



Treaty party at Split Lake in 1930; making lunch. The school is in the background.

Chapter 3

Adapting to Outside Influences

Split Lake in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s

DURING THE 1920s, the way of life of the Split Lake Cree remained, much as it had for generations, within the ongoing process of gradual adaptation and change that had enabled the self-sustenance of the people since time immemorial. The *Ininewuk* continued to utilize their traditional territory in the manner, and according to the rhythms their forefathers had followed. However, external factors were beginning to intrude and make their presence felt.

The final Adhesions to Treaty 5 were signed by the Deer Lake, Fort Churchill and York Factory First Nations in 1910.¹² Two years later in 1912, Manitoba's boundaries were extended north to the 60th parallel, increasing the province's land base by over 180,000 square miles.¹³ This set the stage for the development of northern lands and resources by non-Aboriginal outsiders.

Although the Cree had been adapting successfully for more than a century to changes introduced into their way of life by Europeans, most notably through the fur trade, the 1920s saw the start of an acceleration in the pace and nature of such change. Two examples discussed by Split Lake Elders could be considered a portent of what was to come.

Figure 7 (opposite): Split Lake Registered Trapline Zone.



Reverend Dewdney amidst the congregation at Split Lake in 1929.

Some of the Elders spoke of a mysterious 'plague-like' illness that killed many Split Lake Cree over a four month period in the early 1920s. Many people starved and others suffered tending to the dead and dying. While the cause of the disease is not known, it is speculated that it was part of the deadly world-wide influenza epidemic of 1918 making its way to northern Manitoba and Split Lake.¹⁴

One story suggests that it may have been a York Factory resident who inadvertently spread the disease when he travelled across the territory to warn people at Split Lake not to visit York Factory, where the illness was running rampant. Whatever the cause, people suffered greatly and it has been only recently that the Elders have found it possible to talk about "the time of death".

In the late 1920s, for the first time, some children from Split Lake were sent out to residential schools. They went to Elkhorn and Birtle, Manitoba and some went out-of-province to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Usually the eldest child in the family was selected, with the parents consent, to attend such schools. Formal education at residential schools was for full days up to grade four. After that students spent half of the day in class with the remaining time taken up by farm labour. While the precise impact of the residential schools of this era is beyond the scope of this study, it appears that it had only a minimal disruptive effect on the teaching of traditional knowledge and skills to young people. It was by no means as devastating as the impact wrought by residential school attendance in the 1960s when greater numbers of

children attended, and other modernizing factors also played a part.

However, by far the most significant development at this time, which was to open the door to all future change, was the completion in 1929 of the railway line through Split Lake Cree traditional lands to Churchill.

Hudson Bay Railway

Canadian National Railways (then the Canadian Northern Railway) began construction of a line from Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan in 1906 and by 1918 had completed the track as far as Wabowden, 106 kilometres southeast of present day Thompson.¹⁵ The Pas, 300 kilometres southwest of Thompson, which had been a fur trading post, agricultural centre and mission, became a divisional point on the railway. By 1916 it had become the economic and administrative centre of the north.¹⁶ Forestry, mining, and rail line employment were its key industries and by 1921 its population had grown to over 1,800.¹⁷

The rail line had been extended to Churchill by 1929, crossing northeasterly through the Split Lake Cree's traditional territory and introducing a new technology into their way of life.¹⁸ Even though the Elders speak of the railway as a largely beneficial development, it also brought other less desirable features that the people would soon learn were associated with all of the externally-driven developments. The plan to build the railway and the selection of the right-of-way were not matters on which Split Lake Cree were consulted. There was no apparent consideration of any adverse effects that might be related to this incursion across the resource area. No record exists of any thought of compensating Split Lake Cree for this use of their traditional lands for the primary benefit of outsiders.

The railway was built for the primary purpose of transporting grain to tidewater, where it was stored for later shipment overseas, and its construction and operation was a key step in opening up the north to development. A significant number of northern Cree, including many from Split Lake who were

noted as some of the hardest workers, worked on the construction of the railway and subsequently settled along the line to take advantage of seasonal employment and transportation. Railway employment introduced Split Lake Cree to cash remuneration and the goods and services it could purchase. It also took them away from traditional activities.

The various communities that arose at railway section or divisional points quickly became places of contact and settlement for Split Lake Cree. Some families moved to these communities and often remained there throughout their working lives, although they generally returned to Split Lake to retire. Others obtained supplies and traded furs at these settlements. Ilford, 55 kilometres southeast of Split Lake and accessible from Split Lake by the Aiken River, became a major point of contact with the outside world. Another important settlement was Gillam, 85 kilometres to the east which was directly accessible by rail from Ilford and Bird.

Indeed, the railway played a significant role in increasing and maintaining contact with the outside world. By the 1940s more and more Split Lake Cree were participating in the wage economy. During the Second World War, as the labor force shrank reflecting the demands of Canada's participation in the war, the railway hired men from Split Lake to work as section men. Men were also hired to go south in the summer months to help harvest the crops on the farms. Some men from Split Lake also saw action in the war.

In addition, contact increased with the Department of Indian Affairs and the Manitoba Department of Natural Resources, from their offices in Ilford. Chief and Council began to travel more on outside business. Ilford remained the main point of contact through these

decades, although Gillam had a significant presence as well. The Pas was still visited for medical emergencies and for the delivery of babies.

Resource Harvesting, the Economy, and Government Involvement

Despite this increased contact, the nature, mode and range of resource harvesting continued much as before at Split Lake. Its primary purpose and greatest value continued to be self-sustenance, rather than commercial gain. However, both the federal and provincial governments gradually started to become more actively involved in the regulation of harvesting activities.

The federal Natural Resources Transfer Act came into force in 1930. By virtue of this legislation, Manitoba received title to all of the lands and resources within its boundaries, subject to outstanding treaty land entitlement and to Aboriginal rights to hunt, trap and fish for food on unoccupied Crown land.¹⁹ Subsequent developments have shown that Manitoba was eager to exercise the rights of ownership, but was rather less observant of the related responsibility associated with the obligation to protect Aboriginal rights. Indeed, the historical record does not show the province having any great concern to protect these rights. Rather, it seems to have been primarily interested in seeking ways of controlling trapping activities.

During the depression years of the 1930s, many white men came north looking for work and to get away from the bleak economic conditions in the south. Some of the people involved in the construction of the rail line stayed in the north. A lot of these men decided to try their hand at trapping.

Beaver and marten were the most



Left to right: Billy Wavey, William Wavey and Horace Morris having tea on the trail.

commonly trapped furbearers at this time. However, excessive demand, resulting from good prices as well as non-native trapping pressures, led to beaver becoming over-harvested. The government imposed a quota system to deal with the depletion of the beaver population and Northwest Mounted Police officers began confiscating pelts, sometimes without regard for eligible quotas. As a result, significant quantities of beaver could only be trapped in the far northern regions along the Churchill River and beyond.

The new rail transportation link was making a difference both for the Hudson's Bay Company and for free traders, who saw possible profits in the fur business. Many such trappers began to find their way into what had once been exclusive trapping territory for the Split Lake Cree and other northern First Nations. This influx of white trappers made the need to share the lands and resources a much more tangible reality. Unfortunately, with little planning or consultation, and inattention to existing Cree rights and usages, the influx disturbed the delicate balance between the Cree and their environment, resulting in avoidable damages.

Despite the increasing intrusion of external influences on the Split Lake Cree way of life, traditional harvesting patterns generally continued. New technologies were adapted to support traditional practices. Canvas canoes replaced those made of birch bark, and small-powered motors were introduced in the early 1930s. Beaver continued to be scarce throughout the 1930s, and were still available mainly in the vicinity of the Churchill River. The continuing scarcity was made worse by outside trappers who used poison

to kill the animals. The quota system remained in effect. The Northwest Mounted Police continued to make sudden searches and arbitrarily confiscate pelts.

In addition, with the introduction of a wolf cull program in the 1930s, the province further broadened its interference with traditional resource harvesting and management practices. The use of poison to kill the wolves, along with its use to harvest beaver, is reported by the Elders to have been deadly to other animals in the region. At the same time, Manitoba also indicated its intention to establish a registered trapline system in northern Manitoba, a development which was to have an impact upon the scope of traditional resource harvesting. This proposal to divide up the resource area into individual traplines was initially resisted by the Split Lake Cree.

Registered Trapline System Established

Long traditions had governed the allocation of lands and resources through arrangements among clan leaders and Chief and Council, with the decisions based upon the good of the collective whole, not on individual entitlements. According to the Elders, the provincial government people did not understand the communal aspects of the system traditionally used by the Split Lake Cree. Even though the new system was meant to keep out the non-Indian trappers, it was based on a concept of individual ownership, rather than the customary land use relationship. Chief Sam Cook warned that if parts of the resource area were allocated to certain trappers it would lead to tension and in-fighting.

A provincial representative, Jack Lundy of the Manitoba Department Natural Resources, who was fluent in Cree, persuaded the Split Lake



“The missionary and his wife are in the two sleighs. This is the post at Sand Lake - 65 miles north...” – Jack Harrison

Community Development

In the 1920s, Split Lake was still not a permanent settlement for most First Nation members, many of whom continued to live in the bush and return to the community only during Christian holiday seasons and the summer. About 100 people lived year-round at Split Lake. Recluse Lake was still the main settlement outcamp in the resource area where six to ten families lived. Kettle and Atkinson lakes were important gathering places in the spring for muskrat trapping.

The community of Split Lake was still in the early stages of development. Settlers were arriving from York Factory, where the wildlife resources had been depleted, and many Cree are reported to have come in an attempt to escape the worst influences of non-Aboriginal culture, which conflicted with traditional values. York boats still travelled up and down the Nelson River from Norway House. Their arrival in the community was a major event. As summer frosts were unusual in the region and the long hours of summer sunlight resulted in rapid germination, gardens were very successful and produced a rich abundance of crops.

The construction of a one-room school house in 1928 was an important community development leading to the expansion of formal education.

The Anglican Church maintained its influential social presence. A men’s guild and a guild for teenage girls were formed in 1928 to care for and maintain the church. A women’s auxiliary was established around the same time. It held quarterly meetings and provided many gifts of furnishings to the church.

Social problems were still the exception in the community. Bush life remained the centre of most Split Lake Cree’s existence. Wherever

Cree that the registered trapline system would be beneficial for them. It would prevent outsiders from harvesting their resources. In addition, he argued, Split Lake Cree trappers could be better assisted by the department, if it knew where they were located, for example, in case of emergencies.

The intent of the new system, at least with respect to conservation, may have been sound, but there was no real consultation with the Split Lake Cree beyond trying to convince them of the system’s merits and making many promises. While the system was sold to the people on the basis of its ability to keep the resource area for their use, in practice it resulted in provincial control of the resource area, with provincial game wardens essentially acting as a new type of ‘Indian Agent’ with very strong powers of enforcement.

Notwithstanding their concerns, and with no effective alternative, the Split Lake Cree accepted the merits of controlling the intrusions into their homeland by outside trappers. Reluctantly, and after much local consideration, three Split Lake Cree Elders – Donald Flett, Judah Ouskan

and Isaac Spence – described and marked out the Split Lake Cree’s traditional resource area for the province. However, regardless of the information they provided about the extent of traditional occupation and usage, the creation of the registered trapline zone by Manitoba resulted in the formal reduction of the size of the traditional harvesting area. In the southwest the Sipiwesk Lake-Grass River region was allocated to Pikwitonei, although some of Split Lake trappers still retain lines in that area.

Nevertheless, despite the negative effects of the changes caused by the registered trapline system, the Elders also report that general harvesting traditions were maintained, albeit with progressively less time being spent on the land. Even though there was a greater permanency to the community, Split Lake Cree still made extensive use of much of their traditional resource area. Figure 7 opposite page 33 shows the Split Lake registered trapline zone.



Christmas festivities outside the old band hall.

they resided, the church and customary enforcement of practices and mores exerted a stabilizing influence.

Although Split Lake was still not treated as a year-round community in the 1930s, it continued to develop. Log cabins began to replace teepees and tents. Gardens continued to be cultivated. The fur buyer, Mike Hatley, opened a small store, competing with the Hudson's Bay Company, and was popular with local residents. Modern appliances like radios and wind-up phonographs made their first appearance.

The great depression, which economically devastated much of Canada in the 1930s, was only marginally felt in Split Lake, existing as it did on the margins of the mainstream Canadian economy. While a scarcity of store-bought items like flour and baking powder

were noticed, no one starved as there was always an availability of country foods.

The Anglican Church Minister, Reverend George Cowley, arrived in the community in 1930. He was to be a key figure in the Split Lake community for the next 25 years or so, acting as missionary, school teacher, doctor and generally as the 'Indian Agent'. Social stability continued. While non-Aboriginal influences were growing, Reverend Cowley and the Hudson's Bay Company manager were the only white residents. The presence of the Department of Indian Affairs was minimal despite the existence of the district office in Ilford. The work ethic was promoted and no alcohol was allowed on the reserve.

The community's composition and character remained much the same into the 1940s, although it continued to grow. Some people

began to move away from the outcamps, such as Recluse Lake, and to settle in the community to be nearer to Ilford which was the closest transportation and service centre. A seaplane base was constructed there. Outside resource harvesting activities increased in the Split Lake vicinity and in 1949 Indian Affairs built the first teacherage in the community.

Split Lake's social and cultural fabric remained strong, as Chief and Council and the Anglican Church both maintained their positions of authority and influence. Traditions continued, exemplified by the use made of medicine men who had special knowledge of the healing attributes of many plants and animal parts. Christian teachings continued as well and blended with traditional values.



Isaiah Mayham, Tubal Kirkness, William Flett, Billy Spence and Simeon Beardy



Fanny Dick, Susanna Flett, Labella Kirkness, Emily Nepitabo and Priscilla Kirkness

"Some of my class. 1930 - Split Lake, Manitoba"— Jack Harrison



Left to right: Oliver Lindal, Billy Wavey and Carl Muir outside the local store in Gillam. Late 1930s.



Left to right: In the foreground, Moodie Nepitabo, James Wavey, Jonah Flett (standing) and John Flett. 1930s.



Reverend George Cowley. c. 1935.



Left to right: Unknown man, Sarah Brightnose and George Brightnose. c. 1935.



Leaving the church after the Saunders' wedding in Split Lake. Late 1930s.

Community Governance

Just as the patterns of resource harvesting and community life gradually evolved over these decades, so too did the practice of local government. Much however was marked more by continuity than by change. Chief and Council was the respected authority in all social matters and opposition was rare. Social relations, such as marriages, were governed by Chief and Council, many of whom were Anglican clergy. These responsibilities were rooted very firmly in the traditional Cree understandings of the role of the leadership.

A larger, more permanent community population as the years passed required Chief and Council to spend more time and pay more attention to dealing with community matters that had been less important when people lived with fewer close neighbours. As a result of the increasing need to deal with the governments, Chief and Council were called upon more often to represent Split Lake Cree interests. For example, when the registered trapline system was being considered locally, Chief and Council both organized internal discussions and spearheaded the dealings with Manitoba.

There was still no permanent staff of the First Nation government, and all required government functions, whether executive, political or administrative, were carried out by Chief and Council, as had customarily been the case.

The peacekeepers continued to be influential, contributing considerably to the tranquillity and continuing mutual respect in the community. It seems most likely that it was early in this period that these positions started to be filled by election at the same time Chief and Council were elected.

Even though the structure of governance was rudimentary, it was entirely adequate and appropriate to meet the everyday needs of the Split Lake Cree. Its evolution continued within the essential concepts derived from the practice of generations of ancestors.

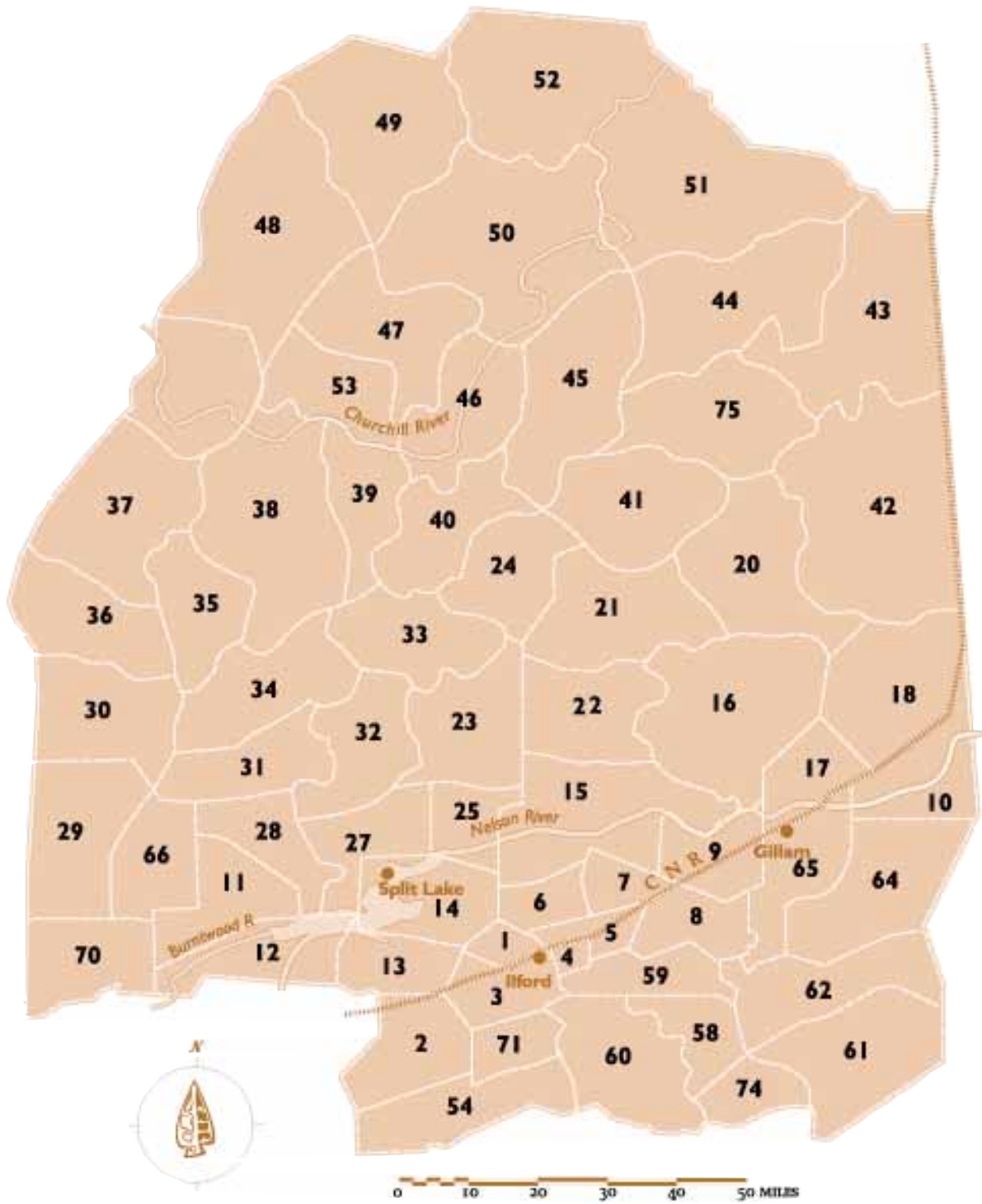


Left to right: Solomon Harvey, John Flett, Peter Beardy, Aaron Beardy and Jack Wavey camping on the trail to Split Lake. c. 1940s

Conclusion

The period up to 1950 brought many changes for the Split Lake Cree, a number of which challenged traditional ways of getting things done. The perceived disturbance related to the introduction by Manitoba of the registered trapline system has been noted. For all of the change, however, life continued within the known, respected and loved environment of the permanent

tribal homeland. Even though the changes strained the Split Lake Cree patterns of life, they did so to no greater extent than many other changes which the people had experienced and accommodated during their long occupation of the lands and waters. Unknown to the Split Lake Cree, however, more disturbing developments were just around the corner.



Split Lake Registered Trapline Zone