

DEATH OF A COMMUNITY

LINDA KENDALL

THE LITERAL MEANING OF THE WORD “utopia” is ‘no place.’ That is, it exists only in our imagination, not in the real world. But I grew up in a community that was, if not true utopia, as close to it as could be. For a time...

I grew up in the small community of West Arrow Park, in the Arrow Lakes Valley, a quiet community of about four hundred, where everyone had lots of space and lots of privacy. Some people farmed their land, and many worked in the forest industry. We enjoyed an idyllic lifestyle, with clean air, an abundance of forest, wildlife, and pure crystal-clear water from the mountains. We also had safety, and more importantly, we had a strong sense of community. With the naivety of a child, I assumed that everyone lived this way, and I took it all for granted.

In the spring of 1965, West Arrow Park was visited by B.C. Hydro. They told us that we were all to be expropriated. They seemed to think that we should see it as a great opportunity to get out of such an isolated place. They referred to us as “poor,” to our area as “economically depressed,” and spoke as if money and shiny new things were the only symbols of a worthwhile life. In the end 4,376 parcels of land, totalling almost 34,000 acres, were acquired by B.C. Hydro. Of those 34,000 acres, 26,800 were flooded.

What made the expropriations of West Arrow Park unique was that, unlike other communities being expropriated for this dam, most of West Arrow Park was benchland, situated so far above the proposed high water line that a total buy-out was completely unjustified. Except for a small area immediately beside the ferry landing, none of the land would ever be affected. Hydro had previously distributed booklets to all residents stating that only the land below the flood level was to be taken. So why, stunned residents asked, this sudden change? Hydro,

ever ready with their well-rehearsed explanations, said that it was too dangerous, that after construction of the dam, the silty riverbanks would give way and a massive slide extending half a mile back would cause a forty-foot high wave in the Columbia River narrows. No one ever believed this, and, of course, it never happened. Several years later, the dangerous West Arrow Park land was offered for sale by BC Hydro.

The death of West Arrow Park was a slow and painful process, beginning in 1965 and ending with the completion of the Keenleyside Dam in mid-1969. Those who remained until the end, as my family did, could only watch in sadness and horror as B.C. Hydro bulldozed and burned homes, barns, orchards and everything else that pioneers had taken a lifetime to build. One elderly woman told my mother that she hoped she would die soon and not have to witness this senseless destruction.

What I remember most was the confusion, denial, and disbelief that pervaded our community. This was a valley not used to sudden changes, and although we were largely self-sufficient and well equipped to deal with issues of our survival, we soon found that we were no match for the power of B.C. Hydro. We had neither the money, courage, nor organizational skills required to battle this formidable legal authority.

In the spring of 1967, we were told that the school would not be re-opening that fall, and a school bus to Nakusp would not be provided for anyone choosing to remain at West Arrow Park. Worn out from years of stress and uncertainty, many residents saw this as the final straw, and moved that summer. Their houses, awaiting burning, were often left open, naked, stripped of all the things that had made them simple but comfortable homes. It was indescribably sad to walk past these deserted homesteads, their flowers courageously blooming, fruit trees laden with pears, plums and apples. Sometimes I envied those who had moved in the early years, and were spared the pain of seeing our beloved community in its death throes.

In the fall of 1967, we were told again that no bus would be provided to transport students to the main highway where we could get the school bus to Nakusp. Parents protested bitterly. We didn't go to school for two weeks, but no bus ever appeared, and we had to again accept defeat, end our feeble strike and resign ourselves to the three mile walk. As winter approached and the days grew shorter, we were walking to the bus in the dark and doing the return walk home in the dark. It was horribly cold on some days, but no one, not even the youngest, ever complained. We did not doubt for a moment that this miserable situation was just

part of Hydro's plan to drive us out, and it made us more determined than ever to stay put.

The pall of winter was made worse by the constant house burnings. So often I would come home from school to find another familiar house reduced to an eerie glowing pile. Usually there were a few kids who wanted to hang around as the fire burned into the night. In fact, it became a ritual for some of us, and with each new fire we understood, in a way we would never forget, the meaning of the word "powerlessness."

When my father died in February, 1968, only a few families were still residing in West Arrow Park. The day after my father's death, we were again visited by Hydro representatives, and a week later we left our property and that beautiful little community I would forever call "my home." The other families, tired and discouraged after too many years of battling this unrelenting juggernaut, followed shortly afterward, but the last remaining one stayed another year before finally accepting defeat in mid-1969.

SPRING OF '65

On the narrow winding road
 hard-packed by logging trucks
 we poke the quivering frost heaves
 watch them bubble and puff
 oozing mud and gravel breath
 redolent of yeast softly growing
 in a warm porcelain bowl

In the old community hall
 rusted metal chairs in ragged lines
 stand like vanquished soldiers
 awaiting some unknown fate
 Above the grim-faced farmers and loggers
 faded crepe paper streamers
 remnants of last year's Christmas pageant
 sag from rough-hewn beams

The cool scent of the evening river
 like crisp winter apples
 drifts through the open doors
 and anxious mothers motion
 "Time to come in"

Now the powder blue cars
 of the B.C. Hydro and Power Authority
 snake their way up the valley road
 Young men in shiny black suits
 with rumours, now official, encased in black briefcases
 swarm upon the creaking stage
 deftly unfurl crisp maps and charts
 their words swirling in the air above us
 "This is our 'Resettlement Plan' for you"

The lady beside me, everyone's grandma
 plucks at her dress, cherry-stained
 from an afternoon of pie making
 She has never lived anywhere else
 I tremble She takes my hand
 I smell the cherry syrup
 and silently practice unfamiliar words
 'expropriation' 'hydroelectric dam'
 until the twilight turns to darkness
 and their tail-lights become a blur
 a long red fingernail raking
 another weal in another valley

Forty years later I still wince
 at the sight of black briefcases
 and powder blue cars

FIELD TRIP

“Step carefully”
she directs us
as we skirt the edges
of the teeming ant hill
“Step carefully and respect their home”

The yearly field trip
for plant identification
lupine, mullein, vetch
extra points if you remember
the latin (burdock – arctium lappa)

The heat hums, presses down
with sticky sweat-drenched hands
we swat at flies, take notes
In the distance the Caterpillar clanks
and rumbles relentlessly on
Pungent whiff of diesel
the greasy black blood
of the yellow monster
that criss-crosses our valley
on cold steel feet
crunching, crushing, battering
another homestead flattened to earth
sacrificed to B.C. Hydro’s
“New Outlook for the Arrow Lakes”

She is saying that
the quaking aspen (*populus tremuloides*)
provides building material for beavers
a home for woodpeckers and chickadees
cattails (*typha latifolia*)
a home for wrens
At the pond
Robbie hefts a branch
shatters the tranquil water
tadpoles leap and wriggle
their wispy grey bodies
fall helpless on mud and gravel
She screams

Field trip aborted
we trudge back in the heat
(he will get the strap)

And I step carefully
in the tracks
of the yellow machine

SEMANTICS

i sit on my chair
and quietly study him
this hydro man
who has come to see my father
about our expropriation

well technically
he tells us
it's not expropriation
we hope to make a 'voluntary settlement'
with all property owners

bc hydro
at your door
makes you an offer
you dare not refuse
but it's not expropriation

bc hydro
on your land
without your permission
tying orange tape
to fenceposts and trees
but it's not expropriation

bc hydro
sends you questionnaires
to which new community
should we relocate you
but it's not expropriation

bc hydro
behind your barn
driving yellow stakes
in garden soil and pasture
but it's not expropriation

bc hydro
knocking once again
with a pre-determined deadline
by which you must accept
their 'fair and generous' offer
but it's not expropriation

bc hydro
paper in hand
advising you this matter
now referred to arbitration
but still no, not yet
it's not expropriation

so many words
so many ways
to make you feel so frightened
for what is it
this constant threat
if not expropriation

CENTENNIAL TREE

I remember Canada's centennial
every school had a project
we planted a tree
a Douglas fir seedling
our principal promised
would grow straight and tall and magnificent
to reach for the stars
shovel slicing silky new grass
slivering tips of spicy bracken
he dug the cold moist earth
shivering in the morning wind
we sang
'This land is your land, this land is my land
this land was made for you and me'
a song for Canada's centennial
Across the road
bright orange surveyor's tape
glared from the trees and fenceposts
flapping fiercely
'Go away go away, this isn't your land
anymore'
Years before
Hydro's words: no land
above the high water line
would be taken
our community sighed a collective breath
safe!
but the powder blue cars
with the gold cross logo
soon returned
and fathers cursed
and shook their fists
at the sign of the double cross
When the tree was planted
the bigger boys stamped on the ground around it
the principal wiped his brow on his starched white shirt
and the newspaper dutifully noted our contribution
to this very special year
Somehow it seemed incongruous to me
planting this little seedling
in a doomed community

BURNING

Against the white birches, forked and bare
 Bill and Joan Jeffrey's house is burning
 That big house on the hill
 where I learned to play the piano
 is on fire
 It started early this morning
 before I left for school
 We all stood around watching
 then had to run like hell for three miles
 so as not to miss the bus

An old log house
 Strong, solid, stubborn
 like the people of this valley
 it will burn a long, long time
 Flame fingers clawing at the sky
 as if beseeching for salvation
 and finding none
 Thick, black, choking smoke
 slowly settles over neighbouring farms
 and far away at school
 I smell its acrid breath
 on my clothes

We kids who are left
 know that our houses
 will look like that...
 soon
 as we kick the smouldering embers
 hear them hiss and crack their rage
 and ours

Burning, burning, burning
 the pace is picking up
 one about every week or so now
 With their gasoline and matches
 these Hydro men are certain
 it's a very important job they do
 destroying our houses, our barns, our fences
 taking pains to ensure that nothing is left
 to show that anyone ever lived here

But I wonder, do they know:
 that Lavinia loved that window seat
 that Georgina picked greengages from that upstairs dormer window
 that Jim carved cedar chests on that verandah every summer

All these houses
 that have stood for generations
 a little bit of history
 in each tiny flake of ash