Mapping Migration Patterns in the Upper Fraser Region, British Columbia

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Abstract: In 2000 and 2005, two sets of oral history interviews were conducted with current and former residents who lived in the Upper Fraser region of British Columbia 1945 and 1975 (the peak years of sawmill operations in the region).   Many of the questions posed revolved around issues of migration, including why residents migrated to the area, where they came from, and reasons for their departure. This research presents results of the two sets of interviews and displays the results using data-intensive descriptive mapping techniques. Results indicate that most residents arrived from the Prairie Provinces and Scandinavia in search of employment, and were prompted to leave due to forest industry consolidation, lack of employment opportunity outside of the lumber industry, and lack of educational facilities in the region.

Keywords: Upper Fraser region, descriptive mapping, rural-to-urban migration, community change, historical geography

1.0 Introduction

Between 1920 and 1990, the Upper Fraser region of British Columbia experienced a period of rapid socio-economic change in which numerous small communities developed, boomed, busted and faded away. The fortunes of these towns largely revolved around the existence of sawmills, which began to close in the 1960's as the lumber industry consolidated.   As the long-term sustainability of most rural communities is dependent upon resource-based primary industries, these communities are vulnerable to even slight variations in local socio-economic infrastructure (Halseth 1999, Bryant and Joseph 2001, LeBlanc 2003). These are particularly evident in the Upper Fraser region, where communities that were, in some cases, fifty to seventy years old disappeared in a relatively short period of time due to changes in the resource industry and in local transportation infrastructure (Giesbrecht 1998).   The transient nature of employment in the area and varying degrees of isolation from contact with the outside world combined with fluctuation in economic conditions meant that certain communities were more attractive for settlement at various periods in time (Ryser and Halseth 2004). These factors led to establishment of differing migration trends for each Upper Fraser community. The differing trends ensured variances in ethnic compositions and thus in communal social conditions.

The Upper Fraser Historical Geography Project was begun in 2000 to document the historical, cultural, social and economic geography of the area, with a focus on the interaction of policy and technology with community development and associated land use. As many Upper Fraser communities continue to disappear, or already have disappeared, it is important to observe and record the nature of the various factors that led to the varying ethnic compositions of these communities before these data are lost to history (Halseth 2005). While internal factors such as the development of the Upper Fraser forest industry had been covered by historical publications about the area (Walski 1985, PRC 1994, Boudreau 1998, Boudreau 2000, Jeck 2000), the various migrations patterns and ethnic compositions of the communities themselves, as well as the factors which led to the differing compositions of each community, had not been studied. This

paper summarises research conducted in the summer of 2005 with the intention of better describing migration patterns in the Upper Fraser region between the years 1945 and 1975.

2.0 Background

The Upper Fraser area of British Columbia is defined in this study as the region extending east along the Fraser River valley from the outskirts of the City of Prince George to the western border of Mount Robson Provincial Park, a distance of approximately 250 kilometres (Fig. 1). Major settlement in the area was prompted in 1913 with the completion of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (now CN Rail). Settlement began in earnest when grain cooperatives on the prairies began opening small sawmills along the rail line for the purpose of obtaining timber for grain elevator construction (Bernsohn 1981, Stauffer 2001). The rail line's easy access to adjacent timber made the area attractive for the forest industry and soon dozens of small sawmills sprung up along the rail line in close proximity to rail stations. Soon, small communities had arisen around these stations as labour was needed to supply sawmills (Stauffer 2001). With the advent of the great depression, many sawmills closed but enough stayed open to support Upper Fraser communities. After World War II, the second boom in Upper Fraser population occurred as new technology allowed for greater amounts of lumber extraction and deeper penetration into the forests (Stauffer 2001). Not only did the older communities thrive,
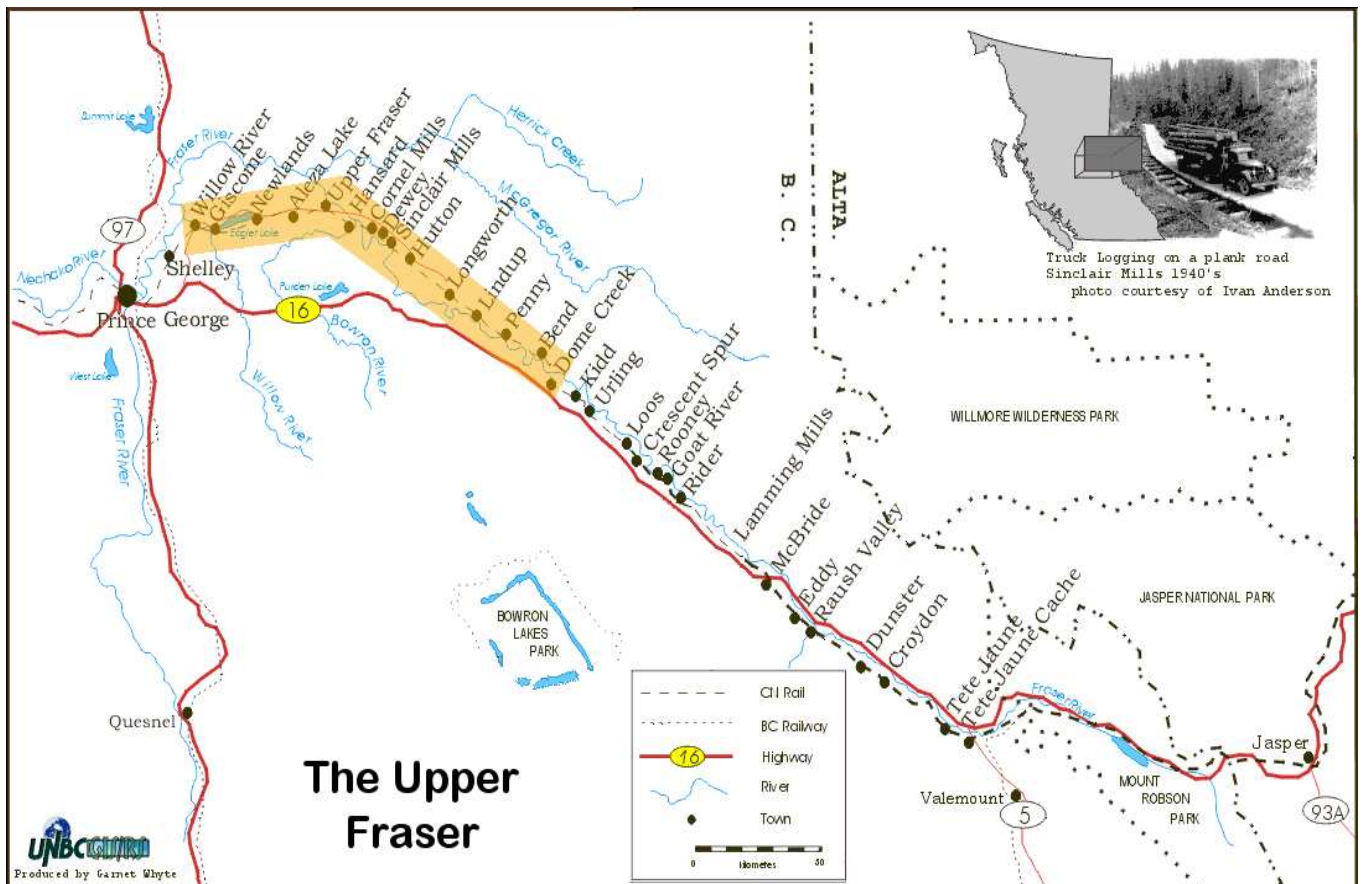

Fig. 1: Map of the Upper Fraser Region.

but newer company-built towns also sprang into existence as labour was required to haul out the greater loads of timber (Bernsohn 1981).

As technology improved, it also became more efficient. By the 1960's, labour had become mechanized both in the forests and in the mills, allowing companies to increase production while downsizing employees. The new technology also allowed for greater centralisation of production. Smaller sawmills were bought by larger organizations and closed as operations consolidated in a select few communities (Bernsohn 1981). The formation of Northwood Lumber in 1961, and the construction of two massive pulp mills in Prince George, soon led to the closure of almost all small local mills. Northwood began purchasing the timber allotments of the various local mills to service its new pulp mill. The loss of labour and the removal of employment led many Upper Fraser residents to leave their communities to work at newer, larger mills.

With depleted population, services in smaller Upper Fraser communities like schools, churches, and stores were closed and many towns were depleted entirely of their residents. Many of these towns were company-owned. Lamming Mills, for example, was sold off in its entirety, buildings and land intact, as a single lot. Most notably, Giscome, site of what was the largest sawmill in the British Empire in the 1950's, was auctioned off, building by building, and what wasn't auctioned was levelled. Houses that were sold were either dismantled for scrap or moved to private lots elsewhere. While a small 'back-to-the-land' movement in the 1970's did rejuvenate population numbers for a brief time, most Upper Fraser communities exist as map locations and rail posts, with population centralized in a select few villages, the largest no greater than 750 people. Lumber operations have been removed entirely to either Prince George or McBride, and the Trans-Canada Yellowhead highway now bypasses almost every Upper Fraser community, leaving the possibility of commuting to work a tedious one (some communities are accessed by small sideroads but are not conveniently located close to services and employment). A disproportionately large number of the residents of the smaller towns are elderly hangers-on. It is of great importance to document the history of these communities before the living memory of this region is lost forever. This study intends to serve as a starting point for future study of the region.

3.0 Methodology

During the summer of 2005, 18 interviews with 27 former and current Upper Fraser residents were conducted, from which information on migration was extracted. Interview participants were selected from a pool of people who had participated in a previous round of Upper Fraser oral histories conducted in 2000. All participants were residents of the western half of the Upper Fraser region (Fig. 1, highlighted in orange) at some point during the boom and bust years of 1945 to 1975. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim, as the interviews not only assisted this particular study but also provided further oral histories for the Upper Fraser Historical Geography Project. Each interview was then followed by having the participants fill out a questionnaire. In the questionnaires, respondents were asked to weigh various factors that may have influenced their decision to migrate to, or leave the area.

Once trends had been garnered from those interviews, results were compared and combined with those observed in the original oral histories conducted in 2000. An additional 31 interviews with

35 residents were analysed in order to derive any pertinent information. In total, 49 interviews with 62 residents were used in this study. Not all of the same questions were asked between the two sets of interviews, but for those same questions that were asked, it was possible to test the fit of the new interview results against the results of the larger archive pool. In all, the results of twenty-six of the original thirty-three questions were able to be directly compared and combined.

Some of the results of these questions lend themselves well to being displayed through descriptive mapping. By placing data directly onto an illustrated map, rather than just a giant spreadsheet of tables and graphs, it allows the viewer to absorb the information much more quickly. Not only is it an easy-to-understand format, people can also see that data in a geographic context. While there were many non-geographic questions posed to participants, for the purposes of this paper, only those results which lend themselves well to mapping will be discussed.

4.0 Results

As none of the towns in the study area were incorporated at any point, the census data that exist are quite unreliable. In order to gauge the size of these towns, one of the first questions asked to residents was to gauge how big the communities were at various points in time. The results for each decade were averaged to produce the following maps.

Fig. 2 displays the average population of Upper Fraser communities in the 1940s, the beginning of the economic boom years. Giscome was the largest community at over 500 people. Upper Fraser townsite, which had just been constructed at this time, was in the 300-person range. Willow River, Penny, and Sinclair Mills all contained around 200 people at this stage; large enough to sustain basic services like general stores and post offices.
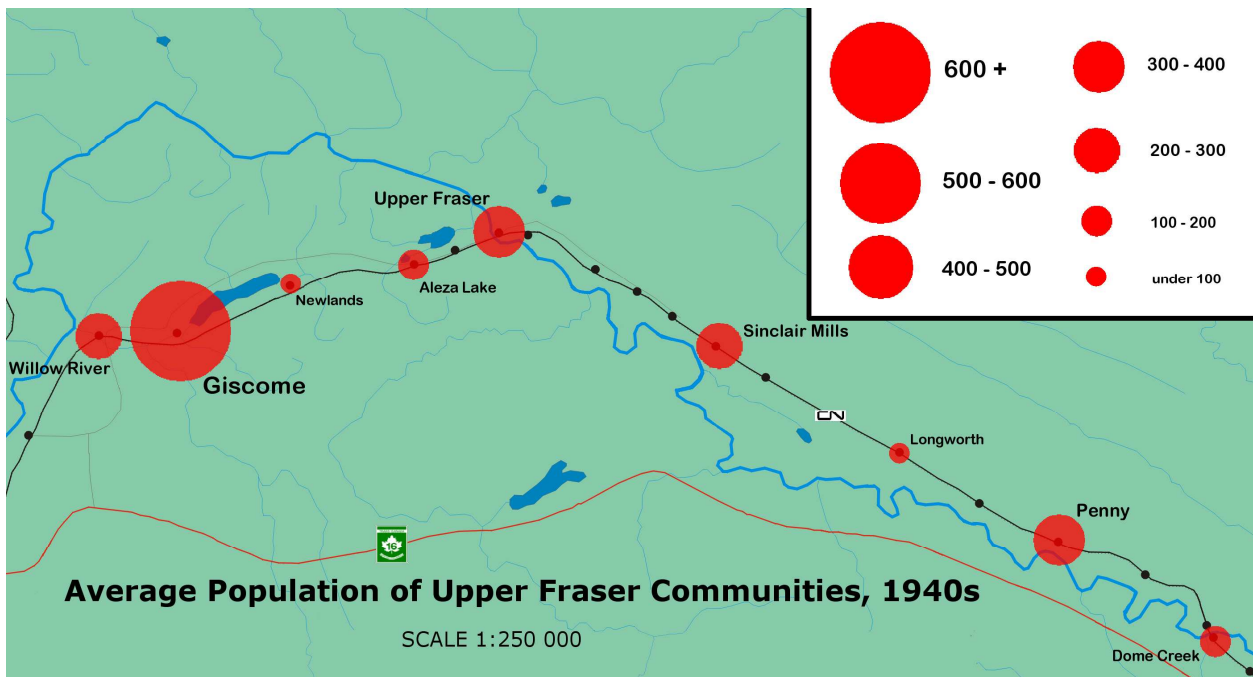

Fig. 2. Average Population of Upper Fraser Communities, 1940s

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In the heart of the boom years in the 1950s (Fig. 3), Penny began to emerge as Penny Spruce Mills entered its heyday. Giscome had lost a bit of people, but was still large compared to the other towns. Sinclair Mills was growing with its large eponymous mill, and Dome Creek was also growing. Dome Creek's growth, however, came from increases in farming and rail employment, as there was no large mill in Dome Creek at this time.
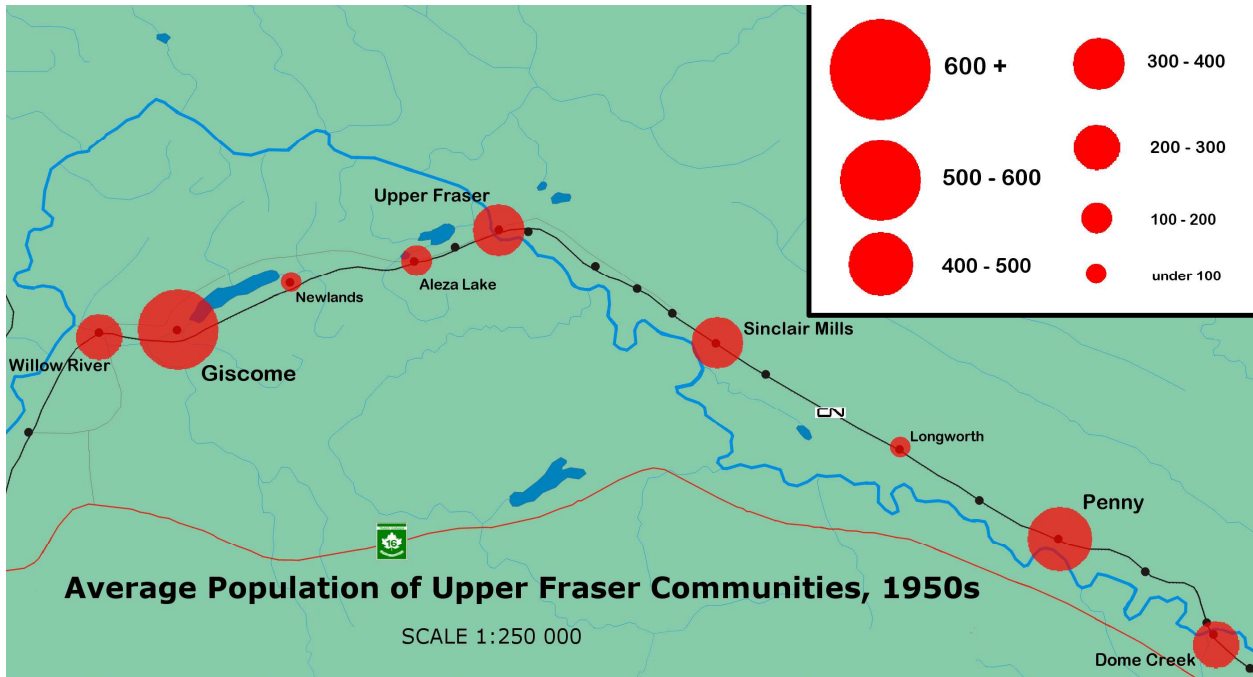

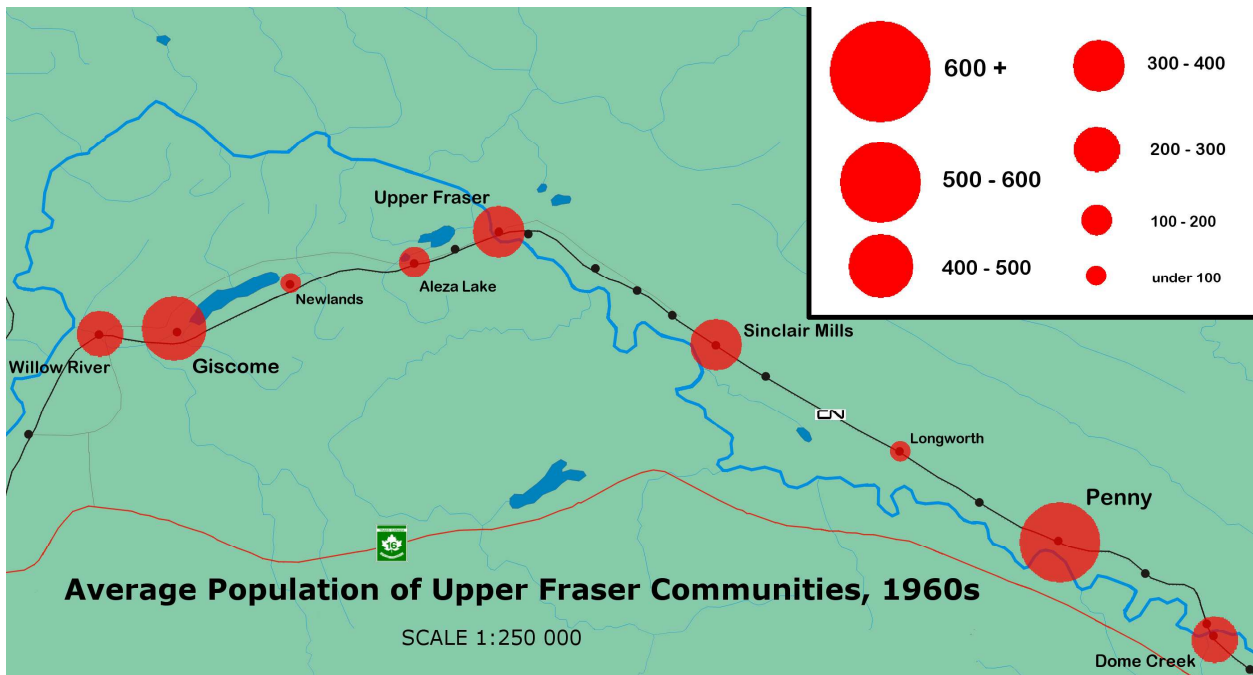Fig. 3. *Average Population of Upper Fraser Communities, 1950s.*

Fig. 4. *Average Population of Upper Fraser Communities, 1960s.*

By the time the crest of the boom hit the Upper Fraser region in the early 1960s (Fig. 4), Penny had become the largest town in the region, and Upper Fraser townsite had caught Giscome in population. Giscome had already begun shrinking well in advance of its closure and dismantling in the next decade. The mid-1960s was the last time any of these communities were this large in population. Centralisation of technology, together with corporate consolidation, was soon to affect all of these towns.

This is not to infer that depopulation in the Upper Fraser region was instantaneous. Rather, it was a decade-long process (Fig. 5), starting with the first major closure at Hansard Lake near Aleza Lake in 1963. Penny Spruce Mills was acquired and folded into Giscome, and Sinclair Mills (1966) was consolidated into Northwood Lumber's large mill at Upper Fraser townsite. The large Eagle Lake Sawmill at Giscome followed in 1974, with the town core being dismantled outright. In 1968, the Yellowhead Highway was completed, bypassing all of the communities in the process and making train travel through the communities obsolete, as regularised passenger service was discontinued by 1974. The Upper Fraser townsite was still thriving into the 1990s with a steady population of around 300 people, including a supermarket and modern school, with modern plumbing and electricity facilities provided by Northwood. Northwood's desire to stop providing these services, as well as relieve itself from providing housing directly to its employees, led the company to slowly withdraw from Upper Fraser townsite over a period of two decades. Over the years, shifts were reduced and employees were transferred to the main mill in Prince George. In 1999, Northwood closed Upper Fraser townsite and ripped out all of the buildings, plumbing, power lines, and other infrastructure. Workers were now to be bussed in from Prince George. Four years later, after Canadian Forest Products had completed its purchase of Northwood, the mill was closed for good.
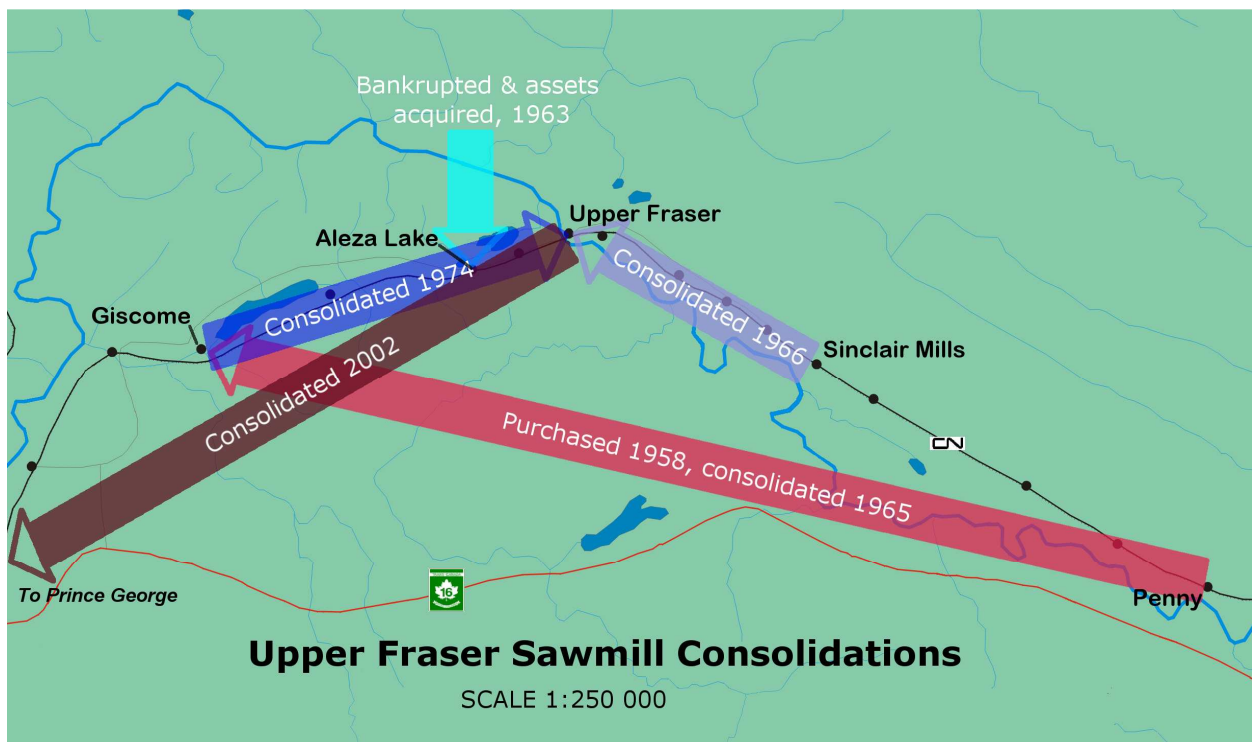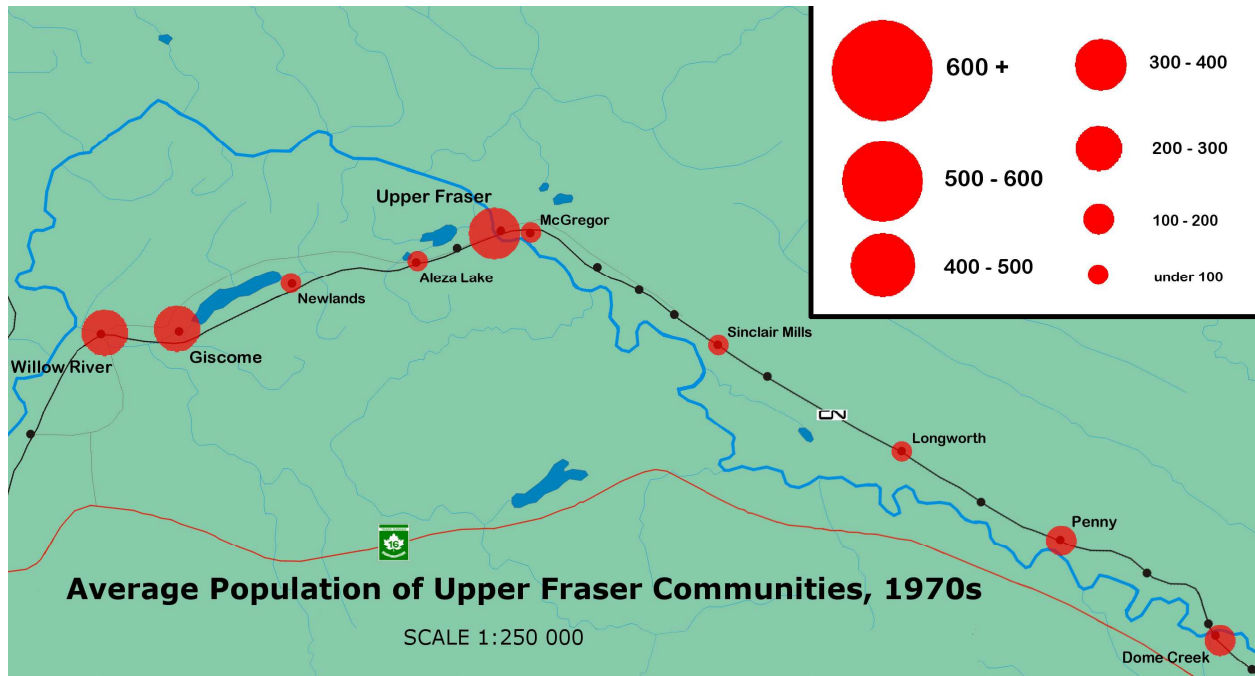

Fig. 5. Upper Fraser Sawmill Consolidations.

Fig. 6. Average Population of Upper Fraser Communities, 1970s.

Once the process of consolidation and centralisation had begun, communities began rapidly shrinking in the Upper Fraser region. By the 1970s (Fig. 6), Sinclair Mills, Penny, and Dome Creek had all reduced to almost nothing. Giscome shrank to about 200 people until its dismantling in 1974. With everything going to Upper Fraser townsite, it and Willow River were the only towns of size left. As a result of the closure of Upper Fraser townsite, other than Willow River, which is close enough to Prince George to be a bedroom community, every single one of these towns has less than 50 people remaining today.

Commuter patterns changed with consolidation (Fig.7). Before the consolidations started, towns were mostly self-contained around their mills, and not many people owned automobiles due to the lack roads of maintained roads in the region. Consequently, the only commuting that did occur was from Willow River and Newlands, towns which didn't have mills of their own. The distance between Willow River and Newlands and the mill town of Giscome was minimal enough to facilitate commuting even in the worst road conditions.

The twin impacts in the 1960s of an improved Upper Fraser road and the consolidation of timber supply tenures into the Upper Fraser mill altered commuting patterns. Particularly, workers from the closed-mill towns of Aleza Lake and Sinclair Mills began to make this commute. As road improvements and paving began in the 1970s, workers began driving in from Prince George. It was also at this time that Northwood began bussing in workers to the Upper Fraser mill from Prince George, as bussing workers in became cheaper than housing them on-site. Upper Fraser
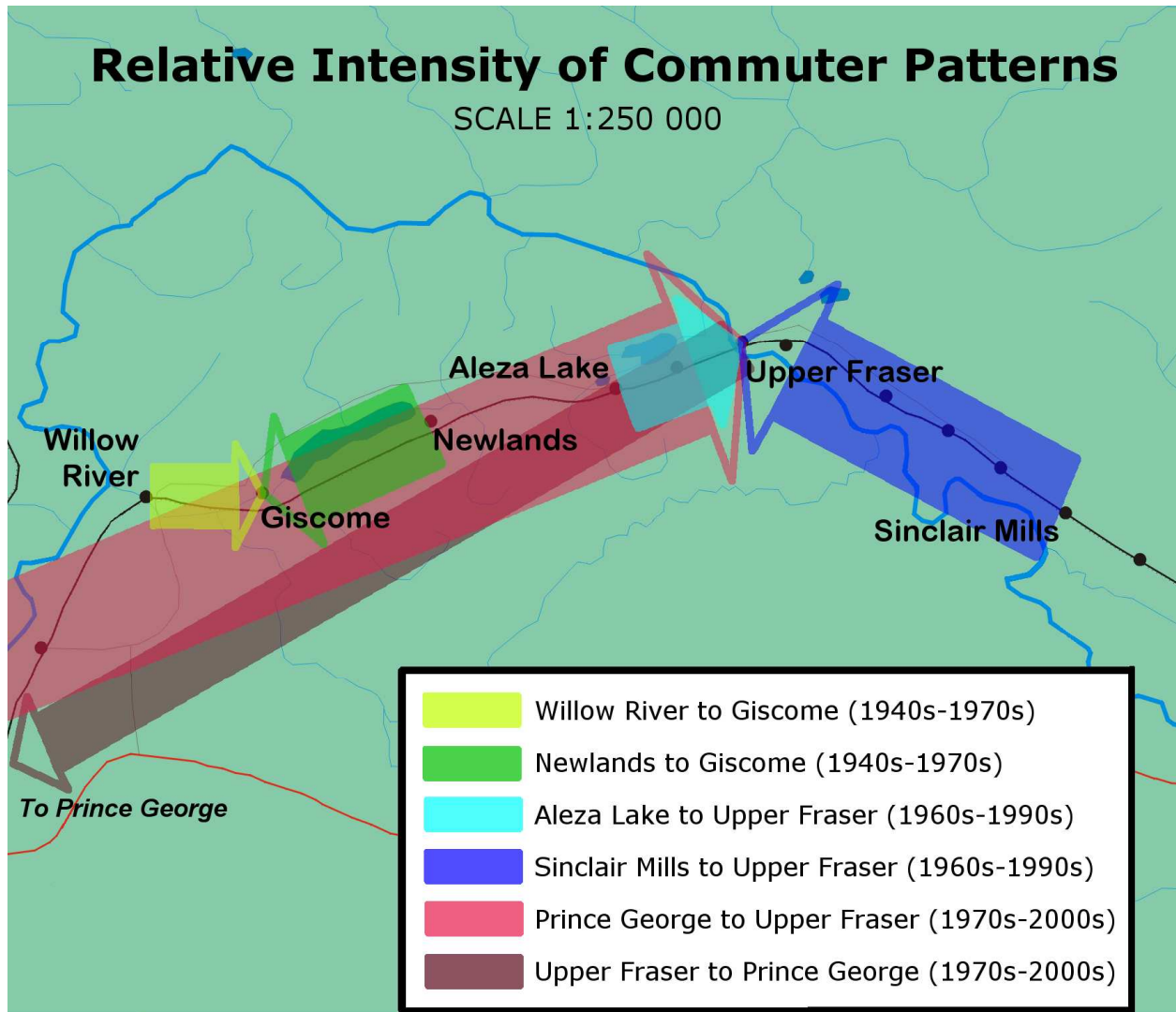
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Fig. 7. Relative Intensity of Commuter Patterns, Upper Fraser Region.

also began commuting Prince George more frequently to access social services, shopping, and recreation.

According to Upper Fraser residents, the population of the Upper Fraser region was a very transient one, a trait typical of many resource and company towns (Fig. 8). Only Aleza Lake, the oldest of the main towns, was described as having a typical 'spread-out' demographic of residents, with both young and old families as well as single residents and seniors. Most towns featured a block of company-provided housing for young families whose head of the house worked at the mill, and a bunkhouse full of single men who typically lived in the community for a couple of years at a time before moving on. Upper Fraser is the only company town to be shown as 'mostly families', due to having the biggest mill and thus being able to attract the largest amount of services and residents.

In almost all cases, residents stated that the largest group of residents came from the Prairies. (Fig.9) Because of the CN line, mills in the Upper Fraser had direct contact with communities,
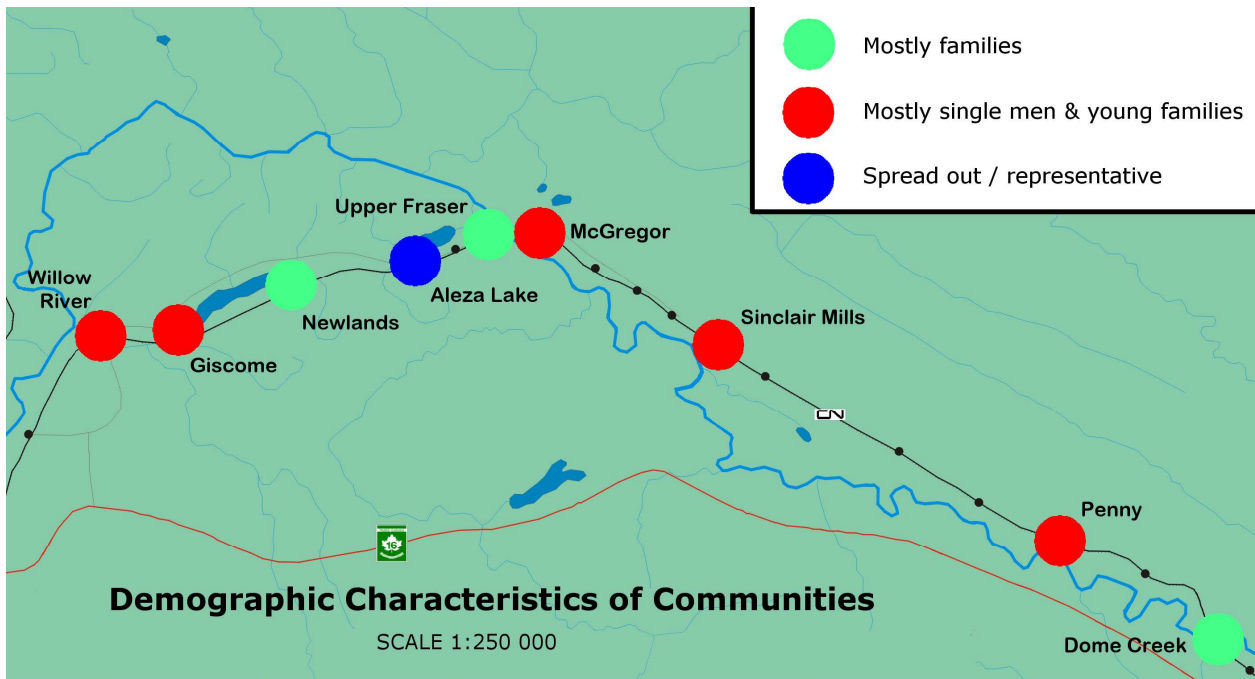
Fig. 8. Demographic Characteristics of Upper Fraser Communities.

companies, and mills in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and were able to draw upon those mills for skilled employee recruitment. There was also a sizeable Scandinavian contingent in the Upper Fraser; these residents tended to be descended from earlier waves of immigration during the original pre-World War II settlement of the area. Interestingly, not a lot of people named British Columbia itself as a major source of residents. This could possibly be due to the relatively late
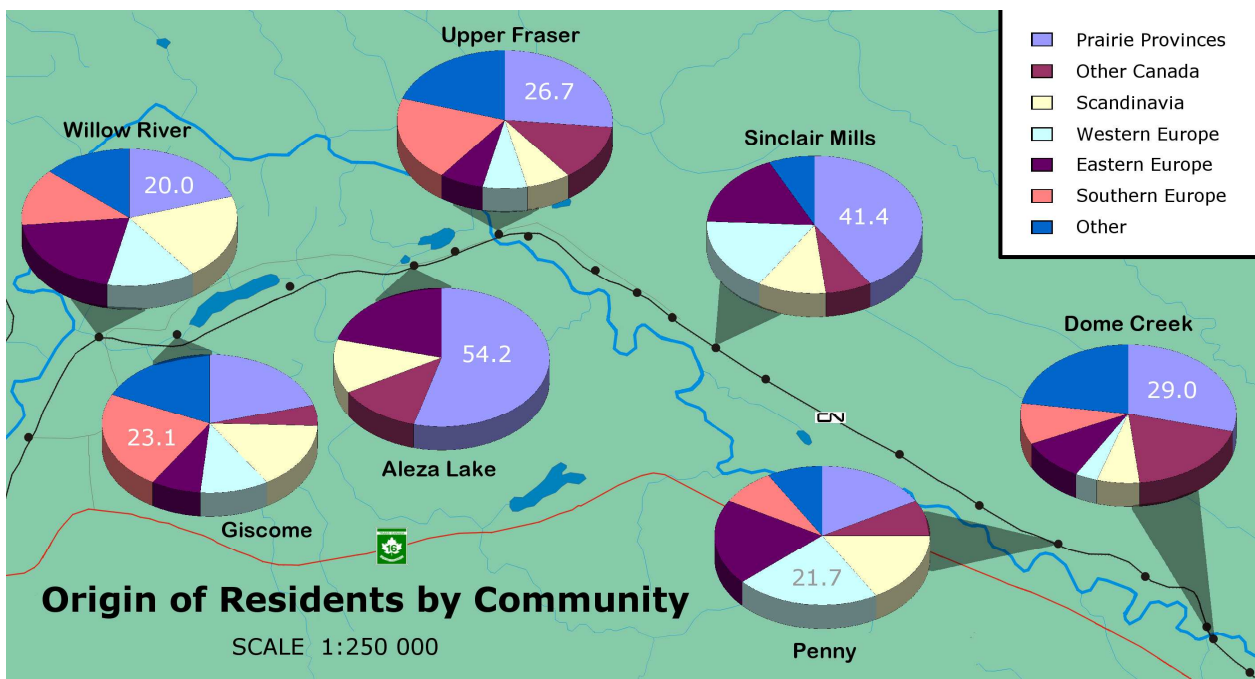

Fig. 9. Origin of Upper Fraser Residents by Community.