

STONY LAKE

History, Trails & Recreation

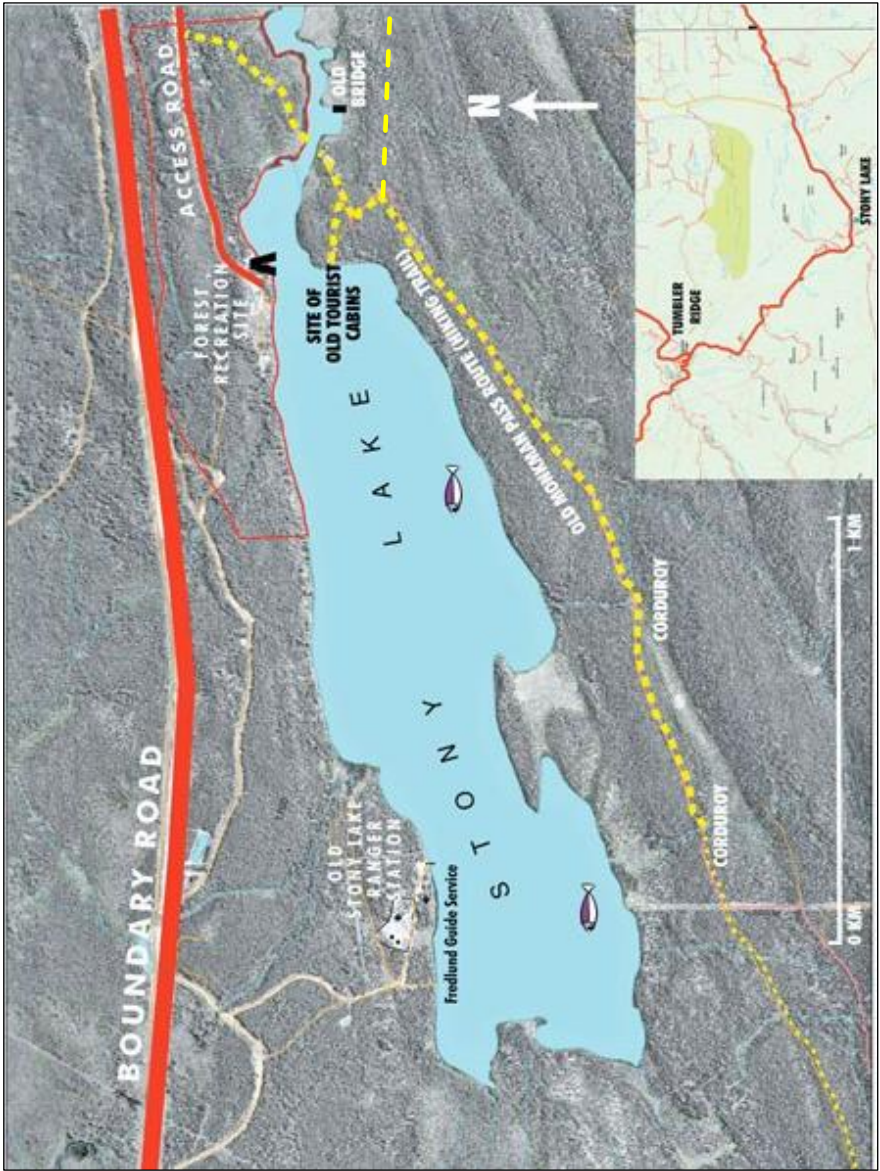


*Stony Lake watercolour, by Euphemia McNaught, 1976
(view from the Stony Lake Ranger Station)*



The well preserved remains of the old bridge at Stony Lake





Stony Lake today

Stony Lake, popular for camping, fishing and hiking, lies southeast of Tumbler Ridge, fifty-five kilometers by road on Hwy 52E (Boundary Road or Heritage Highway East). Its shores and surrounding area have been the scene of some of the most intriguing history in northeastern British Columbia, such as its first tourist resort and the discovery of natural gas in Canada.

Access to Stony Lake today is via a slightly rough road that leads for 1.6 km off Hwy 52 E (55 kilometres from Tumbler Ridge) to the Forest Recreation Site on the northeastern shore of the lake. Here there are a number of campsites and fire pits, and a simple boat launch area. Within this area would have stood trapper Emil Kruger's old 1930s cabin, of which there is no trace. (Its location was under 100 metres east of the boat launch and in the tiny bay just east of the prominent knoll, so as to avoid the force of the prevailing westerly winds.)

The lake remains popular for fishing, predominantly Northern Pike, although the prodigious catches of the late 1930s no longer occur. The long reach can make for large waves. Canoeing in an easterly direction along a narrower portion of the lake to the terminal beaver dam is more sheltered, with opportunities for wildlife and bird watching.

There are tantalizing remains of the Monkman days, which make for a fascinating trip back into the past. Start at the sign beside the access road, a few hundred metres back from the forest recreation site, and follow an old route down to the water. Once at the water's edge it is necessary to cross the creek, which is dammed up by beaver action, and harder to cross than in the 1930s. The trail continues on the far side, and it is quite feasible to swim across, although many will prefer to reach this point by boat or canoe.

Once on the far shore, first deviate left (east) for 100 metres to the astonishingly well preserved remains an old wooden original bridge across the creek, which has washed up at this site (1969 air photos show it already in its current location). Here one can marvel at the ingenuity and enterprise of the pioneers. Then return to the old (signposted) route and follow it west. Soon a junction is reached. The right fork leads to the sandy shores of the lake at the site of Rudy Jacobs' 1938 cabins. Just a few clearings, wooden items and remains of old stairs remain. Alternatively, this site can be easily reached by canoe or boat from the main boat launch by heading south across the water and right around the first corner, a total of around 100 metres. On less windy days one can enjoy the beach, the sunset and the distant mountain views from this point and contemplate the activities of 70 years ago.

Returning to the fork and taking the left branch, it is possible to follow the old Monkman route for a further two kilometres, parallel to the southern shore of the lake. This stretch has been virtually untouched since the 1930s, and one is walking in the ruts of the old Model T and Model A Fords. One can imagine such a vehicle popping around a corner at any moment. The original Monkman Pass route headed east from here, on the southern side of Stony Creek. Volunteers of the Wolverine Nordic and Mountain Society and Tumbler Ridge Museum Foundation are "following the ruts" and re-establishing this route.

On two occasions the trail descends to cross small creeks that drain into the lake. Here are the precious remains of the old corduroy crossings. On the slopes on either side the results of the toil of the pioneers are to be seen, where they converted slopes into a road and cutting with pick and shovel, horse, plow and scoop.

It is best to return the same way, although truly intrepid devotees of the old route may be able to follow it west to where it crosses the busy and dusty “500 road”. This section is overgrown with alder.

The Stony Lake and Kruger’s Flats sections of the Monkman Pass Memorial Trail are the best preserved of the entire old route. In view of their importance and the tangible history they encompass, a process is underway to have them declared Heritage Trails in British Columbia.

Immersed in history, Stony Lake remains an enchanting site. Fittingly perhaps, it seems still to be most popular with visitors from Alberta. The intense development of recent decades has not touched its peaceful ambience. It is possible still to fall under the same spell that captivated the pioneers in the late 1930s, when in a flicker of intense and inspiring activity it became the first tourist resort in northeastern British Columbia and in the Peace Region.



The beach at Stony Lake, at the site of the old tourist cabin

Geological and Archaeological History

Stony Lake lies in a basin gouged into glacial till, a mixture of boulders, sand, and silt transported and left by Pleistocene glaciers after they covered the area. Ice sheets repeatedly advanced and retreated east of the mountains, and one of them is known as the Stony Lake Advance. A pattern of northeast-southwest trending ridges to the south of the lake is apparent from the air, indicating the direction of ice advance. The till layer is thick here and completely covers the underlying bedrock. Each and every stone in Stony Lake was once ground and transported by these glaciers. The small beach at the east end of the lake is the result of the frequent blowing of prevailing westerly winds for many thousands of years.

The youngest underlying rocks are from the Cretaceous Era, in which dinosaurs roamed. Less than twenty kilometers to the east, British Columbia's first tyrannosaurid footprint was discovered. The five tonne rock has been transported to Tumbler Ridge, and an exact replica is on display in the Dinosaur Discovery Gallery.

Although dozens of archaeological sites have been discovered within a ten kilometre radius of the lake, just one has been found close to it. That site provided only a single flake off a stone tool. This absence of evidence simply reflects the fact that no archaeologists have yet analyzed the lakeside area. The old pack trails ran close to the lake, and it is likely that with dedicated work further sites will be discovered.

The Monkman Pass Highway

An epic saga unfolded in the area in the late 1930s. In the 1920s Alex Monkman had a vision of a trade route that went from the Peace Country to the West Coast via a low pass through the Rocky Mountains that he knew of, and which came to be known as Monkman Pass. He believed that it was the quickest, most economic and efficient route for the Peace Country farmers to market their produce. At the time, northwestern Alberta farmers were struggling with long export routes for their products.

He rallied successive governments to put a railway through the pass, but met with little support, and eventually shelved the idea. Yet Monkman refused to let his vision die, and in 1936 the Monkman Pass Highway Association was formed. This group of determined pioneers led a drive to push a highway through the pass and establish the trade route themselves.

Over the next three years, many people put their hearts and souls into the highway route, often labouring for only three meals a day and the chance to share in the adventure. They built a road from Rio Grande to Kinuseo Falls and blazed a trail through the pass. Limited funds posed surmountable problems, but the outbreak of the Second World War spelled the end of the project.



Jacob's Passenger Service in operation, 1938

Many of the participants dropped their tools and lined up to serve, and some made the ultimate sacrifice. Sadly the highway project came to a halt, but not before they had managed to drive, push, pull, coax and claw a Model T truck, "the Pathfinder Car", through the Pass, and carry a symbolic bag of grain to Prince George. The Monkman Pass epic is a tale of bravado and dedication in the face of great odds.

Monkman Days and Stony Lake

The first stretch of the Monkman Highway was built in 1937. As the road construction neared Stony Lake, groups would set out ahead to visit the lake, and already there was agreement that its shores would make for an ideal tourist resort. In September, the road crew was in sight of the lake, and they stored their tools and equipment beside Emil Kruger's cabin at the eastern end of the lake, ready for resuming work the following year.

That same year the Trailblazer Crew pushed the route through the mountains, all the way to Hansard and thus to Prince George. On the outward journey Art Smith, Publicity Director for the Monkman Pass Highway Association, said, *"The reflection of mountain and forest on the still lake made a lovely picture."*

Carl Brooks, one of the Monkman Trailblazer Crew, who within a few years would lose his life in a plane crash in Kakwa while guiding, wrote in his 1937 trail guide: *"Stony Lake is a lovely lake with a sandy shore, nestled in the hills."*

Yet another visitor, John Floen, reported, *"What an ideal summer resort! Especially an ideal playground for kiddies... and the mountains are only seven miles away... An artist would have plenty of material for a canvas."*

Little did he know that years later the most famous artist the region has produced would be painting Stony Lake. It was recognized that while millions of dollars had been spent on tourism in the preceding year, not a cent of this had been in the Peace Region. For the first time, tourism was considered as a regional attraction.

It took a German immigrant to realize all this potential. Rudy Jacobs had come to Canada from the Saar Valley in 1929 and settled in Rio Grande. A practical man, he saw the need for organized transportation and accommodation to support the Monkman Pass venture that was on everyone's lips. Stony Lake was the obvious site.

In 1938 logs were cut and floated to his position of choice, above the beach at the south-eastern end of the lake, and "Jacobs Passenger Service" was founded.

"As soon as the road...was reasonably well finished, Rudy was busy constructing his cabins... He built five cabins without a nail, using only wooden pegs to tie them together.... He obtained twelve inch boards for the finishing work, as well as for tables, benches and shelves. Winnipeg couches were bought from a second hand store in Grande Prairie and used for beds; stoves were made from 45 gallon drums set in sand boxes for safety. There were coal oil lamps for illumination at night." (People of the Pass)



He learned the art of boat building and soon could make a boat a day, at a material cost of \$1.25 per boat.

"Once the cabins and boats were completed, Rudy hired Pearl Robinson as storekeeper, gas jockey, cook, baker, dishwasher, and boat and cabin supervisor, leaving him free to attend to his passenger service and freighting."
(People of the Pass)

Pearl Robinson became the essential and central figure in the operations at Stony Lake in 1938 and 1939. Initially scared out of her wits by the wilderness, she soon was adept with a rifle and became attached to...*"Rudy's dear little cabins, with steps up to the neat front porches, and so close to the lake that the spray would fly up on them when the wind blew down the lake."*
(Pearl Robinson quoted in People of the Pass)

She competently and with good cheer fulfilled her diverse job description and tended to the needs of tourists, volunteers, game wardens, the trail crews and the sick and lonely. The 1939 guest book had over 250 signatures, and one weekend alone there were almost sixty people at the cabins. There was even competition for tourists, as cabins at Kinuseo Falls had been built, and the Stony Lake cabins provided a convenient stop en route. Heavy storms could cause the road to be impassable for up to a week, so Pearl and the guests needed a flexible schedule.

Naturally, freshly caught fish was the main item on the menu, and the early fishing was legendary. One afternoon two competitive groups went out and managed a combined haul of ninety-five fish. Pearl's radio was the only contact with the outside world. As the summer wore on, the news became gloomier, and dealt with an impending war.

Then one day, the war became fact, and the guests and the road crews departed, many of them to enlist, and some never to return. She spent the rest of the season mostly alone, with her dogs and the bears, nursing a broken ankle that she bravely thought was just a sprain.

In 1959 Rudy Jacobs' last surviving boat was sunk, between the site of his cabins and the current Forest Recreation Site.

One visitor who passed through in 1939 was Euphemia McNaught, arguably the most famous artist the Peace Region had produced. She was born in Ontario but moved with her family to Beaverlodge when she was just ten years old. She studied at the Ontario School of Art under some of the Group of Seven, then returned to Beaverlodge, where she resided until she passed away in 2002, a centenarian. She produced numerous masterpieces for the region, and the Monkman Pass project played a significant role in her art. She kept returning to the area over the ensuing decades, and her 1971 and 1976 oil and watercolour works perfectly capture the spirit of Stony Lake.



Rudy Jacobs' tourist cabins at Stony Lake

After World War II

One unexpected effect of all this activity was the discovery of natural gas. Charles Michell, one of the workers on the Monkman Pass project, had found gas seeps near Stony Lake. He spent the war years trying to convince government of the importance of this discovery. He guided a 1948 Geological Survey of Canada expedition to the area, and the first well in Canada was drilled on one of the foothills above Stony Lake.

Soon after, a spring of crystal clear soda water was found somewhere west of the lake. Its location is a current mystery, waiting to be solved.

At some point after the war a road was built on the north side of Stony Creek. This replaced the old Monkman Pass route, and eventually was improved and became the Boundary Road (Hwy 52 E). Exactly when the wooden bridge was built across the outlet of Stony Lake is unknown, but it was probably some time after the war.

The Ministry of Forests, through its Dawson Creek Forest District office, established the Stony Lake Ranger Station, including a boathouse, on the north shore of the lake in the early 1960s. Primarily devoted to forest protection, those who manned this lonely outpost would patrol the area, perform logging inspections, cover the lake by boat, look for fires, watch over the campers who came in from Alberta, and stay in contact with Francis Belcourt on the newly constructed fire lookout on nearby Thunder Mountain. Some of the legendary names of Peace Region forestry, like Harry Barbour and Greg Duke, were involved in supervising this station or attacking fires.

This was the age of water bombers, and Stony Lake, being the largest in the region, was often used for scooping up water for extinguishing forest fires. Later it was used more by float planes, as a staging area for flights into the mountains. With the advent of new technology, a permanent human presence at the Stony Lake Ranger Station was no longer needed, and patrolling became easier to achieve out of Dawson Creek. The station finally was shut down in the 1990s.

Perhaps coming full circle, tenure applications were sought in 2006 for the old Ranger Station area, and as a result cabins at Stony Lake are once again a tourist attraction, operated by a guide outfitter (Fredlund Guide Service, 403-638-1368).



Stony Lake from the tourist pier, 1938



Photo Credit R.E. Leake, 1939



70 year old corduroy on the old Monkman route

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The Stony Lake section of the Monkman Pass route was re-established as a hiking trail by volunteers of the Wolverine Nordic and Mountain Society and Tumbler Ridge Museum Foundation.

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The washed-up remains of the old bridge



Stony Lake tourism promotion, 1938



*Stony Lake, oil on burlap, by Euphemia McNaught, 1971
(view from the site of the old tourist cabins)*

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