major northern rivers—the Athabasca, North Saskatchewan, and Peace. From 1821, when the companies merged, until 1870, when this region was transferred to the Dominion of Canada, the Hudson's Bay Company controlled and governed the area, which was populated by First Nations people, Métis, and a few European fur traders, missionaries, and settlers.

After 1870, settlement in southern Alberta began, based on a ranching economy. The First Nations had been decimated by European diseases and the disappearance of the buffalo, their main source of livelihood. The signing of treaties relegated the remaining First Nations people to reserves (reservations), but not before the abuses of unscrupulous traders had hastened the creation of the North-West Mounted Police (now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police). In 1874 the Mounties established Fort Macleod and laid the bases of Canadian law enforcement in Alberta.

The Dominion Lands Act of 1872 (which provided low-cost homesteads), the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway (which reached Calgary in 1883), and vigorous promotional campaigns brought an influx of settlers from eastern Canada, the United States, and Europe. By 1901 the population had reached 73,000, and by 1911 it had ballooned to 374,000. The development of earlier-maturing and more disease-resistant varieties of wheat made crop farming less risky and, in northern areas, newly feasible. Subsequently a wheat-based economy expanded throughout most of the arable parts of the province.

Responsible government (government in which the executive branch is drawn from and answerable to an elected legislative branch) developed gradually from 1875, when the North-West Territories Act went into effect, until 1897, when a fully responsible legislative assembly was elected. Made a district of the North-West Territories in 1882, Alberta was enlarged to its present boundaries in 1905, when it was made a province of Canada, although crown lands and natural resources remained under federal control until 1930.

Edmonton, a distribution centre that became the capital, grew rapidly, as did other urban centres. Calgary boomed with the discovery of oil at Turner Valley in 1914. Medicine Hat and Lethbridge, the latter a coal-mining area since the 1870s, developed into important distribution centres. Railways spread over most of the province, increasing agricultural development and providing a ready market for Alberta's vast coal deposits.

During World War I the growth of the population and the economy slowed. A postwar slump in wheat prices was a major factor leading to political discontent and the election success of the United Farmers Party of Alberta in 1921. During the 1920s the economy improved and population again increased, but years of depression and drought in the 1930s had a devastating effect. In 1935 the Social Credit Party, with a new monetary policy, was elected and retained power for 36 years, before it was replaced by the Progressive Conservative Party in 1971.

The construction of the Alaska Highway helped to revive Alberta's economy during World War II, and greater growth came with postwar discoveries of oil and natural gas. The boom in the oil and gas industry rippled throughout the economy in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, fueling growth in the construction and manufacturing sectors and making Alberta one of the choice destinations for migrating Canadians. In the process, the formerly agrarian province has become an increasingly urban and industrial one, with nearly two-thirds of its population found in its two metropolitan centres, Edmonton and Calgary. With Alberta remaining one of the world's leading oil-producing regions, the future continues to look bright for the province.