



*Aerial view of the growing Split Lake community.*

## Chapter 7

### Decade of Uncertainty and Reconstruction

#### Split Lake in the 1980s

**T**HE EARLY 1980s were marked by uncertainty and indecision. Split Lake Cree First Nation was unsure how to deal with the deepening negative influences of the outside world and, in particular, with the continuing adverse effects of hydroelectric development which should have been mitigated or alleviated by the 1977 NFA. From the Split Lake Cree perspective, the other parties to the agreement had not lived up to the promises in the NFA. While, from the outside, the community was perceived to be stable, among members there were real concerns that it may be overwhelmed by the new, stark realities it was facing. By the late 1980s, however, a number of developments indicated that the

First Nation had again found its bearings, and was beginning to reassert control over its own affairs.<sup>30</sup>

#### Resource Harvesting and the Economy

Hunting, fishing, trapping, and the gathering of country foods and medicines carried on in the 1980s. Because of continuing interest in these pursuits, as well as a growing population, there were more trappers than in the 1970s, although the number of commercial fishermen remained about the same. Among resource harvesters there was as strong an attachment to the land as before. However, hydroelectric development impacts were still a major limiting factor.

On the surface, trapping and fishing appeared productive with large numbers of participants. However, the continuing physical effects of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion, particularly related to transportation impediments, made these activities difficult to carry out and produced substantial hidden costs in terms of extra expense, time and effort. Domestic fishing declined on Split Lake because of concerns about the water quality, particularly after the flood of 1986. Elders noted a sharp decline in goldeye in the early 1980s. As well, fur prices dropped sharply towards the end of the decade. Despite all of these problems, the people's attachment to the lands and waters continued. Country foods still comprised, perhaps, half of the diet. One response to the hydroelectric impacts was to move some of the harvesting activities and to fish and trap unregulated waters and shorelines.

Notwithstanding the continuing attachment to resource harvesting, severe unemployment characterized the local economy for most of the year in the first half of the decade, with a corresponding increase in social assistance dependency. Women's handicraft production all but ceased, with bingo and visits to Thompson taking its place. Fewer people made snowshoes. The customary division of labour became blurred as women began to work and men took more of a role in raising children. To some extent this was made possible by the gradual expansion of employment opportunities in the government and service sectors of the local economy, particularly in the latter part of the decade, as progressively more functions of government were made subject to the devolution policies of the Department of Indian Affairs. The education and health systems also contributed to the increase in local job opportunities for women.

In the early eighties, construction on the reserve was essentially confined to a modest housing program. After the middle of the decade, however, there was a relative boom in this sector. The extensive construction activity on the reserve, resulting from the provision of basic infrastructure such as the water and sewer system, improved housing, and local streets, provided many much-needed local jobs for First Nation members.

Hydro construction continued when work on the huge Limestone dam and generating station resumed in 1985. This was the fifth and last hydroelectric generating station to date on the Nelson River. Some Split Lake Cree participated in skills and employment training programs there. Benefits from these programs were slight, however, as skills were not adequately developed at work or could not be applied elsewhere as employment opportunities were few. In addition, those Split Lake Cree with jobs were often overlooked for advancement.

In spite of the general increase in local job opportunities in the late 1980s, the rapidly growing labour force meant that there were probably more people unemployed and reliant on social assistance at the end of the decade, than at the beginning. This was particularly the case since most of the people born in Split Lake continued to reside there, with a very low rate of permanent out-migration. The challenge of defining a new basis for the economic self-reliance of the Split Lake Cree, which had never been seriously addressed by the governments, remained to be taken up by the people in the future.



*Several construction projects began in Split Lake in the late 1980s.*

## **Community Development**

Social and health problems seemed to deepen. Lack of respect for authority increased. Young people became even more alienated from the values of their Elders and began asserting their new-found legal rights, as individualistic notions began taking hold, partly as a result of Constitutional deliberations and the passage into law of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

There was conflict between external values and Aboriginal cultural traditions, which were weakened and began to be redefined. Traditional religious beliefs were practiced only by the Elders, who were also the First Nation members most frequently attending church services. Although there was a reported decline in active church attendance, the Anglican Church and its practices and moral code remained a predominant influence on everyday life. Alcohol and drug abuse was more frequent, although, as in the past decade, usually not in the community, given the local ban on intoxicants and active enforcement by the peacekeepers.

Numerous events interrupted or curtailed a wide range of community services in the 1980s. The airport was closed in the early part of the decade. The school burned down in 1986 and temporary classrooms had to be used for the next four years until a new school was built. The Bay store burned down in 1987 but was soon rebuilt. There were power outages because of load rejection at Kelsey. Electricity was also cut off when the submarine cable snapped in 1989. Shoreline development became restricted because of the Manitoba Hydro setback or severance lines. On top of these problems, Split Lake experienced high waters in 1986, and in 1989 major forest fires threatened the whole community.

However, there were also notable community improvements. Household telephone service to the outside world became available in the early 1980s. The Split Lake community doubled in size when adjacent land beyond the peninsula, including the old airstrip, was set aside and developed for community expansion. This had been recommended by the 1985 Hilderman, Witty Community Plan. A major water and sewer project began slowly in 1986 as one of the then major benefits from the Northern Food Agreement. Under this program water and sewer installation occurred on the mainland, providing running water and bathrooms for about 65% of the homes. This was part of a major water and sewer infrastructure program that took place on all five NFA First Nation reserves.

### **The New School**

The response of the Split Lake Cree to the destruction of the school by fire illustrates that no matter how desperate the situation may have seemed at times in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the will to control their own affairs was never lost. When the school burned, the Department of Indian Affairs informed the First Nation that the children would be taken out of the community to school until the building could be replaced. It also indicated its plan to construct replacement school facilities on the site of the old school, a site that had always been considered undesirable by the local population.

Chief and Council, supported by the members, rejected both these positions. Using the First Nation's own money which had been secured through negotiations to implement the NFA, portable classrooms were purchased, moved to the community and installed on the old school site. Having succeeded in creating this

new situation on the basis of their own efforts, Split Lake Cree continued the pressure to secure a modern, replacement school, with the goal of providing kindergarten to grade 12 education in the community for the first time. At the end of July 1988, two busloads of Split Lake Cree arrived in Ottawa to lobby the federal government. Shortly afterwards, approval was received for the construction of the new school, on the site favoured by the people. This noteworthy success contributed to renewed self-respect, and underpinned the major efforts made by Chief and Council to gain local control of education in the 1990s.

### **Road to Split Lake**

Even though the Split Lake airport was closed in the 1980s, access to Thompson, and to southern Manitoba, became easier because of the completion of PR 280 to Split Lake in 1979. By 1983, the road had been extended to Gillam. This caused an increase in on-reserve vehicles, creating added pressure to improve the inadequate internal road system. More important, however, was its negative influence on social stability.

Besides hydroelectric development, PR 280 has been cited as perhaps the key agent of change affecting Split Lake in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>31</sup> By making access to the outside world easier, modern influences affected the community more, further weakening traditional social and family relationships.

Chief and Council agreed to the road, which was vital for maintaining a reasonable level of services in the community, and was made even more necessary as a result of the deterioration in traditional travel routes on the waterways caused by the hydroelectric projects. At the same time they were aware of its potential adverse effects, in

particular, easier access to alcohol. One result of this realization was to maintain Split Lake as a 'dry' reserve where alcohol was banned. There is no doubt that the road created a major attraction to take advantage of services in Thompson, with very many Split Lake members travelling there weekly, if not more frequently.

### **Impacts of Hydroelectric Development Continue**

Adverse effects on the lands and waters continued as before. The seasonal reversal of flows and levels on Split Lake, the low flows on the Churchill, and high flows on the Burntwood, were now permanent features of the environment. While some outsiders claimed that nature had begun to adjust to the unnatural cycles, the Elders continued to notice far more signs of negative effects than positive adjustment. Traditional pursuits continued to be adversely affected along 'on-system' waterways and, more and more, hunters, fishermen and trappers had to go further afield in order to harvest game and fish, incurring additional expenses.

The spring and early summer flood of 1986, not totally unusual in a state of nature, also caused consternation, as had the earlier flood of 1979, since such floods were contrary to the intended effects of the Hydro regulation scheme. Both domestic and commercial harvesting practices were seriously disrupted as unnatural ice effects and flooding up to five or six feet beyond the norm took their toll. Extreme events such as these also caused many 'hidden' effects on plants, insects and wildlife struggling to adapt to the regulated water regime. These are difficult to describe and impossible to quantify. The flood seriously affected the recreational use and enjoyment of Split Lake, caused community concern and anxiety because of its



*Satellite view of Split Lake area showing main highway and other features. July 27, 1987. – Manitoba Centre for Remote Sensing*

unpredicted nature, and, perhaps most troubling of all, seriously undermined the theory that Mother Nature would be able to adapt well to artificial interference with her natural rhythms and patterns.<sup>32</sup>

### **Northern Flood Agreement Implementation**

Both the perceived failure of Canada, Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro to adequately address the ongoing physical adverse effects of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion, and the resulting sense of powerlessness, were symptomatic of the loss of control felt by Split Lake Cree in the early 1980s. The people had believed the promises in the NFA, had trusted that its terms would provide a vehicle to counteract the adverse effects of the hydro projects, protect the integrity of their lands and waters, and foster the social and

economic recovery of their community. The failure of these expectations to be realized led to bitter disappointment and mistrust.

The governments and Manitoba Hydro failed to implement seriously the numerous advantageous provisions of the NFA, and adequate resources were not made available to ensure that its provisions were carried out. Notwithstanding the determination that the NFA was a binding contract, its general wording left considerable room for interpretation. Canada, Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro consistently used this fact to downplay their responsibilities.

The NFA had generated understandable expectations amongst the Split Lake Cree. These expectations were increasingly frustrated as successive Chiefs and Councils, in alliance with the other Northern Flood Committee First Nations, waged a continual struggle

to obtain the promised benefits contained in the agreement. The Split Lake Cree, like the other NFA First Nations, had to resort to filing numerous arbitration claims to try to force implementation of the agreement.

By the mid-1980s, almost a decade after its signing, most of the NFA was being implemented only partly, inadequately, or not at all. Compensation lands had not been provided; drinking water was considered unsafe; shared management of wildlife was minimal; and community development was not being addressed. Normal Indian Affairs program funding had been reduced, because of perceived benefits that were supposed to result from the NFA. Some benefits that were seen by Split Lake Cree included a few local remedial works, advance payments on a handful of claims which went towards housing

development, and the Manitoba Hydro trappers' assistance programs.

One of the key provisions of the NFA not adequately addressed by the other parties was the commitment to comprehensive monitoring of the adverse effects of the Hydro projects, including a socio-economic assessment of such effects. The first order physical, biological and chemical consequences had been suffered by Split Lake Cree on a continuing basis since 1960, when Kelsey began operating. Yet the impacts had only been investigated or monitored in a limited, piece-meal way by Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro since the early 1980s. The lack of comprehensive monitoring of hydroelectric project impacts rendered such assessments meaningless to the Split Lake Cree, and did nothing to allay the enormous uncertainties associated with the projects' effects.

### **Political Approach to Implementation**

Faced with the continuing intransigence of the other parties, the Northern Flood Committee Chiefs and their senior staff and advisors held many discussions to find a way to obtain the entitlements which their people insisted had been promised. Finding the NFA arbitration provisions ineffective at producing practical results, the decision was taken to forge a more political approach to secure the promised benefits of the NFA.

Consistent with this decision, the five Chiefs travelled to Ottawa in May 1984 to meet then Minister of Indian Affairs, John Munro, and press their case. The outcome of the meeting was unusually rewarding, and only six weeks later Canada announced the approval of a package of NFA implementation measures, including: ongoing

funding for the Northern Flood Committee; the commitment to spend the money required to provide water and sewer services, in recognition of the obligation to provide safe water to the communities; and a Federal Ecological Monitoring Program, to monitor selected impacts of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion upon the lands, waters, fish and wildlife of the five NFA First Nations.

This almost stunning success, after so many years of frustration, started Split Lake Cree and the other First Nations down a road with many new challenges. A period of intensive planning and organization began in order to develop the means to control and secure the maximum possible spin-off benefits from the unprecedented infrastructure development in the communities. Split Lake Cree took on the shared leadership in proposing to Canada and receiving approval for the establishment of the Northern Flood Capital Reconstruction Authority, a wholly Cree-owned institution, which would take on and manage successfully the completion of the water, sewer, housing and road development project. Local work in Split Lake was substantially completed by the end of the 1980s.

The efforts to implement the NFA Article 6 water and sewer program demanded a large portion of the time and energy of the leadership of the Northern Flood Committee and the First Nations, until a formal agreement was concluded with Canada in May 1988. Nevertheless, important lessons from this process were applied to other unmet entitlements under the NFA. Split Lake Cree and the other First Nations concluded that political means could be effective in asserting their rights, and that the First Nations would do best to take on direct responsibility for implementation measures, rather

than relying on the other parties to take the lead.

### **Global Approach**

Out of this experience was born the global or comprehensive approach to implementing the NFA, based on the concept that the First Nations should negotiate with the other parties to receive the lands, moneys, authorities and continuing inter-party relationships sufficient to place each First Nation in the lead with regard to implementation of the NFA. Many workshops were held in Split Lake, and among the First Nations, during the late 1980s in order to reach a consensus among the people. Finally, in January 1989, full four-party negotiations began in order to try to win the complete implementation of the agreement that had been signed in 1977.

For the Split Lake Cree another critical factor in reaching the decision to take this global approach was the growing apprehension and uncertainty over future impacts associated with Hydro's exploration and drilling around Birthday and Gull rapids downstream of Split Lake in 1988. That same year Manitoba Hydro announced that the Split Lake reserve boundaries would need to be re-negotiated because the planned Birthday/Gull hydro development option could raise Split Lake by several feet.

Split Lake Cree protested Manitoba Hydro's lack of consultation about these twin projects as well as the failure to conduct an adequate assessment of already existing impacts. Faced with this strong local opposition, Manitoba Hydro withdrew its request to renegotiate the Split Lake Reserve setback lines in late 1988, pending further investigation and study of the flooding effects of Birthday/Gull. Buoyed by this additional evidence of their increasing capability to protect their

own rights, Split Lake Cree took assurance that Manitoba Hydro was now more aware of the importance of joint planning and impact assessment processes. The Split Lake Cree approached the global negotiations with renewed determination and confidence that this time things would be different.

## **Community Governance**

The struggle to win the implementation of the NFA, combined with the increasing responsibilities of the First Nation government flowing from the program devolution policies of the Department of Indian Affairs, resulted in substantial changes to community governance in the 1980s. Chief and Council became less involved in family issues, and focused more on the broader collective rights and interests of the First Nation. This transition was aided by the negotiations, along with other First Nations in the north, to establish AWASIS, an Indian child care agency providing specialized support, help and guidance to First Nation families and children.

Chief Norman Flett took a very active role in the Northern Flood Committee in starting the successful negotiation of the Article 6 Agreement of the NFA regarding sewer and water services, over a period of three years. The experience gained in building from scratch a major Cree institution, the Northern Flood Capital Reconstruction Authority, to manage the construction, added new understanding of the ways in which a modern government could meet the needs of the people.

The global negotiations which began with the goal of settling outstanding NFA obligations, provided valuable lessons on how governments worked and the requirements for negotiating for

community development initiatives. These developments were concrete evidence that Split Lake Cree were progressively reclaiming control, not only over NFA implementation, but over other dimensions of community development as well. The Chiefs who continued to negotiate implementation during this decade were, beginning with the 1979 election, Ken Wastasecoot, Michael P. Garson, Daniel Kirkness, Norman Flett and Larry Beardy.

Another very visible characteristic of the increasingly sophisticated First Nation government was the growth of staff, both executive and administrative, at the local level. At the beginning of the decade there were fewer than a half dozen such staff; by the end, there were as many as four dozen, including those working in the school and at the nursing station. Although this growth was fuelled to a considerable extent by the devolution of program management responsibilities from the federal government, it was fundamentally driven by the decisions of the people and Chief and Council to take on all responsibilities possible, and to structure NFA implementation activities with the maximum possible local involvement.

Even with all of the changes resulting from the growth and increasing sophistication of the First Nation government, essential aspects of continuity could still be found. All decisions of vital interest to the First Nation continued to be debated fully in the general band meetings, which were still very well attended. The respected role of the Elders remained. Indeed, notwithstanding the pre-eminent role of the younger leaders in meetings at the Northern Flood Committee level, Elders were frequently in attendance and their wise words of counsel and experience were highly valued.

The peacekeepers also maintained their prominent community responsibilities, and grew in number over the decade. The persistence and growth of this traditional institution of self-governance is particularly notable given that senior officials of the RCMP and Indian Affairs made several trips to Split Lake to explain that the peacekeepers could not remain in existence. The people listened patiently, but persisted in the ways passed on to them by their grandparents. This persistence not only underlines the unbroken autonomy of the Split Lake Cree, but also the people's wisdom, since by the end of the decade Split Lake was openly acknowledged to have the lowest incarceration rate of any northern Manitoba Aboriginal community.

## **Conclusion**

The 1980s were a defining moment for the Split Lake Cree. At the beginning of the decade, it seemed to many that the way forward had become obscure, that there was a real danger of losing not only a known and loved environment as a consequence of hydroelectric development, but also the precious, sustaining links with those who had gone before. The First Nation showed remarkable resilience and by the mid-1980s there was already practical evidence that this was beginning to change. By the end of the decade, the practical groundwork had been successfully laid, based on the decisions of the people to create a new and different basis for future self-sustenance, building on the traditions, knowledge and perspectives that had sustained the Split Lake Cree in their tribal homelands for many generations.



*MV Joe Keeper provides ferry service between Split Lake and York Landing.*



*Community York boat built to represent Split Lake Cree at York Boat Days in Norway House and at other festivals.*