John the Baptist Anglican Church, built in the mid-1960s by Split Lake residents.

Chapter 5

Advent of the Modern Era

Split Lake in the 1960s

Split Lake Cree Elders have portrayed this phase of Split Lake Cree history as relatively stable after the changes of the 1950s, as a time of more calm community growth and modernization.[23] There were, of course, still increasing pressures and influences from the outside world. Not least, this decade saw the establishment of two new communities within the resource area, as well as the direct experience of hydroelectric development impacts.

Resource Harvesting and the Economy

Wildlife and fish gathering activities still extended beyond the northern and southern limits of the registered trapline zone, but fewer people would range this far. Nevertheless, trapping remained an important activity and the return of a trapper after months on the trapline was a significant community event, as the men went to visit the successful trapper in his home. Fur prices remained depressed, as reflected in the records of low remuneration received by Split Lake trappers during the 1960s. The commercial fishery on Split Lake continued, but with somewhat erratic catch and financial returns. The Elders have observed that the porcupine disappeared during the late 1960s. Resource harvesting was still pursued primarily for domestic sustenance purposes and affirmation of traditional ways, rather than for commercial gain.

Wood hauling, building log cabins and freighting were the main sources of wage employment. In addition, employment on the rail line still attracted a significant number of Split Lake Cree families. From the perspective of an economist, Split Lake Cree lived on the margins of the modern economy, with a growing but still relatively weak attachment to its cash basis. In financial terms the people were poor, but their continuing use of available natural resources for domestic purposes meant that life was less hard than a simple assessment of financial means would suggest.

The introduction of social assistance for adults, primarily for married couples, in the form of vouchers or cash, provided some modest relief from the scarcity of cash. However, the availability of social assistance also resulted in more Split Lake Cree reducing the amount of time they spent away from the community trapping, hunting and fishing. More and more people were leading an increasingly sedentary and dependent life in the community.

The increase in cash income did not result in a marked change in consumption patterns. The community store was still relatively small and was only restocked in winter. As well, with little electricity, there were no refrigerators in the homes for food preservation. Country foods like moose, fish and beaver continued to make up most meals, supplemented by oats, tea, and bannock.

Split Lake Cree remained largely dependent upon the natural environment, as they had always been, for their recreational and leisure activities. Access to the outside world was limited and travel was expensive. Even though the effects of the operation of Kelsey were noticeable, people maintained their confidence in the quality of the waters, which are reported to have still been relatively clear, and which were relied upon for drinking, other domestic purposes, swimming and boating. Shorelines were used extensively for camping and picnicking, and the bird life around the community was extensive. A favourite activity for young Split Lake Cree was to search for minnows between the rocks in the shallow water along the shoreline.

Community Development

Centred on the peninsula, the Split Lake community continued to modernize. It started to become a more formal, planned community with the completion of a planning study by Underwood McLellan Associates in 1966. Figure 8 shows the extent of community development at that time. The on-reserve population was 368, 57% of whom were young people.[24] Some modern homes were being built and 15 amp diesel electrical service was introduced. This was enough to power a few electric lights and a radio. Wood stoves were still relied on for cooking and heating. For the first time radio programming broadcast from Thompson included some Cree language content.

A new four-room school house was constructed, but after grade six most children were sent to Indian Affairs residential schools in Dauphin, Brandon, Cranberry Portage or Norway House. When they returned to the community, few took up the traditional life of their Elders, and many had lost their mother tongue. Some slowly regained it; others never did. The residential school experience widened the generation gap between Elders and young people.

This was a time of significant natural turbulence. In the early 1960s, a huge forest fire threatened the reserve. There was a major flood on Split Lake in 1966 which raised the level to elevation 553 feet, that was five feet or more above the long-term average. While these events threatened the community for their duration, people accepted them as natural occurrences that were expected in the centuries old relationship between man and nature, which was certainly not always benign.

There was no road access to the community yet, and few, if any, cars on the reserve. Travel by dog-team continued, but snowmobiles became more common. The use of motorized boats expanded further. In both cases, the traditional paths and travel routes, over the open or frozen waters, remained the principal transportation corridors within the resource area and to the outside world. These were travelled in safety and with confidence.

Although the community was modernizing, social problems are not noted by the Elders to have been prevalent. There was still a respect for traditional values and authority, as illustrated by regular church attendance, the significant role of the priests and by evening curfews. When necessary, individuals were assisted in physical chores like wood cutting and water hauling. The community was still close-knit and traditional, celebrating seasonal community events together. Children would visit the school teachers, not least to see the wonders of new technologies such as vacuum cleaners in their modern homes. Wood was gathered for the church in the early fall, when a community feast was also staged.

There were few visitors to the community, which retained many of its traditional Cree customs. In 1969, a major community event was the meeting between then Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chrétien and Split Lake Cree on the reserve.

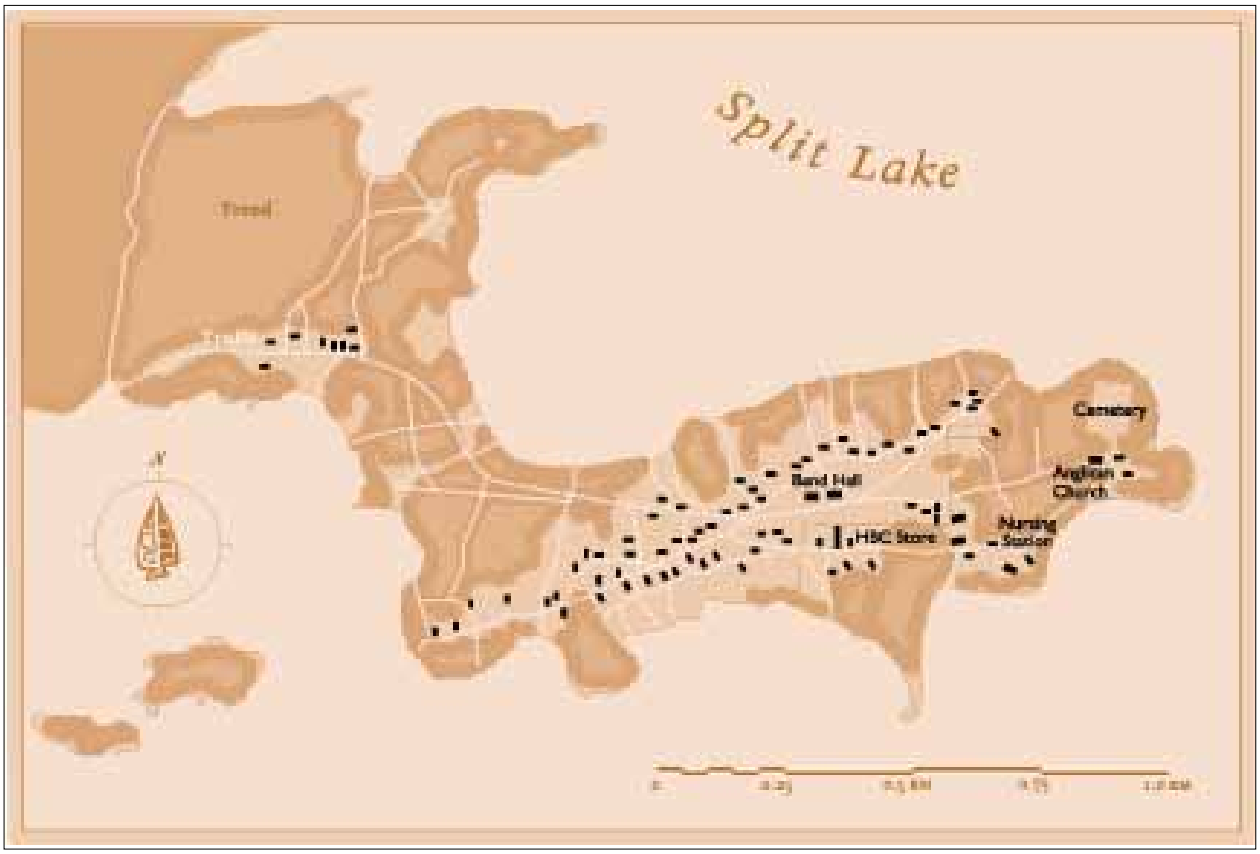

Figure 8: Extent of Split Lake Community Development in 1966.

New Communities

The emergence of two new communities playing major roles in the resource area brought Split Lake Cree into further contact with the modern world.

Gillam, once a small divisional point on the Hudson Bay railway, was a thriving modern town by the late 1960s. It was developed by Manitoba Hydro as an operational base for the Kettle Rapids generating station and the future planned hydroelectric facilities downstream on the lower Nelson River. It was inhabited primarily by Manitoba Hydro personnel. Many Cree in the resource area, attracted by wage labour opportunities, moved to the townsite. These were mainly Fox Lake First Nation members, but some Split Lake Cree also moved there. The settlement at Atkinson Lake was practically vacated by members of both of these First Nations in favour of Gillam.

Thompson was the other community that began to play an important role after 1960. There had been mining activity in northern Manitoba for several decades. From the discovery of gold at Herb Lake near The Pas in 1914 and sulphide ores in the vicinity of Flin Flon in 1915, to the development of nickel and copper mines at Lynn Lake in the early 1950s, the mining industry had been a major catalyst of northern development and settlement.[25] However, none of this had had significant impact on the Split Lake Cree until Thompson.

In 1956, nickel deposits were found, after a decade of exploratory drilling by INCO, in the Cook Lake area.[26] This lead to the development of the huge INCO mines and the establishment in 1960 of the town of Thompson which grew rapidly. Thompson quickly became the administrative and service centre of northeastern Manitoba and, located 140 kilometres by air southwest of Split Lake, its influence would soon become pervasive. However, this was not felt immediately by the Split Lake Cree.

Train access to Thompson from Split Lake was available through Landing River by way of the Aiken River, but initially there was no road connection. It was not until the late 1960s, when an airport was built at Split Lake and scheduled air service was started, that Thompson became more influential. Unlike the experience with the railway, it is notable that few, if any, Split Lake Cree were employed at the INCO mines. The reasons for this are hard to pin down definitively, although lack of local interest in working underground and the impossibility of simultaneously maintaining mining employment and the

Squared log house on the peninsula built by William Wavey in the early 1950s.

Round log house built by Robert Wavey on the peninsula.

This stained glass window sits above the altar in John the Baptist Church. From the original old log church in Split Lake, it was donated by the women's auxiliary.

traditional way of life, as well as the mining company preference for hiring experienced miners, all undoubtedly played a role. The fact that INCO hiring took place in The Pas was also a factor. Thompson would have progressively greater influence on the Split Lake Cree way of life in following decades, and the early signs of this future role were already inescapable.

In spite of the expanding influences of Thompson and Gillam, Ilford still continued to be the key service/supply centre and point of external contact for the Split Lake Cree in the 1960s. Its easy accessibility by the Aiken River either by winter road or by seaplanes operated by Ilford-Riverton Airways and its direct rail link to the outside assured its ongoing importance in this period.

Hydroelectric Development

As noted in the previous chapter, starting in 1960 the operation of the Kelsey generating station made Manitoba Hydro's presence well-known in the Split Lake resource area. Kelsey flooded land for a distance of 150 kilometres upstream of Split Lake along the Nelson River, affecting 14,250 acres of northern boreal forest. Little, if any, of the shoreline was cleared and tons of debris, trees and soil entered the Nelson River increasing its sediment load. Traditional hunting areas on the upper Nelson River, in particular Goose Hunting Lake and as far as Sipiwesk Lake, were lost to Split Lake Cree hunters. The dam raised forebay water various levels up to 30 feet at the site of the former rapids.

Kelsey was a 'run of the river' project which harnessed only a modest portion of the total Nelson River, and did not greatly change the levels and flows of the downstream reach of the river. However, Split Lake residents noticed many adverse effects. The water in Split Lake seemed to be less clear, and algae became more common. There was more debris both downstream of the dam on the Nelson River and in Split Lake. After heavy rains water levels on Split Lake seemed to rise faster. In 1968 a winter fire at the dam site caused the release of stored up water and substantially raised elevations on Split Lake, causing slush ice. These effects started the process of undermining the confidence that the people had always had in the quality and safety of their waters.

The commercial and domestic

Long Spruce dam and generating station was the third plant built in the Split Lake resource area. Started in 1971, the first units went into service in 1977. It is located 16 kilometres downstream of Kettle.

winter levels were increased by an average of nearly three feet while summer levels were reduced by about three-quarters of a foot. A greater frequency of water fluctuation also resulted.

According to the testimony of the Elders, each part of Hydro's project, particularly Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion and the Kettle dam and generating station, caused a large range of impacts, from bio-physical to cultural and social, in a domino-like fashion.

Biophysical Effects

Terrestrial and shoreline habitat was either destroyed by flooding or rendered inhospitable for wildlife and human use by water level and flow changes. Flooded shorelines along the diversion route introduced mud, silt, vegetation and wood debris into the waterways and made the water dirtier. The projects drastically altered the ice regime. Ice now formed later in the year and break-up came earlier. Higher winter water flows caused thin ice and slush ice which resulted in perilous travel conditions according to Split Lake Cree. Fluctuating water levels in winter resulted in very dangerous ice conditions, for example on Stephens Lake, where water levels varied by as much as six feet in one week. The seasonal reversal of water flows, combined with debris, limited shoreline access and water-based transportation.

The waterways had been the most travelled transportation routes. The developments of the 1970s effectively left the Split Lake Cree with much reduced, more costly and less safe access to their territory. The negative effects experienced with respect to the waterways, on which the Split Lake Cree had always relied, explains why the Cree came to call Manitoba Hydro "the flooder", or *o-inski-poo-chi-kayoo* in Cree.

These extensive bio-physical impacts of hydroelectric development affected every facet of the First Nation's use of its traditional lands and waters and shook its cultural identity to the very roots.

Harvesting Effects

Commercial and domestic harvesting activities were seriously affected. Fur bearers and waterfowl were destroyed, or driven from their ruined habitats. Moose, deer, and lynx were forced upland as the shorelands could no longer support them. Fish habitat was changed by the increased turbidity, and the relative abundance of various species changed. Mercury contamination of fish, particularly in Stephens Lake, became a problem, and Split Lake Cree were advised not to eat certain species.

There was a local perception that the fur and fish that were caught were of inferior quality. Trapping

and fishing now required significantly greater effort and expense to produce a reasonable return. Winter ice conditions, particularly slush ice, was reported to have been a costly problem for fur trappers. The cost of fishing increased dramatically as boats and motors were damaged by debris and shoreline conditions, and nets had to be cleaned or repaired because of fouling by algae, silt, mud and other debris. More expensive aluminum boats now had to be used. On the Churchill River, the dewatering of lakes damaged fish habitat. For example, Billard Lake could not be commercially fished after 1976. The Butnau River diversion into the Kettle River, completed as part of the Kettle dam development, made the water more turbid and damaged domestic fishing in the lower Kettle River.

Changed Water Quality

People could not drink the lake and river water, as had always been their practice, without feeling they were getting sick. As a result they became afraid to eat any fish they caught. The changes to the source of the peoples' drinking water completed the loss of confidence in the wholesomeness and safety of the water for consumption that had started in the 1960s after Kelsey. These changes in the water quality made particularly significant the contractual guarantee of continuous availability of potable water which the Northern Flood Committee had secured under Article 6 of the NFA.

Effects on Recreation

The Hydro projects also destroyed the aesthetic beauty of the waterways and severely limited their recreational and cultural use. Dirty water made swimming less attractive and debris inhibited boating. Children got sores from swimming in the lake. Winter recreation was adversely affected as ice conditions made many activities more dangerous. Summer activities had to be curtailed because camping and picnicking sites had either been flooded or left high and dry. Boating was dangerous below the Kettle dam because of severe water level fluctuations. The Churchill River was completely destroyed for recreational use and its pristine wilderness values were lost.

The presence of construction and operational personnel associated with the hydroelectric project also had detrimental effects on traditional land and water use. As discussed in the previous chapter, the establishment of the modern town of Gillam in the late 1960s left a permanent, new population within the resource area who used Split Lake Cree lands, resources, and waters as if they were their own. Hunting and fishing by the newcomers also placed increased pressure upon wildlife and fish resources.

The 1979 Flood

There was not even any consistency in the changed water regime. Only three years after Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion, spring and summer flooding in 1979 produced some of the highest water levels on record, with particularly severe impacts on shorelines, wildlife habitat, and domestic harvesting. Split Lake Cree had barely begun adapting to the new 'normal' water regime when this happened. The occurrence of this flood, in spite of Hydro's assurance that the changed water regime would behave 'normally', even if somewhat differently than the state of nature, further eroded peoples' willingness to believe that the outsiders really understood the continuing effects of what they had done.

Few Benefits

While the Kettle and Long Spruce projects were responsible for generating a substantial proportion of provincial power and produced corresponding revenue, Split Lake Cree received only minimal benefits. A few First Nation members worked on the construction of Kettle and Long Spruce. Some people worked in operations and maintenance at Kelsey, and one First Nation member recently retired from Manitoba Hydro employment to reside in Split Lake. One hundred (100) amp power was provided to community households, but electrical costs were high, imposing a new requirement for cash expenditures on the people. Benefits under the NFA were slow in coming, and Elders commented that in the 1970s the cost of the new hydroelectricity may actually have exceeded the Hydro resource compensation programs.

As the power developments curtailed traditional land and water activities, cultural values were damaged. Social problems began to increase in Split Lake. People lost confidence in the lands and waters which had always sustained their identity. Negative aspects of modern society for the Cree, such as store-bought food and television (made possible as a result of the telecommunication towers built by Manitoba Hydro and Manitoba Telephone System in conjunction with the Kettle development), began to exert more of an attraction. The growing social disruption was increased by the construction of PR 280 to Split Lake in 1979. The Thompson-Gillam road, serving Split Lake, was built as a result of the Long Spruce development and was cost-shared by Manitoba Hydro.