

## 'Secret Alberta': New documentary brings Amber Valley back to life

'I'm very, very grateful that they had the foresight to want a better life'

By Wallis Snowdon, [CBC News](#) Posted: Feb 06, 2017 10:36 AM MT Last Updated: Feb 06, 2017 5:50 PM MT

To her ancestors, it was the Promised Land.

To Myrna Wisdom, it was home.

Though few traces of Amber Valley still exist, the forgotten town about 100 km north of Edmonton was once a thriving all-black settlement of homesteaders.

Hundreds of African-Americans, fleeing escalating racial violence and the segregation of newly enacted Jim Crow laws, left the United States and settled in Alberta.

### 'They weren't prepared'

By the time Wisdom was a young girl, Amber Valley was bustling — with an all-black school, its own post office and church, and a highly competitive baseball team.

"I don't know why people don't know about it," said Wisdom, who contributed to a new documentary called [Secret Alberta: The Former Life of Amber Valley](#), which aired for the first time last week. "We have been here for over 100 years."

- [Hidden history explored in new doc as Alberta celebrates Black History Month](#)

Enticed by the promise of free land, the black settlers came north, first a few at a time, then by the hundreds. By 1911, about 1,000 had crossed the border.

Facing racial hostility, and some of the harshest conditions imaginable, the pioneers not only survived but thrived.

"My grandfather, he talked about it a lot," said Wisdom, who now acts as the community's historian. "They found it extremely difficult, because it was so darn cold and they weren't prepared.

"They did the best they could, considering that my grandfather came from the south. My dad came to Amber Valley as a child, and they carved out a living."

By 1910, some 300 people, largely freemen from Oklahoma — where small settlements of freed slaves had taken root after the American Civil War — had moved into the Amber Valley area, east of Athabasca.



The community was founded by five original families, after a trio of scouts travelled north to survey the area.

"They came and decided that this was a good place for them to come. The fact that it was all bush didn't seem to dissuade them," said Wisdom.

"And one of the scouts, Parson Sneed, went back to Oklahoma to tell these people that he had found what he termed was the Promised Land. And I always thought, 'Lord, have Mercy, why the heck did they have to come so far?' "

## **'We were deemed unsuitable'**

The first wave of settlers — including Wisdom's grandfather — made their way north and braved a hostile border crossing, where officials had been instructed to scrutinize African-American immigrants for any medical or "moral" conditions that would justify their exclusion.

After rigorous medical examinations that included their children and livestock, the group was granted entry. They rode the train from the border to Edmonton, then followed the dusty wagon road to Amber Valley.

"We were deemed unsuitable for this environment and for this locale," said Edmonton musician Junetta Jamerson, whose family settled in nearby Wildwoods. "When they came, there was vicious anti-black racism, reaching up to some of the highest levels of influence in our province."

Life was harsh, especially during those first few winters. Food and money were sparse. Lured by promises of sun-swept prairies ripe for farming, they had unwittingly signed up for a bug-infested swamp.

## **'It was all muskeg, and bush and black flies'**

While a few settlers managed to find abandoned land claims that had already been cleared, most plots were thick with trees. They toiled long days cutting timber and hauling rocks from the thick bush.

Most had to wait two years or more before they could harvest their first crops.

Mainly cut off from the outside world, the racial tensions of the day were overshadowed by the challenges of pioneering life.

"They had to cut their own road through there, if you can imagine," said Wisdom. "It was all muskeg, and

bush and black flies, which caused some real problems for them.

"There were a lot of Ukrainians in that area, and they too had suffered some form of persecution. So they depended on each other, because you had to in those days."

Not much remains of Amber Valley. The few homes still standing have, for the most part, been reduced to listing skeletons of weathered clapboard.

When Wisdom looks at the rotting remnants of her old home, she can't help but feel grateful.

"I'm just so glad they came," she said. "I'm very, very grateful that they had the foresight to want a better life, and did what they did so we could grow up and be who we wanted to be."

*With files from Ariel Fournier*

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