

Willow Flats, NWT: Metis Road Allowance Community

During the 1960s, in the burgeoning city of Yellowknife, the government sought to dispossess the Dene and Métis of their land holdings as part of their grand scheme for the city. The new non-Aboriginal work force had designs for the shoreline, islands and lands where the Métis and Dene had settled. The methods by which the city attempted to acquire these lands were particularly heavy-handed and the Métis were left dislocated and up-rooted to this day.

In the early 1960s, the government set about eradicating this living pattern and forcibly removed the Dene to a piece of land at the end of Latham Island referred to as “Squaw Valley.” Notices of eviction were often placed at a distance, sometimes on utility poles 100 feet from their homes. If people refused to leave, their residences were bulldozed in their absence. “People lost everything. All for the betterment of the community,” says Clem Paul, President of the North Slave Metis Alliance. The government built 500 square foot “matchbox” homes for the Dene at N’dilo. Feeling some concern about relocating the Dene to a place labeled “Squaw Valley,” the government painted the matchbox homes sundry colours and re-dubbed the area, “Rainbow Valley,” present day N’dilo. The Métis were also forcibly removed from their homes at School Draw and Cabin Courts, and along the shoreline of Great Slave Lake and Willow Flats. At School Draw, Métis homes were bulldozed and berry-picking grounds were torn up for the construction of 45 government homes. Unlike the Dene, however, the Métis were not offered a settlement area, but low-cost row housing in the new town. Many Métis families living in the “Flats” refused to move from their homes. In response, the city moved the municipal garbage dump adjacent to Métis homes. “The garbage was burnt steady”, says Clem Paul:

They burnt sewage, cars, gas cans, everything. Small explosions were always happening. Sometimes it would burn for three weeks. The government had a place for the Indians [Dene], but they couldn’t get the Métis to move, so they moved the dump there and burnt it steady for several years. Métis families tried to stick it out. The options were stay near the dump and die, or move to low-cost housing. It was a scam. The government then bought up the land, surveyed parcels and when non-natives started moving in, they moved the dump. (Paul, p. 152)

The city deliberately disempowered the Métis by refusing to survey the lands upon which they had settled. Because it was unsurveyed land, the government called them ‘squatters.’

That’s what they did to Métis all over. Families could never buy the piece of land they were on because the city wouldn’t survey it. The city would try to get the families to move any way they could, then bulldoze their homes, survey it, and then offer it for sale. That is how Yellowknife was built. That is what they are proud of. (Ibid.)

Reference:

North Slave Metis Alliance, Marc Stevenson, Clem Paul et al. “Strong Like Two People: North Slave Metis History.” In L.J. Barkwell, L. Dorion and D. Préfontaine (Eds.), *Metis Legacy Volume I*, Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications and Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001: 135-168.



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