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## Paint Lake Volunteer Fire Department: History in the making

17 years along the road from its start in 1995 By Jim Nicholls  
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The Paint Lake Volunteer Fire Department Inc. was formed in 1995 by a group of cottagers after the development of five new blocks of cottage lots along Paint and Liz Lakes by the Lakefront Co-op Inc. A road was then built to connect these and the existing cottages to Provincial Route 375 directly. The old road around Liz Lake was abandoned, due to beavers plugging culverts and washouts. Previous structural fires had made cottager owners aware that at best, it would take a truck and crew from Thompson a minimum of a half hour to action a cottage fire at Paint Lake, if they were not otherwise deployed. The combined real estate values of cottages in addition to the Manitoba Conservation buildings of bunk houses; garage; warehouse; campground facilities; largest boat marina in Manitoba and a business with restaurant/bar/store/rental cabins all needed a faster response time than one half hour for adequate fire protection. In addition, the parking lots and campgrounds were often full to capacity on a typical summer weekend. Helitac were untrained in structural fire fighting, and often could be engaged in wildfire suppression elsewhere, and the crews were seasonal only. With this in mind, a concerned group of cottagers began planning to form a Volunteer Fire Department.

Setting Lake cottagers had formed a similar group, so the first step was to study their operation. In addition, Falcon Lake had the South East Whiteshell Fire Department made up of volunteers and Chief Pat Mason was helpful with suggestions. The issue of funding was an enormous hurdle, since no grants or financial assistance were available from any level of government, because we lived in a provincial park. The fact that the Trans Canada Highway ran past Falcon Lake provided them with funding because of the need for a full-time ambulance crew to cover the long distances between communities along Highway 1. After many letters and phone calls and visits to numerous government branches, it was apparent that any funding for a Paint Lake Volunteer Fire Department would have to be done through local efforts, only.

The Paint Lake Search and Rescue (PLSAR) organization, who shared members in common with the PLVFD, combined with the PLVFD to jointly fund raise. The first attempt was a raffle, which wasn't a high-profit activity. A better venue was discussed jointly between the two groups and the idea of a "Wild Boar Night" featuring a full banquet of roast wild boar; smoked Arctic char; turkey; appetizers; salads and desserts; and all the trimmings, followed by dancing and silent auctions would be more successful. Two of these were held at what was then called the Paint Lake Marina, and were sold out, and successful. But, due to seating limitations, ticket numbers were limited, so five more of these events were held at the larger St. Joseph's Ukrainian Hall in Thompson. All these events were sold out. The

various businesses and crafters that donated prizes for the silent auctions deserve a lot of thanks, but especially the wives of both the PLVFD and the PLSAR who made the appetizers; desserts and salads that made tickets to this event so popular, really deserve a lot of the gratitude for their skills.

The initial purchases were portable four-stroke Honda pumps, followed each year by more pumps, which were located in barrels with fuel; hose and ice augers at strategic locations along the park roads. The purchase of a used diesel ambulance from the City of Thompson, and the conversion from ambulance to a command vehicle with a 250-gallon water capacity, and an enclosed Honda pump gave the PLVFD more mobility. The command vehicle carries a ladder; generator; lighting; hoses; portable pumps and other firefighting tools and equipment.

In addition, a more powerful two-stroke pump has been added since the truck was converted. Some other Northern fire departments donated used turnout gear, which some of the crew members continue to use. All pumps are fitted to use the standard 1½-inch Manitoba Conservation fire hose and fittings. A possible fire hall location had been discussed with local conservation officers; the minister of natural resources and deputies by mail and telephone. Various options were studied, but none were approved. Then on a low water level year, Manitoba Conservation had problems getting water at their intake in Cottage Bay and decided to put a pipeline from Liz Lake to their treatment plant. Manitoba Conservation proposed a 200 x 200 foot site where the fire hall is now located. The PLVFD agreed to this site, thinking that a source of water would be essential for a fire hall. The clearing of trees and site preparation soon began. Fill was hauled into the site and a culvert was installed. Manitoba Conservation later located a deeper spot for a water intake on Cottage Bay, and abandoned the pipeline idea, which is why the fire hall currently lacks plumbing.

The PLVFD still didn't have enough funds to build a fire Hall, until a letter from NDP Minister of Conservation Steve Ashton was sent to the PLVFD stating that the Parks District Program could assist with the administration of funds by adding an annual appropriate amount to the Parks District Service Fee for all cottages and businesses if the majority of PLCOA members and executive were in support of the project. The then PLCOA executive were concerned about maintenance and operating costs of the operation, and resisted the idea of building a fire hall. Finally, after presentations by the PLVFD, a motion was made from the floor at a PLCOA annual meeting to proceed with the construction of a fire hall. The motion passed with only one dissenting recorded vote. PLOCA executives are pleased with the reduced insurance premiums, and fully support the PLVFD in their improvement endeavours.

Finally, with financing in place, efforts could be more focused on construction of a fire hall and training, rather than on fundraising. Seven continuous years of fundraising were burning the PLVFD members out. Plans were drawn up and tenders sent out to local contractors. M. B. Construction was the lowest bid received, and after more site preparation, construction began. The PLVFD kicked in an additional \$7,000 for the construction from their savings. Wives and firefighters mudded; taped and painted the interior to save on the finishing costs. With the finishing of the new building, gear and the truck could be housed in a warm building. Firefighter Brian Clace later located a written-off three-ton low-mileage fire truck, which added another 650 gallons to the total mobile capability of the PLVFD ( 800 gallons was the minimum required amount for official recognition.)

The grand opening of the Paint Lake Fire Hall was held in the hall on Oct. 30, 2004. The ceremony was a very special event, marking a project 10 years in the making. Unfortunately, the event was missed by Steve Ashton due to previous commitments, but attended by his assistant. The mayor of Thompson and the Thompson RCMP congratulated the PLVFD, and presented the plaques, which hang on the interior wall today. Manitoba Conservation personnel and other local dignitaries spoke about the hard work the PLVFD had gone through to achieve this result. It was truly a grassroots effort by a determined and dedicated group of men and women, who look at the fire hall with great

pride. The annual budget covers maintenance; operating costs; workers' compensation; MPI; yearly inspections and purchase of new equipment and safety gear for the firefighters. This budget has been partially covered by the Parks District service fee every year but one, due to an office error, during which the PLVFD used their savings to continue to operate, although it was close, and no gear could be purchased on that particular year.

Chief Ian Thompson of the Thompson Fire and Emergency Services department encouraged the PLVFD to join the Hudson Bay Training District, which meant the PLVFD could train with other Northern firefighters at the Manitoba Fire College in Thompson. It was with great pride that the PLVFD took part in the official ceremonies with other Northern fire departments at the dedication for the Tribute to Northern Firefighters statue in Ravine Park in Thompson on Sept. 11, 2009. The statue is solid concrete with a liquid bronze coating and was created by Clayt Lennox of Winnipeg, and represents firefighters in the North from volunteer, municipal and forest fire departments, as well water bomber pilots and Helitac crews, and Vale's volunteer mine rescue crews who can go down underground 4,000 feet to fight fires.

Another proud moment was when after many telephone calls; filling out forms; sending letters with photos; the PLVFD was officially recognized by The Fire Commissioner's Office on Sept. 16, 2003, followed shortly afterwards by the insurance industry in finally achieving "partially protected community status." It took many years of hard work to reach this achievement and has resulted in substantial insurance premium savings for cottage owners.

The PLVFD continues to place barrel pumps at strategic locations for remote cottages clusters, and trains cottagers in their use during summer months. Helitac has the advantage of faster mobility times for remote fires, and the PLVFD receives wildfire training by Manitoba Conservation instructors, and has fought fires with Helitac.

The PLVFD has a close rapport with both Manitoba Conservation and the City of Thompson's Fire and Emergency Services department. There is little chance of Paint Lake becoming another Slave Lake, Alta. due to wild fires. The PLVFD also hands out pamphlets on fire safety each year during Fire Safety Week. They also make these available to the general public by placing them in the Paint Lake Resort restaurant entry way. Fire can be a terribly sad event for anyone, and the financial losses can be staggering for families, so fire prevention education is paramount.

It takes a special person to be a volunteer firefighter, and spend Friday evening; all day Saturday and Sunday in courses at the Manitoba Fire College. Volunteers might be placed in harm's way during a fire, which produces heat; toxic gases; electrical hazards and the possibilities of explosions. The PLVFD is a talented group of individuals with a wide variety of skills, who are not paid. They are volunteers. The chief and deputies plan for training sessions, and carry out the business of the PLVFD. There are 25 firefighters; a chaplain, and bookkeeping and accounting personnel behind the scenes. Since the PLVFD's incorporation in 1995, many have served on this worthwhile group of committed people, in one capacity or another.

The PLVFD continues to fund raise each year by selling the Paint Lake nature calendars with wonderful photos of the lake and wildlife. Cottagers and others submit their photos to assist in putting together this popular calendar. Also each fall, in connection with the annual mainlanders vs. islanders softball tournament, a pancake breakfast is held at the fire hall, with silent auctions and draws for both donated and hand crafted articles. Manitoba Conservation assists in this fundraiser by setting up tents and picnic tables, in case of inclement weather. The Paint Lake Resort donates the food items for the PLVFD breakfast menu, which is prepared by the members of the PLVFD. This combines to make future equipment purchases possible.

If you have attended one of these events, you may have noticed the rather cramped conditions inside the fire hall. Cottagers may be asked to support an expansion of the present fire hall at some future date. The PLVFD has little space for meetings and training with the trucks inside the hall, especially in winter months when freezing of pumps and valves is a huge issue. This expansion would greatly aid in improving faster response times as well as provide some space for meetings and training. The primary mission of the PLVFD is providing fire protection for the over 266 cottages; campground RV's; parking lots and marina: two businesses and the Manitoba Conservation buildings in Paint Lake Provincial Park.

Thompson Fire and Emergency Services continues to provide mutual aid to the PLVFD to the extent of their capabilities at the time of a request, as is dictated by their equipment and manpower availability. They also initiate the call out to the PLVFD after a fire is reported to them by telephone. The PLVFD scrambles their trucks and crew from that point on. If you have a fire in Paint Lake Provincial Park, the number to call is 677-7911.

Also noteworthy are the efforts made to equip the PLVFD with stretchers and emergency defibrillator packs by the Valentino family. The PLVFD is very grateful for their gift.

***Jim Nicholls is the longest-serving member of the Paint Lake Volunteer Fire Department. He apologizes in advance for any errors or omissions, as names, details and dates may have been missed out in the difficult process of reviewing old files; letters and meeting minutes.***

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