



One of the major streets in Split Lake. c. 1970.

Chapter 6

Environmental and Social Disruption

Split Lake in the 1970s

THE 1970S WERE A TIME OF turbulence and environmental upheaval for the Split Lake Cree. The Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion projects of 1972-77 wrought havoc with the water and shoreline habitats of hundreds of kilometres of the resource area. At the same time the negative aspects of other outside agents of change, such as social assistance, residential schools and television, were also becoming more pronounced and widespread. Television, for example, was perceived by Elders as having a bad influence on young people. At the same time, other examples of modernization, such as electrical appliances and better education, were positive developments.

The community became less tightly-knit and family cohesion weakened. The environmental devastation and disruption caused in part by hydroelectric development affected traditional Aboriginal values and compounded social problems as people found themselves cast adrift in a new, strange, and hostile world.²⁷

Resource Harvesting and the Economy

By far the most significant pressure on Split Lake Cree resource harvesting and other traditional land and water activities in the 1970s was the massive hydroelectric developments which were profoundly altering the landscape in ways which were far more dramatic and profound than the effects of the Kelsey generating station.

Although traditional harvesting activities did continue, fewer young people participated, and the territory travelled continued to decrease. Dog teams were replaced by snowmobiles, which were more expensive to operate and maintain. As a result of increased prices for certain fur bearers, trappers did manage to increase the gross financial return of their activities in the late 1970s. At the same time, trapping programs negotiated with Manitoba Hydro to offset the adverse effects of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation -Churchill River Diversion project provided incentive for some trappers. However, those people who went to the north of the resource area talked so negatively on their return about the impacts on the Churchill River that trappers stopped going there. The commercial fishery on Split Lake continued, although income was erratic and it was closed or partially closed for many of the early years of the decade because of concerns about industrial mercury contamination expressed by the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation.

External pressures on harvesting continued to be felt. Hunters and anglers from Gillam and Thompson were active in the Split Lake resource area. Gillam residents began illegally constructing cottages on Stephens (Moose Nose) Lake without the consent of either Manitoba or Split Lake Cree. About the same time, the Manitoba Registered Trapline Association came into existence to give trappers a united voice on provincial trapping issues.



Jigging at the old band hall.



Elders Eveline Wastasecoot, Sophie Spence and Helen Spence.

In addition to the traditional resource-based pursuits, Split Lake Cree continued to work on the rail line. As well, some First Nation members found temporary work with outside developers, usually in relatively low skill jobs. Some younger people who had secondary school education were able to find employment away from the community. A few local businesses were established towards the end of the decade as a result of funding from Neyanun, an economic

development corporation established under the terms of the Northern Flood Agreement (NFA). Unfortunately, in spite of all of the investment and economic activity surrounding Split Lake, social assistance became more widespread, increasing dependency and idle time.



Since the establishment of a mission at Split Lake in 1890, the Anglican religion has been an important part of community life. Shown here is the existing Anglican church and cemetery.

Community Development

In the community, development on the peninsula continued. The on-reserve population had grown to 792 by 1974, and there was an influx of families of CN rail retirees to Split Lake.²⁸ A new kindergarten to grade nine school was completed in 1973, and local teachers began to be trained through the Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program. An electrical submarine cable allowed for the use of home appliances, as 60 to 100 amp service became available. Local party-line telephone exchange service was also introduced.

Community standpipes were constructed by the Department of Indian Affairs in 1973, providing a rudimentary chlorinated water supply for the community. The people were told that the lake water was no longer safe to drink. According to the Elders, this new source of supply was, in one sense, welcomed by the people, given the growing lack of confidence in the safety of the traditional lake supply. At the same time the need for this alternative source deepened people's suspicions that the changes being experienced would last forever. The replacement of easy access to lake waters with several centralized sources also increased the effort required to access this most fundamental element of life's sustenance.

Television was also introduced into many community homes and its impact cannot be underestimated. It created expectations, some false. It exposed young people to the outside world, on the one hand introducing previously unknown cultural influences, but at the same time bringing readier access to information about the struggles of other Indian peoples, in far off parts of the country, to assert their rights. The greater difficulty and less satisfying nature of traditional, outdoor activities tended to make television a substitute, thus isolating the youth even more from the experience of the Elders and the traditional values of the Split Lake Cree.

Reliance on store-bought food grew, although country foods still reportedly comprised the majority of meals. In the early 1970s, the Hudson's Bay store encouraged increased consumption of red meat, at the expense of fish consumption. The perception that the taste of the fish from the lake had changed, and the associated lack of confidence in its wholesome nature, markedly increased the effectiveness of the store's advertising. As the diet changed and sedentary ways became more prevalent, the health of residents deteriorated and the incidence of modern illnesses, particularly diabetes, became more common.

Parents placed increasing emphasis on formal education as a means of understanding and dealing with the changes being experienced, as well as of obtaining future employment. This, combined with continued residential school attendance, left many of the youth unfamiliar with the traditional ways of living off the land.

Increased access to Thompson with its 'city ways' was another destabilizing factor. By the early 1970s there was scheduled air service between Split Lake and Thompson. Taxi service from the Odei River, near Orr Creek, began in the mid-1970s. The completion in 1979 of a year-round road, Provincial Road 280, between Thompson and Split Lake consolidated the link.

As a result of all of these factors, the social fabric in Split Lake began to erode and young people, alienated from the old ways, increasingly questioned the wisdom of traditional life and values. Church attendance began to drop. The curfew disappeared. Alcohol and drug use increased, although still mainly off-reserve.

Hydroelectric Development Accelerates

There can be no doubt, however, that the most profound factor of change in the 1970s was hydroelectric development. Manitoba Hydro projects caused extensive flooding along the Nelson River, and also dewatered thousands of acres of land along the Churchill River. These projects permanently altered waterways in the resource area, forever changing the relationship the Split Lake Cree had enjoyed with the natural world since time began.

Manitoba, along with the federal government, had established the Lake Winnipeg, Churchill and Nelson Rivers Study Board in 1971 to study the environmental impacts of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion projects. However, by the time the board's report came out in 1975, both projects were already nearing completion as was the construction of the Long Spruce generating station and initial development of Limestone on the lower Nelson River. The board's report was also considered by some environmental experts and critics to be substantially less than an environmental impact assessment that one would expect today.

In the space of a decade, two dams and generating stations were constructed downstream of Split Lake on the lower Nelson River, and the massive Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion scheme was implemented. The Kettle dam and generating station, with a generating capacity of over 1,272 megawatts, began operation in 1970. It tripled the size of the lake that had always been known to the Cree as Moose Nose Lake, and flooded over 54,000 acres of land including many First Nation traditional harvesting, recreational and cultural sites. This was not unlike the flood that had occurred naturally in 1966. However, this time it was unexpected as Split Lake Cree believed that Manitoba Hydro was now regulating the waterways. At the same time Moose Nose Lake was re-named Stephens Lake in honour of a former Chairman of Manitoba Hydro.

Shortly after this flooding, construction began on the Long Spruce dam and generating station, 16 kilometres downstream of Kettle. Long Spruce became operational in 1977 and water levels were raised 85 feet. Over 3,400 acres of Nelson River shoreline and tributaries were flooded. The Split Lake Cree were not consulted about either of these hydroelectric projects nor were they prepared for the range of negative impacts that would result. Although both the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion project and the Long Spruce generating station on the lower Nelson River had been planned for a number of years and were already being built, the First Nation did not know that its reserve lands would be directly affected until 1973.

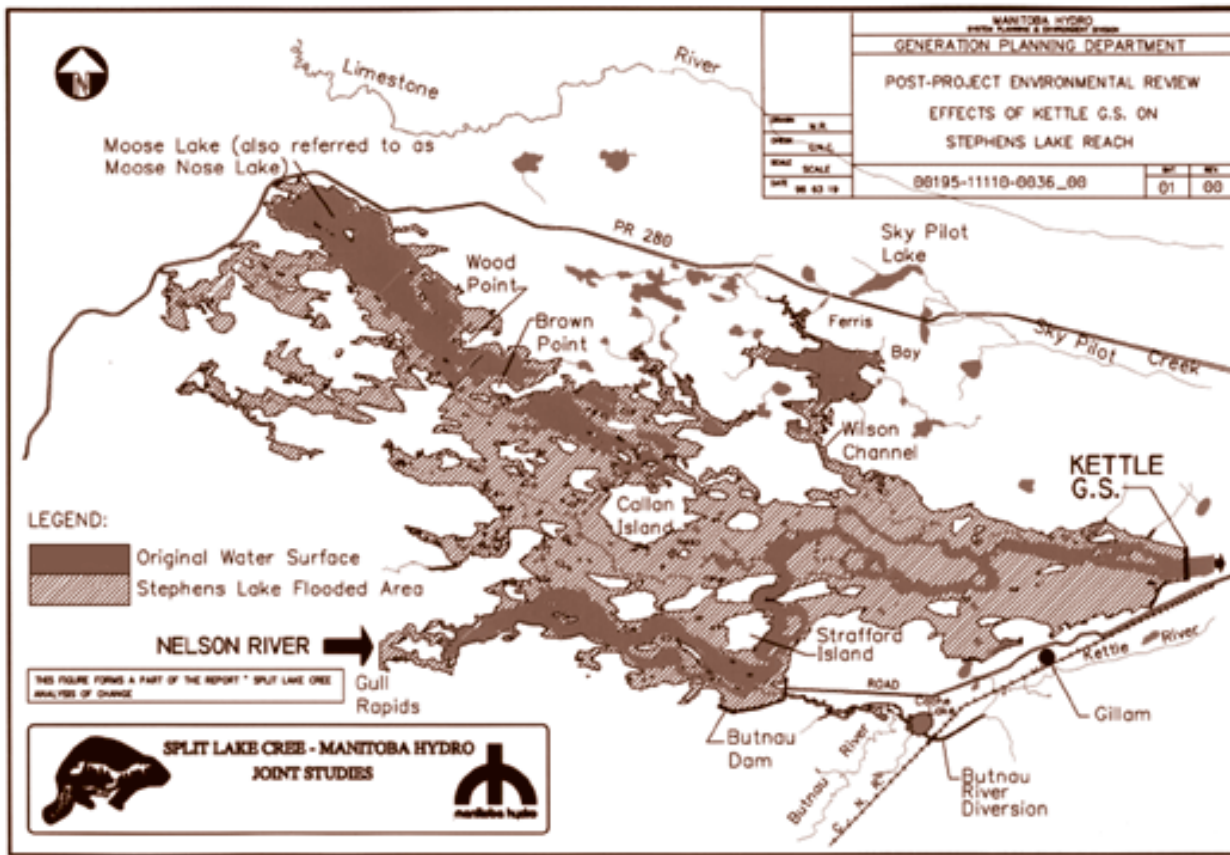


Figure 9: Effects of Kettle Generating Station on Stephens Lake Reach. – Manitoba Hydro

The Northern Flood Committee and Negotiation of the NFA

As discussed earlier, allying itself with four other Cree Nations who anticipated and experienced adverse effects from the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion, Split Lake Cree First Nation became a founding member of the Northern Flood Committee in 1974. The committee was formed, by the independent action of Split Lake, Nelson House, Norway House, Cross Lake and York Factory First Nations, to oppose the Manitoba Hydro development project. This coming together of the threatened Cree peoples marked a fundamental step in their political development. The basis of the alliance was that each First Nation would remain responsible for its own affairs, but that there would be cooperation to fight the actions of Manitoba Hydro

and the governments, and to secure the collective rights and interests of the Cree.

Initially, Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro, refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Northern Flood Committee and attempted to negotiate separate compensation settlements with each of the communities and affected resource users. However, under pressure to negotiate with the Northern Flood Committee from the increasingly organized and informed First Nations, as well as from the federal government, which recognized the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion's certain impact on reserve lands, Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro finally recognized the committee in 1975.

In the face of the huge investments that had already been made, and the consensus among Canada, Manitoba and Manitoba

Hydro that the First Nations should not succeed in stopping what was seen by the outsiders as 'progress', the Cree were not successful in stopping the project.

However, even though the primary objective could not be accomplished, the Northern Flood Committee was successful, for the first time in the history of northern Manitoba, in forcing the governments and Manitoba Hydro to recognize the legal rights of the First Nations. Negotiations began, but notwithstanding Cree legal rights – related to reserve lands and other interests – they were conducted under considerable duress, caused not least by the continuing construction activities within the resource areas. In spite of the difficulties they faced and the unequal bargaining positions, the First Nations, under the umbrella of the Northern Flood Committee,



Kettle generating station, located on the lower Nelson River seven miles east of Gillam. Construction occurred over the period 1966 to 1974. The first turbine units went into service in 1970.

succeeded in negotiating the Northern Flood Agreement (NFA), which was finalized in 1977 and ratified in 1978, by the Northern Flood Committee and the five First Nations, Canada, Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro. Key Split Lake negotiators included the then Chief Ken Wastasecoot, Philip Garson, and Sam Garson, the latter of whom signed the NFA on behalf of the Chief. The signing of the NFA was testimony to the cooperative efforts of the Chiefs, Councillors and Elders of the five First Nations, and to their determination and tenacity in the face of very adverse circumstances. This was exemplified by the fact that the reserves of the Nelson House Cree were already starting to be flooded by the Churchill Diversion even before the NFA was finalized.

The Northern Flood Agreement contained promises, by Manitoba Hydro, Manitoba and Canada, to replace all affected reserve lands on a 4:1 basis, as well as to provide a wide range of compensatory, remedial and developmental measures to offset the adverse effects of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion. Under the terms of the NFA, the

implementation of the promised measures was left substantially in the hands of Canada, Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro. Unfortunately, the Cree First Nations' faith in the willingness of the other parties to take all of the promised actions was found to be misplaced. Faced with high projected costs to implement the NFA consistent with its language, spirit and intent, the other parties shrank from the task and proceeded with what can only be described as the narrowest possible interpretation of their responsibilities. Indeed, it would be several years before the other parties' insistence that the NFA was a 'political accord' rather than a contract, would be overturned, first by the arbitrator appointed pursuant to the NFA, and then by the Manitoba Court of Appeal.

In 1979, the Commission of Inquiry into Manitoba Hydro (the Tritschler Inquiry) criticized Manitoba's and Manitoba Hydro's approach towards the northern Aboriginal communities in the development of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion:

It is clear to the Commission, after reviewing all of the evidence and listening to all of the witnesses,

that had the Government and Hydro started meaningful negotiations with the communities prior to 1968 and even as late as 1972, the course of events would have been vastly different.

The Commission went on to recommend that:

...in the future all Hydro projects that will have an appreciable impact on a community or on the environment be given a rigorous environmental assessment and review before authorization. Moreover, the people affected should be consulted and fully informed long before project committal, so that their legitimate concerns are taken into account in the authorized scheme.

Government must ensure these ends are achieved.²⁹

Hydro Project Impacts

The Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion development became operational in 1976-77, prior to the Long Spruce flooding, and, as noted, before the signing of the NFA. The Churchill River Diversion increased flows down the Burntwood River more than eight-fold, permanently flooding shorelines and adding additional flow down the lower Nelson River. Over 1,500 acres of Split Lake reserve land were taken for Hydro water storage purposes. The opposite effect occurred on the Churchill River, in the north of the resource area, where over 17,000 acres of formerly rugged wilderness shoreline were dewatered and Billard and Fidler Lakes were substantially reduced in size and depth.

Lake Winnipeg Regulation reversed the natural, seasonal flows and levels which the Split Lake Cree had lived with for all time. The entire Nelson River from Lake Winnipeg as far as the Kettle dam forebay was altered. On Split Lake,



Kelsey dam and generating station located on the Nelson River where it flows into Split Lake. Construction began in 1956 and the first four turbines started operating in 1960.

fisheries were also affected. Sturgeon did not come down the Nelson River as frequently as in the past, which the Elders attribute to the presence of the Kelsey generating station. Split Lake Cree fishermen noticed cyst-like defects in fish, particularly in walleye and pike. The mooneye population was reduced. In the areas not protected by bedrock and stone shorelines, shoreline bird and furbearer habitat was damaged; the red-winged blackbird disappeared from the upper Nelson River area in the mid-1960s.

First Nation members were gaining their first direct experience with the impacts of hydroelectric development, which, as noted earlier, had been planned without any consultation, and certainly without the informed consent of Split Lake Cree. In spite of the impacts that the Elders report were being experienced by the people as a result of the operation of Kelsey, no compensation was paid. The project was viewed by the proponents and other northern developers as an admirable sign of northern growth,

and any costs, to the extent they were recognized at all, were treated as the 'price of progress'. There is no record of Canada doing anything to insist on the recognition of Split Lake Cree rights, other than perhaps the belated creation of the Split Lake Cree reserves in the late 1950s.

At about the same time as the Kelsey development became operational, Manitoba Hydro began construction of the Grand Rapids hydro project on the Saskatchewan River between Lake Winnipeg and Cedar Lake. The Grand Rapids dam and generating station was completed in 1965 and was fully operational by 1968. This severely damaged traditional resource areas of the four First Nations inhabiting the Saskatchewan River delta and the Chemawawin Cree were forced to completely relocate. These negative effects provided a tragic lesson for Manitoba Hydro and the governments. They revealed the inevitable consequences of such development on the indigenous population. Sadly, in spite of what the governments and Manitoba Hydro knew, or ought to have

known, there is little evidence that the lessons were applied to the developments that would shortly create similar impacts on the Split Lake Cree.

After completing Grand Rapids, described in official Manitoba Hydro literature as the 'jewel of the system', Manitoba Hydro turned its attention to harnessing the enormous power potential of the Nelson River. The federal-provincial Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba Board in 1958 and the Nelson River Programming Board in 1965 completed reports investigating the energy potential of the Nelson River, including the regulation of the outflow of Lake Winnipeg and the diversion of the Churchill River into the Nelson River.

In 1966, Manitoba and Canada entered into an agreement that provided the basis for the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion. It specified that Manitoba Hydro would finance and construct the Kettle Rapids dam and generating station, 80 kilometres downstream of Split Lake, while Canada would pay for the

construction of, and own, the high voltage direct current transmission lines (500 kV) between Kettle Rapids and Winnipeg. Manitoba would provide the land required for the transmission line and give the necessary approvals for the project. Water power reserves along the major river systems were created in that same year.

This was the beginning of the hydroelectric project that would cause such damage and disruption, and change forever the way of life of the Split Lake Cree in the coming decade.

Community Governance

Even though the impacts of hydroelectric development and of the new communities in the resource area were only beginning to be felt in the 1960s, they created new pressures for the Chief and Council. Such changes had never before been experienced by Split Lake Cree. The impacts of Kelsey were increasingly being raised in the general band meetings, but the leadership was unsure how to effectively voice these concerns to the governments and Manitoba Hydro. It would be another ten years before the government of the First Nation would succeed in establishing a forum for doing so, by allying itself with other northern Cree First Nations within the Northern Flood Committee.

At least during the first half of the decade, Chief and Council, comprised of the older First Nation members, governed consistently with the traditional customs. The Elders continued to exercise the most influence on decisions within the community. The functions of government remained primarily inward-looking, such as the strictly enforced daily curfews imposed by Chief Alfred Spence and Council. Similarly, Chief and Council had, and used from time to time, the

power to reduce or cut off social assistance. The Department of Indian Affairs exercised considerable power, managing directly both the finances and the external relationships of the First Nation. Up until at least the mid-1960s, there were no direct employees to carry out the everyday functions of governance, which were integrated into the responsibilities of the Chief and Council.

The peacekeepers were still proving to be an enduring force in the community, a very visible symbol of the continuity of governance practices from ancient times, enforcing the curfews and generally maintaining the good order and traditions of the people. The Elders report that at this time there were still three peacekeepers. The RCMP were viewed generally as an unnecessary outside force, and were only allowed on the reserve with the permission of Chief and Council.

In the latter half of the decade, as pressures continued to mount on the traditional leadership, there appears to have been a conscious effort made to actively encourage the participation of the younger men in the community decision-making process. Today's leaders talk of Elders approaching them individually as young men to convince them of the need for their more active role in the regular general band meetings. The age of the Council started to reflect this transition. The late 1960s saw the election of the youngest Chief in the history of the Split Lake Cree.

Frequent general band meetings were still held, maintaining the age-old tradition of the active participation of the adult members in the everyday governance of the First Nation, while retaining the power to make decisions which Chief and Council felt obliged to put into effect.

Conclusion

The 1960s were essentially an extension and continuation of the changes of the 1950s. Harvesting of natural resources was still very important to Split Lake Cree who continued to rely on the lands, resources and waters of their forefathers, despite being more settled in a planned and growing community. According to Elders, considerable country food in the form of moose, beaver, whitefish, and pickerel was harvested, blessed and consumed by the people, with country food meals still surpassing store-bought. Traditional cultural practices and festivals were actively maintained. The community of Split Lake remained relatively isolated and stable.

While the changes taking place were not as dramatic as those of the 1950s, influences, such as the growth of northern towns, mining and the first direct effects of hydroelectric development were increasingly evident. As a result, the most central beliefs and trust in a well-understood environment were shaken by the magnitude of devastation seen upstream along the Nelson River to Sipiwesk and Cauchon lakes. The 1960s provided the first concrete indications to the Split Lake Cree that their unending struggle for survival and adaptation to circumstances in a known world was changing because of fundamental changes to the very character of that familiar world. Further serious impacts were soon to come.

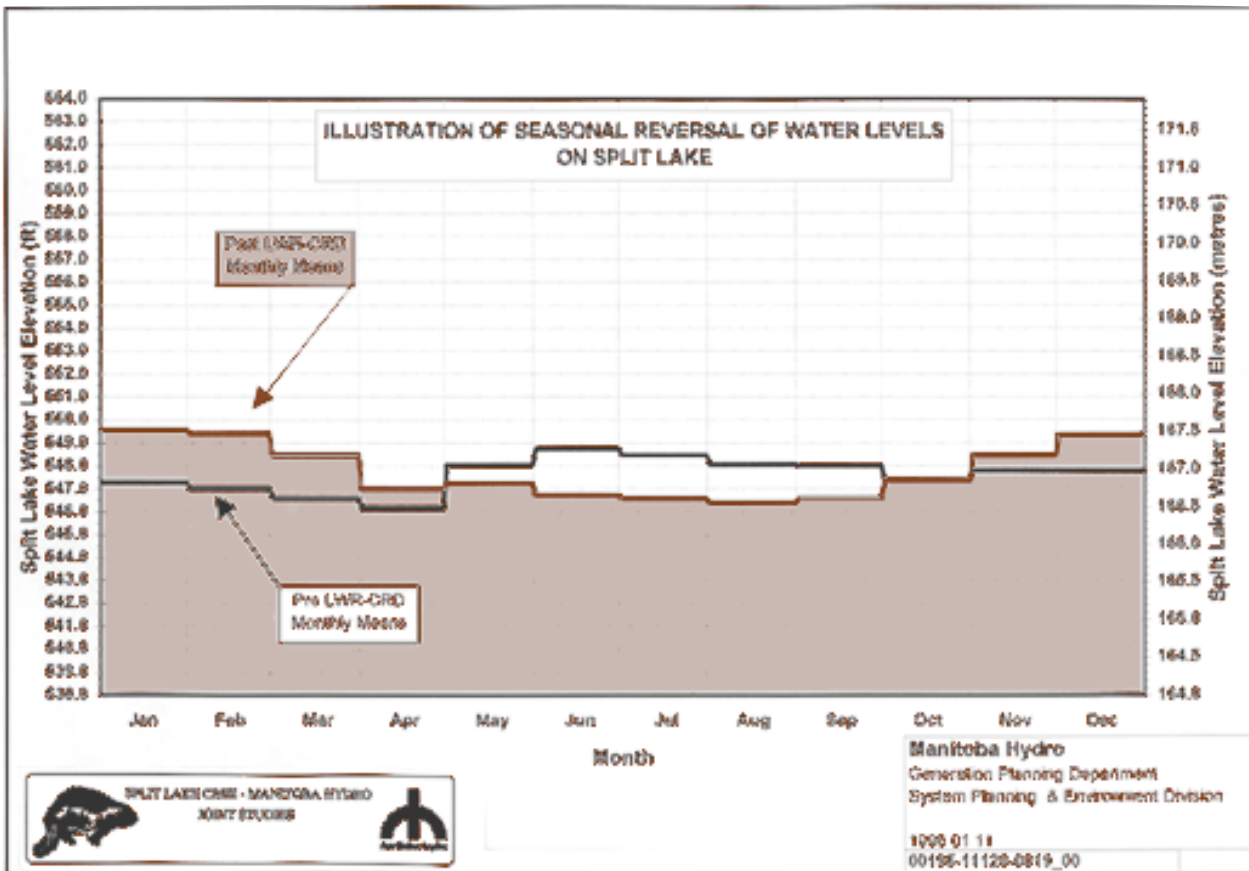


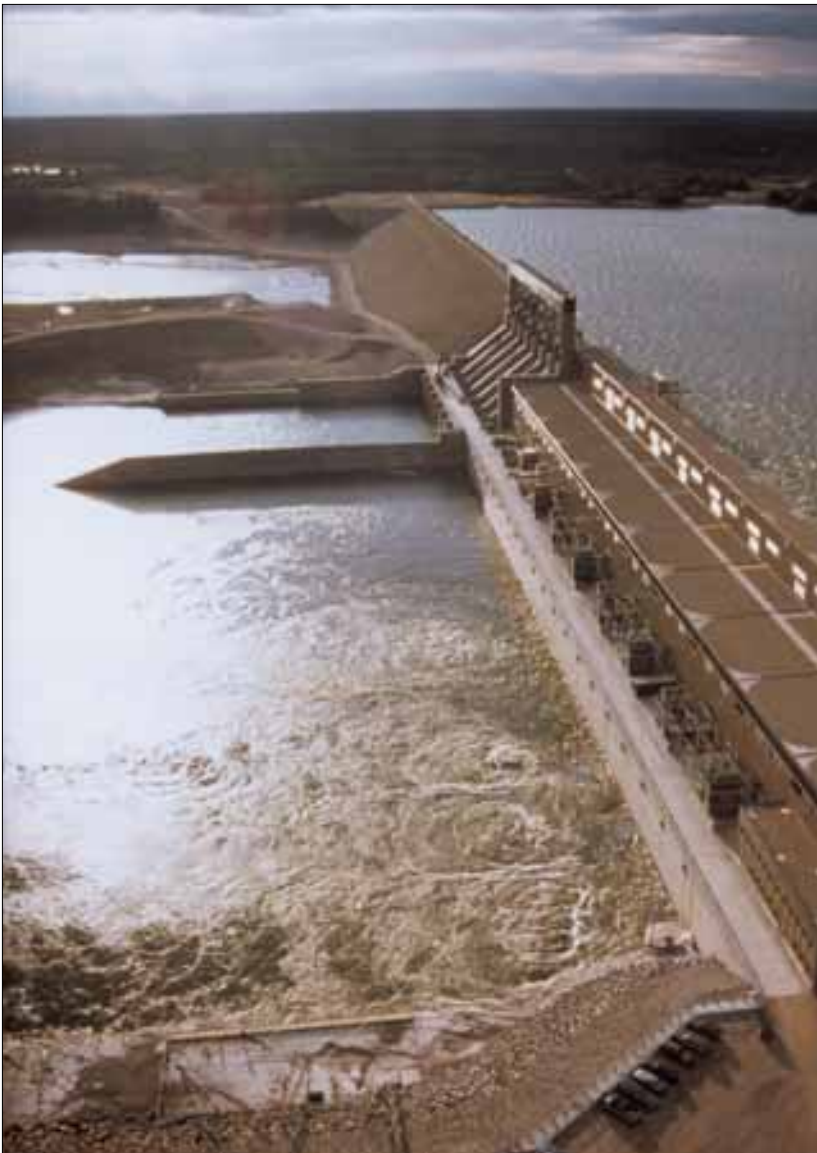
Figure 10: Split Lake Water Regime: Average Monthly Water Levels for Pre- and Post-LWR-CRD Periods. – Manitoba Hydro

Figure 9 on page 59 illustrates the effects of the Kettle dam and generating station on the Moose Nose (Stephens) Lake reach of the Nelson River. Visually, the effects are dramatic. More subtle, but nonetheless profound, were the seasonal reversal effects of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion on the immediate environs of Split Lake. Figure 10 illustrates the Split Lake water regime for the pre- and post-Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion periods. The reversed cycle of low water in the summer and high water in the winter periods is particularly notable.

Community Governance

Not surprisingly, the 1970s was a period of rapid transition in the role of Chief and Council. In order to deal with the perceived threats to the very existence of the people, there was a need to draw upon the more ‘modern’ perspectives and education of younger members, who had greater familiarity with the outside world. This internal impetus, coming from the older people, to pass the torch of leadership sooner than would have traditionally been the case, was reinforced by the reduction in voting age from 21 to 18 in 1972. This substantially expanded the voting age population.

Complicating this generational shift in leadership was the increasing requirement for Chief and Council to be out of the community to participate in tribal governing activities. This contributed to a decrease in their internal authority. While the younger generation took more of a leadership role in terms of political responsibilities, the Elders continued to take responsibility for ensuring respect for the moral and customary practices of the community.



Limestone dam and generating station, the most recent Manitoba Hydro plant, is located 47 kilometres east of Gillam. Initially started in the 1970s, it was built over a period of several years, mainly in the late 1980s.

The tremendous efforts required first to negotiate and then endeavour to convince the other parties to implement the NFA, began to impose a diverse array of administrative, technical and legal demands upon Chief and Council. The very modest numbers of staff working in the First Nation government were complemented by the Cree staff and other technical and legal advisors working within the Northern Flood Committee. Chiefs during the 1970s were, in chronological order, Daniel Kirkness, Bill Spence, John Wavey,

Ken Wastasecoot, and Michael P. Garson. John Wavey and Ken Wastasecoot led the Split Lake Cree participation in the struggle to negotiate the NFA.

Despite the many significant changes that occurred during this decade, there were still significant elements of continuity within the structure of governance. As noted, the Elders continued to play an important and respected role, both internally and as valued advisors in meetings among the five Northern Flood Committee First Nations. The

peacekeepers still represented the will of the people in the maintenance of social peace and order. The general band meetings, while having to address hitherto unknown challenges, remained an important forum for discussions and debate, and a source of guidance and support for the leadership.

Conclusion

This chapter has described how traditional values and customs came under increasing pressure during the 1970s, as the consequences of increased modernization and contact with the outside world were felt. From the Split Lake Cree perspective, hydroelectric development was by far the most profound agent of change, causing both major physical impacts on the lands and waters, as well as the resulting undermining of the essence of Aboriginal practices and customs. As a result of externally imposed developments that were beyond their control, the people of Split Lake had become casualties of change.

While resource harvesting activities continued, people participated for less sustained periods of time. Many young people, steered towards educational endeavours, were less capable of carrying on traditional activities and began to hold animals in less esteem than had their Elders. The centre of traditional pursuits had always been the shorelines, but shoreline activity decreased because of the adverse effects of hydroelectric development. People lost faith in the altered waterways and in the natural environment that had always sustained them. In short, the sudden environmental degradation in the traditional territories resulted in a traumatic break in the pattern of evolution and sometimes difficult adaptation that had characterized earlier eras.