

BUILDING THE OPASKWAYAK CREE NATION ECONOMY *A Case Study in Resilience*

.....

Yale D. Belanger

Overview

On 15 February 2002, the Aseneskak Casino operated in conjunction with the Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN) nearby The Pas, Manitoba officially opened its doors to an eager public.¹ For one fleeting moment it appeared as though all eyes were fixed on the OCN, for not only was this the first provincial First Nations casino to open, it also represented a significant gamble on the part of both the OCN and its holding company, the Paskwayak Business Development Corporation.² Beginning in the late 1960s, the OCN had steadily taken over responsibility for a number of devolved federal programs while simultaneously growing its business portfolio to where the band today is recognized as one of region's largest employers. The casino was considered a means of further enhancing the OCN's economic strength and overall socio-economic potential. The community acknowledged that recovering the losses of a failed casino enterprise could significantly impair the bulk of the OCN's businesses, the majority of which were established in the 1990s. Notwithstanding the potential outcomes, the OCN and its economic development initiatives of the past three decades are in need of closer examination.

History

The Pas region has been home to various Aboriginal groups for thousands of years. Located along the Saskatchewan River, the area was utilized by the Cree while also regularly visited by the Anishinaabe and Nakota.³ The Cree of the region had an established economy predicated on seasonal rounds tracking moose, elk, deer, and other large animals, some gardening combined with fishing in the region's myriad of lakes and rivers. The Pas region was a habitual stop and became a regular meeting place where various First Nations would gather to trade and renew political and military alliances.⁴ Beginning in the late seventeenth century, French and British explorers entered the region and by 1684 the first permanent Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trading post was established at York Factory. The Cree and other First Nations began to utilize the vast river systems to hunt and trap for furs to trade with HBC employees in an effort to augment their economies. Henry Kelsey's arrival in this region in 1690 ushered in a wave of British and French explorers and traders, and by 1743, in addition to York Factory and several smaller HBC posts, two French trading posts, Fort Bourbon and Fort Paskoyac,

were raised on the bank of the Saskatchewan River nearby The Pas.⁵

The HBC established a permanent post at The Pas in 1821 followed by the construction of a Church Missionary Society (CMS) station in 1840. The resulting permanent settler interaction with local Cree populations became the regional norm. Additional work opportunities also resulted in the Cree gradually working as wage labourers in the burgeoning commercial fishing and lumber industries. Hunting, trapping, and fishing still comprised the Cree economy, although some individuals tried their hand farming during this period. Few took to it and most maintained seasonal rounds, however, leaving the mission site each fall to settle in productive hunting and fishing sites upwards of 250 kilometres away. In 1860, the Hind Expedition responsible for surveying the region travelled through The Pas, where expedition member John Fleming noted that the CMS mission located on the south bank of the Saskatchewan River contained Indian homes that "seemed to be uninhabited and in a dilapidated condition; the Indians for whom they were erected, disliking a settled life devoted solely to the pursuit of agriculture, and preferring the wandering and precarious life of the hunter in their native wilds."⁶ Stony and swampy fields made up of glacial deposits with poor drainage located within a moderately adverse climate were not conducive to agriculture.⁷ An inadequate subsistence base led more than three-quarters of the population away from the mission for the hinterlands in winter.⁸

The Pas region was a stronghold of natural resources that included timber, fish, and subterranean minerals, and pressure to open the region to exploration led the federal government to commence treaty negotiations with the Cree and Anishinaabe in 1875. Treaty Commissioner Alexander Morris visited The Pas in October 1876 seeking the Cree's adherence to Treaty Five signed the previous year with several nations located to the south and southeast of The Pas. Morris noted upon his arrival that "the banks were covered with Indians with their canoes."⁹ Fifteen years had passed since the Hind Expedition's visit to the region and little had changed at the Devon Mission. Morris noted, however, that the population at the station had grown and that more Cree appeared to have settled nearby the mission, for "there are also a large number of houses belonging to the Indians

of the place; and on the other bank the firm of Kew, Stobart & Co., have erected for trading purposes. There are also several dwelling-houses on the north bank."¹⁰ Morris finalized the terms of Treaty Five with the Cree the day after his arrival, which included provisions for a 160-acre land grant to each family of five, even though Morris himself admitted that "at the Pas all the land obtainable is now cultivated, and consists of a vegetable garden and one field attached to the mission, and a few patches of potatoes here and there."¹¹ He claimed that "a short distance from the river the marsh begins, and extends to the south for miles; and the same thing occurs to the north. In fact, on both banks of the river at this point, and from the Che-ma-wa-win up to it, one hundred and fifty acres of land fit for cultivation cannot be found."¹²

The Pas Indians were not listed in the text of Treaty 5 as being owed the land allocation Morris promised Cree leaders. Prescribed treaty annuities such as hoes, spades, axes, ploughs, carpenter's tools, seed to plant wheat, barley, and oats as well as oxen, bulls, and cows were withheld at various times due to the region's poor agricultural environment. During much of the next three decades the Cree maintained their seasonal rounds while requesting government assistance in difficult times. The period following the Cree adhering to Treaty 5 was characterized by Pettipas as one of over-exploiting hunting and fishing resources resulting in bouts of starvation at the Mission.¹³ In 1889, for instance, the Cree required additional relief supplies when the regional muskrat and fisheries failed.¹⁴ The Cree were still beyond the influence of wage labour and according to Native Studies scholar Frank Tough, "the lack of alternative activities made The Pas agency Indians (with the exception of Grand Rapids) dependent upon the muskrat swamps."¹⁵ This led to the continued reliance on seasonal rounds. In 1900, the Reverend J. Hines wrote that the Cree left the mission in October to fish at Clearwater Lake "and to take up their winter quarters along the lakes and rivers, forming hamlets of two to three families."¹⁶ It is estimated that the population "was divided in 15 to 20 hamlets, scattered over a radius of 150 miles" from the mission and reserve.¹⁷

By 1903, officials of the Canadian Northern Railway (CNOR) were interested in establishing The Pas as a base for a proposed railway to Hudson Bay. Homesteaders occupying the lands

between the South and North Saskatchewan rivers resulted in increased agricultural production and it was posited that a railway leading to the grain outlets to be constructed at Churchill on Hudson Bay would ultimately expand federal economic frontiers. The financial boon would also improve prairie farmer's prosperity while simultaneously promoting the benefits of western settlement. Federal officials faced increasing political pressure to open a line from The Pas to Churchill.¹⁸ Few understood however that such a move would require the evacuation of the Cree from their reserve, one of the region's few sites not made up primarily of muskeg and swamp. In 1905, the Department of Indian Affairs nevertheless authorized the CNOR to run a line across the reserve and set up station grounds. S. R. Marlatt of the Lake Manitoba Inspectorate proposed a town site surrender of 500 acres to permit railway construction in September followed by Indian Agent for The Pas Agency, Joseph Courtney, striking up informal negotiations with Cree leaders. A little more than one year later, Marlatt informed Indian Commissioner David Laird on 21 August 1906 that he had secured surrender of the town site from the Cree.¹⁹

As part of the surrender Cree leaders accepted that the band would vacate the reserve prior to 1 August 1907. However, within days of the surrender Laird received a letter from Chief Constant and Councillors Norman Lathlin and David Cook describing "irregularities of the Inspector" indicating that perhaps the surrender was not valid.²⁰ This letter was not acted upon and on 5 November 1906, the Order in Council accepting the surrender was passed. Railway construction proceeded slowly as did the sale of town lots initiated in 1908. As of 1910, the Cree were still living on surrendered land, something that annoyed the non-Native residents. Additional resident complaints focused on the Cree practice of drying fish and smoking moose and elk meat upwind, which they claimed made living nearby the 'Indians' impracticable. The Cree also had complaints albeit directly related to the surrender's final terms. Community leaders argued that they simply granted access to their land for use by interested homesteaders and railway officials. During the summer of 1910, following protracted and unsuccessful negotiations with non-Native residents eager to incorporate The Pas into a town, long-time OCN member Ernie Constant stated that the residents

participated in a gun-point removal of 500 Cree to the north side of the Saskatchewan River.²¹ Town officials claimed that the Dominion government was responsible for the relocation that resulted in all but thirty-seven Cree being effectively displaced to what is today the home of the OCN.²²

Following the Cree removal, the town site was formally divided and placed on the market for sale. Sales once again were slow until Herman Finger of Port Arthur, Ontario arrived and purchased a number of lots. By the time The Pas was incorporated in 1912, the Finger Lumber Company employed upwards of 500 throughout the region.²³ The town slowly grew from twenty-five in 1910 to 500 in 1912 reaching 2,000 by 1914. Renewed interest in railway construction followed and by the end of May 1913, eighty-miles had been laid and a steel bridge connecting the north and south banks of the Saskatchewan River completed. Regional development during the next two decades resulted in the 1916 opening of the Mandy copper mine located seventy miles north of The Pas followed by a diamond mine opening in Flin Flon in 1927. Construction of a power plant installed at Island Falls on the Churchill River fifty-six miles northwest of Flin Flon led to a marked increase in the demand for lumber, resulting in fifty million board feet produced by the Finger lumber mill in 1926 alone. As the economist Harold Innis accurately predicted, mineral exploration combined with the completion of the Hudson Bay railway in 1929 resulted in the regional fishing industry's growth that prior to the 1930s had an estimated annual value of approximately \$100,000.²⁴

The expansion of regional industries led to increased opportunities for the Cree. Tough demonstrated by using income data collected by the Department of Indian Affairs that the period 1896–1935 was one wherein the Cree "regional economy remained dependent upon hunting and trapping, and that both major sources of income, hunting and wage labour were influenced by the depression."²⁵ In addition to more Cree farming and harvesting swamp grasses, the per capita tons of hay harvested by the Cree increased after 1917 as did the per capita number of cattle. In general, the Cree obtained more livestock during the study period that was characterized by increasing incomes up until the onset of the Depression. The data also revealed that a bush way of life remained an

important component of the Cree regional economy vis-à-vis the ownership of tents and canoes, both of which increased in overall numbers. The general growth in per capita value of total property and the post-1917 trend towards an increase in the per capita value of buildings led Tough to conclude that this represented reserve development.²⁶ The Cree during this period also lobbied for and received permission to finance improvements upon a portion of the surrendered town land. This in turn allowed the Cree to realize a profit of \$30,000 upon sale of the subdivided lots.²⁷ The Pas town council soon thereafter began to pressure Cree leaders to surrender the remaining Indian land surrounding the town site. Recognizing that they possessed limited federal and provincial government support, Cree leaders once again succumbed to this pressure. Community leaders never acquiesced in total to these demands; in fact, during negotiations many of their counter demands were met, such as insisting that Cree men be hired for road clearing work after an agreement had been worked out permitting a right-of-way through the reserve.²⁸

Little development occurred on the reserve after the 1930s, a trend that would last until the early 1970s. The Cree also found few people in The Pas willing to trade with beyond hostile HBC employees seeking to protect their economic position. Exacerbating financial difficulties further was the transfer of natural resources from the Dominion of Canada to the province of Manitoba in 1930 vis-à-vis the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement (NRTA). The result: Indian hunters and fishermen were now subject to provincial laws related to hunting and fishing.²⁹ With provincial game wardens now exercising augmented jurisdiction over and control of Indian hunting practices, the Cree found themselves with limited access to the region's natural resources such as game and fur bearing animals and fish stocks. This resulted in the Cree's increased reliance upon government handouts and restricted Indian welfare programs. In their brief to the Special Joint Parliamentary Committee established in 1946 to examine the continued validity of the Indian Act, Cree leaders from The Pas stated "Our hunting rights should be extended, and trapping grounds more favourable. Indian people complain that too many white men are being put to trap on the muskrat area."³⁰ At nearby Chemawawin, the people complained in their brief that they had

been threatened by the Indian agent with the revocation of their trapping licenses, adding cryptically that if "our licenses are taken away from us when we leave the reserve we will not be able to sell the rats we get from our reserve."³¹

As sociologist Hugh Shewell has established, most First Nations in Canada were by this period integrated into the federal welfare system due to failing economies.³² Supporting Shewell's analysis is the work of Arthur Ray, who demonstrated that "the older paternalistic fur trade, a hybrid of European mercantilism and native reciprocal exchange traditions, was crumbling by 1945, and the groundwork for the modern welfare system so prevalent in the north today was laid."³³ For the Cree at The Pas things were no different. Unknowing to Manitoba officials, provincial programs designed to promote northern settlement also hurt Cree economic interests. Following the end of World War II, for instance, Manitoba "faced the post-war period with a well conceived land settlement policy."³⁴ The goal was to promote settlement of unoccupied tracts of Crown land "in an orderly, rational way, thus to increased the likelihood of success and to ease the task of local and provincial administration."³⁵ One aspect of the policy was the establishment of the Pasquia Project, a land reclamation venture located southwest of The Pas that was initiated in 1939. The project's intent was to see constructed flood control mechanisms to aid reclaiming 50,000 acres of potentially valuable farmland to open up to settlement.³⁶ The project met with limited success due to among other things years of excessive rainfall that limited construction. The resulting construction and chaos affected regional game patterns, impacting the Cree directly, as did the influx of settlers to the region seeking work and intent on establishing homesteads.³⁷

Undaunted the Cree still maintained seasonal rounds while supplementing these resources with wage labour employment. According to reports commissioned by the Manitoba government in the 1950s in anticipation of construction of the Grand Rapids Dam project that would result in 7,000 acres of Cree land being flooded, the Cree regional economy was still viable. For example, the *US Fish and Wildlife Report* noted in 1961 that "fur animals, water fowl and moose of the reservoir site are estimated to have an average annual value of \$593,000 over a 50 year period without this pro-

ject.”³⁸ A 1955 *Provincial Report on the Project* indicated that over two million muskrat pelts with a cumulative \$4 million value had been trapped since 1940.³⁹ It was also reported that “the commercial fishery harvest from Cedar, Moose and Cross Lakes and the Saskatchewan River delta between Cedar Lake and The Pas have averaged about \$692,000 per year over the last several years.”⁴⁰ The aforementioned report also estimated that “the average harvest could be at least doubled over a 50 year period.”⁴¹

That the Cree regional economy was maintaining itself did not deter provincial politicians from continuing to promote their hydroelectric development agenda along the Winnipeg, Saskatchewan, Nelson, and Churchill Rivers. In 1964, the Grand Rapids Dam was completed on the Saskatchewan River near the community of Grand Rapids. This was according to Manitoba officials needed to provide cheaper electrical power and to help offset the overexploitation of fish stocks that led the federal government to shut down the regional sturgeon fishery for nearly a decade beginning in the early 1960s.⁴² The dam project affected the Native communities located at Grand Rapids, Moose Lake, Chemawawin, and The Pas to varying degrees. According to sociologist James WalDRAM, following construction “many bands began to investigate the circumstances surrounding the construction of the dams and began to hire lawyers and initiate legal action for compensation.”⁴³ It was nearly three decades later before the OCN signed a \$4.56 million settlement with Manitoba Hydro in 1991 for damages sustained from the construction project.⁴⁴ At the time, however, the limited government response to the Cree political demands demonstrated to Native leaders that they were not politically powerful enough to effect change. This in part led The Pas Indian Band Chief and Council to aggressively pursue local political autonomy in the late 1960s. The question of how to improve their political and economic standing was nevertheless difficult to answer.

By the 1960s, a vehicle and foot bridge had been constructed connecting The Pas Indian Band to The Pas, although relations between the townspeople and the Cree failed to improve. In addition to the collapse of the sturgeon fishery, the forestry industry that had dominated the regional economy since 1912 collapsed in 1957 when the local lumber plant closed. Unemployment rates soared and government services

replaced forestry jobs which negatively affected housing starts. While the people in The Pas were dealing with their economic woes, with the exception of hunting, fishing, trapping, and sporadic wage labour, the Cree regional economy languished. The Pas Indian Band claimed no significant businesses and its economy was fuelled by federal transfer payments in the form of Indian welfare programs. However, forestry once again became an important industry when in 1968, Churchill Forest Industries (CFI) was established in The Pas. Within a few short years, the company employed approximately 2,000 regionally.⁴⁵ The forestry industry remains an important economic venture in The Pas employing one in ten people. The pulp mill’s current operator, Tolko, employs 750 at the mill site and an additional 350 under contract in woodland operations with a total annual payroll exceeding \$50 million.⁴⁶ Statistics are currently unavailable to the public to determine how many OCN members are employed by Tolko in The Pas.⁴⁷

The lessons learned from the regional economic decline of the 1960s led Cree leaders to consider political and economic stability as synonymous. Consequently, a community development strategy was established to help strengthen the reserve economy in an attempt to improve its member’s overall quality of life. This strategy involved: (1) development of administration and program delivery; (2) strengthening local government authority; and, (3) developing local enterprises.⁴⁸ OCN administration was established in 1968 following the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development’s (DIAND) partial devolution of financial and administration services to the band. By the spring of 1969, The Pas Indian Band had established its own Social Assistance Department, thereby establishing the band’s first welfare administration. Throughout the early 1970s, the band slowly began to assume responsibility for a number of federal programs, including but not limited to reserve economic development and aspects of public works and reserve lands.⁴⁹ As reported by journalist Heather Robertson in 1970, “The Pas reserve is organized and has few problems, with 65 per cent of the men employed and welfare the lowest of any reserve in Manitoba.”⁵⁰ The last of the strategy’s key components, the development of local, band-owned enterprises, began in the late 1960s with the creation of a gravel

hauling company, which eventually expanded into a general trucking enterprise.⁵¹

A few years after Robertson's glowing report, few band members had found lasting work despite a period of regional economic growth in the mid-1970s. This was largely due to the specialize nature of most jobs that attracted outside skilled workers to the region. This in turn resulted in a large pool of both Native and non-Native locals with no skills and limited work experience seeking permanent employment.⁵² It was at this point that band members Gordon Lathlin, Joe Ross, Malcolm McGillivray, and Henry Wilson proposed the construction of an on-reserve shopping mall in the early 1970s. The four men recognized that even though The Pas was home to the majority of the lumber conglomerate's workforce, the town housed a limited number of businesses required to serve the local community, translate to read that The Pas had no major outlet mall. Economic leakage was also a concern for the people from The Pas Indian Band who were forced to travel into The Pas to do their shopping due to the lack of comparable on reserve services. In 1973, the Ontineka Development Corporation was created with the intent of developing a community grocery store. This was a significant gamble on the band's part considering that the two communities were at an impasse resulting from the 1971 murder of Cree nursing student, Helen Betty Osborne. It would be December 1987 before Dwayne Johnston, one of four young,

non-Native men directly involved in the crime, was convicted of the murder.⁵³ Whether the four entrepreneurs intended that their small grocery store serve only The Pas Indian Band community is not known; however, they must have realized that support from a portion of The Pas community would be required for the endeavour to truly prosper.

What the four proponents hoped for but did not count on was the support the proposal received from local Native communities also experiencing considerable leakage of reserve dollars into The Pas. Plans were expanded to develop an \$8-million, large-scale shopping centre. Construction of the Otineka Mall was completed in 1975, and, according to Glen Ross, President and CEO of Paskwayak Business Development Corporation (PBDC), the opening "scared the pants off the guys."⁵⁴ The complex encompassed 225,000 square feet located on close to thirteen acres of commercially designated reserve land. An indoor shopping centre, recreation, and business offices comprised the complex, which today acts as the region's major retail and business centre. However, during the first months of operations money went missing and beset with complaints of poor customer service, the mall managers discovered that they understood little of what was involved in leasing space, finding tenants, order stock, or managing employees.⁵⁵ By the early 1980s, a number of young, university-educated community members returned who understood the issues their elders were struggling with and the band's fortunes began to change. Regional road construction also made the previously out-of-the-way mall now accessible to communities such as Grand Rapids, Easterville, and Moose Lake. Members of surrounding communities soon began flocking to the complex, creating a market centre that was ingeniously and successfully promoted as a tax-free zone for status Indians.⁵⁶

The mall's success was inspiring. The Pas Indian Band's Chief and council announced in 1987 the establishment of the PBDC to encourage regional economic development. Wholly owned by the OCN, current PBDC ventures gross annual revenues of between \$15 and \$16 million.⁵⁷ The PBDC was responsible to foster commercial and investment initiatives, guide the development of the OCN business portfolio that grew to include retail outlets, property management, and a gravel operation. The PBDC was also mandated to assist those band members



who aspired to open their own businesses while supporting current owners in their attempts to grow their ventures through various capacity building strategies. This involved reviewing and helping to build effective operational structures, implementing educational initiatives to support staff development, as well as conducting training and planning programs.

The local economy became more diversified during the next several years. The OCN development corporation controls a gravel and sand operation (est. 1990) that operates seasonally from May to October. This company provides a variety of raw or crushed aggregate products for commercial and residential projects.⁵⁸ The \$8.2-million, sixty-room Kikiwak Inn officially opened 1 July 1996. The hotel has meeting facilities, a swimming pool and hot tub, an exercise room, as well as a full service restaurant, lounge, and VLT area, and currently employs sixty people.⁵⁹ The Pas Food Town, located off reserve within The Pas Township

lar Store that currently employs ten people, the OCN has since added a Timberland Trailer Court and Chimo Building Centre to its business portfolio.⁶²

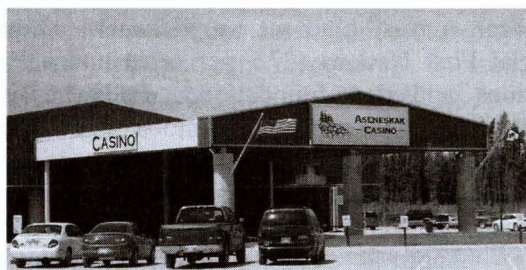
The Aseneskak Casino

In 1984, the OCN became the only First Nation in Canada to establish federally acknowledged by-laws regulating gaming on reserve lands by, in this case, operating a lottery with the community's support. Over the next two years there were few complaints as the lottery continued. However, in May 1986, the RCMP entered the OCN and without warning proceeded to seize tickets, cash, and all records from band office relating to their lottery operations.⁶³ Although no charges were filed in relation to the raid, it was assumed that notwithstanding federal authorization to conduct the lottery scheme that the RCMP was on a fishing expedition in an attempt to determine whether the OCN lottery was an illegal gambling activity in violation of Criminal Code statutes. According to Justice Murray Sinclair, the band objected to the RCMP actions based on the fact that they had agreed to co-operate in an RCMP investigation even though they had in place federally-acknowledged band by-laws to regulate their lotteries.⁶⁴ The raid nevertheless "proved the catalyst for the province, under Howard Pawley's NDP government to enter into negotiations with five organizations representing all the First Nations in Manitoba."⁶⁵

First Nations casinos were a hot topic in the 1990s, and by 1995 the Manitoba Lottery Policy Review Committee made a series of recommendations with respect to provincial gambling activities. It acknowledged that all matters related to on-reserve gaming fell beyond its pur-



limits, opened 3 December 1997 where the 5,000 square foot store employs ten people.⁶⁰ The OCN Shell Gas Bar opened 1 November 1998, has eight pumps and a 1,800 square foot building that houses a convenience store while employing twenty people.⁶¹ In addition to a Dol-



view. Accordingly, the committee recommended a separate First Nations gaming review take place. The committee's recommendation established the notion that matters related to on-reserve gaming activities were to be viewed independently of other gaming policy issues, although it was decided in 1996 to proceed with First Nations gaming. The First Nations Gaming Policy Review (Bostrom Report) followed and recommended that the Province of Manitoba support First Nations' community economic development by helping to establish upwards of five on-reserve casino operations. The following year, the First Nations Casino Project (FNCP) was initiated, followed two years later by the creation of a formal Selection Committee consisting of representatives of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) and the province. It was mandated to review and recommend potential casino proposals. Following its review of twelve eligible proposals, in June 2000 the committee recommended that five proposals should advance to the casino development stage.

Prior to submitting a casino proposal, a six-member partnership was established by the OCN, Chemawawin, Grand Rapids, Wuskwi Sipihk, Mosakahiken, and Marcel Colomb First Nations. The partners all agreed that the OCN should be the casino site. A \$6-million application was developed proposing that the casino be housed in a refurbished bingo hall. The Pas Mayor, Gary Hopper, publicly announced that the community was fully supportive of the proposed casino and the anticipated 150 jobs. He also made inquiries about The Pas becoming a full partner in the project, a request that was turned down because the consortium of six bands was considered to be large enough.⁶⁶ The proposal included a revenue-sharing quotient that would allocate seventy per cent of the profits to the six partners, which the province stated must go toward economic development projects. The remaining profits would be divided between a trust fund set up to benefit all provincial First Nations (27.5 per cent) and a First Nations addiction foundation.⁶⁷ Following one year of negotiations with Manitoba officials, the OCN proposal was accepted and an agreement between the province and the Aseneskak Casino Limited Partnership reached on 7 September 2001. Approval soon followed permitting construction to begin on the \$4.6-million, 20,000 square foot facility.

With the acceptance of the OCN casino proposal, provincial officials in turn established a number of strict regulatory measures. For one, the agreement permitted the government to conduct unscheduled audits and it also forced the casino to be up and running and fulfilling the partnership's proposals within two years (by 2002).⁶⁸ The Manitoba Lotteries Commission (MLC) was given responsibility for security and surveillance, to control gaming proceeds and set policies, while setting the mix and number of games.⁶⁹ As construction began, the Manitoba government sponsored a \$66,000 special training program to prepare OCN members to assume skilled jobs ranging from security, surveillance, slot attendants, cashiers, dealers, accountants, clerical and management positions once the casino opened.⁷⁰ The Aseneskak Casino opened 15 February 2002. One year later, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) posted an article written by Bill Redekop on their news brief website encapsulating the previous year's highlights. The article stressed that the casino generated 180 jobs, eighty-two per cent of which were held by Native people. The tenor of the article was nevertheless dour with Redekop quoting casino manager John Gauthier as saying, "We're hoping for no loss, but there may be a little."⁷¹ Seven months later, the CBC ran a story claiming that the Aseneskak Casino lost nearly \$900,000 in its first year of operations. Chemawawin First Nations' Chief Clarence Easter was quoted as saying, "The province should sit down and give us a fair deal. Instead of a one-way deal, it should be a two-way deal, where they benefit and we benefit as well."⁷² The casino fared better during its second year of operations, rebounding with a \$400,000 profit.⁷³

The main problem was geography and the resulting lack of tourist traffic. Originally it was anticipated that tourists would account for eighty per cent of casino revenues. By year's end it was evident that local residents were contributing eighty per cent of all revenues. Gauthier indicated clearly that this "casino cannot support itself on just local traffic."⁷⁴ According to Statistics Canada, the Manitoba population is 1,119,585 of which 671,274 reside in Winnipeg alone, a five-hour drive from The Pas.⁷⁵ Brandon (41,037) and Portage la Prairie (20,617) are more than four-hours driving distance away. These three centres combined make up sixty-five per cent of the provincial population. More-

over the highest levels of disposable income are found in the southern region of the province.

Recent events suggest that the Aseneskak Casino and several reserve businesses, in particular restaurants, will benefit from the October 2004 provincial smoking ban in public places. The smoking ban in question does not apply to reserve-based businesses since provinces do not have jurisdiction on reserves. Manitoba Gaming Minister Tim Sale recently stated, "We do in fact have the right to regulate gambling under the Criminal Code of Canada. That is very clear."⁷⁶ However, the provincial government did not "have the right to regulate behaviours of a variety of kinds in First Nations communities. That is the chiefs' and councils' responsibility. That is smoking, Mr. Speaker ..."⁷⁷ Federal Indian Affairs Minister Andy Scott publicly stated that in relation to casino operations he would refuse to block a First Nations bylaw permitting smoking in casinos.⁷⁸ The day after the smoking ban went into effect, the Aseneskak Casino reported that it was busier than normal.⁷⁹

Additional Ventures

Although the media coverage could lead readers to conclude that the Aseneskak Casino is the OCN's main revenue source, the band council and the PBDC have in recent years expanded the focus of their economic initiatives. Many of these projects are new and have yet to become fully operational while others have been functional for upwards of a decade to little or no fanfare. While it is impossible to highlight each and every initiative, this section will focus on and provide a brief overview of a number of the more high-profile projects.

OCN's Human Resource Development Strategy

Started in 1994, the close to \$2-million annual program has developed very successful funding partnerships and linkages both within and outside the OCN. The goal is to assist in developing individuals to care for not only themselves but their families and community by providing developmental opportunities. Job placements, college funding budgets, and employment and training programs are in place to not only foster enhanced educational opportunities, but to help ensure the OCN's continued economic success.⁸⁰

Fiscal Accountability

The OCN and the federal government in 2000 signed a five-year block funding agreement that transferred \$16 million annually to the OCN to aid in the delivery of programs and services including land management, elementary and post-secondary education, maintenance of community infrastructure, home care and on-reserve housing, to name a few. According to Chief Frank John Whitehead at the time, "The agreement is about greater control of day-to-day decision making" that represented "another step toward self-management and self-government of our people."⁸¹

Control of Land and Resources

On 9 August 2002, the OCN ratified the First Nations Land Management Act (FNLMA), effectively assuming control over their lands and resources. Community ratification confirmed the transfer of jurisdiction of land management for the OCN from the Indian Act to the FNLMA.⁸²

Natural Resource Management

Hunting, fishing and to a lesser degree trapping still play an important role in the OCN regional economy. Increased resource exploitation led the OCN to ban moose hunting in the 1980s when the regional moose population dropped to less than 500. As recently as 5 March 2003, the OCN Chief and Council and the OCN Resource Council asked its members to suspend moose hunting until after spring calving due to over hunting which threatens local population numbers.⁸³

Policing Agreement

On 3 December 2004, the OCN, the Province of Manitoba, and the Canadian Government announced \$6.1-million in funding for the OCN Community Tri-Partite Agreement. This five-year agreement will provide police services for the OCN that will be shared between the Canadian government and Manitoba, fifty-two and forty-eight per cent respectively. In addition to enabling the continuation of funding for two band constables under the Band Constable Program, the agreement ensured the OCN had continued funding for seven RCMP officers.⁸⁴

Housing Program

Facing upwards of 400 annual requests for new homes and having built only 288 new

homes between 1960 and the late '80s, the OCN established a new housing program that promotes individual down payments and monthly payments for homes. Current requests are taxing the existing INAC-funded system, whereby \$300,000 is annually allocated for the construction of ten homes. The new program also strongly encourages individuals to buy or build their own homes. The process is expected to increase the OCN housing budget thereby freeing more money for home construction for those in need within the community.⁸⁵

Aboriginal Healing Foundation

Accepting that community health and healing was required to maintain a strong socio-economic standing, the OCN leadership applied to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and was awarded a \$246,264 grant to help address alcoholism and violence in the community. The money will also be used to assist community members in their healing journey by providing counselling and out patient care and to address the legacy of physical and sexual abuse through provision of awareness workshops.⁸⁶

Final Thoughts

This brief essay's intent was to generally outline the economic initiatives undertaken by the OCN during the last thirty-five years while focusing on the historical events that led community leaders to become more economically proactive. Developing a stronger regional economic foothold was considered requisite if the Chief and Council were to wrest control over local affairs from federal government control. The OCN leadership still considers a strong economy the key to augmenting its political autonomy. The economic growth described above has also become the key to lowering unemployment among community members, enhancing community pride built on improved individual self-esteem, and creating healthier community schools admired by many of the non-Native parents living across the river in The Pas.

Continued economic growth is the key to the OCN's future socio-economic success. The Aboriginal population is notably younger than the non-Aboriginal population and will remain so into the foreseeable future. Whereas the average age for Canadians is 37.7 years, the average age of the provincial Aboriginal population is under twenty-three years of age.⁸⁷ Cur-

rent trends suggest that this group will remain relatively young in comparison to the Canadian non-Aboriginal population. In all, fifty-seven per cent of the urban Aboriginal population is under the age of twenty-four, suggesting that Aboriginal youth are quickly becoming an important demographic group. Further, the northern First Nations population from 1991–1996 grew more than thirty-four per cent whereas the OCN population during the same period grew by twenty-three per cent. Today, the OCN registered population is 4,751.⁸⁸

When the first gravel hauling business was established at the OCN in the late 1960s, the reserve claimed no significant businesses. In fact, considerable leakage of reserve dollars into The Pas economy was occurring as a result of most OCN citizens being forced to travel into town to conduct the majority of their business ranging from shopping, banking, going out for a meal, or filling their vehicles with gasoline. During this period the local Cree economy was an amalgam of trapping, hunting, and fishing combined with government welfare payments. Today, close to thirty years after the first business opened at the OCN, the community now boasts a work force of 800 during the summer season and an approximate 550 full-time workers year-round.⁸⁹ It also houses the largest northern shopping centre which has become an important commercial centre for both Native and non-Native interests.

NOTES

1. The Pas Indian Band changed its name to the Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN) in 1989.
2. The term Native and Aboriginal will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. The term Indian is used in legislation or policy and hence in discussions concerning such legislation or policy; and in its historical context whereby Native and Aboriginal people were described within the popular and academic literature as Indians; and in such cases where it is used in quotations from other sources. First Nations is used to signify an organized Aboriginal group or community, specifically a band officially recognized by the Canadian government; or when discussing specific policies; or when referring to specific endeavours such as First Nations gaming.
3. Walter M. Hlady, "An Introduction to the Archaeology of the Woodland Area of Northern Manitoba", *Manitoba Archaeological Newsletter* 8, no. 2–3 (1971); William J. Mayer-Oakes, *Archaeological Investigations in the Grand Rapids, Manitoba, reservoir, 1961–1962, Department of*

- Anthropology, Occasional Paper No. 3* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1970).
4. David Meyer and Paul C. Thistle, "Saskatchewan River Rendezvous Centers and Trading Posts: Continuity in a Cree Social Geography", *Ethnohistory* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1995), 403–444.
 5. For a general overview of this history and the economic repercussions of non-Native settlement upon Aboriginal interests, see Paul Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations in the Lower Saskatchewan River Region to 1840* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1986), and Raoul McKay, "Fighting for Survival: The Swampy Cree of Treaty No. 5 in an Era of Transition, 1875–1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1991).
 6. Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858* (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, Ltd., 1971), 453–454.
 7. Environment Canada, *Capability for Agriculture: The Pas-63F* (Canada: Environment Canada, Lands Directorate, 1976).
 8. Katherine Pettipas, "An Ethnohistory of The Pas Area, Prehistoric-1875: A Study in Cree Adaptation", in *Directions in Manitoba Prehistory: Papers in Honour of Chris Vickers*, ed. Leo Pettipas (Winnipeg: Association of Manitoba Archaeologists and Manitoba Archaeology Society, 1980), 215.
 9. Alexander Morris, *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories, Including the Negotiations on Which They Were Based, and Other Information Related Thereto* (Calgary: Fifth House Publisher, 1991 [1880]), 162.
 10. *Ibid.*, 161.
 11. *Ibid.*, 163.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. Pettipas, "An Ethnohistory of The Pas Area", 214.
 14. Frank Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail: Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870–1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 211.
 15. *Ibid.*, 209.
 16. Quoted in Pettipas, "An Ethnohistory of The Pas Area", 221.
 17. Pettipas, "An Ethnohistory of The Pas Area", 221.
 18. Harold S. Patton, "Canada's Advance to Hudson Bay", *Economic Geography* 5, no. 3 (July 1929), 219–221.
 19. For this discussion, see Peggy Martin-McGuire, *First Nations Land Surrenders on the Prairies, 1896–1911* (Ottawa: Indian Claims Commission, 1998), 196–199, 270–273, 364–367.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. Long-time OCN member Ernie Constant informed me of these events during the summer of 2001.
 22. Board of Trade of The Pas, *The Pas: Capital of New Manitoba and Southern Terminus of Hudson Bay Railway* (The Pas: Booklet No. 1 issued by the Board of Trade of The Pas, 1914), 18
 23. *Ibid.*, 14
 24. Information for this paragraph was gleaned from Harold A. Innis, "The Hudson Bay Railway", *The Geographical Review* 20, no. 1 (January 1930). The \$100,000 annual catch estimate can be found in Board of Trade of The Pas, *The Pas and Northern Manitoba* (The Pas: Issued by the Board of Trade of The Pas, 1929), 19.
 25. Frank Tough, "Regional Analysis of Indian Aggregate Income, Northern Manitoba: 1896–1935", *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 12, no. 1 (1992), 103.
 26. *Ibid.*, 102–104.
 27. NAC, RG10, Vol. 4056, File 386,990, (4 April 1912), J.D. McLean to F. Fischer.
 28. NAC, RG10, Vol. 4056, File 386,990, (20 November 1917), Petition from The Pas Chief Antoine Constant to the Department of Indian Affairs.
 29. *Constitution Act*, 1930. 20–21 George V, c. 26 (U.K.); see also Brian L. Calliou, "Losing the Game: Wildlife Conservation and the Regulation of First Nations Hunting in Alberta, 1880–1930" (M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 2002); Frank Tough, "The Forgotten Constitution: The Natural Resources Transfer Agreements and Indian Livelihood Rights, CA. 1925–1933", *Alberta Law Review* 41, no. 4 (2004).
 30. Canada. Parliament. *Special Joint Parliamentary Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons appointed to examine and consider the Indian Act* (hereinafter referred to as the *SJC*), Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, No. 30 (5 June 1947), 1567.
 31. *SJC*, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, No. 30 (5 June 1947), 1572.
 32. Hugh Shewell, *'Enough to Keep Them Alive': Indian Welfare in Canada, 1873–1965*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
 33. Arthur J. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 221.
 34. Burke G. Vanderhill, "Post-war Agricultural Settlement in Manitoba", *Economic Geography* 35, no. 3 (July 1959), 260.
 35. *Ibid.*, 260.
 36. *Ibid.*, 266–267.
 37. Burke G. Vanderhill, "The Decline of Land Settlement in Manitoba and Saskatchewan", *Economic Geography* 38, no. 3 (July 1962).
 38. Martin Loney, "The Construction of Dependency: The Case of the Grand Rapids Hydro Project",

- Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 12, no. 1 (1987), 59.
39. Temporary Committee, *Summerberry Fur Development Project* (Manitoba: January 1955), 6.
 40. Loney, "The Construction of Dependency", 59.
 41. Ibid.
 42. Christopher James Hannibal-Paci, "His Knowledge and My Knowledge: Cree and Ojibwe Traditional Environmental Knowledge and Sturgeon Co-Management in Northern Manitoba (Ph.D. diss., University of Manitoba, 2001).
 43. See generally James B. Waldram, *As Long as the Rivers Run: Hydroelectric Development and Native Communities in Western Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 11.
 44. Manitoba Hydro, "The Pas Indian Band Settlement". Online: <http://www.hydro.mb.ca/issues/thepas_messages.html>. Last accessed: 27 June 2005.
 45. L.B. Spearman, *Comparison of Social Welfare Needs With Service Network in Two Northern Aboriginal Communities* (Winnipeg: Centre for Settlement Studies, 1975), 15.
 46. *Town of The Pas: Economic Profile*. Online: <<http://www.thepasarea.com/pages/economic.htm>>. Last accessed: 15 February 2005.
 47. Several telephone requests seeking these data went unreturned by Tolko representatives.
 48. *Opaskwayak Business Development Corporation*. Online: <<http://www.opaskwayak.mb.ca/pbdc.php>>. Last accessed: 15 May 2005.
 49. *History of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation*. Online: <<http://www.opaskwayak.mb.ca/history.php>>. Last accessed: 13 May 2005.
 50. Heather Robertson, *Reservations are for Indians* (Toronto: J. Lewis & Samuel, 1970), 158.
 51. Helen Buckley, *From Wooden Ploughs to Welfare: Why Indian Policy Failed in the Prairie Provinces* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 70.
 52. Spearman, *Comparison of Social Welfare Needs With Service Network in Two Northern Aboriginal Communities*, 30.
 53. See Lisa Priest, *Conspiracy of Silence* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), and "The Justice System and Aboriginal People." In *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, Vol. I*. (Winnipeg: 1991). The three other men involved were James Houghton, Lee Colgan, and Norman Manger.
 54. Quoted in "OCN band transforms poverty into prosperity", *Winnipeg Free Press*. 16 December 2000.
 55. Ibid.
 56. Today more than 6,000 customers shop at the Ontineka mall, which recently underwent an OCN-financed \$700,000 renovation. In addition to the band-owned IGA and Saan store is a thirty-machine Video Lottery Centre. The mall is home to the PBDC, OCN Chief and Council Offices, Swampy Cree Tribal Council, Cree Nation Child and Family Caring Agency, Opaskwayak Educational Authority, as well as a number of provincial offices.
 57. "OCN band transforms poverty into prosperity"
 58. *Sand and Gravel Operations*. Online: <<http://www.opaskwayak.mb.ca/redi-mix.php>>. Last accessed: 17 May 2005.
 59. *Kikiwak Inn*. Online: <<http://www.opaskwayak.mb.ca/kikiwakinn.php>>. Last accessed: 18 May 2005.
 60. *The Pas Food Town*. Online: <<http://www.opaskwayak.mb.ca/foodtown.php>>. Last accessed: 18 May 2005.
 61. *OCN Shell Gas Bar*. Online: <<http://www.opaskwayak.mb.ca/ocshell.php>>. Last accessed: 17 May 2005.
 62. *Your Dollar Store With More*. Online: <<http://www.opaskwayak.mb.ca/dollarstore.php>>. Last accessed: 17 May 2005.
 63. Dave Debrinsay, "The Gaming Industry in Aboriginal Communities", in *For Seven Generations: An Information Legacy of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* [CD-ROM] (Ottawa: Libraxus, 1996).
 64. Murray C. Sinclair, "Presentation to the Federal Task Force on Indian Gaming", in *Gaming on Reserves: Discussion Paper Prepared by a Departmental Task Force*. (Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1987), Annex 4-A.
 65. Chuck Koppang, "Native Gaming in Manitoba." Paper Presented at the Conference on First Nations Gambling in British Columbia, Duncan, B.C., 30 September and 1 October 1992, pp. 1-2.
 66. "First native casino to open next summer in Manitoba", *Alberni Valley Times*. 18 December 2000, B2.
 67. "OCN casino gets pole position: Province gives gaming operation at The Pas the go-ahead", *The Drum*. 16 November 2001.
 68. Ibid.
 69. Manitoba Office of the Auditor General, *Dakota Tipi First Nation Gaming Commission and First Nation Gaming Accountability in Manitoba*. (Winnipeg: Manitoba Office of the Auditor General, 2003), 13.
 70. Manitoba Government, *Employment Opportunities Result from Casino Training Program*. 15 February 2002. Online: <www.gov.mb.ca/ana/pdf/employment.html>. Last accessed: 16 June 2003.
 71. Bill Redekop. "First aboriginal casino tries harder: The Pas's Aseneskak experiences growing pains." *Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs News Brief*. 17 February 2002. Online: <www.manitobachiefs.com/news/2003/nbfeb03/02170305.html>. Last accessed: 17 June 2003.
 72. "Native-run casino loses almost \$1 million", *CBC News Online*. 12 September 2003. Online: <<http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/regional/servlet/View?filename=>

- mb_aseneskak20030912>. Last accessed: 13 March 2005.
73. Dan Lett, "First Nation wants control of profitable Aseneskak Casino", *Winnipeg Free Press*, 23 September 2004, 10.
 74. Redekop, "First aboriginal casino tries harder."
 75. Statistics Canada, *Manitoba. Record Increase in Median Age*. Online: <<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Products/Analytic/companion/age/mb.cfm>>; Statistics Canada, *Winnipeg. Community Profile*. Online: <<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/profil01/Details/details1.cfm?SEARCH=BEGINS&ID=993&PSGC=46&SGC=46602&DataType=1&LANG=E&Province=All&Place-Name=winnipeg&CMA=&CSDNAME=Winnipeg&A=&TypeNameE=Census%20Metropolitan%20Area&Prov=>>>
 76. Manitoba, *Debates and Proceedings*, Mr. Sale, 2nd Session, 38th Legislature, 24 May 2005.
 77. Ibid.
 78. Manitoba, *Debates and Proceedings*, Mr. Chomiak, 3rd Session, 38th Legislature, 25 May 2005.
 79. "Smoking ban means business booming on Manitoba reserves", *The Canadian Press*. 2 October 2004.
 80. Opaskwayak Cree Nation Employment & Training Strategy. Online: <<http://www.opaskwayak.mb.ca/employmenttraining.php>>. Last accessed: 28 June 2005.
 81. Indian and Northern Affairs, "New fiscal arrangement offers greater control, accountability for Opaskwayak Cree Nation", *News Release*, 27 January 2000. Online: <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/prs/j-a2000/2-00108_e.html>. Last accessed: 7 April 2005.
 82. Indian and Northern Affairs, "Opaskwayak Cree Nation takes control over lands and resources", *News Release* 9 August 2002. Online: <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/prs/m-a2002/2-02184_3.html>. Last accessed: 17 June 2003. Eighty-eight per cent voted in favour of ratification.
 83. HRSDC, *Labour Market Review for Northern Manitoba, January–March 2003*. Online: <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/mb/lmiquarter1_03/nman.shtml>.
 84. Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, "New community tripartite agreement for policing in Opaskwayak Cree Nation, Manitoba", *News Release* 3 December 2004. Online: <http://www.psepc-sppcc.gc.ca/publications/news/20041203_e.asp>. Last accessed: 28 June 2005.
 85. Don Sandberg, "New housing model emerging", *Winnipeg Free Press*. 10 March 2005, A11.
 86. Aboriginal healing Foundation, "Opaskwayak Cree Nation". Online: <http://www.ahf.ca/newsite/english/funded_projects/pull_project.php?id=4253.00>. Last accessed: 29 June 2005.
 87. Statistics Canada. *Aboriginal Origin (10), Age Groups (11B) and sex (3) for Population, for Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2001 Census*. 2001 Census of Canada, vol. 97F0011XCB01004. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2003). This cohort also accounts for thirty-eight per cent of the provincial Aboriginal population under the age of fourteen.
 88. Indian and Northern Affairs: Community Profiles. Opaskwayak Cree Nation. Online: <http://sdiprod2.inac.gc.ca/fnprofiles/FNProfiles_GeneralInformation.asp?BAND_NUMBER=315&BAND_NAME=Opaskwayak+Cree+Nation>. Last Accessed: 14 May 2005.
 89. History of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation.