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CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES

CENTRE CANADIEN
de POLITIQUES ALTERNATIVES

The town that lost its name: the impact of hydroelectric development on Grand Rapids, Manitoba

**Peter Kulchyski and Ramona Neckoway
With the assistance of Gerald McKay and
Robert Buck**

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**Social Sciences and Humanities
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1. Introduction

Grand Rapids is a community divided and silenced by hydroelectric development. Two distinct municipal entities live across from one another where the Saskatchewan empties into Lake Winnipeg. The Cree community of Grand Rapids First Nation has a current population of close to 600, while the Town of Grand Rapids has 751 residents. These communities are located approximately 400 kilometers to the north and west of Winnipeg. Passersby who stop at the gas station on the Grand Rapids First Nation, then breeze on northward, see what appears to be a typical northern reserve. Rarely, if ever, do they stop to ask how it got that way. There is little that connects the community to the extraordinary gargantuan hydroelectric transmission lines that accompany them for most of their journey up provincial Highway Six, but it is hard for the average traveler to recognize a connection between these lines and the communities they have affected. A closer look might lead one to notice the sign pronouncing the existence of a hydroelectric dam there, one of many built by the provincial utility in its expansionary glory days of the sixties and

seventies. A closer look than that begins to reveal some sad and ugly truths about development in northern Manitoba.

The dam that was built at Grand Rapids can be considered the last great dam of a first phase of hydroelectric development in the province, following for example the dams on the Winnipeg River at Pine Falls/Powerview and at Pinawa, and an early dam on the Nelson River called the Kelsey Dam. It was started with great fanfare: Premier Duff Roblin visited the community in 1965 to announce a great future that hydro development would bring. By the time of his announcement the local First Nations and Metis peoples already had a strong taste of the dam future and it was not to their liking. But, in the sixties, concern with Aboriginal and treaty rights was only beginning to emerge as a theme of Canadian politics. A 'Big Thing', like a hydro dam, which was supposed to represent "Progress" and "Modernity", was not going to be held up over concern for few marginal fishing families. The dam was built. The local people were ignored. Prosperity did come, to the utility, to the rest of the province, to the buyers of the relatively cheap power, to just about everyone who mattered. The local people at Grand

Rapids were not included in their number. The rapids that their community was situated along, called Misti Bistihk meaning grand rapids, were suddenly silenced and the town of Grand Rapids 'lost its name' or at least the reason for its name.

A decade later, the Churchill River Diversion, a far more massive hydroelectric development, was completed in northern Manitoba. After the national debacle over the Trudeau government's proposed White Paper (1969-70) and no less than the Supreme Court of Canada began to move in the direction of recognition of Aboriginal rights (Calder, SCC 173), it became harder to ignore Aboriginal peoples.

In response to hydroelectric development in the northern Cree territories, a Northern Flood Committee was formed in Manitoba, consisting of the five Cree communities most affected by the proposed project (a sixth community was at the time a sub-band of one of the five). Although they wanted to prevent the project from taking place, they settled for a modern treaty called the Northern Flood Agreement (NFA) in the hopes that they would at least gain appropriate compensation for the damage caused by the project. After more than ten years of struggle to have the NFA implemented, all but one of the communities signed what were called 'Implementation Agreements.' Signed in the nineties, these agreements were individual, community-by-community packages, providing cash compensation, in exchange for promises not to take the utility and governments to court over their treatment of the NFA. For all the problems associated with the NFA and the subsequent Implementation Agreements, at least the Northern Flood Committee communities received compensation and received some consideration.

Grand Rapids received next to nothing in terms of compensation and no special attention was paid to the local First Nation or municipality, until 1991 when the First Nation finally managed to negotiate a compensation package of approxi-

mately \$5.5-million. The Town of Grand Rapids has yet to receive monetary compensation for the disruption to the livelihoods of its residents. The compensation allotted to the First Nation will be put into context later in this report. It should also be noted that other communities affected by the Grand Rapids Generating Station, particularly Chemawawin-Easterville and Moose Lake, negotiated compensation agreements in 1990 and are not a part of this research project. The experience of Chemawawin-Easterville is the story most often associated with the Grand Rapids narrative. As a result, the experiences of the communities that lie at the base of the Grand Rapids Generating Station are virtually unknown.

The story of Grand Rapids is a cautionary tale about development. At its most basic, this story evokes the question: 'development for whom?' To economists wedded to the bottom line, the project was an unqualified success. The economy of Manitoba had a new star that generated a long-term revenue through use of a local renewable resource. Unfortunately, the economic benefits did not 'trickle down' or in any significant fashion improve the lives of the local people. To the contrary, social and economic devastation resulted, as this report will clearly demonstrate, directly from the project. If we look across the colonial divide that separates newcomers from indigenous peoples, it can be said that this form of development was of enormous value to the newcomers and represented a vicious assault on the indigenous social and economic life.

Although this story is of intrinsic value to the people most affected, it also contains lessons that can be learned as the province of Manitoba and its public utility, Manitoba Hydro, contemplates a new phase of expansion of hydroelectric production. The mentality that pervaded the Grand Rapids project then pervaded the Churchill River Diversion Project, then pervaded the negotiation of Implementation Agreements, also saturates the new round of hydroelectric development propos-

als. The mentality treats local peoples, mostly First Nations and Metis, as obstacles whose support should be purchased with the minimum possible expenditures. The mentality treats the hunting and fishing economy as a residue from the past with no significant social or economic value in a contemporary context. The mentality is not concerned about the ultimate impact both environmentally or socially but sees these in classical economic terms as 'externalities' to be minimized where affordable.

The mentality is exhibited in Grand Rapids today, both in the paucity of imagination that suffuses negotiations between the municipality and the public utility, the very poor deal that was negotiated with the First Nation, and the ongoing smaller and larger indignities that the communities face as Manitoba Hydro treats them with an almost imperial disdain. We can support every statement made above with concrete evidence developed through research, and are confident that readers of this report will find material that, if anything, illustrates the restraint we have used in characterizing what is in fact an appalling history that has led to a tragic legacy.

2. Methodology, Research Approach

This project was inspired and aided through the energy of two members of the municipal council of Grand Rapids, Mayor Robert Buck and Councillor Gerald McKay. The two, along with a local teacher Blaine Klippenstein, approached Dr. Peter Kulchyski in the fall of 2003 with an interest in securing financial resources to help research and write an independent local history of the community. Prior to that time, Manitoba Hydro had announced a partnership with Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (formerly Nelson House) to build a new dam at Wuskwatim Lake along the Burntwood River. Attention was turning northwards and a conflict over the proposed development was beginning to take shape. The two local leaders, mired in negotiations for a compensation

package over the Grand Rapids project, felt that the story of their community needed to be told. Kulchyski secured a small amount of funding from the Manitoba Research Alliance, a new research initiative under the rubric of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada's Initiative on the New Economy. The Alliance was led by a team of community-development minded researchers from each of the leading Manitoba universities, including economist John Loxley, and run from the offices of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. With the funding from this new initiative, a graduate student from the Cree community of Nelson House, Ramona Neckoway, was hired to conduct interviews with local community members. Buck, McKay, Kulchyski and Neckoway established an agenda of interview questions, though in general an open-ended format was used.

By the spring of 2005, 12 individuals had been interviewed. With the support of Buck and McKay, Neckoway was introduced to most of individuals. They included local Metis and Cree citizens, both men and women, as well as non-Aboriginal people who in one capacity or another were involved in the community at the time of the hydro construction. Neckoway also engaged in a modest degree of archival research, where possible correlating research findings with archival documents; as well Kulchyski and Neckoway reviewed secondary literature and used official Manitoba Hydro documents to explicate the general features of the project.

In the summer of 2005 former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Ovide Mercredi, was elected Chief in his home community of Grand Rapids First Nation. Late that summer, together with Mayor Buck, Chief Mercredi established a protest camp on the emptied riverbed, now a spillway, to gain the attention of the province's and the utility's regarding the dire situation the communities found themselves in. This allowed for a series of visits by Kulchyski and Neckoway

that included informal group discussions at the camp and a variety of community tours that exposed the layers of history. The tours also helped explain the current conditions in the community. Hence, participant-observation methods and focus-group discussions were added to the research techniques used in gathering data relevant to the experiences of the study communities. At a broad level, this research deploys qualitative research approaches with a strong degree of community participation-action research. It is action research in part because its orientation toward documenting claims made by the municipality in support of its ongoing negotiations; no doubt the work will also be of value to the First Nation as it reopens similar negotiations.

We have found in publicly exhibiting the story of Grand Rapids, that a presentation of conditions in the communities, contrasted with the conditions of the nearby 'hydro community' constructed for the mostly non-Aboriginal employees of the public utility, using photographs, is a very effective way to portray the injustice embedded in the material realities of Grand Rapids. Therefore, in this report we include a photo essay on the community in order to convey contemporary reality or the ultimate impact of the project; hence photojournalism can also be added to our methodological toolkit.

3. Grand Rapids and the Grand Rapids Dam

Today there are three communities that sit at the site of the former river channel known as Grand Rapids near the mouth of the Saskatchewan River at Lake Winnipeg. Misti Bistihk was the Cree name of the channel adjacent to these communities. The Grand Rapids First Nation, population 751, consists of descendents of original Cree occupants of the territory. The community sits on reserve lands, as defined by the Indian Act, on the south side of the Saskatchewan River. Today it looks like most reserves in north and western

Canada: gravel roads, run-down government housing, a few public buildings and attempts at 'community development' are visible. The municipality of Grand Rapids is a community of approximately 600. Many are of Metis descent, or are Cree who have lost their legal status and are therefore not entitled to live on the reserve, or are non-Aboriginal. In some ways the town typifies the phenomenon of many Metis/non-status communities who, not enjoying the meager benefits provided by the Indian Act, live in even more dire circumstances on the outskirts of the reserve. Finally, a small 'hydro community', which we call by that name, with no more than a hundred people, has been created away from the municipality and the First Nation behind the hydro generating station. With suburban-style housing, paved roads and a large housing complex utilized by a modest number of Hydro employees without families, in comparison to the Town and the First Nation, this community lives in luxury. The story of Grand Rapids will uncover the stark disparity in the quality of living between these three communities,

It is important to note that the "Town of" and Grand Rapids "First Nation" are recent designations introduced after the construction of the Grand Rapids Generating Station. Mayor Robbie Buck asserted in a recent interview that "there were [are] three separate, communities. One of the things that Hydro did was it separated the community. It made the reserve the reserve, it made the town, and then Hydro was a separate entity in itself." A mighty river was once the only partition for two Grand Rapids communities, now hegemonic designations and legal categories impose structures and realities contrary to the lifestyles and values that once existed. Prior to the hydroelectric development, the peoples of Grand Rapids co-existed as one community, making no distinctions between Cree and Metis. They were one community connected by familial bonds and a way of life. The violent disruption caused by the

hydroelectric project is felt, generations following the silencing of the Misti Bistihk.

Construction of the Grand Rapids Generating Station began in 1960 and was fully completed in 1968 at a total cost of \$117-million to the utility. According to the Manitoba Hydro website, in:

1965 [the] Grand Rapids Generating Station, located on the Saskatchewan River about four kilometres from Lake Winnipeg, was officially opened on November 13. Its three units produced a total capacity of 330 MW. The generating station was re-rated to 339 MW in 1966, and to 354 MW in 1967. In 1968, the final unit was placed in service bringing the total capacity to 472 MW. Grand Rapids operated with a 36.6-m head, or waterfall — the largest in Manitoba. The giant Kaplan turbines and generators at Grand Rapids were the largest installed in North America for this size of operating head. (http://www.hydro.mb.ca/about_us/history/hep_1960.html)

They go on to note, in their summary history of hydro development, that

One of the most challenging problems in developing the forebay at Grand Rapids was the prevalence of limestone and dolomite in the region. To prevent water from seeping out of the storage area through numerous crevices and separations found in limestone, it was necessary to form an underground seal beneath the dykes. Over 99,909 tonnes of cement were used in the sealing or “grouting” program, one of the largest of its kind ever attempted in the world. (http://www.hydro.mb.ca/about_us/history/hep_1960.html)

It is significant that no mention of the local people is made in this brief overview of hydroelectric development, which treats the development as entirely a problem and feat of engineering. It should be noted that the development included

‘spin offs’ that had significant impacts, including construction of a road that for the first time connected the community to southern centres. The presence of the first liquor outlet in the community also had significant consequences on the communities, as did the sheer numbers of migrant workers required to physically construct the dam and its ‘spin off’ projects.

The actual hydroelectric project involved construction of a dam, a dyke, transmission lines and a spillway dam. The dyke, basically a huge pile of gravel that runs 25.7 kilometers, was built out of material dug out of the earth in the vicinity. Cement was poured every few feet adjacent to the dyke, which served as an “underground seal beneath the dykes” (Ibid). Both the dyke and the hollowed out landscape are the largest visible reminders of the project. The dam itself is a large, concrete facility very near the community and at the southeast corner of the dyke. A few kilometers from the dam, also on the dyke, is another concrete dam, though its purpose is not to generate electricity but rather to allow another outlet of water onto a spillway, the former riverbed, when the backup is too high. The ever-present hydro transmission towers, both from this project and from the more northerly dams, are other unavoidable physical reminders of the presence and impact of hydro development: five transmission lines were associated with this project.

Manitoba Hydro notes on its website that “when development of Manitoba’s northern rivers was first considered in earnest in the 1960s, proposals and plans were drawn up with little community consultation”, adding that as a result “in the 1990s, Manitoba Hydro made a concerted effort to work with affected communities to find resolutions for past effects and to build cooperative relationships for the future” (http://www.hydro.mb.ca/about_us/history/hep_1990.html). They then describe a variety of settlements reached in the nineties with NFA and other affected communities. Pertaining to the Grand

Rapids situation, they write: “in the early 1990s, five settlements were reached related to the Grand Rapids Generating Station, built on the Saskatchewan River. Agreements totaling \$31.8 million were signed with Easterville/Chemawawin, Moose Lake, The Pas Indian Band, Grand Rapids First Nation, and Cormorant communities.” A total of \$5.5-million of that went to Grand Rapids First Nation. The rationale for the agreements contains the condescending statement that: “these new agreements were a major step forward in the relationship between Manitoba Hydro and northern First Nations. They not only compensated those bands affected monetarily, but more importantly, the First Nations were empowered to make their own decisions with regard to the use of funds and the development of their communities.” One would at a minimum expect that First Nations could ‘make their own decisions with regard to the use of funds’; that this needs to be said reflects something of the attitude of Hydro, which seems to have contemplated at least some other kind of arrangement.

At the time of writing this report, the municipality of Grand Rapids has not signed a compensation package and is in protracted negotiations; the Grand Rapids First Nation, unhappy with the deal that had been reached, has reopened negotiations surrounding the issue. A recent estimate, compiled using data from Manitoba Hydro Annual Reports, calculated that since 1982 the Grand Rapids Generating Station has created \$1.08-billion in revenue.

4. Findings

Testimony of local residents provides a compelling source and a wealth of information pertaining to the on-the-ground impacts of hydroelectric development at Grand Rapids. For the purposes of this research, we did not discriminate between members of the First Nation and members of the municipality, between Metis and Cree, between status and non-status of interview subjects. We

have divided the material into five parts: firstly, life before the project; secondly, material pertaining to the construction phase itself (the immediate impacts); thirdly, impacts of the development over a longer term; fourthly, a photo essay on contemporary circumstances of the communities; and, lastly, recent efforts by the community to regain control of its future.

4.1 Before the flood

A visitor to Grand Rapids in 1959 would have found a quiet, industrious fishing community, similar in many respects to the contemporary Ojibwa community of Poplar River on the east side of Lake Winnipeg. There was no direct road access to the community, which meant that access for local peoples was restricted to watercrafts when there was open water or dog teams in the winter. Prior to the project, most local people were responsible for the livelihoods of their families, and with little in the way of a wage economy, they relied on the local renewable resources and harvests off the land. The local people were hunters and fishers, as their ancestors had been. The community boasted no significant infrastructure apart from the scattered houses, many made by their occupants. Elders knew about the ancient trails that ran along the banks of the Saskatchewan River and the roar of the great rapids could be heard from afar. It was said that if infants could be taken by canoe and shoot the rapids, they would gain from the spiritual power of the rapids and have strength in body, spirit and endurance.

People were not wealthy in the material terms of today’s society. They had little taste for the consumer products that were coming to change much of the rest of the world. Local people recalled the difficult transition from fresh country food to food purchased at stores and came in cans. One interviewee recalls: “... we used live off the land, everybody shared food and everybody always had food and then when the dam came then of course [Natural] Resources came so then my mother, I

remember them, they had to buy Klik stuff and they weren't really used to eating stuff but they had to because they had no choice." This particular story is indicative of the reluctance of some community people toward the shift in lifestyle.

There were no local businessmen amassing fortunes and little interest in such matters. However, there was a pride that came from being self-sufficient. Other benefits came from following a way of life that had been practiced, albeit with different technologies, for centuries. There appears to have been fairly close co-operation between the Cree, who lived on reserve lands, and the Metis and non-status Cree who lived across the river, including intermarriage, work partnerships, celebrations, and a whole host of mutual support. This cooperation ensured the survival and sustenance of the community.

Siblings Valerie and Floyd Ferland live on the north side of the river. In an interview together, they recalled what life was like prior to Hydro:

Before, we didn't have welfare and jobs and people always had things [With emphasis]. Say if one family didn't have anything, and this family had quite a bit, they'd give to the other family that didn't have anything. Now you don't see that. Everybody used to help each other before, now they...they don't.

I remember... my mom would take me over there and, do the moose skin. Take hair out and make that moose skin leather. Couldn't do that after [Natural Resources was around]. They used to have moose meat hanging on, you know racks? Hang them, smoking them. Around town here. After that, they couldn't do it. That's when we started eating canned meat. Bologna! Oh I used to hate that Klik, I could never like it.

Gerald McKay is a local resident of Grand Rapids and was a child when the construction was

in full force. His recollections pertained most to observations that he had as a child going to school and experiences related to the invasion of Euro-Canadian peoples and values and the hardships people experienced. He also recalled the seasonal route that his family once followed. Due to the subsistence economy of Grand Rapids, many of the local people relied in large part to the harvests off the land:

before the flooding my mom and dad used to go up, everybody went up the river. That was where all the animals were and all the ducks and geese, rats, and they were in the marsh. But after that was flooded then we out north on the road. We used to go to Buffalo Lake and camp there and after when we'd finish there, we'd move camps. We'd move every couple of weeks when the root, the Seneca root was getting scarce.

In another interview, a local trapper, Angus, discussed the significance of the land and its harvest to the people of the community. This was undoubtedly necessitated by everyday life and the fact that families had few real options:

There wasn't a hell of a lot but fishing and trapping. That's all they did [hunt, fish and trap]. Dog was the transportation; canoes. They paddled all the way to The Pas of someone got sick. Yeah, there was a lot of hard times, People even stayed out there in cabooses fishing and all that. The good old dog team was the only transportation that time. A lantern, that's what I used when I was a kid running around. My dad had one and I had one. We used to go a long way to get that balsam branches, and boy they smelled good and we stuck them as a mat inside the tent.

Former Hydro employee, Oscar Olson, has been a resident of the Town since 1961 when he began working for the utility. He discussed the thriving

fishing industry that existed in Grand Rapids prior to the construction of the dam:

I have all the records from the 40's up 'til the late 80's. During the 60's, the community produced a million pounds of pickerel a year. That's worth a fortune. That's just Grand Rapids, including the First Nation, Grand Rapids produced a million pounds of pickerel a year: '60, '61, '62, '63. After '63, they could no longer get through.

4.2 It all went quiet

Many of those interviewed discussed the changes they observed and experienced once the rapids were silenced. This subject matter was especially difficult to navigate as the local people were divulging harsh and personal stories of traumatic experiences and utter upheaval. At the same time, it seemed as though many were eager to share their experiences to expose the treatment they endured. Many talked in one way or another of the rapids being “shut off” or “turned off” and discussed how some of the community people had gone down to the mucky river bottom to retrieve old guns, or as children, when they themselves had gone to find and catch the fish which were thrashing in the emptied river.

Joe Mercredi grew up on the north side of the river, and lived on what he described as “prime real-estate.” He discussed how his family who had been on that particular site for more than a century, were evicted to accommodate a “Natural Resources” site. Mercredi also described the period when the waters were silenced:

The explosions were hard to deal with. Like the blasting was hard to deal with. But the rest of the sound was actually not a whole lot different from listening to the rapids. The rapids were there 24 hours a day, except for really, really cold spells in the winter time, when it would freeze over for a bit. And then it would be quiet. But because of the way

the river ran, there was always that rumble, so the construction was basically more of the same. A little bit louder. All of a sudden there was no sound. It was exciting because they turned it off [“shut off the rapids”], can't remember exactly what day it was, but we got to walk on the river bottom. That was cool! We were able to go out there and walk along the river and catch fish with our bare hands, that was neat! We didn't know the damage at that point right.

Robbie Buck, the current mayor of the Town of Grand Rapids, discussed his experiences and memories related to the construction era of the Grand Rapids dam. The major phase of construction was immediately adjacent to his community and for the most part completed in 1964. He discussed some of its aftermath, and talked candidly about the social, economic and environmental disruption caused by the project. The following are excerpts from this conversation:

[H]ome was along the Saskatchewan River, in the community of Grand Rapids...down river from the power dam...Right beside our house there [was] where the river [was] the deepest. And so that's where Hydro put their dock up for the big barges to come in because there was no roads to Grand Rapids yet...[T]hey used to bring everything in by barge...So there was always things going on there 24 hours a day when I was a kid, eh. And in fact, when they moved in they tried to take over my mom and dad's land, and they tried to buy it off them, but my dad refused to sell it to them so, regardless [of] whether it was sold to them or anything, they went ahead their [Hydro] fence on to our land anyway ... they were told “no”, they went ahead anyway regardless of what they were told ... It was fairly noisy all the time and it was fairly busy so. The barges came in at all times of the day and night. As

soon as they came in, they were unloaded, like it or not.

Buck went on to talk about how Hydro displaced and literally evicted people off their land:

Until the 60's, Grand Rapids was what you called an 'unorganized territory', there was no what you call a 'municipality' today. When Hydro came, they're the ones who organized...what was called Local Government District at that time, 'LGD'. They incorporated it...like a municipality I guess...with that came taxes and ...they planned the town and everything. And peoples whose houses didn't fit into their plans were asked to move, eh, cause they were squatters and things like that.

One of my aunts was living right next door to us, where they [Hydro] had...their warehouses and everything ... she came to Winnipeg, cause she's sick, she's in the hospital for awhile. She came home, and her home was gone. They had bulldozed it down ... in the time that she had been gone.

They [locals] didn't have any recourse ... they just had to move ... some sold their homes for very little amounts of money...other's didn't, and you know, those that didn't were moved.

Buck talked about the impacts of the project on his parents, who were at the time young parents coping to deal with the influx of a system unlike that they were accustomed to and the overwhelming presence of migrant workers. Several of those interviewed mentioned the substantial change in population, which occurred nearly "overnight":

[F]or my mom...there was always lots that

fear...because...there was a lot of people who came, who didn't get jobs eh...they'd get hungry sometimes and they'd break into homes and everything like that...there's some stories where kids were just about stolen and things like that, and that was one of my mom's big fears.

My dad was a commercial fisherman...my dad noticed a lot of changes in the fishing...like with the strength of the current...and he knew that the bottom had changed...when I was a kid...he said 'yeah, we're losing our fishing, we're losing our fishing business'. [H]e knew that there was changes in the fishing...[h]e couldn't go trapping at Summer Berry Marsh [SBM] anymore. It used to be up the river eh. But it was flooded when they flooded everything, that's where they used to go muskrat trapping, and so they didn't do that anymore...trapping became localized and I guess what happened was eventually, government being government, they started the Trapper's Association, and a lot of Hydro employees that were there became hobby trappers and started competing...started taking over the trapping.

[T]hey saw the break down of a community...how do you exactly put that into words?

McKay recalled the transition from the subsistence economy, or the hunting and trapping lifestyle, to the wage economy and its impact on his family:

There was five of us, five little kids and my dad got put out of work. There was no training, nothing provided for them, and there was no welfare at that time, or else they refused it. We were never on welfare. So we through some pretty tough times, like,

for, actual hunger, you know don't think people go hungry in the land of plenty but we went hungry.

He also discussed the impact of project, that is, the arrival of authority figures in the community who had the ability to enforce Provincial and Federal legislation, and what this meant for his family:

I can never remember ever being hungry before the dam, but after the dam we were hungry. What happened was, when they'd built the highway, all of a sudden there was police there and the resource guys....My dad was not Treaty, his mother was Treaty...but he wasn't. He was Metis. So he couldn't hunt, and he couldn't fish...he had been bought up to live off the land, and then all of a sudden that changed over night. They couldn't... even set a net in the river for his own use. And he couldn't hunt. Only in September, or whenever hunting season was, that's the only time he could hunt. And he couldn't fish. Only when...sport fishing was open. Or when fishing season was on.

[I]n the spring time, when the animals, when the birds are coming north, people used...kill geese and ducks for about a month. That's what you lived on...[A]ll this changed, all at once. Then my dad couldn't hunt...he couldn't kill geese, and he couldn't even have it in his possession. If somebody gave it to us, my dad could've got charged, so...nobody could even give us food...my mom had been treaty but she lost her treaty when she married my dad. So, if my mom's family gave her food, he couldn't take it...he couldn't bring meat over the bridge.

When they flooded it [Summer Berry Marsh]...there was no compensation. My

dad was just put of work...[h]e went from a qualified fisherman and trapper to an unskilled labourer. Just over night...we never knew hunger until after that dam because my [dad] would be working out of town, and there was no welfare; my mom and dad were never on welfare. So if we didn't have food, we didn't eat.

Among the many other disturbances caused by the construction of the Grand Rapids Generating Station, community members experienced and discussed the physical displacement that resulted with the various projects in the community. Regarding the forced relocation of his family, Joe Mercredi had this to say

One of the things that happened to us, which still bugs mom to this day, is the fact that the house that my great-grandfather built whenever he moved there, in the late 1800's, where my dad was born and where some of my brothers and sisters were born, was, well it was our homestead. We lived there for a hundred years, when Hydro came in because Natural Resources (NR) wanted to have their compound right there, they ended up expropriated our land.

In terms of the physical alteration to the environment and its effects, numerous community people described the environmental atrocities. Steve Pranteau had this to say:

They had these huge tanks, tanks as big as the radius of this house, high.

If you talk to Percy he'll tell you that they buried a lot of stuff where he, where he lives. Tanks would break down and they would, they would just bury them. He says the, the great big machines right in front of his house there. Just buried. I'm pretty sure that place is saturated with, with, oil, PCBs, gas, diesel fuel, you name it. I bet you if you stuck it down there and tested the ground, you'd find it

just soaked. A lotta people who live there now are getting sick because of that. If you stay there long enough, you'll get sick. That, all that should have been scooped out and tilled and that.

4.3 A series of entirely explicable social disasters

One of the most compelling and blatant indications of the Grand Rapids experience is that social chaos occurred in the wake of hydroelectric development. All those interviewed, at one point or another, discussed or reflected on the social disruptions they experienced as individuals or the collective experience of the community.

Regarding the bearing on the social fabric of Grand Rapids, Pranteau had this to say:

You wouldn't believe the violence we saw man! Holy smokes! That was a horrible experience boy! You know I wouldn't wish that Grand Rapids on anybody else; what happened to us. They turned our house into a bootlegging joint and a whorehouse. Yeah, that's what it was too.

There was a lot of fighting going on...it was like a old wild west town, minus the guns...there was a lot violence!...they used to watch and stare and make fun of us.

The actual construction phase of the project inaugurated the social disasters that would follow. The construction camp, filled with strangers, transformed life virtually overnight and a powerful mix of alcohol abuse and racism fed tensions between the now outnumbered locals and the newcomers. This is further supported by McKay who stated:

When we were kids we didn't know any different we just accepted what was here we didn't know all of the problems that this stuff was causing like all the influx of people looking for work. There was a lot of crime

and after when I guess almost right away when the road came the alcohol. And all the violence, you know like I bet you we've seen more violence in those four years than most people will see in a life time. Violence in the community and violence between the workers...they were just harassing the local people.

Many horrendous tales involving the experiences of local people in Grand Rapids were documented. All are significant, but the story of a retired nurse who worked in Grand Rapids especially stands out. This story perhaps exemplifies the treatment experienced by local peoples. Betty Caylin worked at the Grand Rapids nursing station; the doctor she refers to was her supervisor. A separate medical facility had been built to serve the Hydro employees. Caylin's story is compelling:

[W]hen I came...first of all, I came to The Pas. I lived in The Pas and then I worked in Moose Lake, Cedar Lake and Grand Rapids. But...my doctor said 'don't spend anytime in Grand Rapids, because there's a hospital there'. But...those Hydro people didn't want to look after the people.

[M]y impression always was that...it [the hospital in Grand Rapids] was for the Hydro employees...I had some experiences that were really bad...my impression was they...didn't want to look after people, really. It was for Hydro employees...that's the only people they wanted to look after.

Caylin told a disturbing story of a pregnant woman who was turned away from the Hydro hospital to illustrate her assertion that Hydro was not in the business of looking after locals:

[O]ne case....really, really upset me. There was a lady that came from the bush...well she was gonna have a baby, but she didn't

know many months she was pregnant; she was bleeding and all that. And she said that she had gone to the Hydro hospital but they had said 'you don't belong here, you go to the station!'...I didn't know her...and I didn't know what to do with her. So I phoned my medical director in The Pas and I said 'what am I going to do with her?' [he replied] 'Well, hasn't she got some friends in town!'...[she replied] 'well, I know the Leask's'. And so she went there and by now it was colder, very stormy, it was in November or December when she was here and then all of a sudden, eleven o'clock at night, the guy pushed her into the nursing station and said 'she's your problem now!'...and then he took off...So anyway, he took off...I didn't have any facilities. Hydro had given me a bed and it was in the reception room, it was there if we were ever gonna set it up...But then, when I realized that she would have to stay the night, I went and gotten my own bedding and put it, tryin' to make the bed. And I guess I was mumbling to myself and she said 'but nurse, you do know I need help'... I said 'yeah, I'm sorry'. I said 'the reason why I'm upset is because I have a feeling I can't look after you...I don't know how to look after you'. And I said 'but I'll tell you...if I would have been you, I would have gone in the bush and had my baby and died there' because she had been turned away at the hospital, and I was upset because I was supposed to look after her. Here she was...all alone and she's gonna have a baby. And then I said 'but I'll tell you one thing, I'll do what I can...and I'll help you as much as I can' and all night long I was with her, and she was having stronger pains. I was getting more worried and more worried. And I phoned...I just had that sense or that feeling that this was a case I could not handle...then I phoned the doctor in The Pas. I said 'can't I phone

Dr. Wal...like Dr. Walton was a doctor here then, and he was very good. So he says, 'no you don't! You look after her yourself' And then I waited and waited. Five o'clock...and I went against all my teaching. Like you never went against the doctor's order or stuff like that. So, I phoned Dr. Walton. I said, 'look Dr. Walton, I know this lady had been turned away from your hospital and my doctor said I wasn't supposed to call you, but I need help; do you mind coming and helping me?' He said, 'certainly not! I'll come right down'. And then he examined the lady, and he looked awful worried and he said for me to go and lie down. I said 'no, I can't lie down'. Then she had the baby...she bled a lot, and the placenta didn't come out after birth...he was terribly worried because she bled so much...had already passed out...and I was there with the baby. I didn't have a box; I'd had nothing. I had to get one of those zinc tubs...I put a pillow and that's where...I put the baby. Doctor Walton was really worried, he thought she was gonna bled to death because she was already passing out, And then he said, 'why don't you phone the hospital and tell them to come and bring anesthetic and then I'm going to try and remove the placenta. And I was gonna say, 'Oh! Just take her to your hospital! Never mind doing that in the nursing station!' You know with all the infection and stuff like that stuff. And then...it went through my mind and then he said outside, 'on second thought, [I] just had a station wagon, tell them to come and get this woman' and he wanted to go to the hospital. So what they did then is load her up on that station wagon and took her to the hospital, and then he took her into the operating room, and he tried to remove the placenta. And the whole uterus was inverted, it goes inside out...And then afterwards, Dr. Scott said to me, that's the doctor in The Pas,

he said 'you're lucky she didn't die because usually the shock of that kills a woman'. I felt like saying 'you're lucky she didn't die! Because it was your fault!'...But if I wouldn't have gone against the doctor's orders, and if Dr.Walton would've refused to help me, that woman woulda died! ...Dr.Walton was good...he didn't always do what Hydro said...But you know, they discharged her the next day and she went back into the bush!... That poor woman! I thought it was just terrible the way they treated her...the uterus had inverted so that's no small thing...so she went back into the bush...her baby was alright...today maybe you wouldn't get away with that.

Yes, they had nothing to do with us, no! That is the Hydro and I was government.

While there has been a focus here on the unpleasant experiences of the residents of Grand Rapids, it is important to remember that the local people are survivors.

Following the construction, the Metis and Cree communities were left to their own devices. A variety of social problems that had already emerged took hold, as citizens moved from a self-reliant, isolated 'bush' lifestyle to a welfare-based lifestyle at the side of the road. Alcoholism and substance abuse started to have a real impact on families, an impact that would become intergenerational. Grinding poverty with no outlet or hope replaced the 'poor in things but rich in spirit' lifestyle that existed formerly. Many simply left town, giving up on finding a meaningful future there. All kinds of social divisions emerged, between Hydro employees and those who were not, between the Cree and Metis, between status and non-status Cree. A few people continued, against the odds, to hold their families together, to live off the now damaged land, and dream of somehow, some way, fighting back.

4.4 The divided world of Grand Rapids: a photo essay

Ramona Neckoway and Peter Kulchyski took the following photos – except for the historical ones – in and around Grand Rapids in June, August and September, 2005. They portray the project, the land, and the communities. Perhaps nowhere else in Canada are the words of Franz Fanon from his classic study of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*, so directly and tragically relevant. In 1961 he could have been writing about Grand Rapids, 2005, when he stated:

The colonial world is a world cut in two... The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners.

The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The Native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs. (Fanon 39)

These words are worth keeping in mind while one looks through the photo essay, which contains only a small part of what can be shown to graphically illustrate the end product of 'development' in Grand Rapids.



“Working with the community” boasts the public utility. The photo on a sign leading into Grand Rapids shows the main generating station. Ramona Neckoway and Gerald McKay here use a PowerPoint to tell the story of Grand Rapids to the Manitoba Research Alliance



Highway 6 has been a mixed blessing to the community, bringing easier access to southern centres, less expensive store bought food prices, but also alcohol, drugs and other social problems. From being a community at the great rapids, Grand Rapids has become a roadside town.



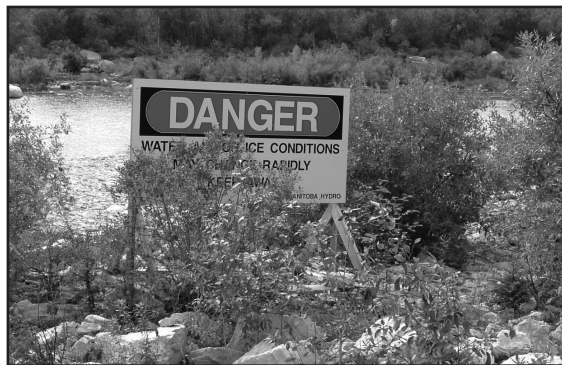
The spillway dam.



This burial site is now well above ground on the excavated area. Hydro is justifiably proud of sponsoring rehabilitation of this gravesite. But questions linger: how many graves were disturbed that were not found? Whose ancestor's bones are likely among the crushed gravel of the dyke?



A stretch of the dyke near the highway.



Once, water rushed over the mighty rapids and flowed over and past this now almost dry riverbed.



A small part of the sand excavated in order to build the dyke. This area of land was once a well-trod trail from camps to the river.



A view of the spillway dam from across the reservoir of water it holds back. Much of this was once dry land.



Traces of ancient trails can still be identified by local people, along the shore of a river that no longer exists. Nothing has been done to recognize this heritage, which lives only in the memories of local indigenous peoples.



This house is less than a kilometre from the houses provided to Hydro employees. To add injury to injury, hydro frequently cuts off the power to reserve and municipal residents who can't pay their bills, while hydro employees get a subsidized rate.



The children of Hydro employees will grow up, metres away from their Aboriginal counterparts, in a much wealthier world: this is their playground.



This unit, for unmarried Hydro employees, is known by local people as the Taj Mahal.



Hydro employees live in suburban conditions with paved roads, lawns and modern amenities.



Facilities in the municipality and on the reserve approach Third World conditions. Here is the 'development' promised by Premier Roblin and Manitoba Hydro.

4.5 On a dry riverbed: fighting back

In the spring of 2005 councilors from the Municipality of Grand Rapids asked Manitoba Hydro officials what their plans were in the coming summer for the spillway. A good deal of brush had grown on the dry riverbed. Local people were concerned that if the spillway were opened, the brush would end up in the rivers and lakes. Distracted officials reassured them that there were no plans to open the spillway, no reason to hire a few locals to clear the brush. Then, in August, an impersonal fax arrived from Manitoba Hydro announcing that the spillway would be opened in two days. Newly elected Chief Ovide Mercredi and Mayor Robert Buck set up a camp on the riverbed to prevent the opening of the spillway.

What followed was an opening, a glimmer of hope in a place long denied such an important emotional resource. Most strikingly the community, which had developed its own share of divisions as a result of the project, began to come together in a show of solidarity. People provided the leaders with food and logistical support, came out to sit and chat and visit. About a week after the camp was established, a fiddle and guitar-based, spontaneous music festival took place at the camp, with at various times in that one evening about eighty people coming out under a stormy sky to dance, listen or play music with the leaders.

The camp could not be called an 'occupation', as many such actions have been described, because the site arguably continues to belong to the descendants of the indigenous prior occupants. That is because Treaty Five (1875), signed with ancestors of the present First Nation, does not surrender Aboriginal title to water. The text of Treaty Five pertaining to surrender of title reads:

The Saulteaux and Swampy Cree Tribes of Indians and all other the Indians inhabiting the district hereinafter described and defined, do hereby cede, release, surrender and yield up to the Government of the

Dominion of Canada, for Her Majesty the Queen and Her successors for ever, all their rights, titles and privileges whatsoever to the lands within the following limits... [emphasis added]

In contemporary treaties, very similar language is used, with a significant addition. For example, the 1992 Gwich'in comprehensive land claim, a modern treaty, reads as follows regarding Aboriginal title:

In consideration of the rights and benefits provided to the Gwich'in by this agreement, the Gwich'in cede, release and surrender to Her Majesty in Right of Canada all their aboriginal claims, rights, titles and interests, if any, in and to *lands and waters* anywhere within Canada. [emphasis added](see http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/agr/gwich/gwic/index_e.html)

No subsequent document signed by Grand Rapids indigenous peoples purports to extinguish ownership of waters. While it is not within the parameters of this report to explore the broader implications of this legal fact, at a minimum we have resisted calling the spillway camp an 'occupation' and thereby imply that the leaders were



Grand Rapids Mayor Robbie Buck and Grand Rapids First Nations Chief Ovide Mercredi at their camp on the spillway in September 2005.

camped on someone else's land.

Others dropped by the campsite. Indigenous people from communities as far away as Wabowden, Nelson House and Cross Lake came to show their support. Momentum grew as word got around. Within a week the Chief Executive Officer of Manitoba Hydro, Bob Brennan, visited the camp and listened to the leaders. A week later Premier Garry Doer visited. It was the first time since Duff Roblin's ribbon cutting visit that a sitting premier had come to the community. Formal presentations were made in the community, which included elements of the photo essay shown here. Senior members of the Manitoba government were shown around the project and the communities. The environmental and social damage was made clear. The Premier, clearly moved by what he had seen and somewhat shocked at the patent injustice, made a commitment to restart negotiations with the First Nation and to deal fairly with the municipality. Whether the commitment will be respected is for the future to determine, but it seemed clear at the time that desperately needed change was at least going to be discussed.

5. Conclusions/ Results/ Lessons

A glimpse of the dam is unavoidable if one's destination is northward toward Thompson. The ominous structure is difficult to ignore, no matter how hard one tries. Living beneath the Grand Rapids Generating Station would certainly make it difficult for the local people to dismiss. The spectacle of the dam, the hum of the transmission lines, the environmental devastation or "hydro scars" and the social discord are constant reminders for those who have survived the construction of the dam. Little is known in southern Manitoba about the Grand Rapids dam, or any other dam for that matter. For those down here in the south, exposure to hydro (and hydro issues) is limited to a flick of the switch, switches that heat the homes and provide the electricity so crucial to the livelihoods of many. The story of the hy-

dro era in Manitoba is largely unknown. Instead, hydroelectric power is promoted as "clean and green" energy; "renewable". What was meant to be a new and brighter future came to fruition for some, particularly for those in the south, a promising start. For those in the north who occupied the land since time immemorial, the hydro era opened a dark page in their history.

The sad history of Grand Rapids is a cautionary tale. Often, conflicts with Aboriginal communities around land use are portrayed as a conflict between the needs of the general public versus one small sector of society: indigenous people. We reject this way of understanding such conflicts, and certainly reject it in the context of the Grand Rapids Generating Station. The general public, our society as a whole, is deeply injured when intergenerational misery is created for an important segment, the first peoples. The general public's well being is not aided by the construction of a 'legacy of hatred', a deeply divided world of rich and poor, a situation where one community is left without the resources even to hope for a better future while right next door another community is thriving. The general public is not improved by such a situation, but must live with a time bomb in its midst, and must live as bearers of an injustice created in its name. The social and economic costs of such forms of development, not to mention the human costs, must be factored in and understood from the perspective of a long duration: which is what the current state of Grand Rapids compellingly calls to attention.

The conflict is rather one of conventional economists and engineers with grand plans, solutions to technical problems, a single-minded focus on numbers, and an overbearing hubris on the one side, and the general public with an interest in ensuring that communities directly facing the consequences of developments be justly dealt with, on the other. The Grand Rapids Generating Station has given engineers the right to boast about the technical feats involved in overcoming

the multi-various construction obstacles they faced. And it has given economists the opportunity to boast about the wealth generating in producing low cost power both for Manitobans and for export. But the indigenous peoples of Grand Rapids have nothing to boast about except their ability to endure grinding poverty. It is not in the interest of the general public to create a bitterly divided social world. Nor is it in the interest of the general public to have to pay the cost of social misery created in its name in its backyard. Nor is it in the interest of the general public to create intergenerational divisions along colonial boundaries. The perspective that Grand Rapids offers on hydroelectric development in northern Manitoba is a sobering one indeed.

At a minimum, it must be said that before future projects are contemplated, the public utility and the government it is accountable to must redress the grievous situation they have created. Given the history, this means that revenue streams for local communities must be created out of the utility's profits: an ongoing source of funding provided through taxation, resource revenue sharing, or water rents must replace the once and for all time offers that have characterized Manitoba Hydro's negotiations through the last decade. Otherwise every other community affected by its actions in northern Manitoba will, at some point or other, be forced as Grand Rapids was to engage in direct action and attempt to force a reopening of these agreements.

The municipality and First Nation of Grand Rapids are currently in negotiations to come to a settlement of claims respecting the impact of hydroelectric development on their communities. A just settlement will not include a one-time cash payment, however large. A just settlement will include a revenue stream that will continue to flow as long as the power flows. Such a settlement should be made in the interest of paving the way to a meaningful new relationship between First Nations and Manitoba Hydro. Instead of

the current logic, which will lead to one, ten, a hundred Grand Rapids, an approach is called for that understands First Nations citizens deserve to live at least as well as employees of a public utility, and First Nations communities deserve the kinds of infrastructure that the utility believes its own employees' communities need. A just settlement might also lead to a mentality change on the part of Manitoba Hydro. It might begin to see how consulting local communities about such apparently small matters as when to open a spillway is a better way to do business. The many other kinds of things the utility could do – one thinks of Aboriginal executive training programs, for example, that do not contemplate the only hydro employment for Aboriginal peoples as at the bottom of the hierarchy – will almost certainly spring from such a mentality change. We offer this report in the spirit of respect for the treaty relationship, in the spirit of hope that change will come, in the spirit of gratitude to the people of Grand Rapids who have shared their sometimes difficult stories with us, and in the spirit of admiration for a people who have suffered and survived to struggle on and rebuilt their community.

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