

Trip to Uranium City  
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Growing up in Uranium City, where transportation to the rest of the “outside world”, was difficult, forced me to develop an interest in planes and in air-travel, from an early age. In my adulthood, I was introduced to the “relative ease” with which a plane can be flown, and I decided to obtain a private pilot’s license, partly for the reason that I could travel back to visit my home-town, from time to time. Flying a plane also makes the trip back to Uranium City, an adventure in itself.

Flying a small plane can allow a person to travel at their own pace and see things that regular commercial flights won’t allow a person to see, but of course the flight also depends on the weather conditions encountered. Since I do not own a plane, I had to rent a plane for my trip, which means careful scheduling in order to minimize time spent delayed on the ground, because of weather problems. Otherwise the costs of the trip, could start to increase if a certain amount of time wasn’t flown on the plane while I had it rented out, and it was just sitting around in one location.

Since many people are often training for their pilot’s licenses, flying schools only have so many planes available to rent out. In order to increase my chances of getting a plane, I decided to forgo renting the typical “high-wing” Cessna plane, which gives better visibility for sight-seeing, and decided to take some training on a “low-wing” Grumman Tiger. This would allow me to have a better chance of renting the plane because less people would be interested in renting this type of plane, during the busy summer schedule. Although the low-wing plane had slightly less visibility than the high-wing plane, the cruising speed was about 25 mph faster, due to better aerodynamics, which was a nice bonus.

Another advantage of flying in a small-plane, was that I could take a fair amount of gear, including a portable propane stove with some fuel, that I couldn’t normally take on a scheduled flight. Also important was some transportation, which for me meant a mountain-bike, that I could use to get around various back-roads.

The plan was to fly from Calgary to Fort McMurray, where I would then spend the night at a friend’s place, before flying onward to Uranium City. I had programmed the coordinates for various locations, into my handheld GPS, so that made navigation very easy. Since I had flown the route three times before, it was fairly routine.

To record the trip, I was equipped with a digital camera, as well as a film camera. There are some instances when the film camera results in better pictures, even though the digital camera generally does a good job. In addition to cameras, I also had a video camera with me. I even went so far as to arrange a foam base for the camera, that I could put on the dashboard of the plane, to film some of the scenery, while I flew – kind of like an in-flight recorder.

I departed Calgary on a late July afternoon. I was able to airborne in time before unsettled weather started to deteriorate, as clouds started to form closer to the ground, over central Alberta. Other clouds were forecast to build into larger clouds that would cause more turbulent flying weather, later in the afternoon. Flying is always a matter of departing just before the weather deteriorates, and you are forced to stay on the ground.

Not too far out of Calgary, I was forced to adjust my altitude, to stay out of clouds that were a little denser than I had thought and were obstructing my view. Flying below the clouds would put me closer to the ground, which made the flying less efficient, so I tried to get above them. Unfortunately, the clouds thickened some more, and I was in danger of losing sight of the ground, if I stayed above them. This was not a problem for scheduled commercial traffic, but it wasn't permitted with my basic pilot's license. So I was forced to circle back, and then descend through an opening in the clouds, and then continue flying at a lower altitude.

I still managed to make good time, and as I approached Edmonton, I gained a bit more altitude as the clouds had become more scattered. A good regulation altitude was right about the cloud base, but unfortunately that was making things bumpy. As the clouds were scattered, I was able to gain some altitude and climb over them, and continue on my way.

Eventually, the clouds began to thicken some more, and I was forced to descend. A few raindrops fell, but I was able to get through the scattered showers. I neared Fort McMurray, and the control tower gave me permission to land, once a faster commercial flight landed. My friend's wife picked me up at the airport, and I visited with their family for the evening, while keeping an eye on the weather forecasts for the next day. The total flying time was 3 hours and 20 minutes.

The next morning, the weather forecast for Uranium City said basically "a mix of sun and cloud". That is generally a pretty safe forecast to make, but it doesn't give a person much idea of what will be faced. But conditions were okay to fly, so I filed a flight plan and departed for Uranium City. Fort McMurray had a clear blue sky, but as I flew north, the scattered clouds from the day before, started to reappear as the morning sun rose higher in the sky.

As I approached the Athabasca sand-dunes, I descended in order to get a better view of the sand, and the beautiful colors of the sand in the braided William River. This was one of the big advantages of piloting a private plane: being able to see the sand-dunes at close range. Separated from Uranium City by Lake Athabasca, the sand-dunes were always a mystical place that was difficult to get to, by boat or by plane.

After viewing the dunes, I climbed higher to gain some altitude prior to crossing the lake. Flying regulations require that any single-engine plane be operated at sufficient altitude that a plane could glide to shore in case of an engine failure. That wasn't always possible in the case of lower altitude clouds.

I could see that the clouds looked a lot darker to the north, and their height appeared to be closer to the ground. There was just enough height to get under the clouds and maintain a safe gliding distance. I didn't have to be able to glide all the way across the lake, just to Long Island, which was the first island reached when flying from the south.

I called out on the radio that I was flying across to Uranium City from the south shore of Lake Athabasca. Another plane responded that they were flying from Uranium City, to Meadow Lake, and were obviously at a similar altitude, just below the clouds. I replied that I would cross the lake on the west side of Long Island, and they agreed to cross on the east side of Long Island, so there would be no conflict. I never did see the plane in the hazy weather, but that is why radio communication is important when flying, so as to avoid any conflicts with other aircraft.

I flew across the series of islands located southeast of Gunnar, then along Milliken Lake. I then approached Beaverlodge and Martin Lake. I flew to the south of Uranium City, which looked a little dreary in the grey, overcast skies. It was obvious that the forecast was going to be more on the cloudy side, of the "mix of sun and cloud". Actually it looked like it would rain at any moment, which would make the trip a bit more uncomfortable. I would have circled the town, but I decided to land before the weather worsened.

Proceeding onward, I neared the airport, and started my landing preparations. The first step was to determine which direction to land. I flew over the runway, but I couldn't tell from the "wind-sock", which direction the wind was blowing. I continued to fly north of the airport, then did a series of turns over a small lake, where I could see that one side of the lake had calm water, and the other side of the lake had some waves, which allowed me to determine that the wind was blowing from the calm side of the lake, to the wavy side of the lake. I turned around and headed back to the airport.

As I approached the mid-point of the runway, another pilot spoke on the radio, and asked where my location was, and if he could taxi onto the runway and prepare for take off. I replied that I was just crossing the runway, and would land very soon, so there wasn't much time. He probably had enough time to taxi out and then take off, but he agreed to hold short of the runway.

I turned and flew parallel with the runway, along the road that led from the airport to the Eldorado mine-site. I would flying in over Ace Lake, which was always my favourite direction for landing, just because it was neat to fly over water, before reaching the runway. I flew parallel with the Lake, and started my descent, turning to the left, and then turning again to line up with the runway in preparation for landing.

The runway had been shortened and narrowed a few years ago, to save operating and maintenance costs. So a good asphalt runway had been turned into a second-rate one, but that was how things worked for a town that wasn't supposed to have lasted this long. There was still enough distance to land, but there was just less room for error. My

landing was trouble-free, with minimal bounces, and I coasted to the end of the runway, passing the other plane that was waiting for me to clear the runway.

I parked the plane at the end of the runway, close to the fuel pumps, at about 12:20 PM. First step was to walk to the old terminal building, and use the payphone to call the toll-free number for the flight control center, and tell them that I had landed safely, and my flight-plan should be closed. Second step was to get my mountain bike unpacked and assembled, then get all my gear sorted out, before any rain started. One disadvantage of this plane, was there was no high-wing that I could shelter under in case of rain, so I needed to open the plane door and get my gear out as quickly as possible, because the weather was a bit windy, and it seemed that it could rain.

I managed to get my equipment assembled, then I got on the bike and proceeded to start biking to Uranium City, or Kiwanis Beach more specifically. Carrying a fair amount of gear, including my sleeping bag and tent, it was a slower ride than it would have been, if I just had a small amount of equipment. But I wasn't in a hurry, other than to avoid any possible rain showers.

Along the way, I stopped off at different parts of the road, and noticed an abundance of wild strawberries. I had come at just the right time to catch the wild strawberry season. I didn't recall so many strawberries when living in Uranium City, but obviously they were quite abundant. I picked a few berries to give me some nourishment, and to take a rest from the bike trip.

Continuing on along Martin Lake, I approached the Kennedy Corner bypass, next to Melville Lake. I pedaled up the hill, which was the steepest hill along the route, stopping to push my bike up at the very top. This wasn't a triathlon, just a leisurely bike-ride, and there was no reason to over-exert myself. I passed the road that turned off to Fredette Lake, then approached the old Martin Lake float-plane base. Passing the "Welcome to Uranium City" sign, I turned off the main road and headed towards Kiwanis Beach.

The bridge to the beach was in surprisingly good shape, which indicated that people had been taking care of it. Kiwanis beach had become more of a "field", grown over in most places with various grasses, dandelions, and wild strawberries. But there was still a fair amount of sand around, and the field was cut and maintained. There also were a few picnic tables next to a metal culvert fire-pit. And also of primary importance, there was an outhouse at the far end of the beach. So I was well equipped for a short stay in Uranium City, provided the skies didn't open up and dump lots of rain.

Setting up the tent was the first priority, as the skies still looked threatening, although it was hard to tell what the weather might do. I needed to get the tent set up, in case it did rain, so that my gear could be sheltered from the rain, especially my sleeping bag. I had pedaled from the airport to Kiwanis beach, and managed to get the tent set up, all by 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon. It was then time to have some lunch, which consisted of some type of canned stew.

Finishing lunch, I got back on the bike and headed for town, to do a bit of a tour. The town still looked the same as it did during my last trip, which was back in 2003. I had expected that with the hospital closing down, there would have been still more of a loss of people from town. But it turned out that in this summer anyway, there was actually a fair amount of activity around town.

Part of this was thanks to the mining company, GLR Resources, which was doing work on the Goldfield's project. They had been working the property for some time, and were using one of the buildings as a warehouse, along with renting a few houses for their employees to live in. Given today's higher gold prices, perhaps they might finally get something going on the property, which would give Uranium City another extension on life, although just as an indirect staging base. But their ongoing exploration work, was definitely giving more activity for the town.

I passed a few signs that warned people to stay on the roads, and avoid entering the ruins of abandoned houses, or remains of houses. Fireweed was abundant, along with caragana hedges, that had become the dominant shrub, transplanted from the south. Passing one corner lot closer to the Catholic church, I noticed a white looking dog with pointy ears, grazing on some sort of food. The dog looked to be part wolf, and it glared back at me as I video-taped it. A person just couldn't tell if it could be a wolf, as the quiet condition of Uranium City, meant that it was possible that wolves could be coming closer to town.

I then headed down Uranium Road, and up towards Jackpine Crescent, where my family's house used to stand. Abandoned houses are undergoing a program of controlled burning, to clean up the town, and reduce the danger that a large forest fire would rage through the empty town, uncontrolled. All that remained of my family's home was the concrete block basement, and remains of the furnace. The yard was completely overgrown with small trees. But there were still signs that people used to live on the crescent.

Turning back towards the more settled areas, I decided to bike to the pumphouse. Along the way, I noticed a few houses that were in really good shape. One house had a new deck, and the owner was clearly taking exceptional care of the property. Another house had a large garden in the vacant lot next door. There was even a large sheet plastic greenhouse, complete with a moveable vent-door at the top, to help extend the short growing season. Clearly the residents of Uranium City, had to do what they could to reduce their food costs, and many former residents had also grown their own food, in the long daylight hours of the summer sun.

It was nice to see that there were still signs of people that had chosen to make their life in Uranium City, no matter if it was only a shadow of its former town, and it was good to see that those people were doing what they could to make their lives comfortable.

The weather actually seemed to be improving, as the overcast sky showed patches of blue. I biked towards the pump-house and stopped to admire the scenic lake that was located behind it: such a pristine lake, just a short distance from people's homes. The

natural places around Uranium City will always remain, even if the man-made structures fall apart over time.

I continued to bike around the town, and approached the concrete floor of Spence's Hardware Store. The metal store had been dismantled and shipped out, and the current residents had converted the concrete floor into a skateboard park, complete with a few rails to slide across, and a ramp to allow people to do some jumps onto the rails. The kids using the park were pretty good, and had obviously had some time on their hands to practice.

I then biked towards the Candu High School, to do a tour of the ruined structure and see what had changed since my last visit, two years ago. I wasn't disappointed, as someone had now broken into the boiler room, and opened a hole in a wall, which led onto the roof of the building. This allowed me to actually walk on the roof, which looked like people were salvaging various parts of it.

I went back inside and toured various classrooms. There wasn't very much left, but it was still the school that had given a good education to many people. Stopping off in the "old-gym", I could see that basketball hoops were still in place, where kids spent many a lunch hour getting some exercise. The oak floor had really buckled and heaved during the years, but it was still recognizable as a gymnasium floor, and there were still even some bleachers standing.

I decided to go back to the beach, and have some supper, which consisted of another can of stew, cooked over the propane stove. I was also consuming a lot of dried fruit and salted cashews, to feed my strong appetite. The sky had cleared right off, and Martin Lake had become a reflective mirror. But as I found out when checking the thermometer, the temperature had already dropped to 12 degrees, at just a little after 8 o'clock. It was going to be a cool evening.

Thus my healthy appetite was as a result of my body just trying to burn calories to stay warm. Of course biking a fair distance, also gave me a strong appetite. Given the minimal calories in berries and other northern foods, I could see that large game such as caribou and moose, were an essential food used for the historical survival of native people, in a harsh outdoor environment. A concentrated food source was a lot easier than gathering lots of small berries, which consumed some calories in itself.

Of course a campfire was one solution used to maintain warmth when surviving in the bush, but I chose not to do so as that would require gathering some wood, and drawing more attention to my camp.

I decided to hike up the hill behind the beach, and take a walk towards the town. I was able to get a nice view of the surrounding hills and of Martin Lake, from a lofty viewing point. I then toured around the old cement-block factory, which was all over-grown with trees. But there were still a few remnants of previous times.

Returning to the beach, it was time to get some sleep. The sky had cleared right out, and it looked like the temperature would drop to around 5 degrees. I put my food into a bag, which I hung from a taller tree, in the slim chance that a bear might decide to wander around the beach – I assumed the bears would stay around the garbage dump, and would give me no problems. Since I had never seen a bear, in all my years living in Uranium City, I assumed that that was a relatively safe assumption.

I slept fairly comfortably in my tent, with my air mattress providing some insulating comfort from the cool ground. One problem I noticed was an apparent smell of gasoline from something in the tent, although I didn't recall having done anything that should cause the problem. I assumed that a bag containing my sandals, must have come into contact with some gasoline, so I moved them outside, in the middle of the night.

I awoke to find the morning sky covered in cloud. A sunny clear day was not going to happen, but it didn't look like it would rain hard. The sound of an airplane continued to increase, so I got out and walked towards the beach. A float plane had decided to land on Martin Lake, at 7:45 am. The water was calm, and the pilot circled, then made a nice landing. He taxied the plane to the dock, and I went over to see what was going on.

A bearded passenger got out of the plane, along with the young pilot. I asked him where he came from, and how the weather was, and he replied he had come from Fort Smith, to carry some freight to another fishing lodge, and do a passenger pickup from the other side of Martin Lake. He said that the clouds were about 4000 feet above ground, so it was okay for flying.

The passenger had been at the other side of Martin Lake, and had been prospecting for a week in the bush. He was doing some work on old high-grade mining claims, looking for small deposits of uranium, that might still be feasible to go after. He explained that the high price of oil was having beneficial effect on the price of uranium, which was in turn increasing exploration for uranium. So area around the old town of Uranium City was once again seen as having some potential for exploration, as it had 50 years ago. It was just ironic that now, that smaller uranium deposits might be economical for high-grading, there was no uranium milling infrastructure remaining.

The passenger was going to get to the Eldorado airport, to catch a scheduled flight south, but his ride wasn't around. He decided to start walking to the airport, as he had some time until his scheduled flight arrived. I confirmed that the distance to the airport was about 6 miles from the beach, and bade him well.

It was time for some breakfast, which consisted of oatmeal, along with some juice and fruit. I was preparing for another long trip today, as I intended to bike and hike to Don Lake, which was a few miles northwest of town. I was hoping for some nicer weather, to get some good pictures of the wilderness, and the lakes, that would be framed with a nice blue sky.

I started off towards Jean (Cayzor) Lake, and proceeded down the steep hill. The road at the bottom of the big hill had always been a bit of a low, wet spot, and now had sunk completely into the muskeg, and had totally disappeared. Someone had cut a trail through the bush, but it was essentially just a walking trail, with just enough room to drag my mountain bike through the bush. I don't know if people could get a quad through there or not. I regained my path on the road, and proceeded onward. I then made the turn onto the road going towards Beta-Gamma Lake and Don Lake.

I had suspected that the road would be covered in brush and it would be difficult riding, as it had been in previous years, but actually someone had come through with some sort of clearing equipment, and removed the small trees. This was evidence of additional mineral exploration, as there would be no other reason to clear the road. I was appreciative that my ride would be much easier than I had anticipated. It had started to drizzle a little bit, but as long as it wasn't pouring rain, I was pleased with the progress so far.

Continuing onward, I turned off the Beta-Gamma road, to take the rougher road/trail towards Don Lake. The road turned into more of a trail, and was still in relatively good bike-riding shape. I then came across a new fork in the road, and a trail that seemed to go into bush. I followed along the new quad trail, and finally reached a rocky area that was the scene of some exploration trenching work. A pick and shovel lay lying around, along with a jerry can of gasoline. Once again, there was evidence of new mineral exploration activity, probably more activity than the region had seen in a long time.

I decided to start hiking through the bush towards Don Lake. I had my handheld GPS with me, so I marked the spot where I would leave the bike. Unfortunately, I had departed Calgary in a hurry, and I forgot to pack my topographical map, which would give me better resolution of the surrounding landscape. As a result, I did not have a good idea of the actual remaining distance to Don Lake, and further on to Pluton Lake, which is what everybody called "Don Creek", and was just beyond a series of beaver-dams, where people used to catch Arctic Grayling.

I started trekking through the bush, but I was not making a very straight path, in the dense bush. To compound matters, the light drizzle had started to intensify. While I had a water resistant windbreaker, I had left my good quality rubberized rain-jacket back in the tent. Being the optimist, I had assumed that it just wouldn't rain during the day, but I was proven wrong.

I was starting to meander through the bush, and couldn't pick up the trail to Don Lake. This wouldn't be a problem if I had a destination programmed into my GPS, but without the map, I couldn't get an accurate coordinate to program into the GPS. Finally I approached some trails that I recognized, and came to the edge of Don Lake.

It would still take some time to go to Pluton Lake, but not too much. But fatigue was setting in, and it was continuing to rain. I had intended to try and catch a Grayling at Pluton Lake for lunch, but I knew that there wasn't a high probability of actually catching

a fish, from my previous trips. Given my fatiguing condition, I decided that I would end the trip to the beaver dam, and turn around and go back to Jean Lake. That would give me the best opportunity to catch a fish for lunch.

I started to walk back to the bike, and this time I found the trail that I should have walked on, in order to get around Don Lake with a minimum amount of hassle. I followed the trail back over a rocky hill, to the location where it eventually met up with the road. I was a little farther off-track than I thought I was when I was hiking through the bush, from the trenching site. Going back on the road wasn't a problem, and then I could just follow the quad trail back to the spot where my bike was located. I knew from my GPS exactly where my bike was located, because I had programmed the location.

I retrieved the bike, and headed back to Jean Lake. First I decided to go a little bit up the road to Beta-Gamma, but it was turning out to be mostly just pushing the bike up a rough road, although the road had been cleared of brush. Given that I had only so much time before more hunger would set in, I decided that I'd best curtail this diversion, and get riding to Jean Lake, although I was always eager to explore the area in more detail.

The trip back to Jean Lake was mostly downhill, so that was a nice benefit. I stopped off at the far end of Jean Lake, where a fire-break had been cleared back in 1981, to guard against the big fire that had threatened Uranium City. The fire didn't reach the fire-break, but the defense had been prepared, just in case. The fire-break was now mostly overgrown with poplar and pine trees.

Arriving at Jean Lake, I got to work to try and catch some lunch. I had pulled many jackfish from the lake when I was young, so I knew it shouldn't be too hard. It took about 20 minutes, most of the time which I spent casting on the core-point, and I eventually caught a fish. It was a smaller pike, but I think that most of the pike in the lake had been genetically affected by over-fishing of the larger pike, and leaving the smaller ones to reproduce, so that most of the pike were now of a smaller size. But it was a decent size for lunch for one person.

I quickly filleted the fish, while boiling some water to cook some noodles. I then fried the fish. It was a tasty shore lunch, and restored my energy levels. This was a good thing, as the rain had been increasing from a scattered drizzle, to more of a steady light shower.

I packed up my belongings and headed back for the town. I rode up a bit of the big hill, then pushed the bike up the remainder of the hill, once I got close to the top. I then rode through the abandoned DOT housing subdivision, and through the town, and back to Kiwanis beach. I decided to have a bit of a rest in the tent, and since the rain had increased, that was about the most sensible thing to do.

After a couple of hours, the rain had finally died off, and it looked like things would start to improve. I took the opportunity to ride around town, taking some more photographs.

I had made arrangements with Ken, a worker at the fuel agency, to catch a ride with him to the airport, at 5:00 PM, so he could fill my plane's fuel tanks.

Arriving at the fuel agency, I jumped in the truck and headed for the airport. Arriving at the airport, we pushed the plane closer to the fuel pump, and he filled it up. Driving back to town, we saw the RCMP truck on the road. We had seen the RCMP plane at the airport, as they had arrived to do a check on things around town. There was no worry about seat-belt laws in Uranium City, as we waved to the RCMP truck as we passed them on the road, with our shoulder belts hanging at the side.

Weather conditions had really started to improve, and blue sky was becoming more visible. As with anything, bad weather would soon pass, followed by the hoped for clear blue northern sky. I took the opportunity to continue to ride around town, and stopped off at the Fredette Creek Falls to admire the scenery.

It was now time to check out the hospital, which I had been told was still standing, although I had assumed that it was going to be demolished shortly after it closed down, two years ago. I went around to the back of the hospital, and found a door that was opened, so I could go inside for a tour. Unlike the high-school, the hospital hadn't been totally trashed, which was good to see that the building might remain in reasonably good shape. It was probably also a sign of just a complete lack of people in the town: there was nobody left who cared to do such vandalism anymore, and everyone living there just wanted to make the community a good place to live in, and enjoy their lives.

The evening sky had cleared right out, but I noted that the temperature was also dropping, faster than the previous evening. At 8 O'clock, it was 11 degrees, and bound to get colder with a clearer sky. Getting into my sleeping bag, I noted that I hadn't expected this cool weather, and had a minimum of warmer clothing with me. I piled various clothes on top of the sleeping bag to try and keep the heat in, while sleeping. It was definitely a cool night.

I found out later on that the temperature had dropped to 3 degrees during the night, which is a bit cool for late July, and certainly fairly cool to be sleeping in a tent. I think the manufacturers of cold weather sleeping bags really mean: "if you go to sleep in this sleeping bag, while wearing all the clothes that you would wear when going outside in a temperature that is the same as the temperature limitation of this sleeping bag, then you will be warm."

I woke up in the morning and cooked some oatmeal for breakfast once again. I video-taped a loon calling in the water, just off the beach. I noted that the weather was kind of hazy or smoky, although it wasn't really cloudy. I hoped there wouldn't be any delays with my trip. I was planning to fly to Fort Chipewyan, and take a break, then fly on to Fort McMurray, later in the day.

I packed up all my gear, and loaded the bike. For a living souvenir, I dug up a few of the wild strawberry plants, and placed them into a Ziploc bag, to take down south with me.

(I am proud to report that they appear to have taken root in Calgary, and we shall see if they actually produce some strawberries.) I departed for the airport. Arriving at the plane, I started to load the gear into it. I checked the fuel tanks, which had been filled up the day before, and I noted that I had lost some fuel from the one tank. This could explain why I had a strong smell of gasoline inside the plane, and why my sandals had seemed to be smelling of gasoline.

I noted that there was a drip of gasoline beneath the plane's fuselage, although the tanks were located in the wings. I deduced that there must be some sort of leak that is leaking gasoline to the bottom of the plane. I couldn't understand why the inside of the plane smelled so badly, or how gasoline got on my sandals, as that would imply that gas was staying inside the plane, which I assumed must be impossible.

I took note of the gasoline problem, and noted that I was about 4 gallons short of fuel. I walked over to the payphone and called up the Edmonton flight control center. I discussed that I planned to fly to Fort Chipewyan, then Fort McMurray, but he informed me that Fort McMurray had low ceilings, and a steady rain. Conditions did not allow me to travel, although the rain was forecast to lift later on. But it could be some time until the weather improved.

I decided that I would tour around the area surrounding the old mine-site, and the surrounding areas, in order to pass some time. Flying a small plane forces a person to be completely flexible in their travel plans, should bad weather conditions force a delay, although they might really want to get to a destination. I followed one of the roads leading out from the airport, to see where it led.

The road quickly became overgrown with small trees, but it was still quite passable using a mountain-bike. I noticed that there were a fair amount of core samples, that had been piled up in racks. I had discovered the outdoor storage area for all the diamond-drilled core, that had been drilled by Eldorado Nuclear. There was a significant amount of core, stacked over a large area.

This was a treasure-chest of geological information, if it had been properly catalogued and inventoried, as to where it was taken from, so that people could do additional exploration. But now it was just a lot of cylindrical rocks, sitting in weathered boxes. I was going to take a couple of long samples home, but then I decided I didn't want to accidentally take a radioactive sample back home. It was still interesting to see the different layers and rock types.

I proceeded on down the road, but I wasn't quite sure which road I was going down. I had never lived in Eldorado, so this wasn't my "turf". I thought I would bike out to Donaldson Lake, but since I didn't have a map, I wasn't quite sure how far to go. I went a short distance, then followed some old mining road, ending up at a lake that was possible a tailings lake. A map sure would have helped!

I turned around, and after awhile, I stopped at a bridge to get some water from a creek that appeared to be coming from Ace Lake. I then prepared some noodles for lunch. I then toured around the old mine-site, that had been completely reclaimed, other than some concrete pads that were still remaining.

Getting back to the airport, I phoned the flight control center, and they said that the forecast for Fort McMurray was still poor. The rain would probably stay around until the morning, so it didn't look like I could get there tonight. Since it was 3:00 PM, I decided that I would just fly to Fort Chipewyan, and spend the night at the hotel. Sure I could survive in the bush if I had to, but I had a taste for the finer things in life too, and a couple of nights in a tent was enough. I had seen enough of Uranium City, and it was time to start the trip home.

I departed for Fort Chipewyan, but first I circled the town to take a few pictures. From the air, it still was a town, although the abandoned parts were looking less recognizable than they had been in the past, due to more trees growing bigger, and less houses remaining. I then flew towards the north, to look over the country-side around Don Lake, which I had biked to. Another flight past Uranium City, and I then turned to the west, to follow the north shoreline of Lake Athabasca, towards Fort Chipewyan. The weather conditions were not as favourable as I had hoped, and I couldn't get the desired photos of the blue lakes surrounding the town, with the blue sky in the distance, as the hazy air, limited my visibility.

I noticed some interesting features as I flew along the shore-line: storms would force sand against the inlets of small creeks, temporarily damming them up, until enough water accumulated to break a new channel of the creek, into Lake Athabasca. But the really interesting features were viewed closer to Fort Chipewyan, as the Peace-Athabasca Delta, formed an interesting pattern of river channels, in the grassy plains surrounding Fort Chipewyan.

Landing in Fort Chipewyan, I reassembled my bike, packed a change of clothes, and headed for town. I checked into the hotel, and had a nice hot shower. The hotel was reasonable accomadation, and the window had a nice view of the lake. I then went downstairs to the restaurant, and ordered a nice greasy hamburger, along with some French fries smothered in gravy. Given my extended bike riding, I was due for a recharge of calories, and a large serving of greasy food, definitely fit the bill.

I wandered around Fort Chipewyan a bit. I was surprised to find that the streets had all been paved, making the town fairly clean. I could see similarities to Uranium City, although Uranium City was not located in a province as rich as Alberta, that could afford to pave every small town's roads. I then returned to the hotel, and settled in for a good sleep, in a reasonably comfortable bed.

The next day consisted of numerous calls to the flight control center. The rainy weather system had socked in, and Fort McMurray was still not possible to fly to. Unfortunately, that meant that I couldn't fly past Fort McMurray, as the cloud was still in the way, and

wouldn't allow a detour. And I had to stop in Fort McMurray, as I didn't have enough fuel to make it to Edmonton. So I just had to wait it out.

There really wasn't that much to do in Fort Chipewyan. I toured around the lake shore, and saw where the winter road entered the town. There were some old buildings, indicating that the town definitely had an old fur-trading history, in its desirable location at the junction of the Peace and Athabasca rivers, which joined to flow north to the Slave River, and ultimately form the MacKenzie River.

Finally at around 4:30 PM, the control center declared the conditions were reasonable enough to fly in. I had started to get behind schedule, as the plane was due back in Calgary, the next day. So my plan now was to fly to Edmonton, and spend the night at my relatives place in Fort Saskatchewan.

I took off for Fort McMurray, and conditions were indeed marginal as I approached the city, with scattered showers and low clouds. Thus I have confidence that the flight control people know what they are talking about when they say that the weather is poor, and a person shouldn't fly. I dodged some low clouds around Fort McMurray, and then landed the plane, and taxied to the Esso Aviation, to fill up the tanks. I watched a helium filled blimp, do some takeoffs and landings at the airport. It was giving rides to people, and was impressive to watch, as it did a steep ascent to its cruising altitude.

I then departed for Edmonton, where relatives picked me up at a small air-strip located at the east side of the city. When I returned in the morning, I discovered that the plane was still smelling of gas, and I still had leak problems. But because I had been flying and trying to use the left tank more than the right tank, I had drawn more fuel out, in order to avoid leaking out more fuel than absolutely necessary.

I departed for the final stretch of the journey, back to Calgary. The trip was uneventful, and I landed at the Springbank airport. There I discovered that my shoes which had been lying on the floor behind my seat, had actually soaked up some gasoline, which explained the strong smell of gasoline. The manager took the plane in for immediate servicing, and it was discovered that a loose fitting on a fuel-line, had been leaking gasoline onto the floor-pan, underneath the carpet, and it was in turn leaking out the bottom of the fuselage.

But the trip had been relatively trouble free, although the weather conditions were a little poorer than hoped for. Still, the weather was always a gamble, and you never knew when good or bad weather might cause problems. Certain years, the weather could easily have been a week of sunny, hot weather. Thankfully it wasn't a steady downpour, which could also have been a possibility.

As for the desired ideal photographic conditions, they would have to wait for another trip. I had lots of pictures to remember the blue skies, from previous trips, but there was always room for a few more photos. I was fortunate that the town appeared like it would still continue on for a few more years, which allow me those future trips back, despite the fact that many people had always felt that the town would soon close down.

Maybe with the increased mineral exploration in the area, the high cost of recreational properties in the rest of Canada, the scenic outdoor setting, and the relative proximity to over-populated Fort McMurray, the town was just getting a second lease on life. Perhaps it could still continue on for some time, although it was predicted to close once the hospital left.

Uranium City lives on in people's memories, and it still lives on as a real town, that people can go back to visit. It just takes some effort to go back, but it is still interesting. It is not the same as it was, so each person must make up their own mind on what they expect to see, and what memories they want to remember.