



Memories of Mining: First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elders' perspectives

Pre-Contact & Fur trade era

"First Nations people have lived in our traditional territory since time began. Historically our ancestors lived on the land, maintaining a balance between the environment, the animals and our people. Back then there were no borders and we would set up and move camp with the seasons and the food sources. People came to this traditional territory from as far away as Dawson City, Fort McPherson, Fort Good Hope and Tulita in the North West Territories." (Peter, Hogan and the FN of NND Lands Department 2006:86).



1955 Relocation and Life in Mayo

Eventually a relocation took place to the other side of the river, which proved to have several negative repercussions, for example a sudden increase in consumption of alcohol. Nonetheless First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun elders emphasise their continued agency and told stories of how they quit drinking. Some families, instead of moving to Mayo relocated to their trapline or other places along the Stewart river:

JJ: Back in the 50s, the doctor ordered the First Nation to move to Mayo ... and it's something we didn't do, my family. Instead of going into town we moved downriver twenty miles. ... We lived in a tent for a while, until we built a cabin, hunt and fish in that area for many, many, many years.



1936 The flood

This singular event stands out in the history of the Old Village: "Julius Kendi started a school with two people from the Old Village as teachers, Charlie Jimmy and Mary Moses. Classes were held in the church at the village. In 1936, the river flooded the village, destroying the church and many of our traditional clothes for dancing. After the flood, children either went to the school in Mayo or the residential school in Carcross or elsewhere. Eventually the church at the Old Village was rebuilt further away from the riverbank..." (Peter et al. 2006:88). The flood also caused the abandonment of another dwelling and trading site: Lansing Post.

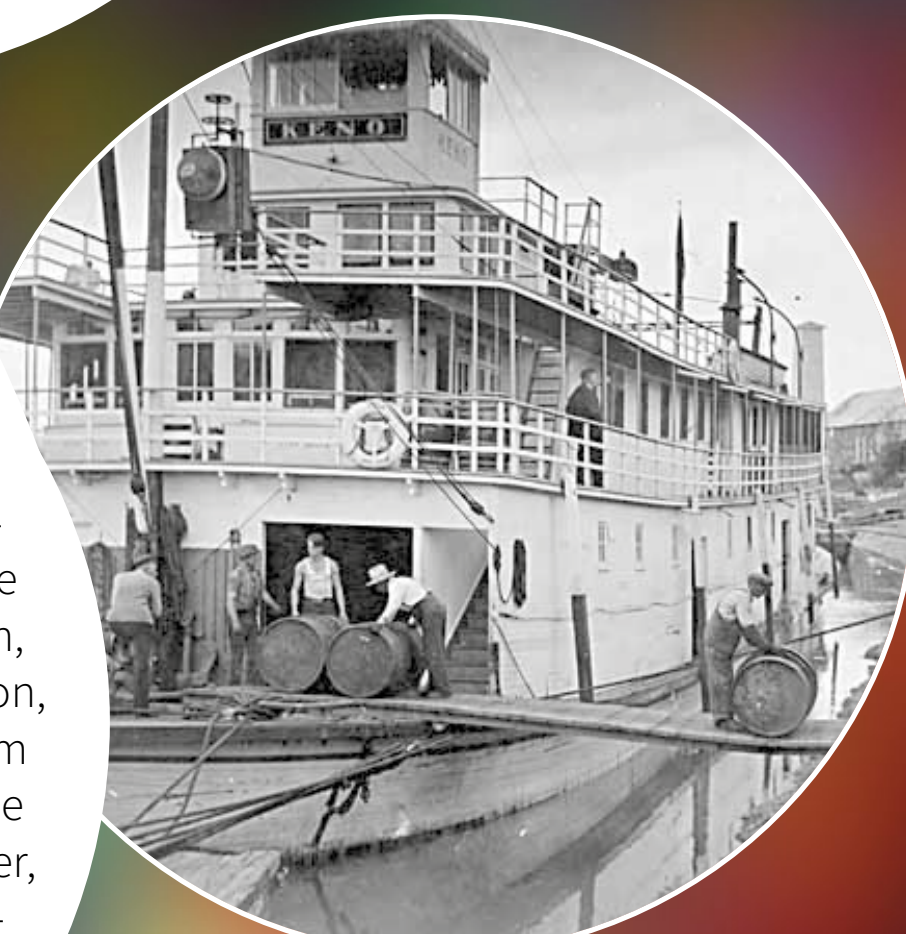
Summertime in town: "When we were children, every day of summer held a promise of adventure. In the dusty long hot hours of continuous daylight, we would constantly cruise around on our bikes waiting for something exciting to happen. And most times it did. In our little village, Main Street and the Stewart River ran perpendicular to each other, which made surveillance easy from either the road or the dike built up on the riverbank to protect us from spring floods. Life was good." (Profelt Le-Blanc 2005: 147f.)

Residential Schools

Aggressive assimilation policies and especially the fact that some children were taken to residential school created much tensions that still need to be resolved today. When I asked on of the elders if he lived in Mayo all his life he tells me:

WP: Oh, off and on, away. In 1955, I was stolen from my home. Until 1960 the government took me away to residential school. That's what's all the commotion going on today, it's about that. Government taking them kids, forcing them, well not forcing - where they don't want to be, but still they take us like we're criminals or something. If we don't go they said they gonna put our parents in jail. That's how they were. SG: How old were you when you came out? WP: I was only thirteen. I never came out, I ran away. SG: Oh really? WP: Yeah, some of us run away. Run away from school, it took us three days to get back to Mayo. SG: Good for you!

Eventually his mother was able to protect him from having to go back, but the negative repercussions proved to be far-reaching, making it difficult to learn in school for example. Moreover many of this generation's children and grandchildren have to deal with the intergenerational effects on their healing journeys.



Steamboats & Early associations with mining

SG: So tell me about that moment when the steam boat came, what was it like? BL: Yeah that was the first time we see new people on the steam boat come in. And the only time men make a Dollar, when the steam boat come in, they all come to Mayo. All the men from First Nation, they load and unload steam boat. When the steam boat go by down village, they used to throw apple and oranges to us. Doesn't matter, out on the river, we still go out and grab it. First time we taste something good, oranges and apple, that we never see. So anyway, men make a few little Dollar to buy grocery for their family, my dad was there too.



1915–1955 Childhood and Life in the Old Village

SG: Do you remember anything about that time? RL: We used to have a lot of fun, you know, we don't think about town - we didn't even know this town (Mayo) existed. Growing up, people used to come in, get groceries with the boat then, but we just stayed around the village. We made our own games and we had lots of fun down there.

HB: In summertime people do fishing, you know, king salmon. In July they dry lots of dry fish and they get it ready for winter. You can't keep no fresh food in those days because there's no such thing as a freezer, that's why they dry everything - as much as they could for Winter. And we eat lots of fresh fish, and white fish, any kind of fish, you name it. And then about around fall time - July, August - people go out, three or four families go out in the bush to dry meat for the winter.

1989 Shutdown of United Keno Hill Mines and the change from mining towns to FIFO (fly-in/fly-out)

When the mine shut down it had a profound effect on the area, many people moved away, and never returned. Today, Elsa is a ghost town and Keno is populated by some ten people during winter time. WP: There used to be lots of houses (in Elsa) and that was good for Mayo that time. On the weekend they come down, they buy groceries down here and people make money off the miners too. There was a bar down here too. They come down and have a drink, all of them, that was pretty good in those days. In the 50ies, 60ies, 70ies until the 80ies, when the mine shut down. The way it is now it's not very good for Mayo. They bring in workers from BC, Alberta, across Canada, for maybe two or three weeks and then they rotate their shift. And all they do is board the plane and take the money back out of the Yukon. They don't spend their time in Mayo, they don't spend nothing in the Yukon. Which is not very good.



1993 Signing of the Self-Government Agreement

After the signing of their self-government agreement with Canada the relationship between the First Nation and mining companies became more regulated. Nowadays, mining companies need to negotiate Impact Benefit (or similar) Agreements. Representatives of the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, who recognise the importance of the industry for local employment, stress the role of environmental protection and position themselves as 'stewards of the land':

"Our position in regards to mining is that we must be part of the development of the mine.... The integrity of the environment is very important for the First Nation of Yukon and we look forward to environmental protection. First and foremost." (Chief and Elder Simon Mervyn) Elder Jimmy Johnny says: "Mining can be good for people, they say we're going to make money. But they have to learn how to respect the land and water. There should be no pollution".

Both quotes stem from the LACE film "Mining on First Nation Land - The First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun in Mayo/Yukon Territory" (2017), which can be watched online on Youtube.

2018 Reclamation and Opening of Victoria Gold Mine

After the shutdown of United Keno Hill Mines a company was charged with remediating the site, simultaneously continuing to extract galena or silver ore. Recently a new large gold mine started operations in the vicinity of Mayo. Several community members, men and women are employed there currently. A two weeks on, two weeks off shift-rosters seems to allow enough time for most people to pursue hunting, fishing and other traditional activities, including obligations related to kinship-ties. A challenge that remains is that First Nations, and especially young women, are often employed in low-paying, entry-level jobs.



Gendered Experiences

Women would also start working early but rather in Mayo: as baby sitters, in the bar or as assistants in the hospital. In Elsa (or Millerville, as one part of town was called where some families lived) women seemed to have been rather confined to the house, being responsible for care work and raising children. One elder, who lived in Elsa with her husband, decided to go back to Mayo and live with her mother, raising her kids there, because she felt she didn't have much freedom of movement. Some people thus remained resilient and social ties intact under these conditions. When asked what she thought that mining brought along she articulates her uneasiness:

JB: The mine was good too. You know, they had grocery stores there, a bank, it was just like a town, you know. For the miners or for their wives, and things.. Yeah, it was pretty good, but it was kind of.. I don't know how to say it. I don't know very much about mining, what they were doing. Just big checks were going back and forth there, and then... I didn't go out to pick berries up there: I don't know what it was about it, I just didn't went out to pick berries.



1950s to 1980s Life and work in Elsa

Opportunities to work for the United Keno Hill Mines company in the Keno and Elsa area were taken advantage of by a number of young First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun men. Many started working early in the mines and take pride in being successful in this sector (see also Winton and Hogan 2016):

SG: How old were you then when you started work? FP: I was probably seventeen. I had to quit school at grade ten, because our family was so big. We were eleven in our family and my mum was a single parent. So I had to go to work. So that's what I did. But I was very fortunate, because I was a natural born operator I guess. And I just moved on to equipment and learned and experienced every jurisdiction that I could. I was operating CAT's, scrapers, trucks, loaders, graters, so on and so forth.



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Steamboat: www.houngengroup.com
Mine Site: www.vitgoldcorp.com

Poster by Susanna Gartler, student investigator of ReSDA Project „LACE – Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Extractive Industry (2014–2019)“, and Gertrude Saxinger (Co-PI); in collaboration with the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun.

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