



The Lamont house in Split Lake. c.1950s.

Chapter 4

Traditional Lifestyle Changes

Split Lake in the 1950s

BEGINNING IN 1945, in addition to the registered trapline system, there were forces building up from outside Split Lake which were to have the effect of forcing the Split Lake Cree to adapt their way of life in a manner that had never happened before. National policies concerning Indian education and the introduction of the family allowance would have a major impact on the traditional lifestyle. Both mining development at Thompson and the need for more and more hydroelectric power in the south would also have far-reaching consequences on the lives and the lands of the Split Lake Cree.

Split Lake Cree Elders have characterized the 1950s as a period of important change in the history of their people. This change can be best described as the transition from a traditional way of life to a more

modern settled existence in the community at Split Lake, together with the disruption and need for adaptation that such change necessarily entailed.²⁰

Resource Harvesting and the Economy

While fur and fish harvesting activities continued over as large an area as before, notwithstanding registered trapline boundaries, several factors reduced the central importance of harvesting in the lives of the Split Lake Cree. Resource harvesting was increasingly regulated by Manitoba, and conservation officers suddenly became more noticeable, although the restrictions imposed were relatively minor, such as prohibiting the harvesting of tagged animals. Prices for fur, particularly beaver, began to plummet in the early 1950s



The Flett family at Muskrat Portage, Waskaiowaka Lake.

and trapping proved less remunerative. Caribou migration started to diminish, reducing hunting activity.

In addition, contrary to the forecast benefits of the registered trapline system, outsiders were intruding more and more into the resource area. Outside commercial fishermen like Duke Lindal and Bill Chorchinsky were fishing lakes traditionally harvested by Split Lake Cree, such as Waskaiowaka Lake where all of the lake trout eventually disappeared. A fishing lodge established on the lake by Indian Affairs passed through a succession of private owners.

Although the outside fishing companies introduced modern fishing equipment such as commercial nets and motor boats, and offered seasonal employment to some Split Lake Cree, they were inevitably competing for this important domestic resource. In other words, the introduction of outside commercial fishing

operations, which first focused on catching sturgeon in the Nelson River followed by whitefish and pickerel in Split Lake, was yet another external, uncompensated imposition on the traditional pursuits of the Split Lake Cree.

At the same time, both wage employment and social assistance increased. Wood cutting continued for the Hudson's Bay Company, and many Split Lake Cree also engaged in other kinds of employment, including freighting and maintenance work for the railway, as well as for Duke Lindal, and, in the late 1950s, clearing a route for the transmission line from Kelsey to service the new mining town of Thompson. This latter work was arranged by the Department of Indian Affairs. Whole families would move to the employment site. Split Lake Cree Elders recall that wages for the clearing project were very low or even non-existent, with labour essentially being bartered for food.

The federal government's introduction of family allowance at Split Lake, with the requirement of school attendance by the children, was another major factor in changing people's relationship with the lands and resources. Whereas in the past groups of families would go into the bush and trap together, now only the men undertook this activity. The women had to stay in the community to care for and raise the children who were attending school. Modern education brought its own rewards, but the failure to adapt the school year to the rhythms of Aboriginal life inevitably meant that the children lost continuity in their learning of traditional harvesting skills and knowledge. A knowledge gap began to exist between the young and the old, as it never had in the past.

Community Development

All of the pressures on traditional harvesting activities further increased the concentration of



Wedding of William and Illa Garson in Split Lake.

settlement and activity in and around the Split Lake community. Many of the numerous trapping and fishing camps scattered throughout the resource area were slowly abandoned as people settled in year-round communities, although there was still a significant settlement at Atkinson Lake. The community of Split Lake had grown to a population of more than 200 by the end of the decade.²¹

There was no electricity yet, but other significant developments occurred. Houses continued to be built of logs from locally available material and, during the 1950s, a log band hall was constructed. Two new small school buildings were built. The establishment of these facilities, in conjunction with increased school attendance, was a key impetus in the growth of a permanent community.

A nursing station was built in 1955, although births and other major medical procedures were still handled at the hospital in The Pas, which remained the centre for major services in the north. The existence of the nursing station tended to reduce the reliance on traditional medicines, although they were still used. Country foods were still a predominant part of the diet, as they

had been for generations, and continued to be stored in the ground.

Outside access was still mainly by rail through Landing River in the summer and Ilford in the winter. Mail was picked up once a week at the junction of the railway and Aiken River. Sigfusson Transport constructed hundreds of miles of winter roads in the resource area, and delivered supplies to the community by winter road on its way towards Southern Indian Lake. Dog-teams and canvas canoes were still the primary means of travel, but float planes and bombardiers had made their appearance and were used occasionally. More powerful boat motors were also introduced in this decade.

A considerable number of Split Lake Cree continued to go to Ilford to take advantage of employment there with the railway. This community was still the key point of contact with the outside world, although there was also continued interaction with other rail line communities where First Nation members worked, visited and traded. Ilford was the main supply centre for Split Lake, and Duke Lindal ran a store in the community.

Ilford also had political significance in the region as both the Department of Indian Affairs and the provincial Department of Natural Resources continued to maintain district offices there. In addition, it was a major place of social contact with friends and relatives.

York Landing was established in 1957 on the southern end of Split Lake when members of the York Factory First Nation were relocated there by Indian Affairs. This created another community where people could visit neighbours who shared some of the same ancestors, the 'Home Guard Cree' of York Factory.

Many Split Lake Cree became enfranchised both as a result of working at outside wage employment and in order to obtain the legal right to drink alcohol. The destructive effects of this strongly government-encouraged but relatively poorly understood practice of enfranchisement, were not dealt with until treaty status was again made possible with the passage of Bill C-31 in 1985.

Even though times were changing, traditional knowledge and beliefs still prevailed. The people continued to oppose alcohol. Although Reverend Cowley left the community during this decade, the Anglican Church maintained its strong presence and church attendance remained important. By 1950, the church's women's auxiliary had a large membership. Salt pork and other foods were distributed by the priest every Friday. Generally, there was a high degree of community cohesion, a system of curfews, and few social problems, although drinking outside of the community was starting to become a concern.



Split Lake Cree men hauling freight from the Landing River portage on the Aiken River.

Community Governance

Chief and Council continued to exert leadership and influence, with the Chief now acting as local magistrate. Nevertheless, the passing of Chief Sam Cook in the 1950s, who had led the First Nation since the 1930s, was taken as a sign that the old ways were changing.

The stresses of the 1950s, attributable to the heightened pace of exploitation of the resources of the region by outsiders, were imposed on a structure of governance which was poorly equipped to manage such relatively rapid and unknown change. Little practical advice and support was available from the governments, which tended to either ignore the impacts, or to view them as 'short term pain for long term gain'. Outside, independent advisors, who might have assisted the Split Lake Cree Chief and Council in the

autonomous exercise of their responsibilities, were unheard of.

Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties, central dimensions of continued self-governance, in the form of the peacekeepers and the consideration of matters of community import in general band membership meetings, were maintained, and in retrospect quite probably strengthened as they had no choice but to come to grips with new problems.

First Hydroelectric Development

Of all externally-imposed factors for change, hydroelectric development was destined by the geography of northern Manitoba and the growing energy demands of industrial Canadian society to have the most significant impact on the Split Lake Cree. There is certainly bitter irony in the nature and extent

of these impacts given the usual description of hydroelectricity as a 'clean' source of power. Unknowingly and without consultation, hydroelectric development was to result in serious disruption of and changes to the way of life of the Cree of northern Manitoba. Unfortunately, it also neglected to take into consideration the requirement to protect Aboriginal rights.

Until 1960, hydro power development in northern Manitoba consisted of the Laurie River I and II generating stations with a combined capacity of only 10 megawatts. These were developed by Sherritt Gordon Mines to provide electricity for its mining operations and the townsite at Lynn Lake,²² and were unknown to and had no effect on the Split Lake Cree.

In 1956 construction began on a larger hydro facility, the Kelsey dam

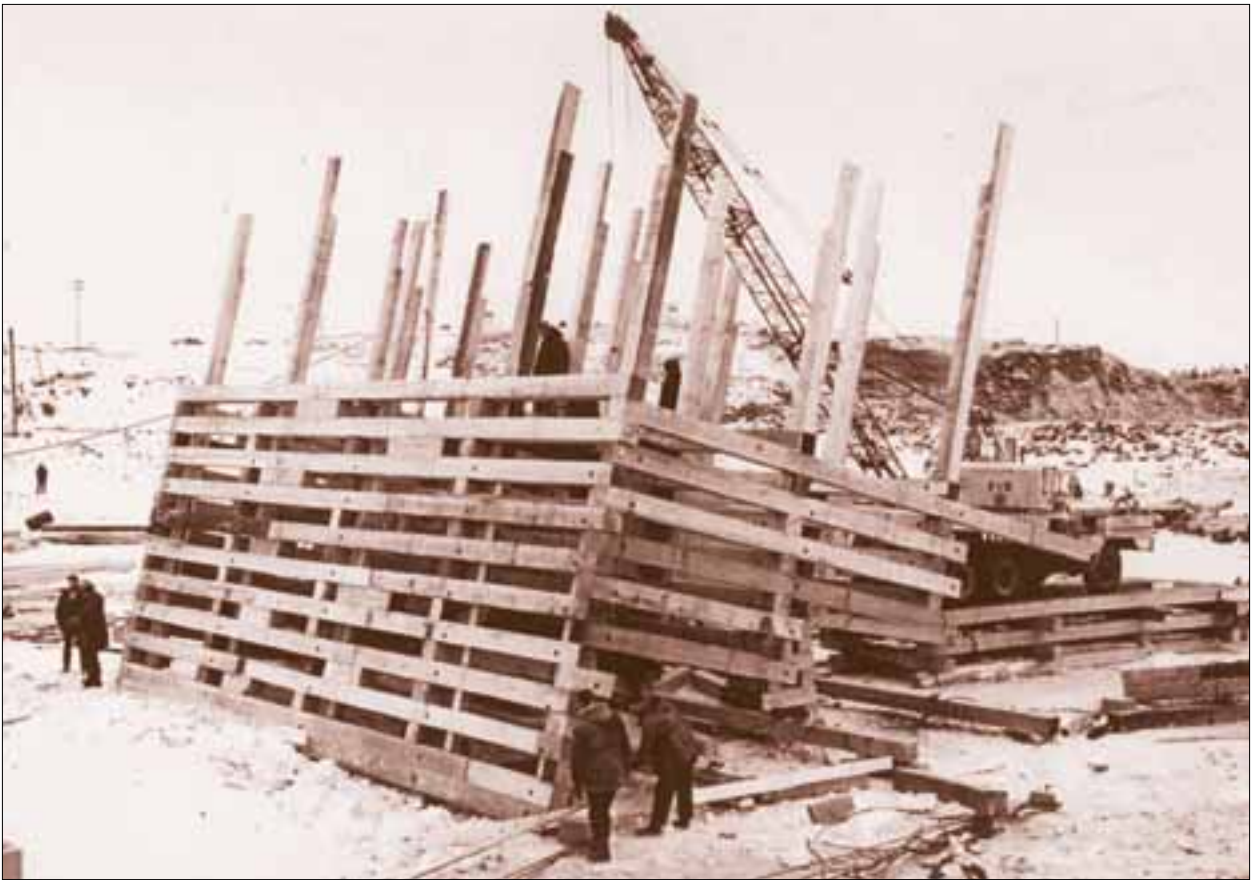


Start of the dock construction at Kelsey from which scows would carry material across the river. September 1957.

and generating station on the upper Nelson River. It came into operation in 1960 with a generating capacity of 160 megawatts. This station was not connected to the southern systems, and was built to provide power to the INCO mining establishment and the new town of Thompson. Located just 40 kilometres south of Split Lake community, this was the first direct experience Split Lake Cree had with the powerful and destructive effects of hydroelectric development.

The Kelsey generating station was a forerunner to the major hydroelectric projects of the following decades, and represented the initial phase of what would become known as the Lake Winnipeg Regulation-Churchill River Diversion project, which began in the late 1960s and would have such a major impact on the lands, waters and livelihood of the Split Lake Cree.

The Kelsey project was developed without any consultation with the Split Lake Cree, either as to its construction or its impacts. They were concerned, but did not know how to deal with Manitoba Hydro. This was a decade of rapid change for the Split Lake Cree, and they were occupied with coming to grips with its challenges and problems. With very little understanding or information about the nature or effects of such a hydroelectric development project, some people thought that the development might be a good idea as it would provide sorely needed work. In any event, Kelsey was completed, establishing the pattern of ignoring Split Lake Cree rights and interests, and failing to provide compensation for damages until much later. It was a pattern that long continued to characterize hydro developments within the resource area.



Kelsey, March 14, 1958. The coffer dam crib for the last tailrace, ready for launching.

Conclusion

The changes of the 1950s described in this chapter undoubtedly required the Split Lake Cree to undergo much adaptation. They were forced by circumstances beyond their control to live in one central location all year round to an extent that previous generations never had. This not only caused major changes to their traditional resource harvesting practices, but also created new requirements for people living in an unfamiliar physical, and social environment.

While pressure grew even greater to keep the children in school, and families in the community, there was no concerted effort to facilitate the type of local economic opportunities that could provide a self-reliant alternative to the traditional way of life.

Nevertheless, while the people adapted to their new conditions, including the increased cash requirements of the economy, there still continued to be strong reliance on the traditional use of lands and waters, despite pressures for modernization. The way of life may have been changing, but the underlying Aboriginal values remained. Moreover, the full effects of Kelsey had not yet been felt as the decade drew to a close. While the stresses on Split Lake Cree society were more noticeable, the people's traditional resilience in the face of change was still supporting their adaptation to the changes within an understood, albeit evolving environment.