This Is My Homeland

Stories

of the effects

of nuclear industries

by people of the

Serpent River First Nation

and the north shore

of Lake Huron.

Edited by Lorraine Rekmans, Keith Lewis and Anabel Dwyer

A publication of Serpent River First Nation, 2003

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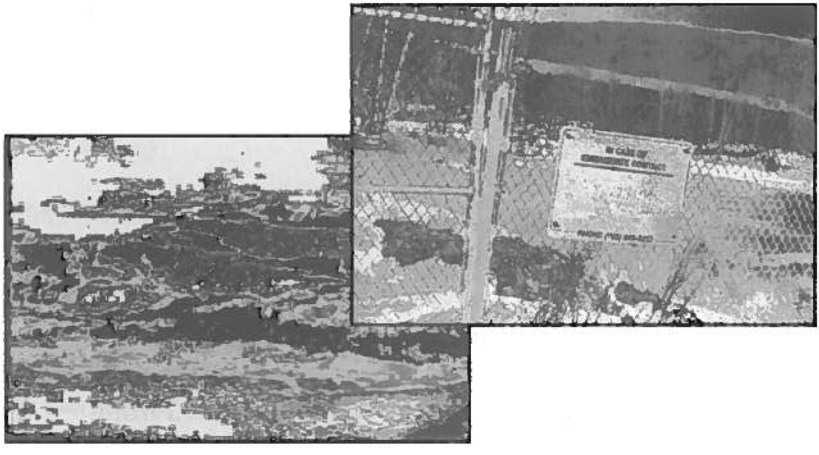

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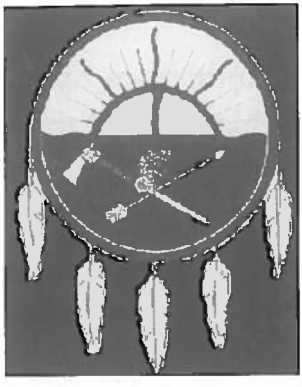

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ISBN 0-9733055-0-9

Printed by Anishinabe Printing

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection, prepared for the Hague Appeal for Peace Conference, was inspired by *Pacific Women Speak Out for Independence and Denuclearisation*, edited by Zohl de Ishtar (The Raven Press, 1998). Their stories and the ones recounted here are parallel, often overwhelming in their intensity, and told with dignity, humor, and detail. They call for an end to nuclearization and to wanton disregard for future generations, demonstrating ways and conditions for altering our present ecocidal course through collective actions.

The commentaries and conversations included here were recorded on March 18 and 19, 1999, in Serpent River First Nation and Blind River, Ontario, Canada. They were transcribed with minimal editing so that the reader may hear the voices of the people and thus, it is hoped, better understand the depth and urgency of our common struggles.

Permission to use the words and pictures for this preliminary edition for the Hague Appeal for Peace Conference has been generously granted by the participants in these discussions.

Chief Earl Commanda, Sharon Gow-Meawasige, Lorraine Rekmans and Tom Biron provided the background materials and assistance needed to arrange the conversations and put them in context. The recording and transcriptions were done by Tom Biron, Michelle Boursaw, Gabriela Bulisova, Anabel Dwyer, and Kevin Kamps. Tom Biron obtained the necessary technical equipment. Frieda S. Brown and Michelle Boursaw read the manuscript with great attention to detail, carefully making only those corrections and interpolations necessary for the sake of clarity. Michelle Boursaw and David Dwyer are responsible for the design and formatting. All photographs are by Gabriela Bulisova.

Funding for this initial printing came from the generous contributions of many groups and individuals including the Restoring the nuclear-free Great Lakes Basin project of the Peace Education Center, East Lansing Michigan. We particularly wish to thank in this regard the India Foundation, Shrikuma Poddar, Sally Schlegel, Michigan Faith and Resistance, James R. Anderson, Joe and Luella Bassett, Frank Beeman, Frieda S. Brown, Shirley Doyle, David Dwyer, Gary Ferenchick, Katherine Guins, the home for Peace and Justice, Saginaw, Michigan, David and Margaret Rovener, Mary Sinclair, Ruelaine Stokes, Sally Potter, Stanley Wronski, the Humanities Fund of the United Steelworkers of America, the Simons Foundation, Kay Cumbow, John Metzler, John Laforge, Bill Petry, Elise Harvey, John Witucki, Marilyn Biernot, Washington Watch and the Indigenous Environmental Network.

the bombs have come from somewhere
deep under the earth
the legends tell us that the devil lives down below
the devil has been disturbed and he is awfully angry

his hell is a place full of fire and brimstone
with an ever blasting blaze burning everything in sight
his pleasure is destruction and unending night

we have brought him home with us
and we embrace his killing lust
we have brought him home with us
to share with our children

we have woken the devil with our picks and shovels
and have brought him home with us
he is restless and uneasy and
needs a place to rest

so we build him a shiny casing
all polished and of steel
and we put these nuclear phallic chalices
anywhere we feel

we put these shiny casings on our borders and our shores
we leave the devil's entrails in our homelands (near our doors)
and we pray there are no wars
while we sip the poisons seeping through our land

Lorraine Rekmans, March 1999

PREFACE

This book contains commentaries by leaders and Elders of Serpent River First Nation and activists from the north shore of Lake Huron. Included also is an introduction and essay by Lorraine Rekmans, a Serpent River First Nation representative to the 1999 Hague Appeal for Peace Conference.

This collection of stories was assembled to focus the discussions at the Hague Appeal for Peace Conference on common problems faced by those whose lives have been directly altered by nuclear exploitation, corporate greed, and industrial and governmental carelessness. The stories reflect courageous struggles to redress the human and environmental destruction imposed by the nuclear industries and to stop governmental support for such persistent and harmful practices, but they also indicate the need for wide participation in this undertaking and suggest collective actions that may make realities of disarmament and an end to violence.

Chief Earl Commanda of Serpent River First Nation and Band Council Member Keith Lewis describe the effects of the Canadian assimilation policy and wage economy on the lives and culture of their people. They recount their multifaceted and long-term efforts to rectify the many permanent losses they have suffered and insist that companies and governments assume responsibility for the damage and perpetual hazards caused by nuclear industries.

The Elders tell of their experiences as uranium miners and engineers in the deep pit mines and as workers in the sulfuric acid plant. They recount the experiments conducted on them, accidents, the premature loss of many of their generation to cancers, their own illnesses, the questionable monitoring, and fluctuating of, radiation exposure standards, and fear for the future.

The Elliot Lake Women's Group members describe how they worked to educate the people of the area by participating in the hearings held on the decommissioning of the mine companies' uranium tailings (waste) management areas and demanding full compensation, long-term and open monitoring, environmental restoration, and involvement of the people in sound community redevelopment.

Members of the Algoma-Manitoulin Nuclear Awareness Group speak of successful organizing to stop the building of many planned nuclear power plants, of unsuccessful efforts to prevent the construction of a uranium refinery in Blind River which now adds to the pollution of the air and water of the North Channel area, and of the ever resurfacing struggle to keep their lands from becoming Canada's high-level nuclear waste dump.

Finally, Lorraine Rekmans' essay evidences strength and courage to overcome corporate, as well as individual, lies and abuse.

In Memory of Keith Robert Lewis (Kijadjiwan)

The stories told here relate to the struggle of a small Anishnawbe community in Northern Ontario that just happens to be situated on the world's largest uranium ore deposits of the time of its discovery in 1954. One of the strongest advocates in search of justice for the environmental and societal degeneration done to the Serpent River First Nation was Band Employee and Band Councilor – Keith Robert Lewis.

Born and raised on Serpent River, Keith's father, like my own. worked in the dusty, dirty and occupationally unhealthy environment of the Cutler Sulfuric Acid Plant built on-reserve to serve the milling process of the more than twelve uranium mines operating in the region from the mid 1950's to the early 1960's. Keith was educated locally at the Indian day school, Elliot Lake High School and regionally at Sault College of Applied Arts and Technology before moving out west to experience western mining in British Columbia and other work in Saskatchewan.

By 1981, Keith returned home to work as the Band Planner and produced one of the first ever comprehensive community plans outlining the capital growth of the community and began the priority seven-year struggle to force the Federal government to finally clean up the abandoned former one hundred acre Cutler Acid Site on the reserve.

Keith soon found his calling in the environmental field and returned to post-secondary education at York University working towards his Bachelor of Environmental Studies. While there, a network of relationships developed that would benefit his work on such issues as Ontario Hydro's Twenty-five Year Demand Supply Plan.

Such a plan proposed the further creation of more nuclear power generation stations. It also forecast the beginning of the end for Elliot Lake's uranium ore for the nuclear industry at a cost unaffordable to Hydro when cheaper sources can be obtained from other provinces like Saskatchewan. These turn of events put First Nations communities of the Anishnawbek Nations under extreme notice of concern over the final decommissioning of the Elliot Lake uranium mines. Keith was very much instrumental in responding to the Environmental

Assessment Hearings strategy for the forty-three First Nations within the Anishnawbek region of the Great Lakes basin.

Knowing all of this work that was done by Keith and the fact of his own health being impacted by colon cancer and his great interest in the traditional ways of our people, I am reminded of his Indian name – Kijadjiwan- meaning the clear, smooth, calm water just before it falls down over the waterfalls – is kind of like the way things were for this Anishnawbe man.

Always calm, joking and teasing his comrades while being serious and rigorous in his pursuit of justices for the cause. And finally, meeting his own Creator at the fall of his journey's end in August of 2001.

It has been a pleasure to know him from childhood and work with him and trust in him for the necessary work required by the community on many developmental levels. This book is dedicated in his honour for the many contributions Keith has made to the community of Serpent River and the region of the Anishnawbek Nation.

The struggles are not over and the work must go on. It is comforting to know that leaders such as Keith Robert Lewis (Kijadjiwan) can look down from the "Happy Hunting Grounds" or our People and guide us from that vantage point.

Ahow- Chi Miigwetch!
Chief Earl Commanda

In Memory of Henri Eugene Groulx 1936-2002

My father was a man who taught me the value of hard work. He also taught me the importance of staying politically aware and interested in the things that were going on around me. He grew up with strong work and family ethics living a simple farm life in a French Canadian village. He left home at an early age to go to work because times were hard.

He passed on many of his values to his five children. All five of us know the importance of a hard day's work and the role each of has to play in building strong communities. We know that each of us is a thread in the fabric of society but together we make up the structures that form our country.

He gave us an appreciation of history and an understanding that we should never forget where we came from. We liked his old stories about the settlers and the First Nation people and how they lived bravely together in the wilderness, hunting, trapping and fishing. Today we all still love to read history books and study the past of our people.

My father enjoyed music and passed that appreciation on to us. Today we still like the old ballads and the new music and we especially love the songs about people who lived ordinary lives. We like the old working man songs and understand the plight of the down trodden very well. We have inherited a fervent sense of justice and honesty from his examples. He loved dogs and was a patient friend to small children. All his grandchildren were blessed with his softer side and they were lucky enough to spend some time with him camping and enjoying nature. He never had time for fools but he had a tremendous sense of humor and liked practical jokes.

He was often up before the sun and traveled to work in the darkness of the mine. In the winter months it was still dark when he came home from work. This is what he did to feed his family. He worked in a uranium mine. He passed away on May 14th, 2002 with his family around him. We hugged on to him until the very end. He was a father that loved to have his family around him and we were children who loved to be near him. He worked so hard all his life that we like to think of him as resting now.

We love you Dad!
Lorraine Anabelle

Introduction

The plight of indigenous people world- wide might not be readily understood by most people at first glance. Like any complex issue it requires time, patience and energy to make sense of the past 500 years in North America. It takes time to understand how the effects of the nuclear industries on remote Aboriginal communities are linked to society at large. This book contains the stories of the people of Serpent River First Nation. They recount their histories in their own voices. They have been kind enough to share their experiences with the world.

The story of the people at Serpent River First Nation is unique but still similar to stories told by Indigenous Peoples around the world who live near nuclear systems. This is a collective experience that is repeated too often in places world-wide. By telling these stories, the people of the world might help stop the folly of the nuclear industry and the shameful interference with and oppression of indigenous cultures.

There is a need to understand the historical and current relationship that Anishnabe people have with Canada. In order to appreciate the full spectrum of issues that confront Canada's original peoples and the work required to protect and rehabilitate the contaminated environments in which they live, a historical context must be appreciated.

Sovereignty

The Anishnabe people of Serpent River are the descendants of the original people of North America, otherwise known as Turtle Island. These people have a language, a history and a culture, which makes them distinct peoples in Canada. Not only are they distinct but they were sovereign nations who are signatory to treaties with the Canadian government. The people at Serpent River First Nation are the beneficiaries of the Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850. Even before the treaties were signed, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 was passed to ensure that Aboriginal people would not be molested by settlers or have their lands dispossessed.

Generally within Anishnabe communities, it is understood that the Robinson-Huron Treaty was an agreement between two different peoples who wanted to live together and share Turtle Island. The history of the treaty has been passed down by Anishnabe people from generation to generation in an oral tradition. People understand this agreement to be made in the spirit of sharing and goodwill. The treaties allow the Anishnabe to continue on with traditional pursuits such as hunting, fishing and gathering in the forests as they

did prior to European settlement. The ancestors of the Anishnabe believed they were protecting their descendants by signing these agreements.

The Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850 was signed as the result of a land dispute amidst controversy over a copper mine development at Batchewana. The mine development was impacting on traditional lands and interfering with the Anishnabe lifestyle. The mine development was hindered and blocked by the people of Batchewana until the government agreed to begin discussions and enter into some type of agreement to govern the relationship and sharing of lands between the Anishnabe and the settlers. The government dispatched Robinson, a surveyor, to enter into the treaty, on Canada's behalf with the Anishnabe people who lived along the shores of Lake Huron.

The Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850 identifies the lands along the shores of Lake Huron, from Penatanguishine, north to the height of land and west to the north shore of Lake Superior, north of Sault Ste. Marie, as lands which were ceded to the province of Canada. There was an offer to make annuity payments to the signatory bands who were represented by principal men of the bands. The Anishnabe saw the area mentioned in the treaty as land where they could carry out traditional pursuits. The land identified was traditionally the land where people of the area carried out their activities. It was understood they would be entitled to continue doing so according to the treaty. It was also understood that the settlers would be able to continue on sharing the land as well.

Divide and Conquer

The treaty in actuality designated lands specifically for use by bands of Indians. Seventeen bands were signatory to the Robinson-Huron Treaty with an "x" as their mark, and seventeen communities were described as lands set aside exclusively for the bands named. This eventually would become the reserves or federal lands the Anishnabe people would be relegated to living on in perpetuity

The Robinson-Huron treaty went further to say that along with the ceded territory even subsurface rights for minerals on reserves are passed onto the province of Canada. In 1850 there was already an office of the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. This office was charged with what basically amounted to the responsibility of disposing of "Indian" lands.

Historical accounts tell us that the Anishnabe ancestors who signed the Treaties had no concept of land ownership and no concept of land cessation. It is clear now that the treaty signing was an exercise to divide people and set them apart from each other on separate pieces of land. It was a way for the province of Canada to claim ownership of all minerals in the territory.

Living on designated reserve lands was not a customary way of life for the Anishnabe people who traveled, traded, roamed and married into other bands. There was no concept of having just one home or one piece of land to live on. The whole of Turtle Island had been considered home, or the land the people come from. Two different mind-sets existed at the time of treaty signing. The Anishnabe believed this agreement would resolve the disputes and the province of Canada believed it was claiming ownership of Anishnabe lands.

Since 1850 there have been many more changes in Canada's relationship with the indigenous people of the land. The Indian Act which was a consolidation of all existing Indian legislation in Canada was passed in 1876 just a little more than 100 years after the Royal Proclamation. The Indian Act gave the Superintendent General power over all Indian Affairs. It defined lands, membership and Indian Government. The Indian Act granted powers to the Indian Agent over all aspects of reserve life and reserve lands and Anishnabe people.

It helped reinforce the reserve system and define a government and electoral system to be used on reserve lands. Basically a First Nation government is not recognized by Canada unless it is elected according to the Indian Act. This is legislation drafted solely by Canada to control the Anishnabe. For example, under the Indian Act, the Minister of Indian Affairs did permit outside interests to conduct forest harvesting on reserve lands set aside for the use of "Indians".

The Canadian government has exercised extreme and complete control over Aboriginal Affairs. In 1884 the Indian Act was amended to make it illegal for people to practice cultural or religious ceremonies. In 1927 it was amended to make it illegal for Indians to raise money for the pursuit of an Indian claim. Anishnabe people could not hire a lawyer to represent them within the courts of the Canadian government.

The Canadian government to this day defines who First Nation members are and decides when it will recognize "Indian" people as such. Indian status is defined and granted by the Canadian government.

Essentially the original peoples have limited powers under Canadian law but continue to believe and argue they have Aboriginal and treaty rights. Their status as a nation continues to exist based on the sovereign approach taken in 1850 with the signing of the treaties.

To make matters more complex, some people were out of town, so to speak when the treaties were signed, and some First Nations refused to sign and remain unceded territories. The Missinabie Cree, for example were traveling between James Bay and Lake Superior in September when the treaties were signed. They traveled to hunt and fish and were returning to their

wintering area and were not provided for in the treaties. They have since launched a land claim to establish themselves as a band with designated reserve lands in Canada.

Once Canada took control over all lands and all Anishnabe people it continued on to develop itself as a Nation. The provinces under the Canadian Constitution of 1867 argue that they have sole responsibility and control for the management of waters, lands, forests, fish and wildlife. They claim authority over mostly everything except reserve lands which are the responsibility of the federal government under the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) . The Minister of DIAND is responsible for upholding the Indian Act (taking care of the Indians) and for initiating northern development, a task which most Anishnabe people see as a conflict of interest, but two portfolios which some argue may achieve the same end.

The Canadian Constitution was developed in 1867 and the debilitating legislation known as the Indian Act was passed just nine years later. None of these laws or regulations have ever been consistent with the Anishnabe understanding of their place on Turtle Island and the way that Anishnabe people were to live with their white brothers and sisters. The original people believed they would share the land and live in peace. The Mohawk people in southern Ontario define this relationship according to the two-row wampum, which is a tool that shows two governments and two peoples living a parallel existence in Canada.

This history of the complex relationship between Canada and its first peoples is important because it shows how settler people have usurped a nation and unilaterally seized control over an existing people and their homelands. This shows a conflict between two different value systems and two different world perspectives. It shows that one way to deal with conflicting values is to ignore what exists and blindly proceed with one's own agenda.

There have been many types of legislation and encroachments since the treaties were signed. It is obvious how a relationship which was initially one of mutual respect and equality changed so drastically. It is not clear exactly when, but it is pretty clear how Aboriginal people became wards of the Great White Father under the Indian Act. It was simply a unilateral decision by a white government to make it so.

The entire matter is of course much more complex because in fact the oppression of Anishnabe people took place over a period of time with the government initiating a systemic assault on an entire people and every aspect of their lives using different papers. The assimilation agenda of the Canadian

government was in practice an attack which left people unable to deal with such rapid change. The legislation actually outlawed Anishnabe culture.

A series of assimilation policies designed to rid Canada once and for all of its "Indian Problem" followed the Indian Act. The conflict in values systems between Anishnabe people and the settlers made it difficult for Canada to move ahead with business. The fur trade had proved to be a valuable lesson to the Anishnabe and they were worried about repeating past mistakes.

The Fur Trading Partners

In short, the fur trade "succeeded" because Anishnabe people were willing partners and participants who were introduced to the concept of accumulated wealth. The people were intrigued and excited by the thought of trading furs for useful gadgets like muskets for hunting. They were such good traders however that the beaver was almost trapped to extinction. While the people focused on this new pursuit they left their old ways of providing for their families and came to rely on the new economy that had been introduced to Turtle Island. This situation created a lot of hardship for the people who were self-sufficient prior to contact with the settlers. They relied on the fickle generosity of the Hudson Bay Company to see them through tough winters. This had a huge impact on the Anishnabe psyche. The need to rely on hand outs from the company and annuity payments from the government was very demeaning and oppressive. The fur trade and its downfall provided a valuable lesson about the importance of self-reliance and about the vulnerable nature of ecosystems and the harm caused by over-exploitation of the beaver.

The fur trade history in Canada demonstrates the atmosphere and attitude in Canada which has existed since contact with the first settlers. The people of the land were initially considered to be mutual trading partners and not subservient to the settlers while an entire economy was built upon the trading of beaver furs used for hats and clothing. It is incredible to imagine that such a fashion frenzy could shape a nation.

In the early days of the fur trade, the relationship between the Native peoples and the entrepreneurs was a necessary partnership. The original peoples were avid traders who welcomed this new enterprise. They worked together with the fur traders to move as many furs out of Rupert's Land as fast as they could. The traders initially relied on the original peoples to show them the way to food sources and pre-existing trading routes.

The Anishnabe people were used to trap the beaver in exchange for modest goods and the pelts were made into fashionable and expensive hats for Europeans. In most cases it was a situation where the Anishnabe owed their soul to the company store. Instead of busying themselves with preparations

for winter, they trapped and traded furs for flour, tea, sugar. Not one known Anishnabe individual ever became rich from the fur trade. Canada was essentially nothing more than a source of fur for the Hudson's Bay Company. It was a country defined not by its citizens and nationhood but by the corporate culture and boardroom chairmen who ran it. Essentially it has always been nothing more than a place to get things.

It is interesting to note this historical relationship that Canada has had as a supplier of fur to those people of means and influence in Europe. The colonial atmosphere lent itself specifically to this type of nonchalant exploitation by those far removed from Canada's shores.

It is important to understand that it is within this environment that the development of the nuclear industry was cultivated in the 1940s. While the world powers were at war and bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Anishnabe people were suffering through systematic cultural assaults and more assimilation policies. Young people were removed from their families and taken away to government run residential schools where they were refused the right to speak their own languages and beaten for cultural practices. While Anishnabe children were being assaulted and assimilated in the residential schools, logging and mining was occurring at tremendous speeds in Canada.

This is an ugly chapter in Canadian history and one not so readily available to school children. The treaties are not typically mentioned as part of the school curriculum and we continue a disservice to future generations by not providing accurate accounts of the past.

The Anishnabe people were being obliterated because of their differences. They had a different world view and a different perspective about what it meant to live on Turtle island. They did not share the same fascination with wealth accumulation for a handful of people at the expense of others. The Anishnabe tradition was always to take only what you need and to share with all your people. They did not want to change to be like the settlers, so the government forced change upon them.

Essentially the fathers of confederation in Canada had a dream about what this country should look like. The fur trade dream had come true and it was possible to fulfill this dream again and again. The dream consisted of a few people gaining incredible wealth for little or no cost at the expense of a large number people.

King George III had the same dream when he signed the Royal Proclamation in 1763,

> "...and being desirous that all our loving subjects, as well of our kingdom as of our colonies in America, may avail themselves, with all convenient speed, of the great benefits and advantages which must accrue therefrom to their commerce, manufactures, and navigation.....with the advice of our

said Privy Council, granted our letters patent under our Great Seal of great Britain, to erect within the countries.....four distinct and separate governments..."

From an Anishnabe perspective the dream appears to be a sad and self indulgent delusion by a people who believed that the lands of another continent was theirs to take and that "loving subjects' agreed to be abused in this way.

Some of these people believed that Anishnabe people would speak English and denounce their language and traditions in favour of those presented by the Europeans and willingly step aside and allow all manner of things on Turtle Island to be taken away to the select few.

When Anishnabe people did not embrace this delusion, the province of Canada launched an assault on Aboriginal people that resulted in great difficulties and social dysfunctions within Anishnabe societies. There was great despair and despondency from this attack and attempt to extinguish the people by forced assimilation. This environment of crisis made it difficult to respond to the changing nature of Canada and the introduction of more and more debilitating legislation. Even today, Anishnabe youth have the highest suicide rate in Canada.

Sadly, there still remains a sense by some of those in power that they know what is best for the nation and they still want all Anishnabe people to melt into Canada and sacrifice their distinctiveness for the Canadian dream.

It seemed that the resource developers in Canada saw what economic benefits the fur trade had yielded to its masters and were off and running with new and similar enterprises in logging and mining. The impacts of resource development, exploitation and removal were never considered in the context of impacts on indigenous cultures and ways of life.

Developers came to this brave "new" land to reap the riches and bounty Canada had to offer. Large logging companies eventually arrived to take out the forests and mining companies followed suit.

Uranium Exploration and Development

When uranium was first discovered in the Erz Mountains of Germany and Joachimstal, Czechoslovakia, in the sixteenth century, the miners noticed that many of their colleagues in the mine died of respiratory illnesses. In 1879, this mysterious phenomena was finally diagnosed as lung cancer. Since the early days of uranium mining, there have been known hazards.

Between 1900 and 1940, published health surveys established clear statistical evidence that mining uranium resulted in lung cancer deaths amongst miners. The dangers were obvious, but unfortunately not well advertised.

There are stories in Anishnabe communities about how people in the beginning, were used to help locate the mineral. It was said that Anishnabe people could actually smell the veins of uranium under ground. They said it stunk, smelled bad and would not live on the ground above the veins. They scouted with geologists to help locate sites for mine development. Of course, there must have been a sense of bewilderment in native communities about the entire process of locating and collecting this strange mineral.

Little did the original people in Canada know about the state of world affairs following the Second World War, the dropping of the atomic bombs and the nuclear weapons program. Some remote communities in northern Canada weren't even aware that the world wars were being fought. A family account from a small community near James Bay, tells of their young men taken away to be warriors, sent overseas never to be heard from again. The Aboriginal communities can boast about war veterans, heroes and the contribution they made to Canadian sovereignty, but this tale is yet another blight on Canadian history, for these soldiers had to denounce their Indian status in exchange for the right to serve Canada.

There was never any discussion or consultation with Native communities about the development of uranium. In fact this activity was cloaked in a veil of secrecy from the outset and managed federally by a new arm of the Canadian government. It was a protected industry in the interest of national defence. The Canadian public in general knew little to nothing of their government's involvement in the uranium industry. Mostly the people were excited about jobs, electricity, refrigerators, ovens and televisions.

Uranium was first discovered at the Elliot Lake site in 1931, however it was not assayed until 1949. In the early 1950's the "Big Z" uranium deposit was discovered by Franc Joubin. He managed to develop the site with the backing of financier Joseph Hirshhorn from the United States.

Rio Tinto Company of England who became the owner of the Rio Algom properties also financed Joubin and his discoveries. From this history we can see, that in actual fact, globalisation existed long before the term was coined. The shores of Canada and its lands have always been open to outside developers, financiers and entrepreneurs.

The town of Elliot Lake, Ontario stands on the site of an Ojibway village, a place where trappers gathered furs for the trade. In the early 1900s it developed into a logging area. In the 1950's the village was made into a township by the province of Ontario which assumed its power under the Canadian Constitution to create towns and cities. The Improvement District of Elliot Lake was incorporated in 1957 and the town of Elliot Lake was built on top of the original Anishnabe village without any discussion with the people from the area.

In 1957 the Canadian government had negotiated contracts with the Atomic Energy Commission of the United States for more that $1.5 billion of uranium oxide, more that two-thirds of this was produced by the Elliot Lake mines. These numbers would have been staggering figures for the village people of Serpent River First Nation located just 30 minutes downstream from the mines. Little did the residents of this small Anishnabe village know they were living so close to a very significant centre of activity working on the solution "to end war", the nuclear weapons program. They were likely unaware that they also played a major role in Canada's National Energy Program either.

In 1958, the mines earned $200 million and milled more than 34,000 tons of ore per day. The rock was milled using sulphuric acid to leach the ore. The waste was dumped into existing lakes near the mills. By 1959 Canada had produced more than 31 million pounds of uranium oxide. About 80 per cent of this came from the Elliot Lake mines. The town of Elliot Lake continued to grow and develop until 1963, when the Atomic Energy Commission in Washington, DC decided not to stockpile uranium any more. Elliot Lake was hit with a dramatic downturn created by the loss of demand for uranium..

Eventually the demand for uranium increased again, with efforts orchestrated by a uranium cartel, politicians, industry leaders and mine moguls. The mine owners at Rio Algom appeared to have considerable influence in Europe, enough so that it signed a $400 million contract with British Nuclear Fuels in the 1970s.

The history of Elliot Lake, a former Anishnabe village, and the history of the people of the region is indeed tied to the working of the world society at large. The community was intrinsically involved in the nuclear weapons program of the United States and the nuclear program of England, even though this wasn't obvious to the miners or to the people at Serpent River First Nation.

The Minister of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) was privy to the uranium mine development agenda. DIAND, used an old lease from the Cutler Salvage Company on Anishnabe land to host a sulphuric acid plant to provide acid for leaching uranium at Elliot Lake. DIAND hoped this economic development initiative would provide a "better" standard of living for people at Serpent River First Nation. Instead this site left a legacy of waste and contamination in the community. The fact that uranium mining and radioactive waste dumping occurred on traditional Anishnabe lands without permission or discussion is appalling to say the least, but in keeping with the general blatant disregard that the dominant culture has demonstrated in colonies world wide.

The resultant contamination, destruction and degradation of hunting, fishing and gathering areas is grossly offensive and inevitably an assault on an entire way of life shared by the Original people for generations. There are ten lakes lost for eternity at Elliot Lake. These lakes were used as dumping grounds for radioactive waste. There is no sanitary way to describe the incident.

The miners at Elliot Lake lost their lives digging this rock out of the ground. The groundwaters under the tailings basins are virtual rivers of poison. The people who worked and lived around the sulphuric acid plant suffered severely.

Good clear drinking water and fish habitat, wildlife, and plants have been destroyed for the benefit of a few people. Weapons producers, nuclear energy develope, and others have demonstrated no regard for the sanctity of an entire ecosystem. They have demonstrated total disrespect and disregard for an entire community of people who rely on this land to survive. They were privy to information about the known dangers of uranium before the mines were opened and did not share this knowledge with vulnerable and unsuspecting people.

In essence, their accumulated wealth was at the cost of uncounted human lives. The impacts and health effects, the disease, and cancer resulting from the contaminated tailings sites and the sulphuric acid plant has yet to be measured. The voices of the Anishnabe people need to be heard. Their story needs to be acknowledged.

The devastating effects of nuclear industries on this remote Anishnabe community undeniably and unmistakably involve international corporations, governments and institutions. We must face the broad issues of responsibility for severe harms and dangers. The need to act is critical.

Miigwetch, in the Spirit of All My Relations - Lorraine Rekmans

CHRONOLOGY

The following chronology will help the reader place the discussions in historical context:

10,000 years ago	Aboriginal peoples, including the ancestors of the Anishinabe peoples, follow the receding glaciers in the North American Great Lakes Basin, now the world's largest freshwater ecosystem.
14th - 19th century	The Anishinabe peoples live on the northern shores of Lake Huron carrying with them long-held traditions which are mindful of responsibility to many future generations.
1850	Serpent River First Nation, with other Anishinabe nations, signs the Robinson-Huron Treaty with the British Crown guaranteeing Aboriginal hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering rights to the treaty areas including the Serpent River watershed.
1950s	Accelerated United States (U.S.) push to make nuclear weapons includes high demand for uranium and spurs a rush of prospectors to the Serpent River watershed area.
1954	The government of Canada gives subsurface rights in the Serpent River watershed to uranium mining companies, and seizes the long-established Serpent River First Nation hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering rights to the Serpent River watershed including land for the "Improvement District of Elliot Lake."

1955-1963	Rio Algom Mining Ltd. (originally Rio Tinto Mining Company of Canada and others) and Denison Uranium Mining Ltd., operate 12 uranium and thorium mines and mills on traditional Serpent River First Nation land. The mines and mills supply the U.S. nuclear weapons program. The United Steelworkers of America (USWA) discover that despite knowledge of the high risks of cancers and other illnesses from radioactivity and chemical toxicity in the mining processes and from the waste tailings, neither mining companies nor the federal or provincial governments give the 10,000 workers or residents any protection or warnings.
1955-1962	Noranda Mines Ltd. operates a 150-acre sulfuric acid plant which supplies sulfuric acid to the uranium mining companies for leaching the uranium from the mined ore. The Cutler Acid Plant, as it was known locally, uses land on the shoreline in Serpent River First Nation, claiming authority to do so under an old Cutler Lumber Mill lease from Serpent River First Nation.
1955-1978	As reported by the Rio Algom and Denison Uranium Mining companies, more than 30 uranium tailings dam failures occur during this period, dumping radioisotopes and chemical toxins into the Serpent River watershed. These dams were constructed to contain uranium tailings, the waste product from the mining and milling.
1955-1990	More than 200 million tons of uranium tailings are poorly impounded in the Serpent River watershed which flows directly into Lake Huron. The tailings contain at least 6 million tons of radioactive materials, such as radium-226 with a half-life of 1,600 years, and also many heavy metals, all highly acidic with potential to leach into the groundwater. Radon-222, a radioactive gas, is also emitted.

1956	The new mining camp at Elliot Lake, Ontario, dubbed "The uranium capital of the world," is established as "the improvement district of Elliot Lake." The provincial government appoints the three-member board of trustees.
1959	Fractured zone at the Spanish-American Mine causes water to seep into the mine. The mine is closed.
1950s- 60s	Miners' housing, built in Elliot Lake on roads made of fill mixed with uranium tailings. Fill for housing sites consists of waste rock from mines.
1963	U.S. ends contracts for uranium. Sulfuric acid plant is closed. Population of Elliot Lake plummets from 25,000 in 1960 to 9000, in 1970. Serpent River First Nation population is down to 100.
1963, 1966, 1976	Ontario Water Resources Commission surveys and reports show high levels of radioactive and chemical contamination in all 55 miles of the Serpent River waterway downstream from the mines and tailings sites. The 1963 survey already shows that "uranium milling operations had a profound effect on the biota." No fish are living in the watershed.
1968	Upper limits to radiation exposures are regulated in Canada for the first time.
1969, 1976	Reports by the Ontario Workmen's Compensation Board (1969) and the Royal Commission on the Health and Safety of Workers in Mines (1976) show high levels of lung cancers among Elliot Lake/Serpent River area miners.

1970s	Some Elliot Lake houses are lifted and waste rock from the mines is removed and replaced.
1975-1990	Ontario Hydro contracts to purchase uranium from Rio Algom and Denison Mining Companies until 2010.
c.1975	Power failure at Stanleigh Mine results in a 500,000-gallon spill of radioactive and chemically contaminated water into McCabe Lake.
c.1975	Quirke 2 Mine fractures Serpent River streambed, causing the river to flow into the mine.
1977- present	Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, studies contamination of moose, beaver, hare, and aquatic species for radionuclide uptake in the food chain in the Serpent River watershed.
1978	The U.S. Congress passed the Uranium MillTailings Radiation Control Act authorizing the Department of Energy to promulgate rules (instituted in 1983) to stabilize, dispose of, and control uranium mill tailings and other contaminated materials at 24 sites and 5200 associated properties. The Act does not cover or require groundwater protection of the Elliot Lake/ Serpent River sites in Canada.
1979	Nuclear accident occurs at Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania. World price of uranium declines.
1986	Ontario study of 15,000 Ontario uranium miners (1955-1986) finds 120 lung cancers in excess of the 171.8 expected in the non-exposed population.

1988	Cutler Sulfuric Acid Plant site cleanup leaves the Lake Huron shore in Serpent River First Nation still highly acidic and the Imperial Oil bulk oil storage site, also ancillary to the uranium mines, remains unremediated.
1989	Rio Algom and Denison layoff announcement to 5500 miners and their families. Hearings on the decommissioning of the uranium mine tailings in the Elliot Lake area are held.
1990	The last of the 12 mines closes and the companies along with the Atomic Energy Control Board (AECB) office move to Saskatchewan to operate uranium mines on other Aboriginal land.
1996	Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency issues *Decommissioning of Uranium Mine Tailings Management Areas in the Elliot Lake Area: Report of the Environmental Assessment Panel.* No compensation is recommended to Serpent River First Nation for past, current and future losses of traditional lands because "the issue does not relate to the proposals for decommissioning the tailings sites and thus falls outside the panel's mandate."
1997	The government of Canada formally responds to the environmental assessment panel recommendations. Government verification of "the long-term performance of the approved containment systems" does not include any protection against or monitoring or remediation of current or future groundwater contamination. (Recommendation 5 Response). Recommendations concerning compensation and policy issues, not part of the panel's terms of reference, were not responded to by the government.

1998	The Campaign for Nuclear Phaseout reports that the "Canadian government subsidies to Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. (AECL) account for $33 billion of Canada's national debt."
1998	Rio Algom establishes a citizens monitoring committee, the Decommissioning Review Advisory Committee (DRAC) begins to familiarize itself with the many issues surrounding the decommissioning process.
1999	The federal government and Rio Algom agree to regulate the older, "idle" mines within the watershed through a Presecribed Substance License.
2000	The U.S. Radiation Exposure Compensation Act of 1999 amendments and the permanent appropriations to the Radiation Exposure Compensation Trust Fund cover an expanded list of diseases that the U.S. acknowledges result from uranium mining, milling and transport and nuclear test fallout. The U.S. neither coordinates with Canadian workers compensation programs nor acknowledges harms and dangers to health of Canadian uranium miners. The U.S. National Institutes of Health (1997) and the Center for Disease Control (2002) studies show significant exposure to a wide-range of highly radioactive elements from nuclear tests in all counties of the U.S. The studies do not provide data for Canada or the Great Lakes and point to the need for extensive monitoring and screening.

THE VOICES

Serpent River First Nation Chief Earl Commanda and Council Member Keith Lewis

Serpent River First Nation Elders, Uranium Miners and Sulfuric Acid Plant Workers

The Elliot Lake Women's Group, joined by the Algoma-Manitoulin Nuclear Awareness Group

Long time Elliot Lake residents, Henri and Linda Groulx

Former Chief Gertrude Lewis and former councillor Loreena Lewis

What you are losing is forever.

What you are losing is forever.

Serpent River First Nation Chief Earl Commanda and Council Member Keith Lewis

Recorded in the Serpent River First Nation Band Hall on 18 March 1999. This first session began with Chief Earl Commanda, who was later joined by his longtime friend and fellow Council Member, environmental expert Keith Lewis. After some time, the chief left to fulfill another commitment, while Keith Lewis remained to share more of his experiences, views, and reflections.

Background and Personal Reflections

Chief Earl Commanda: I am Earl Commanda, Chief of the Serpent River First Nation. In the times where I've told our story in the past, I've shared a little bit about who we are and where we've come from. I guess in terms of my own personal recollection of who we are, this Ojibwe community was self-sustaining prior to the discovery of uranium. By self-sustaining, I mean that we are a people who lived off the land. We hunted, we fished, we trapped. And every family had their own family garden. They took fish out of the river, out of the lake. The territory was relied upon for the trapping that went on there. In the summertime everybody did things like pick blueberries, cranberries, strawberries and used them to supplement their incomes or to make preserves to carry them through the winter. Many of the men had their own fishing nets and trapping areas all throughout this area, on the reserve and north of the reserve.

Chief Earl Commanda

There was no real protection from the contaminants.

And I guess basically what happened when they discovered uranium is we were taken out of that reliance on the natural environment and moved into the wage economy. When they discovered uranium here in the early 1950s, we weren't a community

without a history of community economic development. We had a pulp/timber mill here in the community back at the turn of the century. Land was leased to that lumber company. It was called the Cutler Salvage Lumber Company. [The Ministry of] Indian Affairs took advantage of that surrendered land--the leased land, the surrendered land--to negotiate with Noranda Mines to build a sulfuric acid plant right in the middle of our community in the early 1950s to service the uranium mines. That was, from what my father tells me, quite a controversial thing. There were referendums in the community, there was a lot of discussion, and even the church got somewhat involved, in terms of suggesting that people needed to go to church on Sunday, they shouldn't work on Sunday.

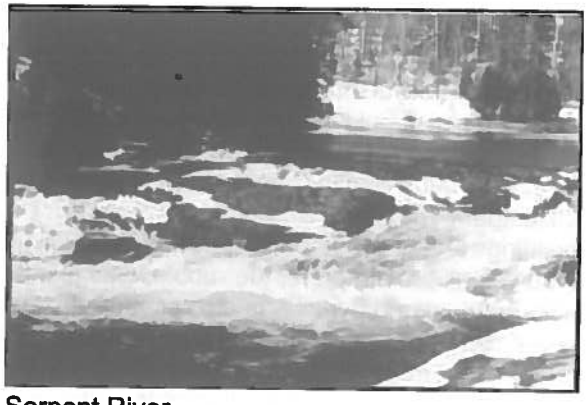
And I think what it did is it took the people, the men in the community, gave them an opportunity to work right in the community and gave them a wage economy, which was not the same as relying on the traditional economy of the community--the trapping, the logging, or any of those other kinds of activities, the commercial fishing that went on.

I saw the community change personally, and I also saw what having all this new-found affluence did to our community. There were a lot more social problems in our community. There was a lot more alcohol. There was a lot of family violence, child abuse. And I guess what really comes into my mind, my Dad had come off of midnight shift one night, was sitting having his midnight supper when all of a sudden we heard a crash. Somebody had thrown a stone through our window, and then [there were] some knocks on the door. Some girls were asking to come into our house as a refuge from these white guys that were in the community chasing them or whatever.

That was the first time we actually needed policing service in the community as a result of that change. This was from about 1954 to about 1963, when they closed the sulfuric acid plant. They closed the sulfuric acid plant because the U.S. government was not buying Canadian uranium anymore for either weapons or whatever. They were stockpiling it for awhile, and eventually they found other sources where they could get the uranium cheaper.

At the height of that activity--the boom cycle--there were something like twelve uranium mines operating in the area. And then when the contracts fell through, that narrowed it down to basically two companies left, Rio Algom and Denison Mines. A town was built north of the city in our traditional trapping and hunting area, called Elliot Lake. It went from a community where we had our spring camps, our fishing camps, our hunting camps up there, to a fairly large town.

In 1963, when the mines closed, a lot of miners left the area. It almost became a ghost town. So did a lot of our own people leave this community, because they were used to now working. A lot of the migration of our community happened at that point. We were down to less than 100 people living in the village [Serpent River] at that time. [Many people] moved to Toronto to find work.



Serpent River

The other thing that happened was the federal government, of course, felt Indians had to be assimilated into mainstream society. And one of the ways that they did that was to close all the federally operated schools and send all the kids to provincial schools--a national policy of assimilation, integration.

In 1963, we were sent to the town of Elliot Lake that needed more students because they had built this infrastructure for a lot of schools but didn't have the young people, of course. They closed the school starting with the higher grades down to grade 3, and everybody was bussed 25 miles away to the town of Elliot Lake. At that time, I was in grade 7. I did my grade 8 in Elliot Lake and started my high school there. For different reasons I ended up finishing up my high school in Sudbury.

The Sulfuric Acid Plant

Chief Earl Commanda: [In addition] to the issue of the uranium industry, the abandoned sulfuric acid plant [left] a bunch of concrete buildings and a whole bunch of pyrite piles and remaining sulfuric acid piles there. Our parents always knew when we were playing around those buildings because when we came home, the shoelaces on our running shoes would fall apart because of the acid and the pyrite. They would just literally rot off our running shoes. That's how [our parents] knew we were playing around there. There were a lot of tunnels there.

In 1969, the Chief of the reserve at the time was Bill Meawasige. He called on the federal government to clean it up. We used some lawyers from the Sudbury area who said if this was a white community, it would not be allowed to remain as it was. So, with that sort of pushing, the government, their response to that, through Indian Affairs, through Health Canada, was to send in the army to blow up the buildings. The army was brought in and got ready to blow up the buildings and did eventually blow up the buildings. What they did with that was all the concrete, the rubble, was just buried. All the sulfuric acid material and pyrite was also scattered. And that was the extent of the cleanup.

So from 1963 to 1969, '70, the community was quite concerned that the rehabilitation of the site was not complete. They started to look at that as being a priority in the community. In 1978, '79, there were some studies done in terms of the cost of the rehabilitation. I think one of the flaws of those earlier studies [was that they] suggested that the federal government was prepared to accept responsibility for that. When Noranda Mines closed that sulfuric acid plant, they sold it to Canadian Industries Ltd. [CIL] in Sudbury. What they did was salvage all the material and whatever was of any value and took it away from there. And so there was a deal that $100,000 from Indian Affairs/CIL/Noranda would be used to clean up the site.

What we didn't know was whether that was an appropriate sum of money to clean it up. So we started to work with funds from the federal government to do some rehabilitation studies. The first couple of studies we did asked, of course, well, what do you want to use the land for? The highest use of the land, of course, is housing. But the survey that was done in the community [showed that people wanted] only recreational use. So they [Indian Affairs/CIL/Noranda] said, "You really don't need to rehabilitate it to its highest occupancy use, you could put a park there and that would be sufficient."

When I moved back home -- I'd been working away up north -- my uncle, Peter Johnson, who was Chief at the time, asked if I would come back home to help out at the band office. In 1980, I moved back home. We started to re-look at this issue again. There was an intensive campaign from 1984, I would say, until about 1988, when we had a cleanup to rehabilitate the site properly.

From our studies that were conducted from that time period, the estimated cost of rehabilitating that site was about $6,000,000 for about 100 acres. We ended up paying more than $6,000,000, because we had to negotiate with our neighboring municipality to accept the rubble and the material and create an industrial waste site,

which had to be properly designed to be put there and capped and covered. They were interested in pursuing that because they were interested to open a municipal domestic waste dump alongside of it, so they got some advantage from that process. They were also interested in using some of that rubble to build a marina. They never ever used it for that.

I don't know how many truckloads of material came out of there. They were estimating about 9,000 truckloads of material came out of there, enough to fill, what did they say, three stadium football fields. And what we had to do was put back clean fill to replace the fill that was there. And what the scientists did, or the people who oversaw this, they put a whole bunch of rods in the ground to test the pH of the soil, to see if there ever were any further changes to the pH of the groundwater. We found just recently that there are still some changes in the pH of the soil--recently--and we may have to remediate some of those hot spots in the ground.

[The cleanup] was done in 1988, but we couldn't do anything with it for about five years in order to allow the land to settle down, and then we could look at it, at housing going on there.

Well, the people who live here--there are some funny stories. If you put a copper pipe in the ground, it would deteriorate from the acid in the soil, so it was not very good to use copper. There were times when the pyrite piles or the sulfuric acid piles would have spontaneous combustion and start catching on fire. This was after the army came in and cleared and scattered all this stuff -- this was still happening. The dust from the pyrite piles, the people were breathing it around their houses. We called in someone to look at the dust, whether it was having an impact on the health of the band members. There was some concern because of our proximity to the uranium industry that there may be some low-level radiation happening in the area as well.

We invited, during the time of the rehabilitation studies, Dr. Rosalie Bertell [of the International Institute of Concern for Public Health, Toronto], from the United States at that time, to come in and look if she thought maybe there were some impacts. And she never really did an in-depth study, but at the same time we were such a small population. You couldn't say out of 10,000 people [to what] we can attribute certain diseases [that] are occurring. She recommended we should be looking at broadening the base of study. She also did that when she was looking at our neighboring First Nations out west, Mississauga and in the east, Sagamok.

Community Planning and Action

Chief Earl Commanda: One of the things we thought we should do to take a look at what is happening with the community and where they want to go was to do a comprehensive community plan. So then we created a community-planning officer and advisor position for which Keith [Lewis] came back home, and applied for it, and got hired. [Keith Lewis had been working for a while with First Nations at a residential school in Saskatchewan.] It was an interesting process because what we did is we surveyed the community. We said, "Well, we've got all this land, we've got all of these resources, what do you want to do?" It ends up what came back quite strongly was, "The first thing we want to do is clean up the acid site. The second thing we'd like to do is get a larger community hall. The third thing we'd like to do is create some businesses, for people to come back into the community."

In light of that study back in 1984, 1985, we began to focus quite extensively on lobbying the federal government. We must have spent--between the band and the federal government--hundreds of thousands of dollars to do the studies, to lobby the government [to clean up the site]. The federal government paid for it all eventually, but at one point, for various studies and lobbying, [it cost us] $600,000 to $800,000 per year to try to get this issue resolved. Even after all of that, it took a presentation to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, which is an all-party committee of all the government parties of the federal government, to convince Indian Affairs to do this. Before, they were saying, "If we give you the money to do this, it's going to affect some other capital, or housing, or water project in the other communities."

We also had to utilize a lot of legal help. Legal help wasn't so much in terms of what responsibility does the federal government have, or the company, but [we needed] legal help also in briefing us and preparing us for all the different meetings. The media, I think, was where we made the greatest impact, getting the federal government--or shaming the federal government--into cleaning up the site.

Myself, Keith, and the Band Manager, Peter Johnson at the time, were heavily involved on a regular basis. What we were doing was aligning ourselves with the different environmental groups who also would support us, like the Algoma-Manitoulin Nuclear Awareness Group and Great Lakes United. We were spending as much time telling our story to non-Native environmental groups in different forums as well as continuing to lobby the government. So it was an interesting process.

When it was all over, it came down to two or three agencies: the province of Ontario in terms of [the waste's] being put into a land-fill site; Indian Affairs in terms of paying for it; Health Canada to insure that we were meeting those kinds of standards. After it was all said and done, we also looked at our on-going relationship with the remaining uranium companies. I think with the uranium industry, a lot of people eventually worked there, continued to have jobs there, and the mining was still carried on.

Every one of our kids really became quite environmentally conscious as a result of this whole experience. Every time there was a class project, the kids would write about the tailings at the uranium plant, or the impact of the sulfuric acid plant on our community. I think we were looked at as being perhaps overzealous in terms of our band members' having this issue at the forefront at all times, that even our kids were writing about it in school. So it was an interesting dynamic that happened to our community.

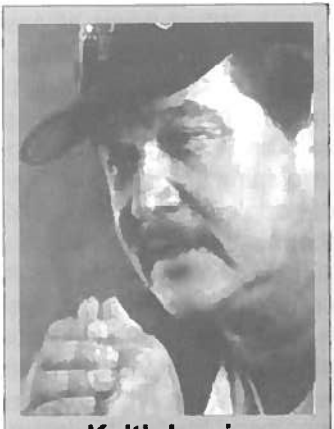
Our kids continued to be bussed, as I said earlier, to Elliot Lake. I think after this particular process, we heard that the companies were beginning to wind down again. They were selling their uranium now to Ontario Hydro for the nuclear plants. There was an agreement by the Ontario government to continue to buy uranium from the mines in this area up until about 2011.

Ontario Hydro's 25-Year Electrical Demand/Supply Plan

Chief Earl Commanda: Then we started to get involved, and this is where Keith's expertise comes in, in terms of the uranium industry, in Ontario Hydro's 25-year demand/supply plan. During that time, in the late '80s/early '90s, the uranium industry decided they were going to put in this area a uranium trioxide refinery in Blind River. There was quite an opposition to the trioxide refinery coming here. It split even First Nation communities, because the Mississauga First Nation felt there were going to be jobs, but our bad experience with the sulfuric acid plant told us it might not even be worthwhile having that in your community for the jobs because of the exposure.

Eventually, after the cleanup [of the sulfuric acid plant site], we got involved with this while studying the health of other communities in comparison to our own health, a health transfer study. We eventually, through Keith and funding from the Ontario government, created an environmental unit at the North Shore Tribal Council. Keith was quite heavily involved in preparing for the 25-year demand/supply hearings of Ontario Hydro.

Keith Lewis: I guess, in personal terms, when we were working on the Ontario Hydro demand/ supply plan and the different aspects of hydro-generation that they were contemplating--nuclear being their front-runner, I guess--there was a plan at that time. I guess they informally called this a "string of pearls." What their plan was about was setting up a series of nuclear-generating stations along the north shore of Lake Huron and Lake Superior that would supply the bulk of Ontario's electricity or meet the bulk of Ontario's electricity demands.



Keith Lewis

There is nothing moral about buying out somebody who is starving.

At the time, we were in opposition to the process, or to that initiative, through the environmental assessment process. We ended up having that aspect of the planning shut down. It seemed to the people that were involved--I guess in a naive way--that it was something that we would never have to come back to. But always in the back of our minds, for some of us anyway, there is the reality, I suppose, that once it's in the plans, it'll always come back. With the population growing and the power demands also growing, it wouldn't take them long to dust off those plans, reactivate, reinitiate those plans.

That was a 25-year plan at the time. It got shut down for a variety of reasons, most of which were based on the financial instability of Ontario Hydro at the time. You remember Maurice Strong? He came from the environmental conference in Rio and then was hired as the [head] of Ontario Hydro, hired to downsize Ontario Hydro and bring it back on its feet financially. Part of that was to get out of this planning process which involved environmental assessments which cost Ontario Hydro millions and millions of dollars, so they couldn't afford to do that and pay all the money that had to be paid. So they just ended the process then.

Chief Earl Commanda: We knew the federal government was changing their environmental protection regulations, laws, [i.e.,] the CEPA, Canadian Environmental Protection Act. We started to get

involved in some of those discussions through the Assembly of First Nations. We got invited to comment on those. There was at one point a Chiefs Committee on the Environment, which myself and Keith used to attend when it was active. At those federal meetings, we gave our input in terms of changes to those federal regulations. I guess in relation to our issue, we soon learned other First Nations were dealing with different environmental issues: Walpole Island was downstream from the gas refineries in Sarnia; the Akwesasene had the aluminum industry located right outside their area.

We started to form, through the Assembly, a process to study the impact on human and animal life within the Great Lakes basin. There was a major multiyear study to determine, Is there mercury in the system? Are there other toxins in the system? It became known as the E.A.G.L.E. Project. This group was comprised of First Nation communities on the Canadian side of the Great Lakes. Keith went back to university and was working on his master's in environmental studies. From the experience, he became quite good at this stuff and decided, "Well, why don't I go for my papers?"

It was a good networking process because there were a lot of other First Nations people who were dealing with those kinds of issues. We got to meet Loralee MacGregor [of the E.A.G.L.E. staff] and a lot of others who were dealing with these kinds of issues. So Keith took some time off from the community to go get his education, came back, and then headed up the Tribal Council Environmental Unit and got heavily involved in the 25-year demand/supply plan.

I guess in terms of this particular issue, we also started to hear what Rio Algom was doing in South America and Mole Lake [Wisconsin]. We were getting invitations to go and talk in those other forums as well as inviting them to come to our area and look at the uranium mines and the tailings.

The Uranium Industry, Its Environmental Effects, and Resultant Studies

Chief Earl Commanda: In this community, prior to the uranium mines, they were mining copper just north of the reserve. The mines were going down and then coming across

Uranium tailings wall, Nordic Site

underground onto First Nations land. There were some objections to that. It was kind of funny because they say when we signed the treaty for this land, we owned everything from the air that we breathed to the berries that we picked, to the minerals underneath the ground. At one point, in 1954, the federal government took away the mineral rights to the reserve. Some of our Elders believe there are some valuable minerals under there, but we haven't been able to prove it. We've got a lot of sand and gravel maybe. (*The listeners laugh.*)

Soon after they discovered uranium, we lost our mineral rights. It was a unilateral government decision to take those away. We've never ever been able to get them back.

I guess in terms of the other things that were happening around us...they did close that copper mine. But right adjacent to the reserve was the Pronto mine, right next to the reserve there. That was one of the twelve original uranium mines. And our band members were going in there and handling uranium stuff without any proper protection. They were handling the drums they were working with. There was no really environmental protection regulation at the time that this industry started to happen. The only land-related protection was the old Lands and Forests [Act], and there was no Ministry of the Environment at the time.

The thing that we were concerned about was with everything north of the reserve, what they did was — all of these twelve uranium mines that were operating — they made sure that all the water continued from the effluents to flow past our community on the Serpent River watershed. Although we have kids who swim in there, who drink in there, who eat fish from there, there was no real protection from the contaminants that were coming through there.

There were different standards. There were the provincial standards and the national standards, and for some reason the federal government had lower standards than the provincial government. So it was quite all right for us to drink the water, but our neighboring municipality was told, "You've got to have the water treated." We have three families who are essentially using their drinking water from the Serpent River directly. Those were some of the issues we were fighting in the mid-'70s when they were having tailings management hearings.

In 1977, there were recommendations made to the government to treat the effluents that were coming from those tailings, to do something about improving the quality of the water. We have been on the mailing list of the Ministry of the Environment in terms of the water quality of the Serpent River ever since then. And the quality

has improved, I'm not denying that it has improved. It improved to the point where the Natural Resources Ministry was re-stocking some of the inland lakes with trout and looking at rehabilitating.

But every time we would say it's not just fish, it's the moose that eats the plants, it's the ducks that use that, it's the partridge. Laurentian University, at the request of the uranium companies, started to do a lot of studies to see if there were any impacts upon the wildlife, because we were the primary consumers of those. A lot of our band members know nobody hunts moose in the area. But there's still some trapping that goes on in there, and they still eat the beaver that comes out of there and the muskrat that comes out of there. But in terms of the moose, they go north of the watershed now.

When we say that this issue of the uranium industry has changed our life dramatically, although we still have a lot of people who migrated off, moved away from the community because there were no jobs here, our population has grown tremendously from the less than a hundred that we were to over a thousand. And a lot of them who left when they were young, they want to come home and they want to retire. We're having such a backlog on requests for housing. If you look at this community, it's rock, it's swamp. We've been fighting with the government to recognize our need to expand. We're back up from the hundred or so that occurred when the first bust-cycle occurred, to over 380 people living on the reserve now.

Because we believe in a process of planning for those kinds of community needs, there is an interest in trading, in an economy for the community. There is an interest in bringing our kids back home on the reserve to our band-operated school. There is interest in creating industry. We're doing some studies now on the potential for a fish farm. Over those years, from the time we cleaned up the acid site, we've started to have some serious discussions with Rio Algom about, "Well, you've taken away from us. When do you begin to put back into our communities?"

Right now, all they've been able to put on the table in terms of actual cash is a couple of hundred thousand dollars to assist in the education of our kids.

Rio Algom is primarily based in Toronto, but they have a bit of an office, monitoring the uranium tailings, in Elliot Lake.

The studies done by Laurentian University were all given to us. Most of them seemed to indicate there was no real toxicity in the animals, except for the moose--you shouldn't eat the liver. The company paid for those studies. If a band member complained that this uranium industry destroyed the whole sturgeon population above the waterfalls...last summer when we had a call from a sturgeon fish biologist, we said, "You ought to talk to some of the Elders about whether there was a sturgeon population there or not until the uranium industry destroyed it." I don't know what the answer to that is, but it seems like every time Keith mentions anything at a conference, there seems to be another study happening. (*Everybody laughs.*)

Keith Lewis: When Laurentian University was doing the study that Earl was talking about, we were warned at that time not to eat the liver of moose because of high concentrations of cadmium --I think that was it. Anyway, that created an effect in the community, like it reinforced an impression that the Serpent River basin had problems, environmental problems. Like Earl said, people from here used to use the Serpent River as their highways to the interior, all the way from the Great Lakes. They used to hunt along there, and fish, and trap, and collect harvest berries and stuff like that. But over the years during the history of the uranium mining, this was reduced considerably because of perceptions. So people started going outside the Serpent River basin.

In terms of the studies and what have they accomplished--not a lot, in terms of putting to rest the fears that people have [about] the Serpent River watershed. Studies are done, it's made known to us that the studies are being done, because to some extent we participate in them. A study is completed, there's a bit of fanfare because they come to the community and they say, "Look, this is what we've done. Here's the summary of what we've found, and basically it's inconclusive in terms of harmful effects to people and to the environment in general."

So people in the community have gotten used to listening to that over the years, too, and don't believe any of the studies. The perception remains, it prevails, basically. Whether the studies do any good for us, no, they don't do any good for us, but they certainly reinforce the arguments that are part of the uranium mining industry, the governments, etc., that "there is no problem."

Decommissioning of the Uranium Mines and Steps Toward a Viable Non-Nuclear Economy

Chief Earl Commanda: We started to get involved in the decommissioning of the uranium mines process. Especially when we look at the decommissioning of those twelve uranium mines--originally just the two remaining uranium mines--we attempted to influence the terms of reference for decommissioning through the "scoping" hearings. We presented a case for broadening the scope to include all the uranium mines and to look at the impacts not just from the environmental perspective but look at them from a broader sort of cumulative impact on the health, the social, other things besides just what physically did you do to the land and to the trees and to the fish and to the animals.

We've gotten our Elders and our people who worked there to tell their stories as well, to these people who were developing these [terms of reference] and listen[ing] to our recommendations. They did not accept all of our recommendations to include a broader look at the decommissioning. They did include all of the uranium mines and did sort of listen to some of those recommendations.

When we take a look at where I started from, looking at the direct impact to health, when we cleaned up the acid plant, we told those two companies and Indian Affairs, we never ever could release [them] of the impacts to the health of the band members. We started to look at studying our health compared to our neighboring communities' health, taking a snapshot picture. I think what we attempted to also look at is what needs to happen in terms of putting a dollar value on compensation. How do you take a look at what was our land use prior to the uranium coming in, and what did we lose as a result of them coming in and [our] not being able to use the land again?

There've been some recent national court decisions around that, the most recent one is the Delgamuukw Supreme court case in British Columbia, which talks about First Nations having absolute aboriginal title to all the lands and resources. Well, if that's the case, and we have absolute title, then we are saying what we should be

doing is studying just how much use of the land there was prior to the uranium mining companies' coming in.

It seems kind of ironic because the municipality of Elliot Lake wants to do something similar in terms of the impact of the uranium mines' leaving, in terms of going after the company and Ontario Hydro. When they decided to close those mines, there was a six billion dollar contract commitment to the region to keep those mines going, and they put on the table about a 655 million dollar close-out compensation package. Because we are in the middle of this region, we were asked to be a part of the process of economic diversification strategies with those municipalities impacted by the closure of the uranium mining companies.

So I've been involved in a process of taking a look at those monies. They kept the mines open for another two and a half years longer than they were originally going to, so a lot of that money went toward extending the contract for those miners. They spent about $10 million one year to make work for the mining people who worked there, another six million dollars the following year. They decided to use some of those monies to take all of uranium mine-company owned houses in the town and create a venue whereby they would attract senior citizens to come and live in this "beautiful, pristine" North Country. They've managed to attract four or five thousand seniors to come back and live in the town.

There've been some various proposals put forward. One is to create a world-class arts academy. We have half of the voting say as to what happens at that arts academy. Keith works there now, actually. It's an interesting project. That was a $10,000,000 venture, with monies from Ontario Hydro.

We never got the benefit of the loss of the land over there at the former acid plant location because they shut down the uranium mine. There was no compensation for loss of the bulk oil storage plant that was created for the uranium mines or for any loss of a tax base that the municipalities get. The municipalities got millions and millions of dollars for their infrastructure costs. We didn't get any of that. We put some proposals in, we've got this fish farm proposal in there now, and they put a half a million dollars on the table, and that's about as much as we got out of the 600 million dollars.

So, we take a look at all of these things happening around us, and then we say, "What do we get out of this?" We're getting a small hydro-generation project being put on the Serpent River; now that's going to offset some of our heating costs. That was part of Ontario Hydro's small energy efficiency program. That was an $11,000,000

project. I guess for us, there was an interest in getting involved in developing a hydro project on the Mississauga River, which was on the 25-year demand/supply plan and was supposed to happen in 2006 or something like that. We said, "Well, why couldn't we own that hydro plant and get the benefit of the sale of the hydro to Ontario Hydro and use that as a continuing source of revenue to fund our economic development initiatives, not just for our community but for all the other communities along the north shore, in the Tribal Council?"

The NDP [National Democratic Party] was in government at the time. They decided, "No!" We were prepared to look at what that would mean to sell hydro--Wisconsin was interested at that time. We started to work with groups to look at what do First Nations want to do with working toward self-sustainability, with their ventures. Right now the Tribal Council is in a major forestry venture. We bought a licensed tract of land around the Mississauga Management Area. There are now some jobs for our loggers to log in that area. It's a multimillion dollar business. But we've had to raise the money to buy out the license. It's about 600 thousand dollars that we've had to raise, through personally guaranteeing some loans from the banks, through individual bands, and we've invested $23,000 of ours as a share in that particular company.

So even though this is a sad story in terms of what has happened to us, it doesn't mean that we are just opposed to any developments. We are prepared to look at creating the economy for our band members, and [we are] looking at ways and means of doing that. I think in terms of what we would like to see happen out of this if we were to [make a presentation] at some point is how do you make the companies recognize that they did essentially destroy a way of life of a community, from being a community that lived off the land to one where that's no longer possible for us. How do you put a dollar value to that?

I guess in some cases when we talk about the occupational health of some of the band members who worked in the mines, they have their own personal issue with the companies. But from the community's perspective, we're looking at what we've lost as a result of this uranium industry being in our territory and how do we begin to rebuild our community as a result of that loss, and that's where the community's perspective comes into this process.

Tailings Wall, Nordic Site

Then there are the dangers from the uranium tailings. [About 200 million tons of uranium tailings are stored behind seven huge earthen dams in the Serpent River watershed.]

The oxygen continues to affect the pH of the tailings because the milling process uses sulfuric acid, and if they're exposed to oxygen, it'll continue to perpetually produce acid. The solution is to bury the tailings under water in tailings ponds or lakes. What we're worried about is what happens if those dams break or there's more rain in a given year than those dams were meant to sustain.

Question: Are you working with other groups that have similar experiences, like the Navajos?

Keith Lewis: The only real contacts we have with others with similar problems are with the people in Crandon, at Mole Lake, Wisconsin, where Rio Algom wanted to mine zinc, copper and uranium. [The proposed mine] was close to the Mole Lake Reservation. The community was downstream from where they were proposing to mine and do the tailings development.

Well, for now, anyway, as far as I understand, it's stopped. But there's a big push on in the area there for development, too. There's been a downturn in the economy there in the way of jobs and stuff, so the non-Indian communities favor development--a lot of them do, anyway, no matter what the cost--although there are small pockets of opposition here and there in the non-Indian communities. But it's mostly the Indian communities united together in the area, five or six of them, who are the opposition.

Chief Earl Commanda: The Mole Lake people got a chance five years ago to get me to speak at the shareholders annual meeting of Rio Algom. They had a proxy that was allowed for me to use. It was one

of the nuns of the Catholic Church, it was her proxy. I went in. Rio Algom knew that we were going to speak there. With Lorraine [Rekmans] at the Tribal Council, we set that up with the Mole Lake people. So I agreed to go down, and I went. I got up and I spoke very briefly. I said, "You know at some point this company's going to have to look beyond the legal definition of what [is allowed] in terms of the [environmental] impact of all this and really begin to deal with the impact that it has upon the people, that is, the social, the cultural." That was basically the message.

The chairman of Rio Algom, Gordon Gray, thanked me for my comments but said that until there are changes to regulations all they have to deal with are the legal requirements of the company. Because now we are challenging that. If there is anything that a process could do in terms of the Hague Appeal for Peace, it would be to show how to regulate those companies from looking at just the limited scope of their view. If and when that ever happens, we would like to be ready, and say, "Yes, here is what it has cost us."

Compensation and Community Revival

Chief Earl Commanda: Well, for people who do not trap anymore, how much money would they make in a given year if they were trapping? Is it ten thousand dollars? Is it twenty thousand dollars? In a lifetime, from the time that they didn't trap there to the present, that's a loss of income to that individual family. If the people were still using that area, [in 1954 when the mines came in], as I knew they were using that area, for maple sugar bush, what is the value of maple syrup now, per bottle, and how many bottles could they have taken out of there, the harvesting area?

We did some interviews with Elders. A lot of them have passed away, but some of us could still go back and say, "Well, this was so-and-so's trapping area, hunting area, harvesting area." But I think we need to do some scientific land-use studies.

Keith Lewis: But there is a difficulty in that type of approach when you try to quantify what it means to a society if they lose their culture, their identity, their self-esteem, their language, and all the things that go with it. You can't. My view is that any approach in terms of compensation has to first be based on a concept of perpetuity. It's got to be forever, because, basically, what you are losing is forever. So the only way to balance that is to balance whatever different mechanism you adopt on the same sort of concept. We have tried to communicate this in several forums. When we were involved in the

federal processes, environmental assessment processes, in regards to the disposal of high-level radioactive waste, we talked about that in that forum.

When Elliot Lake was doing its decommissioning of the uranium mines, we also did it, not only as one-shot deals. We followed them around the country and kept reiterating the approaches that we felt were the best. The same with the decommissioning process. When it came to provincial initiatives, those types of arguments were put forward also. It's been done over and over again. It's frustrating, very frustrating. Our experience, and I'm sure you've heard this from other people, is that any support in terms of industrial development and respect for the environment and that sort of thing is only given in terms of what's required by regulatory agencies. They won't go any further.

There is no consideration for the moral aspects of what they're doing, because you basically can't regulate morality maybe. If you expect the companies to be a good person, they never are. You know, what can you say? They are there to only get what they want, they'll only do what they have to do in terms of being environmentally conscious or considerate of or respectful of the environment.

There is a class action suit in Elliot Lake against Rio Algom right now, but it is not for the negative health effects to miners. It seems to be more in the context of the financial compensation that was offered on the part of the government, Ontario Hydro, and the companies, in terms of regional diversification that went on there in Elliot Lake. Some negative things are being alleged. Earl mentioned the initiation of this process to buy all the Ontario Hydro housing that was available in the city and use it for senior housing and that sort of thing. Well, anyway, there's a group of people who are alleging that a lot of money was mismanaged and [that there was] corruption, and that's what they're talking about right now.

There have been initiatives that have taken place and been somewhat successful in terms of the health of uranium miners, and this was quite a few years back, in the '60s and early '70s. The big health effect for miners who actually worked underground or in the mills with the uranium itself was silicosis. So lots of miners died from that and continue to die [from it] actually, [among] the guys who are still around. The compensation that was offered was on an individual basis. One of Earl's uncles actually died from silicosis. There was compensation paid.

Chief Earl Commanda: There has to be some recognition by the medical community that there is a cause [of these illnesses]. When we look at our situation with people who were exposed to the sulfuric acid plant here, we could never ever get the medical community to say, "Yes, thyroid problems, skin rashes!" They said that we had maybe blown out of proportion the issue of our kids who swim in the lake, who have skin rashes from the sulfuric acid change in the pH and the effect of it in the water.

Somebody would come and say that it's only pollen from the trees that's in the water that's causing the problem. We used to have campers who camped on that site, who, without knowing, in the middle of the night, where they were camping, would wake up in the morning full of itchy rashes, red, having an allergic reaction to it. We've heard those stories a lot. I guess in terms of using the press to argue our case, we've never ever been able to convince people that those who worked in the sulfuric acid plant--because it was a dusty, dirty environment--actually died from lung cancer or whatever because of that. They would say, "Was he a smoker? Maybe that was the cause of the lung cancer."

But I think, with the uranium miners and the silicosis issue, in terms of the occupational hazards, there's people who view that as a separate issue, [because] this is an occupational hazard. But in terms of looking at our perspective, in terms of the losses as a community--being shipped out of this community to Elliot Lake to go to school, the culture, the language--you can't see it in those ways, but I guess those are the kinds of things that we know have definitely been happening to us.

Other communities say of our community, "You are less and less of an Ojibwe community, having gone through this process of being assimilated into the town there." That may be true, but we are doing things to regain our language and our culture. We reintroduced the powwow back into the community, we're going on our eleventh year now. That's become a very strong focus for us to gather and divert a lot of energies to getting back to who we were as a people. Those kinds of things do take money. If we want to have Ojibwe in our daycare [in this Band Hall], where's the money going to come from? We barely have enough money to have daycare workers there. All those kinds of things. What we're trying to do is design programs that will enforce and enhance rebuilding the community to what it was before in terms of the language, the culture, and all of those kinds of things.

The fact that we have a senior citizens home here is because we don't want to send our people outside into the non-Native senior citizens homes. We don't even want to send them to another Native community where there may be a senior citizens home. We want to keep those people in our community for as long as physically possible. We want to use those people in teaching us our legends and who we are. The whole philosophy of our community has been very much one of strengthening our people in terms of who we are as Anishinaabek people. All we were looking at from the external process is what do we have to do out there to make that happen, for our vision in the community. We spend an awful lot of time defining what that vision is and naming that vision. All we're attempting to do now is take the steps to reach that goal, that vision, to work towards being the happy, harmonious community that we were before all this happened to us.

We have to pay an additional amount of money on top of our tuition to make sure that Ojibwe language teaching happens. Right now it's going to cost us about $62,000 more, over and above our tuition fees to the school, to which the federal government says, "We won't give you any of that money." It should be part of the school's cost, but of course they are cutting back all the time in those areas.

We've attempted to influence the regulations themselves at different forums. Essentially, the E.A.G.L.E. Project is to look at the health impacts of industry, not just the uranium industry, but industry, on the Great Lakes system. This isn't rated as one of the hot spots of industry due to the fact that uranium companies have done something about tailings management. There isn't a continuous polluting of this part of the Great Lakes. [Compare the 1997 International Joint Commission Nuclear Task Force Report with the 1966 Ontario Water Resources Commission Report]. There's the pulp mill in Espanola on the Spanish River. There's the St. Mary's River and all the industry in the city of Sault Ste. Marie.

What we've been trying to say is that the uranium industry in and of itself does carry some of those same industrial contaminants that affect the water. When we were looking at how do you change the regulations...we have been involved in this since back in '77, in the tailings management hearings, the decommissioning of the uranium mine hearings, the scoping hearings on changes to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. We often get invited to speak. There's a push on for the endangered species and what's happening with some of those areas now.

I think the networking with our neighbors in the south in the States helps us make this not just an Ontario or a Canadian issue, but

a North American issue. Our discussions with other indigenous peoples in other parts of the world also strengthen that, whether it's South Africa or the islands of the South Pacific or the people in the Arctic. We've been asked to speak to the people, the Dene, in northern Saskatchewan. We've been asked to also speak to the Inuit in northern Labrador, because Boise Bay is happening there now in terms of nickel mining. What they keep asking us is, "You tell us about your relationship to that company." What is that relationship? The company speaks to us and says, "Well, should we be developing a relationship?" because it has an effect on their relationship with the Mole Lake people in Wisconsin and with the South American people. So they want something from us, because they know we have access to those forums. So, the company's saying, "We want to sit down with you, we want to have a relationship arrangement with you guys. We know things haven't been great in the past, we've done all these nasty things to the fish and the wildlife, we're willing to give you some money."

They gave us some free housing last year but it cost 1.2 million dollars to develop the subdivision to accept the houses and $45,000 to make sure all of the houses have basements, proper heating, proper plumbing, proper electrical, upgraded to the standard. That money comes out of our minor capital allocation from Indian Affairs. We had to go and borrow on future year allocations to get the infrastructure put in.

We put all those things on a paper to the company. We said, "If you're serious about looking at anything like this, why don't you give us 8-10 million dollars?" We didn't think it was an astronomical amount. [First] it went down to a million dollars, maybe that would be considered. Now it's down to 200 thousand dollars.

Prospects

Keith Lewis: When I think about progress, I wouldn't at all use a word like "hopeful." In fact, a better word, I think, is closer to being hopeless. That's what I think. I think about our current political environment in the province, with the PC in power, and their gutting of the environmental assessment process and protection acts in different public forums that they felt hindered industry. I think that whole mind set is one that is adopted by industry--is of industry itself--and it's just adopted by the current government. In provincial terms, it's pretty hopeless, and when it gets to federal processes, most federal processes have no teeth, are advisory in nature, that sort of thing.

Ourselves, in the community here, we have to try to balance between what we feel are serious moral responsibilities toward the people and toward the land and at the same time try to develop economically in the community and meet the demands of the people that are here in terms of jobs. That seems to be more of the priority in people's minds in the community, so we have our own agenda pulling us one way, and there is a bigger agenda here that we have to answer to, the reality of the community, putting bread and butter on the table, and that sort of thing.

When it comes to situations--I'm not saying we're in that situation--when it comes to situations like are in the newspapers right now about the high-level radioactive waste disposal concept, the possibility of siting becomes more of a reality in the near future, and a reality that would amount to [nuclear waste's] being located on Indian lands, treaty lands. When you have those realities that we have in this community, and when you think that all Indian communities are like that, when a process like the high-level radioactive waste process throws money at a community that's starving, what are they going to say?

Then you get back to that thing about morality, and there is nothing moral about buying out somebody that's starving. Rather than taking care of the social and cultural dysfunction in the community, righting that first, they just say here's a whole pile of money, you do with it what you want, and let us destroy the environment more, and create further potential harm for your people and the land.

It's always there. It's always a reality. We're never not aware of the reality of the Elliot Lake uranium mines and the Cutler acid plant. We live here and it's always there.

I think, in getting back to one of the first things that we talked about, that in planning processes--industrial and government planning processes--that if [a plan] is stopped, there's a brief period of time where it seems like there's hope, but, if it's stopped, the plan is still always there. It never goes away. So, the people might go away who helped to stop it. But the plan is there, and it'll always remain. That's the way I look at it.

After the World Uranium Hearings, somewhere out in the southwest, I can't remember where exactly, they were talking about stopping strip-mine development in Arizona or New Mexico. But it's short term, a short term satisfaction that goes with it.

In our own situation here, the Cutler acid site, after all the lobbying that we did and after all the studies that we did, it finally came down to putting a shovel in the ground and excavation. We spent

somewhere around 12-14 million dollars with all the studies and processes that went with it, the people's time and that sort of thing. We figured we did it, we really did something good for the community here, we cleaned up a site that was contaminated, we fixed an injustice and made it right. But within the last couple years, we've found out that there's still groundwater contamination there and pockets of pyrite acid-producing materials in the ground. [What we did] met the standards at the time that were there in terms of rehabilitation, but as far as rehabilitation efforts go now, it was lacking.

Chief Earl Commanda: Well, in terms of this situation being resolved with this acid plant company, this time it may be hopeless. But I guess, in relation to where is the community going to go from here, we know we have raised a generation of kids who have been through the experience and [we know] our parents who have suffered from this experience. We know from this experience that we wouldn't want to see this happen to another community. To raise the consciousness level about this bad experience and awareness of those environmental issues, it's going to take a lot more cooperation amongst groups such as ourselves.

We need to take a look at keeping the pressure up with non-Native groups, with environmental groups, as Keith was saying . Poverty is something that is a reality while these other things are still being dealt with. So, working with our neighbors at the Tribal Council helps us achieve some of that balance. [We also have] our other communities in the province of Ontario and our Union of Ontario Indians. There are seven First Nations communities between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury, there are about twenty in the area of Ontario; political organizations--the Union of Ontario Indians--are about forty, in the whole province there are 130, and in the whole country there are 600-some.

Keith Lewis: We are the uranium capital of the world. The Mississauga have a hexafluoride refinery just adjacent to the reserve, the Blind River refinery.

I suppose it's like a flea on an elephant. When you think about the larger picture, the way it is, is that what our job is, basically, is to try to change the worldview. When I say worldview, I mean worldview--it's a global perception of how things should develop and how things should be. And the basis for all that is money, much of which we don't have.

It's a big problem, because industry and government are based on money themselves and will do what they need to do to get the fleas off their body. And that is what's happening. In terms of long-term prospects, the only thing we can do is keep plugging away at it, and fighting, and keep on hoping that through that and some of the catastrophes that are happening, not only in terms of industrial development but in terms of environmental change, to get people more and more to wake up to the reality of what we are doing to ourselves and begin to change that mind set and develop a whole different worldview.

But I think it's a long way off. I'm very cynical about this. I don't see much hope. You break it down to the personal terms of this community and the people who live here--put aside environmental issues and destruction of land and that sort of thing--and just think about the bullshit that Indian people have been put through since Europeans have come to the continent, and that whole effect that has taken place in Indian society in terms of almost adopting a perception or a belief themselves that they're powerless to basically stop the things that happen around them. I think just for aboriginal people to get over that mind-set and then to battle these other realities like environmental degradation and industrialization and that sort of thing, I think we've got a long way to go.

Can it be fixed?

Keith Lewis: Can it be fixed? Well, I suppose, technically it can. But the frustrating part of it for me is that it takes so damn long to get those people who have the money and the technical expertise and the ability to rectify situations like that to accept that something is wrong and to do something about it.

For example, anybody in their right mind would look at the land that the bulk-oil plant was on in the community and say, "All of this pollution has taken place--fuel spilled on the ground and seeped into the groundwater, that sort of thing--there is something wrong, clean it up." It's simple, a simple thing to do. The lease expired the first time for Imperial Oil in the community, I think it's something like eight years, ten years ago, and we've been fighting with them ever since to accept the notion that there is something wrong there. The people that are supposedly on our side are the federal government in Indian Affairs, the federal government in terms of Environment Canada, and they can't do a damn thing about Imperial Oil. Imperial Oil is too strong. I mean, just a simple, small site like that.

The president of the local Rio Algom company here was offered a job there in Peru. They were starting the process in that country, but he was saying there were probably going to be problems with aboriginal people in that development. Basically, all Rio Algom is responsible for now here is monitoring for a certain number of years, I think it might be ten years.

I work for the art academy in Elliot Lake now. In terms of the institution, it's supposed to provide contemporary fine arts and aboriginal fine arts on a fifty-fifty basis. And in the recruitment of students, the same way. It all takes money. And the economy of scale. You can't move a whole school back down to the reserve. When grades only have three students each, it doesn't work. The art academy is post-secondary, university level, and we look all over the province, other provinces, too, like Quebec and Manitoba, for students. I've heard about the Native American Art Institute in Sante Fe. I want them to send me there, but they won't. (*The listeners laugh.)*

I think what's important to remember, you talk about this small ray of hope in terms of Imperial Oil, for instance. Eventually we'll get Imperial Oil to clean up [that site]. But I think what you need to remember is communities like ours are small, resources are real limited, we're short on resources, human and financial. If you wanted someone, like Earl or myself, to do work solely on Imperial Oil and get that situation rectified, it can't happen as simply as that, because there's no money for it. There's greater demands in other areas, like housing, for instance, in the community. If we went to work on Imperial Oil and tried to get them to rehabilitate the site, people in the community whom we're responsible to in general, [not only] for Imperial Oil, would feel we were not providing housing and jobs. The community is going to require us to look at housing and jobs, and say, if you spend too much time over there, "What the hell are you doing wasting our time over there when it'll happen anyway." So it's a big toss-up, in that sense. So, in terms of people like yourselves, if you want to provide help to communities like ours, that have situations like ours, then that is where to focus, on this shortage of human and financial resources, expertise, to help us with those sorts of initiatives.

There are a lot of good things happening and we can't just lay down and let it happen to us. Just in personal terms--I don't want to get too personal--I found out two years ago that I had colon cancer. I've had to deal with that over the past two years. You know, you just can't lay down and let it overwhelm you. You have to continue to play and that's all there is to it. And it's the same with the community, we all have to do it. It's frustrating. People become cynical and want to give up.

It's pretty sad sometimes to think about what you have to give up to be able to fit in. And I think aboriginal people worldwide face that dilemma, to have to quit being the kind of people that they are and fit into the larger scheme of things and play the game that the larger society has imposed on them.

When Earl and I came back to the reserve, one of my observations was that people were real nice. When a non-Native person would come onto the reserve, there would be this reaction in the community. Basically, people would be in awe in one extreme or be like animals that roll over and expose themselves. There were these two extremes and everything in between. But generally I found that if a government person came into the band office and said, "This is what I want. This is the kind of thing that's happening," people would say, "Okay." Earl and I--I'm not saying it was only Earl and I--we didn't fit into that mold. We'd tell them, "Okay. We're happy to hear what you have to say and we'll think about it and when we decide what we want to do, we'll get back to you and only then." They didn't like it at first. A lot of people in the community didn't like it at first, the way we treated these respectable people who came into the community. So we got flack not only from the people who came into the community but from the community people themselves.

We ran into the big project with the Cutler rehabilitation. We were doing running battle for three or four years with the acid plant. We ate, slept, and drank the Cutler rehabilitation project from the time we woke up to the time we went to sleep. It was fighting them out there and fighting them in here to grasp the situation of what happened and reminding them that what happened was wrong. It wasn't just us flying all over the country having a good time, because we weren't having a good time. It quickly turned into a very negative situation for us, for our families. That's the kind of sacrifice that's required of people for limited success.

As for the World Uranium Hearings, I didn't have any great expectations. I realized before I went there that it was a collection of people with a variety of interests and agendas and that they're getting together to voice their opinions about uranium development worldwide. I didn't have any great expectations because, I didn't sense that people who were in power, who were doing uranium development, were listening. I wish that what we had said had gone to the United Nations where something more meaningful could have happened. There were a very limited [number of] representatives of government.

We will continue to do everything we're doing now and hoping that if they do listen that they act in a way that somehow is what we're

asking them to do. In terms of decommissioning we were placed in a reactionary position after the fact. If they were discovering uranium right now, we'd say leave it alone. But again we get back to the reality that we're facing a cash economy.

The main recommendation that we put forward for future development is in terms of meaningful public consultation. Not only listening to what people have to say but putting forth reports about how things should be implemented. In a lot of ways, because of cultural differences, public consultations take into account what's happening in mainstream society and lump everybody into that process and expect that voices of aboriginal people will be heard. We don't agree with that, we've never agreed with that. We have proposed separate public consultation processes for aboriginal people. Rather than putting people into hearings situations where there is a confrontational atmosphere, we want to try to get away from the formality and try to tailor the process for the needs of people before you even implement the process.

In the Ontario assessment process, anecdotal evidence is now accepted. The Ontario environmental assessment process is a statute of the province that requires hearings to be undertaken by developments that are proposed by the provincial government, entities of the provincial government, like crown corporations or anything that is funded by the provincial government. It is a quasi-judicial system and we fought for anecdotal evidence and got it. That was a major victory and this requires that aboriginal people can put forward discussions which are given as much weight as a company lawyer's evidence. Both the concept of anecdotes as evidence and the recognition of aboriginal rights have been accepted in terms of the judicial process. [See also Delgamuukw]. Anecdotal evidence was seen as a linchpin for us, a major step. We really fought for it and we got it.

We don't drink the water from the Serpent River anymore.

We don't drink the water from the Serpent River anymore.

Serpent River First Nation Elders, Uranium Miners and Sulfuric Acid Plant Workers

Recorded in the Kenabutch Health Center in Serpent River First Nation on 19 March 1999. Included in these conversations were Leo Day, Junior, Orville Commanda, John Souliere, Terence Jacobs, Gertrude Lewis and Frank Lewis. (Leo Day passed away in 2002.)

Leo Day

They never mentioned what was in it.

Leo Day: I'll start on the mine outfit first. When it first started, when it was under construction, all these mines here, I think there was about eleven of these mines. At that time there was lots of work, yeah. But we didn't know [what] we was working [with]. Now we know--we knew after, why the uranium--myself I didn't know anything about uranium. But I heard something about that in Ottawa River there, the uranium was going into that town, that's outside of Ottawa River there, Niles? And that's what we hear about uranium. So it's, you know, as the years went by, there was more stuff coming out in town and what the uranium [was] gonna do. [They said] we have the hydro power gonna come out of that, and it will last for years. But that's all they said. And they never mentioned what was in it. And today I hear, you know they knew all about this years ago, eh. Why didn't they say something about it? You know, they let it go. The product was made and shipped out, and they still didn't say nothing.

And today I was listening to the radio there--I usually listen to it every morning, the news, to see what's going on--and they knew about this years ago. Years ago. Way before this even started, the mines there. And that's what makes me wonder sometimes. Either we get on the boat too fast, or, enough to say, well like anybody else, the money is there and you go and work.

You think about it. As you get older you think about it. Because you're no longer in that racket. But what I'm thinking about now is the young people, that they're lost, eh. At least my grandchildren are.

They'll be the next ones, and they don't know anything about what's going on here. They're not listening, what I tell them. But of course trying to talk to kids today, you might as well talk to that wall, you know. You don't know nothing, eh, that's what they say to you, at least to me, that's what my kids say to me. You don't know nothing. I don't know anything, but I know what's going on. I know what I'm saying, there's a truth in it, see.

Anyway, what I was saying. I worked all these mines, all of them. Oh, I don't know how long I worked there. To work all them mines – I worked about two years, I guess--I worked longer than two years. Anyway, everything was temporary, what I was doing. And I left my outfit to go and work there because I took [a] cut in wages there, where I was working. Well, I went up there because you could work up the hours. That's all that I was after. Money. In part because I could spend it faster (*he laughs)*. You couldn't quit because you didn't have anything, [no] great work to have after. Anyway, I worked, and finally I said that's it. I gone back to my outfit.

And my dad comes home one time from this acid plant and says you got a job if you want it. He said, go into the electrical. I said I don't know, I'll go and see. I went to see the man doing the hiring and he says you want a job, he says, here. I went back to my outfit. I didn't want to lose my seniority. So he says, well, okay. But that's not going to last anyway, that acid plant. Not going to last. Go. I told him it's only five minutes away from where I was living and he says yeah, go for it, he said. And he told me, your job will be here when you get back over there. There'll be a job. And your seniority part, he says, it will be there too. I don't know how they worked it but I got my seniority while I was working some other place.

Anyway, sure enough, I was the last one they hired over there; I was the first one they laid off. Pretty near three years of this. Oh, it was dirty. A few places you had to wear a gas mask, quite a few places, not only a few places. If you didn't wear a mask, your wind would be cut off, from the acid, you know. Trying to get your wind from some other place, you know, if you didn't have your gas mask. And the dust from the old roaster plant, they used to call it, eh. It would come right to a point, the dust. And we were using the ramset. And everything would go dark, and all that dust coming down from way up where, from the vibration, that's what come down there. And it was red stuff. Of course we were breathing that, too. Not as much as when you had your gas mask on. But there was places outside, in the plant, you could walk around with no gas mask. But still you were breathing acid, fumes, or whatever it is there. And people were getting sick during that

time. Later, when that acid plant was operating then you'd try and go over across the yard there, you know, that vapor, that acid would cut your wind off. It was open, it was just out in the open. To me it was open. So I was glad when I got laid off. Last one hired, first one laid off, and I said, good.

They give you a rain suit to wear, because you couldn't wear jeans, or nothing like that. Like somebody shot you with pellets when they washed it, eh? Holes. And they give you these acid-resistant clothing, working clothes. But even you got acid on that, it's all white spots. I was glad I got out of that.

So that's all I'm going to say for now. For now, that's what happened to me, anyway.

Junior: I worked in the uranium mines for sixteen years, but I worked in the mining industry for twenty-nine years. I worked up in Quirke 2. I worked at Quirke Mine from 1974 to 1990. There was no protection. I was an electrician underground, that's all. I used to work in the high-radiated areas, okay? Just where, I'm finding out now, it was between 12 and 20 times the limit that we were supposed to take. But we didn't know this. We didn't know what the limits were for us to be able to be in. Part of my beats were in what they call the high-grade stuff. And sometimes I used to walk through some of these places where we already mined out. And you'd go through these places, and the radiation was so high--now, I don't know if I was imagining this or what--but my lips used to start to tingle, you know, stuff like that. So there's something wrong here, you know.

Junior

A lot of the people that worked at the mines, that are my age, are dying... of cancer.

So one day they had these people come around that check the radiations and where they are. I says, "Why not check in there?" He says, "Well, I can't. I never got no orders." I says, "Well, I'm asking you to check and see what's in there. I'm walking through this place to go from one level to the other." He says, "I can't. We're told not to." "So, what was I going through?" And then he says, "Well, just don't go through there no more, okay?"

And what I'm saying, this was their way of mining. This was in the track mining. They had two levels. And one of these places, I said, it's bad in there, I'm sure it's bad in there. This was on the main level and everyone was walking through there. And it was high there. Very high. One day it was so high they had to shut it down. You couldn't walk through there. You had to go down to the main airway and then go up again to get to where you were working.

We didn't know what happened to us. Nobody told us. I think it was about three weeks ago, a friend of mine--he's now a paramedic in Echo Lake--he worked for me underground, and we were talking about this. And the radiation--and he had just been to a conference--and the radiation readings that were taken there, at least the gamma rays, were 12 to 20 times more than what's allowable. Now, we didn't know that. We had no idea what we were getting into. How many of our people are dying? Well, we know some of our people are dying from radiation, from cancer related to the mines. And nobody, they don't even want to compensate for it because they say, no, it's not job-related, you know. Nobody wants to. Like in my case now, I have a heart problem. Was it escalated because I was in this? Who knows? Would I have ever had it, or was it part of what I went through? I don't know.

I had dropped my gamma badge. It had stayed underground for two days and then I picked it up again and put it on. And I guess they were reading it a couple days later and, "Holy moses!" I was brought up to the surface, "What did you do, where did you go?" They went crazy, you know, they were trying to figure out what happened, you know, how come this thing is just gone out of whack, until they found out what. Just two days of exposure underground...they went crazy. Can you imagine we're doing this day after day after day? We're getting just a piece of it but it stays longer--what happens? We don't know, again.

And a lot of the people that worked at the mines, that are my age, are dying. Dying at 40, 45, 50, 55, from cancer. All kinds of cancers, not just one type. Many types of cancers. Like this one guy who put a carpet in my house a couple of months ago. His whole face is deformed. He has what they call Lanier cancer. We're never compensated for it, again. Here's this guy walking around because of this, because of working at the mine, working in high-grade situations again. Some people may be more apt to get certain kinds of cancers than others, I don't know. It's hard for us to really understand, you know? We just hear stories and I think, "Holy smokes! These guys really shafted us and we didn't even know it."

Why did they build the town site [Elliot Lake] and then close the mines? They spent millions and millions of dollars on building a new town site. I mean, we were all supposed to have lifetime jobs. Why all of a sudden did our lifetime jobs disappear? Overnight. And now we're finding out what's happening to the [waste]. We know these dams they got are not going to stay there. We know that because of how they are built. We know, I know, there's one dam in which the water is coming out of, which goes right into Elliot Lake. I know that it flows right into there, it's coming right out of this dam. And they're telling us everything is good. What are we, stupid people?

When they say our water is good to drink, do they take sediment tests? What do they do? Do they just dip a bucket in the water and say, this is our test? I have no idea what their tests are like. Are they taking some true tests, going down, taking soil tests, right from the bottom of some rivers? Nobody says anything.

I'll give you another example. We had an environmental company in Elliot Lake which was a good company. All of a sudden we have another environmental company that is set up by the town. Why? Is it to coincide with what they [Rio Algom and the city] want, and the other one would be more honest? These people [those connected with the first company] didn't even get a job. They had to close down. They didn't even get one contract from a hundred million dollar decommissioning. They didn't get not two cents from the decommissioning, and these are all ex-miners that went to school, took up these trades, started this company and never got a job in any length. Why? Because this was all zipped up because they wanted people in there under their control, as far as I can see.

My grandfather had a camp at Quirke Lake. They just walked in. There goes his camp, there goes everything. This was his trapping ground. Nobody compensated him for taking his camping ground. I mean, we're talking '52, '53, when they got started. All our fish are gone. Our rivers are never ever going to come back to what they was. Never. I mean, I used to be able to go fishing down the Serpent River down by the highway over there and catch all kinds of fish. Every time you'd put the line in the water. It's nothing now.

You never get the answers. We had the decommissioning commission, what was that, three, four years ago? I had the answers to all of their questions before they even came out. Because we knew they were going to go with the mines. You could try all you want, but they weren't going to listen. All they were saying was, no, no, everything is going to be okay.

I'll give you a for instance. They broke through the Serpent River from underground. Now, they broke through, whether it was naturally done or drilled through, however they did it, but the Serpent River was going into the mine, Quirke 2. Now, if, by some strange reason, because all the underground is going to start to cave in, now what happens if it breaks into the Serpent River again? All that water that is in the mine right now is leaching. And it's high-grade ore. It's going to siphon itself, it's going right out of the mine, right into the Serpent River. How do we know that's not happening now? We don't. And is anybody ever going to tell us if it does happen?

Are they actually doing what they're saying, giving us the right answers? They had a company come in, it's called Laurentian Labs. And like I said, we already had a company in town that was doing the same thing as they, and they developed a new company. And again, they all lost at this and had a mandate not to start up another company, because they loaned the first company the money. And then they start up another company? And not only that, people [who are not impartial] sit on the board for this lab, Laurentian Labs? Now, you tell me what's going on there.

How do we know the truth? What, twenty years ago, the Serpent River had twenty-five pectates that was in the water. At that time, we didn't know how much of that stuff was supposed to be in the water to start off with. I heard the magic number was two or three. They told us it was twenty-five or thirty. How would we know? We don't know what it's supposed to be, so we take it as cash. We don't know any different. What do we do? They couldn't reduce it, they couldn't bring it down, so they said, okay, we'll make it higher. Nobody knows if it's right or wrong. We didn't know.

There were supposed to be however many pectates per gallon. It was supposed to be three or four, that's what I hear now. But twenty years ago when this survey went on, they were trying to get it down, and they couldn't get this thing down, so they took a number out of the air and said, well, this is what it's supposed to be. Now we find out it's only supposed to be three or four. We had experts come in and say, "This is what it's supposed to be."

They've washed their hands of this. Take a for instance. There were five thousand guys working here. This was an illustrious steelworkers union. We had a union hall in Elliot Lake. We had it, what, twenty, thirty years? We lost it because it wasn't paid for. I paid forty dollar a month dues. And we had five thousand people working in this, eh? Where did all this money go? We didn't even own the building that they had. After us paying dues for what, thirty years?

I worked in the mines for sixteen years. I worked in mining for twenty-nine years. I have no kind of pension whatsoever. I have workers compensation, that's what I have. I would have stayed with the mine until it closed, I would have had twenty years in it. And I wouldn't have made the line, I would have been two years short. I wouldn't even have gotten anything even if I stayed until the end.

So as far as I'm concerned, I mean, a person who's working in the mining industry--you go to Europe, they take care of you. You work in mining twenty years, you're pensioned off. It doesn't make any difference what mines you work in, they pension you off. That's it, because you've done your time. But in Canada and the United States, you could forever go from one mine to the other and never get a pension. Because you never get enough seniority in one place, never do enough time for one company. But in Europe, they recognize it as one of the better trades, and again, they're ahead of us here.

I think they had good intentions, but then again, the whole system went wrong, I guess, because of how much it cost them to get uranium ore. This is what they're telling us. We don't know what they're talking about. They didn't show us their profits every month or every week or every day. It was only, they didn't care. Because everything was always cost plus with everything that went on. Nobody cared. I worked underground as an electrician, I was a supervisor for the last ten years. Just simple things, like how wasteful they were. You wouldn't believe how much was wasted. We used to put in these fans, big forty-eight-inch fans that were just screaming underground, for ventilation. And they had a junction box where we had to put our connections on. And the rule was we had to put the junction box on the outside so our people that come up could go beside it, not under it, or anyplace else, because we had one of these drop-ins, fell into one of our trucks. It could've killed somebody or hurt somebody bad, but at that time it didn't. I said, "From now on, we'll not go near it, so we'll only hook them up, the junction box, so that our boys won't get hurt with it." They were never ever in the right spots. I mean this happened over and over, repeated, repeated, repeated, repeated. These things, they cost money every time. I mean, it cost about five hundred dollars or whatever it was to send somebody back out there and I said, "No! You're not sending someone out there until it's in the right position." I remember one particular piece, it went right around before they got it in the right spot. Four times, you know?

We had pumps, what you call pipe pumps. They had a little rubber like an extension cord. But the water. There was so much acid in the water underground, I mean, it could melt a scoop tire. What's it

going to do to a little piece of cable like this? So I said, we used to put these things on it, so that they would pump this much water [*gestures*] whenever it needs to. But they insisted that they put them right on the ground, bury the thing. They're submergible; put them right in the water, pump the whole thing out. And I says, "No, that pump is ten thousand bucks to get it fixed every time you do it--burn out a new one." So I used to tell them, we'll fix it up, so you have to pump out only one foot of water. What do you care? You pump one foot of water three, four times a day. It's gonna pump the water out. It took me about three years on my beat to get all these shift bosses and everybody trained so that they would do this. But for years and years, a ten-thousand-dollar pump went out just about every second day. And they didn't care. We had these big plastic bent tubes. Underground scoops would just run right over them. And they were six hundred dollars apiece. Thousand feet of it. Smash 'em up.

You talk to anybody about radiation: "No, no. There was nothing over there." No. Never, never, it's never a discussion. Even to this day it's taboo. They told us, they told us that water and air would eliminate this. I don't know about today, but that means absolutely garbage because all this stuff travels through the air. But I didn't know that. The air and the water, that was the way they were telling us they were getting rid of it.

There was lots of ventilation. There was lots of air. I put fans up everywhere. Every place had a big fan, and there was lots of ventilation. We put them on timers so that when they blasted, all the fans would stop, because, if the fans were running, they would explode all the vent tubings that went to all the different kinds of vents. All the fans would shut fifteen minutes before the blasts. Fifteen minutes after the blasts, the fans would all start up again. This was in the trackless area of mining, and I took care of all the trackless mining areas. There was no protection for anybody. The scoop operators, though, had these ventilator caps, but that was it.

In the '70s, '80s, '90s, the whole region...I mean, we're finding out today what's happening, you know. I mean, how many people of ours have died in the last year, I'm saying, in that age group, 45 to 55? Lots.

They even sprayed water; there was lots of it. There was all kinds of it. They did their part of it with the water and the air, but you know today, it did absolutely no good. All it did was keep the silica dust off--now there is something else.

A lot of people die from silicosis. We used to have this tunnel where they went through to go to the cage. In this thing they had what

they call, what kind of dust? Some kind of dust they used to, I think...aluminum? Aluminum, some kind of dust, yeah, some kind of aluminum, eh. And the whole idea was this. The miners used to go into this room; they'd put this thing in, it exploded, and you'd breathe this thing in. You'd breathe this dust in. It was supposed to stop silicosis.

Orville Commanda: Before you went into your workplace, you would breathe it in. And then they found that it wasn't a benefit; it was doing more harm to us, so they stopped using it.

Question: So they were experimenting?

Junior: Yes, well, I myself personally never went through this thing. But there were lots of miners that sat in there [*inhales, holds breath*] if they didn't want to get silicosis, eh. A lot of our men are dying of silicosis today. Was this part of this? Who knows? Again, like he says, they told you this was good for you.

Orville Commanda: Well, you start work there, and you have a foreman, a shift foreman, and he'll come along and tell you, this is what they're doing, so you go do it. And they say it's for your health, you know.

Junior: This is your livelihood. This is where your dollars are coming from, so you listen to them. Like I said, we didn't know what the radiation counts were, nobody ever told us what's good or bad. Like I said, the water and the air was supposed to do that, keep the silica dust off [along with] the dust they bring in that the miners are supposed to sit there and breathe in, and so on and so forth. They were telling us this was all good for us, but how do we know. We don't know the difference. We're like sheep. Like a barrel full of shit, we just go where we're pushed.

We weren't told the truth. We're still not told the truth. I mean, you could tell me something here today that might astound me. I might say, "Oh, geez, I didn't know that." But we don't know what the truth is. We don't know what the radiations are supposed to be. We have no idea. And I'm sure any one of these guys here [don't know.] Maybe you guys know. We don't. We don't know what the actual exposure to anything is. How long were we exposed to this?

They said if you had too much exposure, to bring you up to the surface. What are we to know what the exposures were? Ten times, a hundred times? And then you would change your job positions, or whatever you were doing.

Orville Commanda: You were supposed to go in the less radiated area.

Junior: [The badges] were turned in once a month, eh, and they took readings. And even to this day I still don't know what those readings meant, what the actual readings are supposed to be.

Orville Commanda: But we never got these badges until...years later.

Junior: That was towards the end of the mining, maybe the last five years of the mining, eh?

Orville Commanda: Oh, maybe around the mid-eighties...'85; I think around '85 is when they started having badges. Well, I started to working in Elliot in '68 ,'69, in [Nordic]. But there, they were mining uranium and thorium.

My uncle worked in it before I did, but he's passed on now. And I guess a good example is when they had a shipment of thorium coming back to the mines, and they wanted to recycle it. So there is, I don't know, there was maybe a half a dozen people that got to putting it back into the mines to recycle it. Anyway, after these people finished, they [went through] some kind of a trap door. They had to go back there, through these testings, because of this high-concentrate thorium that they worked on. And I think that some of them were affected by it just working on it three, four days, something like that. Didn't take much. But that's another thing that's still in them tailings, that thorium. They just took the uranium out.

Junior: But they didn't take out all the uranium out, there's still...

Orville Commanda: Yes, there's still lots of uranium in there.

Junior: I mean, I've heard, there are horror stories after we got out of there. We still don't know what they did with all those big transformers, the oil-based transformers. Where did they go? I know I brought them all up from underground, because I took every one of them out. Where did they go? Nobody wants to move them, nobody wants to do anything with 'em, my guess is, they went right back down the shaft again. This is [what I think happened] after we took 'em out, or they went into the tailings. We don't know.

Orville Commanda: But I was at Quirke when the river went underground. We had a pump that pumps automatically when it gets to a certain level but that pump wouldn't stop this one day. It just kept going and kept going, so I don't know. I was the one who reported it. Why the pump wouldn't shut off? Usually it just ran for a certain time and it would just shut down. But this one day it didn't, and so they went to check it out and that's how they found the river flowing into the mine.

Orville Commanda

That's how they found the river flowing into the mine.

Junior: It took them two weeks to seal it. Something like that. The whole mine was shut down for two weeks. I know that because I was working on--they had these what you call them--cement pumps. They had one diesel one and they had one electrical one, and we had to bring in a diesel generator to seal up the hole or the crack with cement. And they had this pump, just a wee little thing. It was a German thing, and we're trying to figure this thing out because no one could get it to start. And so finally we got it down, we got it to activate this one thing. At least, I was working on it, I had no idea what sequence this thing is supposed to go through, you know. You go to push the button, what's supposed to happen, the motor starts. I could get the motor to start, but what's supposed to happen after that? So here I am, I go to push the button, cross my fingers, and I hope that it works, because I couldn't fix it if something was wrong. I mean, we didn't have the knowledge of what it was supposed to do, we didn't have instructions.

This is how it took them two weeks to seal the river. But I'm saying, this could happen all over again, and who would know it? This water could go back into the mine, and what it would do, it would cause a siphoning effect; you could siphon the whole mine into the Serpent River, as far as we knew.

If we had this decommissioning thing again...I don't think any of these questions were ever asked, because we got people sitting on this thing that don't know anything about the mines. And that's what

happens. We have this commission thing, Ontario Hydro sits on this thing, and they're going to cover their ass every time they turn around, and I'm sure [Rio Algom] is going to cover their ass. I don't know who sits on there from here, but [they] never worked in a mine, have no idea what could happen, or what has already happened.

The leaching process of the mine, that's where all the money was, it was all free money for them to leach the water and go through the mill. It was free money to them, because the process was simple, just take the water and go through the mill.

Orville Commanda: Yeah, over in the Quirke Mine there, I did a lot of leaching. But like you were saying about spending money, they did. They put in new equipment and did all their plans for the future. They did that right up until the day they shut down. I didn't understand it. They put new equipment in and the next day...

Junior:They put in a two-million dollar conveyer there.

Orville Commanda: But they get paid for it.

Junior: We put a two-million-dollar conveyer down, okay? It went for three months. Three months. Millions and millions of dollars were spent, and the only thing we took out of there, out of that conveyer, was the motor. The main motor--all the automatics, the electrical--laid right there. It's all still there, underwater. In the mine. The mine fills itself. But where is the water coming from? Water is filling in there. Now, is it coming from the Serpent River? I don't know. Where does this water come from? And then where's it going? I don't know. I was there at Quirke 2, I was the last guy walking out of the door over there. I had put monitors down this conveyer that wasn't yet down to the bottom of the mine but it was getting close. It wasn't already yet about a week and they were already covering the first one, because I had to cut it off and go on to the next one. That's how fast they was filling up.

Far as I know, like I said, we had people on there [the decommissioning panels] that never worked in the mine or know anything about it, okay. They can say, yeah, we're checking the water.

Orville Commanda: Now they have computerized systems there, eh? But if your level is supposed to be reading at seven, it could be stuck on that, you know? So you could still have a higher reading, actually, going through there and you wouldn't know. The only way you would know is from this white substance [going] down the river.

Terence Jacobs: They're monitoring right at the systems, yeah. They're probably doing it pretty regular.

Junior: But they're just water samples.

Terence Jacobs: Yeah.

Junior: That's what I figured.

John Souliere: I'm only here to listen. I've never worked in the mine. So, I guess, what we're saying, if there's any way we can help this from happening to anywhere else, I guess we'd like to be certain to be of help. I guess everyone's had their share, but I think we did experience a lot of contamination of our water, because most of our water from the Serpent River comes from the Elliot Lake area. Whichever way that was contaminated, we drank most of that water because... actually, before the mines, came you could look right down in that water, the sand looked like jewels down there. But now, a couple years later, that sand grain is scum.

John Souliere

Before the mine came you could look right down in that water, the sand looked like jewels.

Terence Jacobs: Most of our water now comes from city water. We don't drink the water from Serpent River anymore, of course.

Junior: Only the people from Serpent River itself, the little town.

Terence Jacobs: Oh, yeah, down the road, they have their own little [fishing] plant. That's a good question.

Junior: We should mention something about our moose--remember, something about the kidneys and the livers they wanted for a while there because they were contaminated? They were telling us their kidneys were contaminated and whatever else. What about the rest of it, the whole body?

Terence Jacobs: My wife used to make--she still does, actually--we used to eat a lot of beaver that actually. [She was] born and raised around here, [down the river here]. Now, what, five or six years ago, she got colon cancer. Now where did she get that? I tell you what she does. She did like to eat the beaver tail, because it's very rich, very tasty, and then all of a sudden she ended up with this colon cancer. Now, I never did associate that thing with beaver. I kind of let that go until recently, you know, I almost lost my wife because of it.

Terence Jacobs

She did like to eat the beaver tail, because it's very rich, very tasty, and then all of a sudden she ended up with this colon cancer.

Comment: Remember the beaver, where they built their homes. They're chewing on the trees, they're swimming in the water, and then, in order to go out there and get the beaver, you have to go through the territory. You might be getting into the water, you might be getting into a pool where sediment has accumulated. So, all those relations are what you're talking about.

Terence Jacobs: The vegetation, too. The beaver eats the vegetation, drinks the water.

Junior: Well, like you say, it was in the moose. This is what they were asking us, to bring in the hearts--no, not the hearts--the liver and whatever.

Question: Who was asking you to do this?

Junior: This was the MNR [Ministry of Natural Resources]. Because at that time, they were checking for the levels? Was it cadmium?

Terence Jacobs: They were also asking us to...we could eat only so many ounces of fish a week.

Junior: So, that was just the moose. It could be all the other animals, too, like you say. I mean, we don't know all of what was consumed. All

of them should be tested. They all drink the same water. It was the [moose's] kidney [they wanted]. I forget what the other [one] they wanted. The kidney was one of them. Anyways, they were giving us [information] just for these things, eh? But they were testing them for cadmium as far as I know. Was it cadmium? I don't even know what cadmium is. I haven't even got a clue. Again, like I said, we were just asked for them, [that's all].

Question: When you delivered the kidneys and the livers, what kind of information did they give you?

Junior: "Don't eat the kidneys and the livers." Like I said, we didn't even know what cadmium was.

Terence Jacobs: They took what we could eat. I've noticed some of our people passed on before their time because of what we ate. I've seen it. The idea of a survey is good from the early '50s until now, if they are telling you what's out in the bush. Obviously we've got to go to the store to get other stuff.

Question: Is there a place where people will test the meat?

Junior: They never ever told us what the meat was like. All the assessment was in the kidneys and liver.

Terence Jacobs: We became concerned when the mine started going. Where is our food going? What's happened to our water?

Orville Commanda: Through the years this all happened in the mine, eh. Now in the last stages we were at Stanleigh Mine. Okay, we had a system there now. It worked on the wind. If the wind blew in a certain direction toward town then you'd have to shut down, eh. But like how many years had that been going on prior to that? The smell would hit the town and people couldn't live in their houses. This was near the end and when they were shutting it down. When we were in the process--2 years, 3 years--they were getting all this stuff out, all the hydrate, uranium, and we were run by computers now. And the systems wouldn't run right. You could tell with your equipment. That's when you knew when your systems wouldn't run right then there was the hydrate stuff going through. Then we'd shut down. That's how we knew the hydrate stuff was coming through. It was affecting the system.

The people in the town couldn't live so they had to devise a new system but that was just in the late '90s. Beyond that was 30 years or so this was happening.

Terence Jacobs: You guys worked in the mines in Elliot Lake. We ran the mines down here which was making sulfuric acid. They occupied 135 acres. They burned pyrate and pyritite and got SO3 gas out of it. And the by-product of that was calcine, and that calcine was so fine you could pour that through a screen where water won't go through it. They only told you about safety factors on those days if you were caught not wearing the respirator. But you were breathing this stuff all day. I worked in the roaster plant for 3 1/4, 4 years. We were there breathing that stuff every day. That roaster plant made the gases and made iron pellets. They'd send it over to No. 1 and No. 2 acid plant as a gas. Then they'd put it in the towers and spray it with water and you got sulfuric acid out of it . There were more steps. I don't want to get too technical. I want to simplify it but that's where you got the stuff for your gases

Orville Commanda: Burning the pyrite and pyritite in combination produced the gases. And then when they powdered it like that it produced sulfur. Then they melted it and produced the gas.

Gertrude Lewis: What was that stuff that came down? The kids used to slide down that stuff.

Terence Jacobs: They had two stockpiles. Calcine and pyrite and pyritite.

Gertrude Lewis: It was kind of reddish calcine, eh?

Terence Jacobs: What they done, they used the slurry to put in the driers. That calcine, pyritite and pyrite. They put that calcine slurry in there. That stuff was like goo, that helped create the gas. They hydrated it and that makes sulfuric acid. That was sucked over to No. 1 and No.2 acid plant. Like Orville said they used to melt sulfur.

Orville Commanda: Whenever they ran out of the other.

Comment: Ten years ago they told me a story about a ditch that ran right by the school into the lake that would run yellow. I think they were talking about what you're talking about. They were very concerned

because there was a field of sweet grass down there where people used to go pick medicines and that field just died.

Gertrude Lewis: There was one right behind the rock, too, went down into the lake. And it had all that yellow stuff in it.

Question: Is it okay to take your picture?

Gertrude Lewis: You won't have good pictures because every time someone takes my pictures the camera breaks. As I say, I don't like taking pictures. I am saving your camera.

I lived directly across from the acid plant and we couldn't leave our windows open for air because of the sulfur. Our throats would be really dry and burning from the sulfur fumes. And even when we hung our clothes out on the clothesline--now this had been laughed about, but it really happened--when I'd hang my clothes out on the line they'd have little weeny, tiny holes in them.

Terence Jacobs: That was caused by that junction box. They weren't taking all the fumes out of it so it just came out like rain out of the stack. You lived right in the direction where the trade winds would hit your way. It was just like a fog, you know. Them dots were sulfuric acid, that's exactly what they were. If you went to work with something that weren't acid clothes, they'd be like someone shot you with a buckshot.

Orville Commanda: If you were in the direct fall of it, it would hit you in your face. You could feel it. I was just walking across the yard and I got holes in my shirt.

Terence Jacobs: If the wind would blow from the southwest and you had white clothes on the line, they'd come out rusty, because the calcine would blow right in your direction and everything would just get rusty. And it burnt all the vegetation, maybe about a mile up that way, about a half a mile wide.

Gertrude Lewis: They had to reforest that hill then because the trees were all dead. My children were raised there. Not only my kids but all the kids that lived down our way. They used to come home from school in the village and they'd be sliding down this hill of this black stuff. It's still in the bay.

Terence Jacobs: There's stuff still in the bay there. It come out a six-inch line from the burners. It was a slurry pond, they call it--I bet you 8 to 10 feet deep, about 100 yards wide. They didn't pick that stuff and send it away. They sent it to the lake. The whole shoreline as far as you could see is rusted rock, iron calcide .

Orville Commanda: The time they took out the dock there, the end of the posts still had that stuff on. And from the wind blowing on that pile, it would blow right in the water.

Terence Jacobs: They have done nothing with it. You put that stuff in the water and try and get rid of it, I don't know. The fish were contaminated. I tell you, my wife and I, we got a nice bass out there about 15 inches long, about 8 inches in girth. We got it in the evening, eh, a while ago. Took it home, we thought we'd have a nice meal, you know. We cooked it, fried it up and took one little bite of it. It was rotted. It wasn't bass anymore. I don't know what it is. You wouldn't eat it.

The acid plant ran from '55 to '62. The acid was coming out for eight to nine years, eight years in operation. I worked from '57 to '62.

Leo Day: I worked for three years at the plant.

Gertrude Lewis: My husband worked there from the beginning. He worked longer. He worked a lot in pyrite and sulfur. He is on the puffer.

Terence Jacobs: When the power goes out, the plant shuts down. I was stuck on top of the roaster inside the building and all the gases from number one and number two that are supposed to be pulling over there with the 500-horsepower blower, they were backed up, and I was stuck up in the roaster and I couldn't breathe. It was really dry. I couldn't breathe. So I went up on the roof and slid down a six-inch pipe on the outside to the ground, coming down about 60 feet. I'm sure it hurt my throat. I used to be a good singer and I can't sing anymore. Just in church, they don't mind me there.

It had an effect on my throat more than once. Any thunderstorm, you'd get stuck in there. There were times you couldn't wear the gas masks in there. The diaphragms would freeze up and you'd choke yourself. You didn't get anything else. About 175 people worked there.

Gertrude Lewis: It took a good many years to have it cleaned up, from the '70s until about five or six years ago. It took that long negotiating and everything. It closed in '52 and sat there 32 years. It took 32 years to clean it up.

Junior: It's still not clean. I was hanging a shirt up to dry and it fell down and got a hole in it, got acid burns on it. There is still acid there. But I don't think the powwow grounds part was ever cleaned up.

Gertrude Lewis: You can smell it. There's still acid there.

Leo Day: The time they took I don't think they got half of it. They dug right down to the rock. When they were cleaning up, I've walked around a few places where the work was going on. They just went a bucket here and there and hauling it away. They just slung them buckets around there, disturbed it, and put the gravel in there. They put them rats tails in there, you can still see them. That slurry pond, that's just sitting there. It's rust. They said they went down.

Terence Jacobs: How many millions of dollars went into it? We're saying it might of just been a band-aid job.

Leo Day: They spent $7 million. They ate it up, and they were only there not six months. They said they were finished. They didn't do their cleaning up anyway.

Junior. You can smell it; it's there.

Leo Day: The stuff's still along the shore there. There's a couple years they told us not to eat the fish.

Gertrude Lewis: Noranda Mines ran the company. Canadian Industries Ltd (CIL) operated it for eight months and closed it up. Their head office is in Montreal. When we first reported that we wanted the cleanup, CIL came from Montreal. We walked the area with them, and they sneezed and coughed.

Terence Jacobs: The federal government paid for the cleanup. First of all they had the military blow up the building. Noranda sold it to CIL. We asked Noranda Mines to leave that property in the same condition they got it in. So it was their responsibility to move all. So the federal government got behind it to blow it up.

Gertrude Lewis: We didn't have the agreement with CIL we had it with Noranda Mines to leave it in the same condition they got it in.

Frank Lewis: We used to live at the circle. My family and I remember that pretty well that time they came over and said everybody had to evacuate and we had to get out of there because they were going to blow this thing up, the army. We watched from the hill. They had TV cameras up there. And when it went up, there was just a big puff of smoke, and it went up like this and went right back down again. They had to do it the second time. We were all laughing because this was supposed to be a recorded demonstration.

Terence Jacobs: I was watching the news on the TV and I said, "That looks familiar." Puff-of-smoke buildings still sitting there. That was about '69. That roaster plant was full of calcine dust so deep on there, on every shelf.

Gertrude Lewis: No matter where you lived, we people in the village [could smell it]. We moved up the hill a little further and the windows would rattle there during the explosion. Nothing broke. There was a rattle. You could feel it.

Frank Lewis: I worked in the acid plant eight years. I started around '54 or '55. I was the last one out of there in '63. I wish to see my fellows, like Joe Day and all these.

Terence Jacobs: He died of cancer.

Frank Lewis: I used to see them coming out of that roaster plant. They had their mask on but they'd cough, cough, coming out of there. Especially when it was down time. It just blew in there just like a haze. You couldn't stand it in there. Maybe one minute, maybe not even that. You try to go in there, you can't, you couldn't even breathe.

Terence Jacobs: They didn't give us gas masks at the time all they gave us was dust masks.

Junior: This would be a good opportunity for you people to make a survey on this thing. Go to our illustrious union and find out how many people have died. Go to our workers [on] advisor night when we have that or, I guess, our legal clinic, they would have some of that information, too. It would be interesting to know how many people had

actually died in various age groups and how long they worked in the mines or the acid plants or whatever. In the processing plant like where Orville worked, a number of them people have gone. And we have another person in town who has a disease caused by mercury. He's actually getting compensated for it. He's one of the few people being compensated for it. He gets workers compensation because they recognize it as a disease caused by his workplace.

We're talking about the tailings now. They're set up all over the place. They're telling us [about] two feet of water that's going to protect the whole world by flooding them. What happens if we have a summer where there's no rain? What happens now? We don't know.

Terence Jacobs: I've had kidney failure and my sister's had a kidney transplant. I'd still like to know whether it was caused by the roaster and getting all that calcine and gases out of there. I obviously got it injected in my system; something settled somewhere.

Gertrude Lewis: Rosalie Bertell was here about 15 years ago. We had all kinds of videos. We didn't have them, the TV station had them. The Sudbury TV station took videos before the acid plant was blown up.

Terence Jacobs: Your money would come out grey after working in the acid plant. Everyone knew where you worked.

Junior: The acid was used in the process of leaching in the uranium mines.

Orville Commanda: They just added the acid and steam to a slurry that came from the grinding process. They dig the uranium or thorium ore out of the ground and it's made to a powder. It's added to steam and poured into these great big vats and agitated. But that acid for the uranium slurry came from a refinery--from the Port Hope refinery--to the mill. Instead of using a lot of acid, they would use that recycled acid and that saved them money on the acid. [It was] the acid that was costing them money. When they first tried to recycle it, they didn't tell us what happened, and some of the guys got sick.

Question: If we were to make a survey, what questions should be asked?

Terence Jacobs: The biggest question would be the health problem. whether it's hereditary. It's been for decades and there's the younger ones now. The lifestyle has changed. We don't know if it's caused.

Gertrude Lewis: The people who are moving back here now weren't here during the acid plant days and they weren't exposed to it like those of us living here at the time.

Terence Jacobs: Those 30 and under don't know anything about the acid plant.

Gertrude Lewis: And even those moving back from Toronto. They were exposed to things down there maybe as bad as we were here.

Terence Jacobs: Some of us did leave because of the climate. From here I moved to Milliken [Mine] for three months and then Stanrock [Mine] for another three months.

Junior: We still don't know what the impacts were on us. All the people who worked on the surface or underground or wherever you worked in the uranium industry were always exposed to some kind of radiation. We were never told anything. We were exposed to the dust because the miners used to sit in the kiln path. You were told this was good for you, and you did it. The mine must have kept some of these records. We're finding out now what the exposures were and we were way over them. But at that time we were way under them. They could tell us anything about the reading and maybe it wasn't even close.

Gertrude Lewis: They were manipulating the figures. There was a task force that went around and that's what was said in the task force report.

Terence Jacobs: Serpent River First Nation, we put in a strong argument about the contamination of our food and water which was true already, our fish and wildlife. Gertrude and I have been on Council quite a few years and we made that point before. What's the difference now?.

Junior: They said they were pectates or whatever, this is what it was in the Serpent River and we were drinking that water, and they couldn't bring it down so they brought the [exposure] levels up. How do we know what they're supposed to be? We don't know even to this day. Were the figures they gave us right or wrong?

Orville Commanda: The [exposure] levels [in the mines] went according to the levels of the ore. If you have a high quality of ore, you're going to have a higher limit. Now if it's lower, you can put your limit down, show that, and make it look good. It probably went

according to the operation. In order to operate like that, you'd probably have to put more through and then your levels would go up again.

Frank Lewis: Is it not true that every once in a while they'd send a guy that worked in the mines there to Ottawa to take a test?

Orville Commanda: The only time they went for a test, like Wilbur, was when they worked in the thorium. That's where I worked. They were sent to Chalk River to a special lab.

Gertrude Lewis: And they weren't even told there was anything wrong with their health at that time. Wilbur came back and he told me, "I'm happy there's nothing wrong." I don't think you'll get anything out of the company.

Terence Jacobs: How long did he pass away after he was sick. Someone must know there was something wrong with him.

Gertrude Lewis: He was sick for years after that. For years, eh. That's not too long ago. How many years ago since he died? '92?

Terence Jacobs: It's more than ten years. I didn't have my transplant yet. I enjoyed being financially comfortable but I think I'd try a different process in getting to that stage now.

Gertrude Lewis: I was one of them that fought against the expansion of the uranium mines in Elliot Lake in the '70s, and I didn't want to see that happen until they found a safe way to dispose of their waste. But we weren't listened to. Of course, we were looked on as sort of, how you say, just trouble makers or something like that. But that wasn't the reason. We wanted a safe disposal of the waste. We also fought against the Eldorado [refinery] plant in Blind River. I even went to Ottawa to fight against that and parade in front of the company that looks after the mines and all that, and didn't win there either. Eldorado is there. I went to Massey over them bringing their fuel rods back of Massey, and they're still talking about that they might still do it.

I feel as if everything we tried to do was not even listened to. They didn't pay any attention to us at all. Everything just went ahead. Now we're stuck with all this and we've lost quite a few people, people who should be still with us, I feel. Before the mines opened?

We never had as much cancer. We never ever heard of anyone dying of cancer as we have now. And thyroid problems is another one. We've had quite a few with thyroid problems.

Why are Aboriginal people taking the thrust of this?

Why are Aboriginal people taking the thrust of this?

The Elliot Lake Women's Group, joined by the Algoma-Manitoulin Nuclear Awareness Group

Recorded at the Rekmans' in Blind River, Ontario on 18 March 1999. In 1989, the Elliot Lake Women's Group gained participant status in the hearings to decommission the Rio Algom and Denison Mining Companies' mine tailings management areas [see map] and made recommendations to the Federal Environmental Assessment Review Panel (FEARO). The Elliot Lake Women's Group members who discussed their work included Sharon Gow-Meawasige, Lorraine Rekmans, Judy Stevens, and Georgena MacDonald. They invited Christopher Rekmans to testify at the hearings, and he also tells his story. The Elliot Lake Women's Group members were joined in this discussion by Esther Osche and Ed Burt, who added their reflections on the work of the Algoma-Manitoulin Nuclear Awareness Group.

The Elliot Lake Women's Group

Sharon Gow-Meawasige: I moved to Elliot Lake in 1992 from Ottawa and immediately became embroiled in the decommissioning hearings. Since I had been involved in the anti-uranium expansion in northern Saskatchewan in the early '80s, it kind of made sense. Ever since then, I have been involved in the local uranium activity and currently live at Serpent River First Nation with my husband and two children, Michael and Joe, who are 12 and 10.

Sharon Gow-Meawasige

Sort of instinctively, perhaps as women or just as human beings, we realized you can't contain water

Lorraine Rekmans: I was born and raised in Elliot Lake. My kids were born and raised in Elliot Lake. My husband was born and raised in Elliot Lake. We've lived in Blind River for five years now. I used to work as a reporter for the *Elliot Lake Standard* from 1989 until 1991. My mother is Ojibway from Serpent River First Nation. I was involved in the decommissioning hearings with the Elliot Lake Women's Group in 1993. I participated in the World

Uranium Hearings in Salzburg, and I was in the room with a group of people that wrote the Salzburg Declaration. I have been involved in nuclear issues since 1989. My children, I guess by default, have been involved in nuclear issues.

Judy Stevens: In 1989, I moved to Elliot Lake. It was my great pleasure, honor, and subsequent luck that Sharon and I met at a retail store, and it became quite evident that we had a lot of things in common. We both had two children. Our kids are Native people under the Indian Act and we became friends; as I say, we had a lot of similar issues. But I felt right off the hop that I was the pupil and she was the teacher. Her knowledge, involvement, and awareness of environmental issues, uranium issues in particular, were totally intriguing to me and very informative. And I at that time was a somewhat more radical feminist than I am now. I was on the Board of Directors at the Elliot Lake Women's Group who operated a crisis shelter for women in the town of Elliot Lake. The Executive Director and I were also personal friends that met in the university in 1990. Whenever I came up with ideas that might be feasible to educate the public in general, health, or social issues, she was always very supportive.

Judy Stevens

Anything we did, we did in terms of public education, whether we analyzed the survey results or showed the National Film Board movie "Uranium."

I think we came across an ad in the community newspaper that said you could apply for participant status in phase one of the FEARO [Federal Environmental Assessment Review Panel] decommissioning hearings for the Elliot Lake uranium mines that Rio Algom operated. As single moms, we said, "Here's a way we could educate people and maybe make some babysitting money." We said, "Okay, let's do this," but we needed somebody else. By great luck, in 1989, when I moved to Elliot Lake, I had the good fortune to meet Lorraine who is related to me; my youngest child's father is her uncle. Our families became friends and close. Lorraine was living in Elliot Lake, working for the *Standard*, a very intelligent woman as you all know and with writing abilities I didn't possess.

When I was on the board of the crisis center, they always said we wanted to be representative of the people we served but, lo and behold, we had no Native female representation on the board. I guess Native women never experience violence or anything like that. So I said, "I got this perfect person," and [Lorraine] joined our board as a Native female representative. So because she was a board member, as well as me, that gave us a little more leverage to go to the board at large and ask if they would support our endeavors to access this funding to try to publicly educate Elliot Lake and the surrounding community about what Rio Algom and Denison [Mines] were actually planning to do about the decommissioning.

Lorraine Rekmans: When we met we talked about why we wanted to do this. We wanted to do this because we were women and because we believed we had responsibility as caretakers and nurturers and because we had children. The thing we saw was a great big giant mining conglomerate that comes around our community, that built our community and created 250 million tons of radioactive waste and dumped it into ten lakes. And they were going to pack up and leave. So immediately we had concerns. We said, "This is our community. They're leaving and we have nowhere to go and we're going to be here." So immediately you get a sense of responsibility and a sense of territory, because this is my home town and my community, where my children have grown up and where we have grown up and, as women, we felt we had a role to play, we should get involved and try to have some impact on how the decommissioning was to take place.

Lorraine Rekmans

We had concerns about animals and people trespassing onto radioactive tailings... You have this legacy from generation to generation.

We went into the process late. I know we were swapping babysitters and Gerry [Lorraine's husband] was the babysitter for six kids. We were in the kitchen. We had a ceremony there and then we prayed really hard. I knew, I felt, I was getting into something out of my league and certainly didn't feel comfortable and prepared to make a presentation. We had concerns about groundwater, about leaching

into our lakes. We had concerns about animals and people trespassing onto radioactive tailings and not knowing they were on radioactive tailings and looking at the long-term life of this radioactive material. You have this legacy from generation to generation.

We wanted to set up a foundation, a long-term care foundation to manage this, and establish a library and materials resource center. If there ever was a community that was studied in terms of long-term exposure to low-level radioactive waste, in the long term, it's been Elliot Lake. We knew there were a lot of health studies, mine studies, leukemia studies, water quality studies. There were studies on wildlife feeder routes, radium uptake in vegetables. We didn't know where all this material was. We knew it was there because we'd come across it. We wanted to compile all that stuff in a library and keep it in the community as a resource for people to know what they were living on, what was in the community.

Judy Stevens: Lorraine became our writer. Sharon, with all her valuable knowledge, became our resource person. I became project coordinator and accountant. There were three groups that were funded for participant status. One of them was Serpent River First Nation that received $17,000. Then there were the Algoma-Manitoulin Association and Northwatch that received some money, and we were given $6,800. Our focus was public education. Sharon was able to pull together a lot of the environmental impact statement materials.

Lorraine Rekmans: And Paul Robinson from New Mexico [Southwest Research Group], whom I met in Salzburg. I met him in that room where we were writing the [Salzburg] Declaration, and he worked with a research facility that did work on long-term disposal for radioactive waste. We had some money and asked him to come, look at the project, and make some recommendations. It was lucky in terms of the connections that have been made almost by coincidence. I never thought I'd be in Salzburg.

We wanted to get involved and make recommendations for long-term waste management and be part of that process. It was a federal hearing process. The feds came in from Ottawa and the mining companies were making their representations of their own interests. And we said, "We're the community. How do we get into this process? How do we get in between the feds and the mining company and try to work to move things to our advantage in terms of managing as a community?"

We had a concept of including government, industry, and community members in a committee that would plan long-term waste management and accountability. Because when you have a large company like [Rio Algom] moving out of the community, leaving, you know you're never going to see them again, that they're taking their resources and they're gone. We were trying to hold those mining companies to their responsibilities. What we see is a bunch of people coming in from Ottawa, experts that are going to make long-term decisions about our community. And you certainly feel vulnerable because they're going to pack up their suitcases and head back to Ottawa or wherever they came from and we were still in the community and that's where we felt empowered, in a sense, to have a stake.

Sharon Gow-Meawasige: We knew what the plan was; Rio Algom was applying for a tailings decommissioning license. And the plan to decommission the sites was to flood the tailings and the sites, and that would deal with the problem and they would get to leave and everyone would be happy. Sort of instinctively, perhaps as women or just as human beings, we realized you can't contain water. Water has a mind of its own, it clouds, it evaporates, you cannot control water, and yet they were hoping to use water as the primary control for radiation emissions as well as for the acid-generation process which is a large problem with the tailings.

Rio Algom had a public information place set up in the mall. Judy was getting all fired up. I was saying you don't have to be a great scientist here. Whatever you have, grade 10, grade 12, just slowly work yourself through it. And Judy was going, "I don't get it. There's oxygen in water, so how can they say they are going to keep the oxygen in water from mixing with pyrite and turning into acid? So she asked that very simple, good question, to whoever was manning this booth and they took great offense.

Judy Stevens: Lorraine and I played good cop, bad cop. When I asked Dick Diotte, a high executive in Rio Algom, this simple chemistry question, I said to him, "I failed high school chemistry, but I know that water is H_2O, two parts oxygen and one part hydrogen. How can you possibly put water on top of a substance like pyrite when it oxidizes and creates sulfuric acid?" He stood right up, his face was red, and Lorraine had to calm him down and smooth his ruffled feathers. He said to me directly, "Well! You've already made up your mind. Why are you wasting my time?"

Lorraine Rekmans: This is how I smoothed over his feathers. We were in the booth and they had a picture of what they said the tailings site looks like when they put water on it. And then they had another picture saying this is what it will look like in twenty years, and they had this drawing with the tailings site with great big giant pine trees growing on it. So I did this thing with my eyes and said, "But Dick, how can you grow giant pine trees like that in twenty years in sulfuric acid?"

You could see the spin doctoring that was going on in their booth. They have the technology to spit out these models, trying to convince the community that you're going to put water on tailings and in twenty years you're going to have an old-growth pine forest. I got a sense when we went in there that it was a done deal. They were paying lip service to the public consultation and community hearing process, and the deal had been signed, sealed, and delivered.

Sharon Gow-Meawasige: I decided that the chances were we would not be able to change their minds about how they were going to deal with the tailings problem, based on previous experience. I said, "So we're going to have to make sure that that method performs to the best it's capable of and then some and poke holes in everything we can find, and maybe we can get some of it dealt with differently or at least expose the concerns of the women in the community."

Judy Stevens: Sharon designed a public survey and the three of us worked in a booth in the mall. We had 455 responses to 1,000 questionnaires, and 55 percent of the respondents were women. Anything we did, we did in terms of public education, whether we analyzed the survey results or showed the National Film Board movie "Uranium." But the big thing we did was a symposium at Sault College. I have a copy for posterity, thanks to my mother, of my Oprah Winfrey night. Fortunately, with the connections of these women, the symposium included the president of Rio Algom; the acting president of Denison; the president of the United Steel Workers; Dr. Rosalie Bertell, who came in specifically to talk about the effects of uranium on a national scope; Chief Earl Commanda representing Serpent River First Nation; and Mayor George Farkouh but we asked him to come as chair of the economic development committee, not as the mayor of the city. When he stood up to do his thing, after everybody else made a very understandable presentation, Mayor Farkouh held up the rejection letter that the city of Elliot Lake had received when they applied for funding for participant status, and wanted to know how dare three

women he'd never heard of before [think they had a right to apply]. He knew Lorraine because of her reputation as a reporter. He didn't know Sharon and me from page 2. How could we possibly think that we could publicly educate anyone about the effects of uranium? We were like new migrants to this wonderful uranium city--and low income!

Lorraine Rekmans: They were more worried about marketing Elliot Lake as a community to attract industry to come because they were losing commercial space than they were worried about decommissioning. As a mayor and council, they were more concerned about the city's public image to the rest of the country as a viable community instead of taking time to look after the garbage that was there.

Judy Stevens: At the symposium, "Public Education about Decommissioning the Mines," there were 70-80 people in attendance and we had no, and, I repeat, no community newspaper representation and no reports. So I will pass on what we paid $150 for and that was the presentation of our group to the FEARO panel.

Sharon Gow-Meawasige: The symposium was in November. Two months later, the hearings came to town. The transcription service and everything came to town. The media was there but the coverage was maybe one sentence on our presentation. So we found we had a little extra money and bought a full-page ad.

Judy Stevens: At that point we had a breather before another stage of participant funding was going to occur. We asked another friend, Georgena MacDonald, to join our little group. We were going to go under the acronym of GOW, "Guardians of the Watershed." We got together and were going to pull something together and have an ongoing community network.

On a personal note, in 1996, I was diagnosed with cancer. But when I was in Toronto undergoing number 3 of exploratory surgery and I was coming out of the gas, the operating surgeon said to me, "You have this particular size tumor so what you've got to do is go 25 days extensive radiation treatment and 57 hours on an internal radiation supplement into your body." And I went, "Okay, wait a minute now, I live in Elliot Lake. Can't I go home and play in an old abandoned mine shaft and we'll call it a day?" They laughed, they really thought it was funny. But the paradox for me--as I was undergoing this treatment--I really had to take a good look at it. Not that my views on

uranium mining and destruction had changed. But the paradox for me was lying on that slab realizing that I had been involved with two very intelligent friends, sisters, in trying to do something to save our mother earth and yet the very thing I so opposed was what was saving my life. I'm okay now and ready to fight them again. That was the paradox for me. With that, I'll pass.

Lorraine Rekmans: I wanted to say that my son Chris was involved too, because he made a presentation to the federal panel. How old were you, Chris? He talked about his experiences as a child and about the animals.

Chris Rekmans: At eight, I talked to a board of people about how I had sent away my teeth to get them tested for uranium or radioactivity. The results said negative but it's not like they were going to tell you. So I didn't believe the results. At the beach we used to have yellowcake ["an oxide of uranium (and other elements) obtained as yellow precipitate in the processing of uranium ores," *OED*], and we didn't know what it was. We were younger and used to play in it. That's got to have some effect. About the animals I said the uranium mines should clean up their mess and the purity of water and the earth and the environment of the animals. When you are younger, they won't really listen. They think,"Just a kid." If I were talk to them now, they might think I knew what I was talking about as a teenager. [Chris is 14 years old.]

Lorraine Rekmans: I think it was funny because the hearing organizers had a list of people making the presentations and they wanted a written copy before you got there. So we called to make an appointment for Christopher Rekmans to make a presentation on Saturday morning. We went in to register, the three of us, and the women sitting at the desk were in a tizzy. "Is Christopher Rekmans really coming? Is Christopher Rekmans really going to be here?" Like Christopher Rekmans was going to be some giant person. They didn't know who he was but he was obviously somebody. It was so funny to see the look on their faces when he came into the room. He was waist high--and he had his tie on and was wearing his watch on the outside of his shirt to make sure he didn't go over his time, and he said, " Hi, I'm Christopher Rekmans," and everybody stopped. It was his name somehow!

Georgena MacDonald: It's been interesting reliving this. I live in Spragge and I've been back here since 1976. My father worked in the first uranium mine that opened in Pronto in 1950. I was a kid, probably the same age as Chris was when he gave his presentation. I know I wouldn't have had the fortitude to say anything to anyone at that time. As we grow older, we learn about public speaking. And I remember hearing Chris as he gave that speech and I remember thinking this is very good, it makes us think about other things, other perspectives other than our own.

As a child, I was used to uranium mining because that's where our bread and butter came from. I went away from here and got an education and had a few experiences in the outside world. I came back in 1976. I think I was drawn back to northern Ontario and I haven't wanted to leave since.

Georgena McDonald

At the time the mines were operating, there wasn't really concern or thought about the question of what was going to happen in the future with mine waste management.

I was employed by Denison Mines in 1976 in the ventilation department. At that time, women were not allowed to go underground; that was the case with me. Finally, one woman broke the barrier and started working in a warehouse underground and another woman drove a truck underground. I can't think of their names right now but they broke the barrier. I was told by my friends in the ventilation and engineering department, "Oh, you wouldn't want that. That's a man's world. You wouldn't want that. It's pretty dirty business." And I asked why men are down there in that environment if it's that bad and that dirty.

My first trip underground was with my father when I was a student and he took me to show me. He worked at repairing pumps at the Pronto Mine and our house was next to the mine. Our whole house vibrated in the middle of the night because of the pumps. When I was a student, he took me underground. Even then his message was, "You don't want to work here. It's cold and dirty and diesel and dust." He actually died before I started to work underground and he probably would have had something to say about that as he had something to say about the fact

that I was cutting up mice and rats. He didn't like that either. I'm not sure what he thought I should have done with my education.

I ended up working in the mines, testing radon levels and working for the Atomic Energy Control Board (AECB). That's when I got to go underground and saw what people were working on. As the regulatory agency, we were supposed to do a lot of things to make sure the working environment was safe. At the time the mines were operating, there wasn't really concern or thought about the question of what was going to happen in the future with mine waste management. I remember having coffee discussions with the guys I worked with and asking why the company didn't put aside a percentage of all the profits for waste management so that when we need it, it will be there. "Oh, we can trust the company to do this." Now it's interesting to sit on a local committee years later, to sit on a local monitoring committee, and talk about financial assurances, and I'm still curious about that. We have environmental and economic concerns and what we can do is ask hard questions. Maybe that's the best we could do.

I had the pleasure of meeting Sharon when she first moved to town. We were both interested in organic gardening. I had a garden and she wanted one, and she found me. Through Sharon and environmental issues and social issues, I got involved. I knew of Lorraine as a reporter by reputation. She used to come in as a reporter asking for the weekly spill report.

Lorraine Rekmans: People used to call me the little spill freak.

Georgena MacDonald: We had a very good person working in waste management. I learned people working for government departments are like anyone else; some people take their jobs seriously and take them home and there're others for whom it's just a job and doesn't mean much of anything.

[The Elliot Lake Women's Group] did a very good thing for the community in organizing the conference and in giving presentations to the FEARO panel. They acted to raise the social and environmental consciousness of people, not just of women, bringing in different kinds of voices. I respected them for standing up with loud voices and saying what they really felt and having the wherewithal to ask questions and to challenge the establishment.

Sharon Gow-Meawasige: We had Georgena come in and do a presentation at the local women's drop-in center. She was going to help elucidate the technical issues with plain language. She knew

enough about it from her background with the board and mining company and with her own science education. She was able to bring overheads and talk about the way the water flows and where the monitoring stations are and what's going on and why, and treatment lines here. And people could ask questions. She was able to answer questions or if she didn't know, she said she would try to find out. Too often men will not admit when they don't know something and it's totally frustrating to people trying to find out.

Lorraine Rekmans: It's true what Georgena says about finding your voice. At the same time we were doing this, I was going through a phase in my life where I got very involved with personal healing and being a survivor of abuse, and learning to take your voice and speak out and say, "I was abused. This is the end of it," and coming out and saying, "I've had enough of being abused, I've had enough of being railroaded." At the same time, there was a parallel process going on in my life, and learning to speak my own voice, I made the analogy between being [personally] oppressed and abused and being oppressed and abused by government and industry. Suffering environmental degradation is abusive and oppressive. When I came out, I said, "Nobody is going to stop me."

It was about fear. When you're afraid, you're too afraid to ask stupid questions. If you don't know the answer, you don't want people to know you're stupid. You suffer from fear. You suffer from fear of being ostracized in your own community. You live in a small town. People don't want to talk to you because you're a spill freak. You're anti-nuke in a uranium mining town. How do you survive that kind of ostracism? There are mine spills on a weekly basis into our trout lakes and into our water system, and I want to know what the company has thrown into the water. The AECB in the local office were good about providing information and explaining what it meant. I did have a column in the local paper where I ran the weekly spill report.

Georgena MacDonald: Because I work for the nuclear industry and because I've benefitted from it, I really can't be anti-nuclear, so I have to recognize that. But we have a legacy in the nuclear industry that I don't think we're all that good at dealing with. We haven't solved the problem. We've left it on the earth because that's the easy thing to do. I know Ed's waiting to speak and he's involved with some of the answers, good ways of treating the earth, which are ultimately renewable energy and organic gardening. But I and my generation have benefitted from cheap electricity, treating cancers.

Sharon Gow-Meawasige: I think that's something you guys in the '50s thought. Because you are benefitting from it, you shall not speak against it. I grew up thinking, knowing, "Yes, you're benefitting from this wonderful technology, living better electrically." But I also got the next blast that it's extremely difficult technology to control and there are many unanswered questions and we can't keep on relying on this.

Georgena MacDonald: Maybe it's a generational problem. We thought if there are problems, we're going to solve them and they wouldn't make the mistakes. I had a science teacher who said it was much worse to use hydro energy or coal, so nuclear was the least harmful. That was the view of the '50s.

Sharon Gow-Meawasige: You think you can't take a stand.

Lorraine Rekmans: I was thinking about growing up in Elliot Lake. We had the "Nuclear Skating Club"` the "Radon Daughters." There's a great big giant atom as you come into town. Your Dad comes home from work and he's got a core in his lunch pail, a chunk of uranium, that he passes around the table, so all the kids get to look at it. Then we have dinner. AECB comes in your house, throws a radon fan in your house, and it's old hat. You don't know you're nuclear. You just think uranium. My Dad would go to work, come home, have dinner, go to bed. They're digging up uranium and selling it. The trucks are running through town. The sulfuric acid is coming in the highway past the school buses. It was nothing.

The Elliot Lake big, giant atom

Georgena MacDonald: We didn't associate it with destructive power. We associated it with energy.

Lorraine Rekmans: At that point, I didn't even know what it was used for. I just thought they were trucking it away.
Comment: They used to give their employees these lovely clocks with a nice slab of uranium all polished with a clock set in it.

Algoma-Manitoulin Nuclear Awareness Group

Esther Osche: I was born and raised in Whitefish River First Nation in Birch Island. I live my life there and take my stand there, largely to carry on the legacy of my grandmothers and grandfathers before me in protecting the land for generations not yet in this world. I grew up in my home community in the Ojibway culture and was taught from a very early age in a very good way to love and respect nature and my relationship within it and to understand it as part of my identity.

Esther Osche

When you think you can eat money, then come back and we'll have this talk.

When I was a little older, I was invited by an Elder to join a group of people called the Algoma Manitoulin [Nuclear Awareness Group], a coalition who were forming themselves to oppose a uranium trioxide refinery here in Blind River, which refinery eventually got built even though thousands and thousands of people opposed it. That's how I got involved in focusing in a particular area that I feel is bringing considerable damage to the environment which we can not manage waste-wise.

So I went away and got an education. My family believed I should get this really good education, so I went out there and did that. I came back. I was listening to some of the comments here about the wonderment of technology. I was raised in that generation where I was conditioned to believe technology and all the wonderful discoveries were what we were to depend upon, to hang our hats on , to put our security in, and that somehow within that education process, we would find our place within that scheme, earn good livings, and get all kinds of material things in return for believing in, and upholding, that kind of system.

Well, my grandfather taught me when I came home, "Don't you dare buy that bill of goods they sold you." He said, "Your real education

will begin now." From that time--I was 22 years old and had gotten a high school education and a college education--and for the next seven years, I was taught by my Elders, and they gave me a totally different view of the world and what I should be pursuing and how I should be developing my direction in life and how I should be helping my community. And none of it had to do with holding up this system I'd been taught about.

The more they dismantled what I had learned, the more concerned I started becoming about the legacy that would be left to my great-grandchildren and their great-grandchildren through what was occurring in the nuclear industry. Like everyone else, I was amazed that this stuff could cure cancer and could be used to take x-rays of your body and could operate wonderful, clean electricity. But no one wanted to talk about the filthy waste that we would leave behind for hundreds of thousands of years. Nobody ever wants to talk about that. They want to talk about these wonderful, nice things and keep wrapping themselves in this grandiose illusion.

I'm glad I got out of that way of thinking, because waiting on just the other side of it was a desperate world suffering and not only that but a people within it suffering because [they had lived] already with years of experimentation with this stuff. I began to listen to different doctors give testimony at our gatherings on how low-level radiation was affecting human health and the food chain and the water. I started to make my own connections not based on what I felt might be alarmist views. I took everything into consideration the way I was taught to by my grandfathers. It all culminated in an invitation to go to the World Uranium Hearings in Salzburg where I, too, sat in the room where the Declaration was written. In fact, Lorraine and I worked hard to pull out of ourselves what should be said for the earth and its people and the harm that was being done. But, believe me, after attending that hearing, I was convinced that mankind had unleashed a horrible destruction in the world and that there was no way of retrieving it. There was no way of retrieving all the testing and mining and the way the whole industry has handled its waste.

And all the host communities and recipients of this waste seem to be aboriginal people, everywhere in every quarter of the earth from Polynesia to Lapland. I said, "What is going on here? Why are the aboriginal people taking the thrust of this?" And then I came back. I went from the hearings to an even more extraordinary experience, The Second Global Radiation Victims Conference. This is horrible, and I don't know what to think anymore. There was a lot of scientific

evidence that you can not deny. And if you go around long enough--I've been involved in this for 25 years--things start to rise to the top. You can't push this knowledge away anymore.

I was in a lot of trouble spiritually from everything that I was seeing and I did not know how to deal with it, so I went to my medicine people and my Elders for advice. They said, "It is your truth you've learned in this long walk so you have to find some way to balance it now. There are all these young people you have to deal with now." So I went through this transformation process where I didn't go talk anywhere to anyone because I had nothing good to say about the nuclear industry. I still, to this day, have nothing good to say about it. I don't care if they're using this stuff to heal cancer. They're creating more cancer than they're healing. I will never believe otherwise until someone convinces me with good proof that this stuff heals more cancer than it creates. Why is cancer so prevalent in this world? Why? Because we've been messing with something we know nothing about. That's why. We think we are so intelligent and yet we are so utterly stupid.

When I think about ourselves with this whole issue, I think about a man who sees a nice horse. He doesn't know how to ride a horse. But he sees this nice horse and goes, "I want to get on it and ride it." And he jumps on it and the horse starts running and he doesn't know how to stop it. That's what the nuclear industry reminds me of.

Question: Would you have never tried to ride the horse?

Esther Osche: I think to see a beautiful animal I would not want to dominate it. I would want to understand it first, feed it first, and learn about it first, and tame it first. I would try a few things first, not just jump on it and ride it for all I'm worth without any sense of the terrible consequences at the end of the road. But that's the kind of concept I've developed in the culture I come from. That's how it looks to me just from a very flat look at it. There are people that discovered something and said, "Wow! Look at the world that will open up for us." But they didn't think about all that shit that's going to be left behind.

Lorraine Rekmans: The stories are that when the mine prospectors came looking for uranium, they would hire Indian guides. The stories were that the Indians could smell the uranium and they would never hang out where it was. The Indians could smell where the uranium deposits were because the earth would smell different.

I was thinking about what you said about cancer, and that triggered something that Chris did as a science project. Miners in Elliot Lake had the benefit of a sputum cytology program to detect lung cancer early. They were at risk for silicosis and lung disease. CAIRS [Canadian Institute for Radiation Safety] had set up a sputum cytology program and they could deposit sputum and it would be analyzed once a month for any change in the cells. When the mines closed, CAIRS picked up their sputum cytology program and headed out to Saskatchewan, so these people didn't have benefit of that program anymore. I think they had a drop-off box, a little deposit box, where you could spit in a jar, put your name on it, and deposit it. They would analyze it and eventually you would get the results back. So when they pulled the program, Chris was looking for a science project, so I said, "There you go. Explain sputum cytology to your class because they don't know about detecting lung cancer in uranium miners." So he went to my Dad and asked him to hork in a jar and he brought it to school. It was an explanation of the program and he wrote away to CAIR. That was something that people don't like to see. Obviously, it's disgusting to see someone's spit in a jar and it's even more disgusting to analyze it and find out whether they have lung cancer.

Esther Osche: I was the spokesperson for Native people in the Algoma Manitoulin Group and I did a lot of talking about our viewpoint, about what we thought about Elliot Lake and the tailings. I got involved in the film "Uranium". I naively thought we could go up to Elliot Lake and present the film to the community. But the townspeople were booing us off the stage, shooting things at us, yelling at us to go home; we had no business in their backyard, "Go back to your own backyard." I said, "This is our business, what you're dumping into this river is going down to our communities. That's why we're here." It turned into a big shouting match.

Then the high-level radioactive waste disposal concept bandwagon came flying through here, and I said, "You know, I'm getting tired of this stuff. They want to put their nuclear reactors in, they want to put their refineries in, they want to do their transportation up and down the road, they want to bury their damn waste now in the rock."

I said to myself, "Why don't you just leave this stuff alone?" and I made up my mind that I was not going to go up front and talk. I felt nobody was listening, so I began working behind the scenes. I'd prepare a brief and talk a political leader into presenting the brief and maybe that would work to see if government would listen to someone higher up.

We've seen them come and we've seen them go. We've seen them come and we've seen them go. We've participated. We've been vocal. We've written down everything. They don't listen, so what can you do? You try to keep your optimistic attitude about you and go on with your life and try to take care of everything around you and your family and the land around you and just hope for the best.

But I have no respect for government reviews, public consultation bullshit. By the way they call for public consultation, they don't tell us a damn thing about what the public consultation's all about. They don't give appropriate notices, for one thing. They leave different people out of the curve. It is a select process targeted at a select group to get a select response. They don't want anybody in there disrupting or interrupting the flow of what they are trying to present to the public as, "Please accept this. We are the scientists. We are the intelligent ones. Accept this concept." They sit there and explain how they got it and they expect you to buy it. But we don't buy it. We just don't buy it. And aboriginal people by and large as a rule are getting so fed up with all of this coming constantly back into our territory over and over again.

But every time it does, we do get up there and give the old ball another kick. What I would like to say is this high-level radioactive waste disposal concept, which is starting to kick up sparks again around here, was bantered about quite seriously, and I know the Manitoulin Island First Nations communities as well as [those] along here on the north shore. I do know if they try and come and bury that stuff around here again, there's going to be a fight. Because they rolled that trioxide refinery over on us really good, because there were no environmental protection act laws at that time to protect us, and so we got stuck with that and all the radioactive dust that came from that, and we're all breathing that around here on top of the radon gas from the tailings piles and all the stuff that flows down the river into Lake Huron that we drink in our water. What more do they want? What more do they want from the humans in this area is what I'd like to ask. I mean, haven't we sacrificed enough in terms of our land, integrity of our environment, and what we are bequeathing to our children and the future generations? What is it costing in terms of our health? Do we have any idea? Maybe some of us aren't going to be around here to see it reflected in our great- grandchildren.

The scientific evidence is there; low-level radioactivity has an effect on human health. The scientists have been studying it for 30 or 40 years now. They've shown what the results are. You have to ask yourself, where do you stop this? Where do you take a responsible

approach to the future? Short-term gain, replace it by long-term vision. I'm sure our future would thank us for it. They would think we cared about them enough to try to stop this craziness. That's some of the stuff I've been carrying around and dealing with in the nuclear issue, and I intend to keep on bringing out my viewpoints whenever the opportunity arises even though I'm jaded about where that all goes. Public consultation, boy, if you've got a couple of days, I could tell you about that. Thank you for the time to give you a little update.

Ed Burt: I live on Manitoulin Island. Chris, I was interested when you said you thought they were looking at you like a kid. When I go to hearings now, they think I've come into my second childhood. You can grow out of your condition, there's not much hope left for me.

The nuclear industry. Reliving the nightmare. When I was just about Chris's age, I used to listen to the radio all the time. Then I heard the details of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings on the radio and I probably haven't turned the radio on six times since. I used to like to listen to music and I don't listen to music at all because it makes me think of that bomber. I got a glimpse of things nuclear that night. I read a lot of things afterwards. I read the books about nuclear power suns on poles in the Arctic and growing vegetables and how we were going to have energy so cheap we couldn't meter it. I watched that carefully.

I remember going up to Elliot Lake in the early '50s when it took 3 1/2 hours to go up the road and we used all the gravel that we had in the truck for the fellow to make mortar on the hills on the ice. So when we got there, we had an empty truck but a lot of people could follow us. I went up later that summer and I saw the first tailings coming out of a pipe and gradually filling in a cattail pond. And I read about what it was.

In the 1960s, we found out that in Ontario when the nuclear engineers came in to play, they seemed to have a smurf-like attitude. They wanted to build things, specifically, nuclear reactors. They never asked the question as to why. But I don't think there's any why in the smurf language. We needed to build a nuclear power plant on the north shore over here between the Birch Island Reserve and La Cloche, they said.

We formed a group called the Manitoulin Association for Safe Power and we badgered a lot of politicians, wrote a lot of letters. You never know about this. I went through three of these now, and we have no nuclear power plants between here and Pancake Bay where two were to be built on Lake Superior. And people say, "I don't know why

you spent so damn much time working against these things. They were never built." I have no way of answering that question, but I know we worked in our own way the best strategy we knew and we worked a lot.

I remember being called to go down to speak at Darlington where there's a nuclear power plant now because they were going to build another one down there. And I got some information from the government about insulating houses in Ontario and there was no question about it, we could have disbursed the wages and incomes and jobs of people all over Ontario and insulated houses [without nuclear power]. We could have saved more energy than that nuclear power plant will ever produce. But it was built anyway. We can go on. It goes on. We built the one in Bruce. Some of the reactors are closed now. We built the other one up this way from Bruce and it got so radioactive that they actually just closed it down. It hasn't been mothballed but when you can only work for 20 minutes every three days, you could take 30 people to take a door off and repair it and put it back on and it would take them three months. It got so inefficient to work they actually had to close it down.

I remember the big dam spills. I remember one fellow who went up to Elliot Lake to work one morning. He told me he thought a meteor had fallen on Elliot Lake because, he said, when we came up, the road was gone, a great huge portion of the road was gone. He had to get a bolt and get down the bank and up the other side. It was a major operation but he did get to work. This was a dam spill. How many thousands of tons of radioactive waste went into the North Channel via the Serpent River we have no way of knowing. I remember talking to an Indian friend that used to catch trout in a great deep channel out from the Serpent River and a lot of that stuff is probably still in that channel. I don't think there's any trout in it now.

I remember getting information from Eldorado Nuclear about their operations and some of their testing in northern Saskatchewan. I found out about the uptake of radionuclides into the fish. I used to go out into the North Channel with my kids and fish and tent and then I found out about the radium in northern pike and then I found out radium was coming down the Serpent River. I used to take my wife and kids there and that's a wonderful place. It's between limestone and the metallic rock and so there's power spots there and it stimulated me until I could visualize the fish with the radium and I couldn't go back anymore. And I haven't been back of there for years. I'd like to but I know how long the radium will be there.

The next round of activity was nuclear power plants that were to be built here and in Pancake Bay and another round of hearings that took hundreds and hundreds of hours and trips to Toronto and organizing meetings. At one point, I decided I was going to make one phone call or write one letter every day to keep up the vigilance against all of the things nuclear that were surrounding us. We realized that this was going to be a sacrifice area because of the drilling in East Bowl Lake for a possible high-level waste storage site.

So we put all this together and produced a 45-minute video. It cost us about $5,000, but we played it to a lot of people. My son one time was coming across on the Chi-Cheemon [a car-ferry that runs between Manitoulin Island and the Bruce Peninsula] and they play certain films and he had taken it down to the college in Guelph, so he went and asked the captain if he could play it on the Chi-Cheemon. The captain said, "Well, what is it?" He says, "Well, it's a story about northern Ontario." So they played the 45-minute film coming across and they were just about ready to shoot him by the time they got to the other shore. But nobody was paying any attention. But anyway it was played in a lot of places.

Then we got into another round of fighting the nuclear industry about the uranium refinery. I was just sitting here thinking about one time I came up to Blind River to a public meeting in a hall that was filled with people but I wasn't allowed in. I sat outside in the rain that evening because I was told by some citizens in Blind River that I was an outsider. But you know the amount of uranium dust that escapes from the baghouse filters small enough that they will literally fall into the pores in your skin are falling on my farmland every day where my son is trying to produce now organic food. These are the types of things we have to live with: the cumulative effect of radon gas and uranium dust and so many pecilcuries per liter of uranium and thorium and lead 210 in our water. And it goes on and on and on and accumulates and accumulates.

Just very recently we went through another round of hearings to build some more nuclear power plants along the north shore. The fight gets more intensive, costs more money, takes more time. A lot of us went through that. I have a lot of information. One time, a small group of us decided to make a presentation to one of these hearing panels [and thought] that we would put a little book together called the North Shore Needs. We wanted to find out whether there was a need to build one of those things. Nobody ever decided that really. We found out that we did need about 1,000 megawatts more at peak periods. I said at the hearing, "We need 1,000 megawatts and you're telling us

we need 3,000. What will we do with the other 2,000?" They said, "We'll put it in the grid." Their argument was ludicrous really. If you go to enough hearings you can see something that's pretty ludicrous every day.

I was up here for some of the tailings hearings. The mining companies wanted to get on to greener pastures, Saskatchewan mainly. They wanted to get it wrapped up as cheaply and quickly as possible. Before the hearings even started they had flooded some of the tailings.

When I was driving up the road tonight, I was thinking of what this area looked like in the pre-Cambrian era. We had all this uranium, arsenic, heavy metal cadmium, copper, nickel. It was all awash in this area. Take a picture of it when it swirled in the turbulent winds and currents. It must have been a mosaic of color. The only thing is, there wasn't anything living. And over the eons, I guess what I call the kingdom of the mother--and I separate the heavenly father from the earthly mother--I see two deities and I believe it was the kingdom of the mother that somehow harnessed all this stuff. And then, if you could have taken a picture later, you'd have seen green things and then later, moving things and flying and walking and crawling and swimming. Life. And then you know we come in here and we move in to where these demons are. We shouldn't have done anything yet. Esther says it. You don't just get on the horse and ride full tilt someplace when you don't even know how to say whoa. And so we take all this stuff out, we grind it all up, we mix it with air and water. We recreate the pre-Cambrian era. And the pre-Cambrian era had nothing green, nothing crawling, nothing swimming, nothing laughing, nothing walking.

And then when I get up in the morning to put photovoltaic cells on my house, grow an organic garden, and go to meetings and talk to people about sustainable living, I got all this stuff I got to deal with. When you look at all the costs...I can remember when Ontario Hydro had no debt load. As soon as we got into the nuclear industry, the debt is now $35 billion and rising and the government is talking about bailing them out so they won't look so bad, and that's our money. And all of these costs for one generation of electricity. When I look at what we have done in one generation in this area and I think of all the human misery that human beings are capable of putting on future generations, I wonder what it's going to be like not 5,000, but 500, years from now.

Georgena MacDonald: We have knowledge of the data and experts on how you work the relationships. Compile all the data. They were saturating tailings before we commented. But choices need to be made, waste needs to be dealt with. The question is how do we bring the experts back?

Question: If the experts were here all along and the problems developed from what they were doing, why would you bring them back?

Georgena MacDonald: They are the best experts we have.

Comment: I don't think so. Look what they did. They must be the worst experts, in my opinion. Look what they did.

Lorraine Rekmans: We have what we call traditional ecological knowledge: things that Esther's grandparents have taught her, things that your grandmas have taught you, and my grandmas have taught me. That's common sense. It's common sense and logic and [we shouldn't] be oppressed by experts and feel stupid and inadequate in managing our environment, taking care of our own neighborhood.

Esther Osche: I never feel inadequate or stupid in front of those panels or hearing boards or those stubborn people. I know my knowledge is ancient and far surpasses their knowledge in completeness and order. My people would have never done this. Never. They managed this land for generations without harm. They served it. They protected it. They benefitted from it economically through vast trade. When the Europeans got here, there were plenty of fish, plenty of game, plenty of timber, plenty of clean water, plenty of everything. I never feel intimidated anymore. I used to feel this size [very small] because they'd flash their scientific knowledge around like their nuclear power beacons to zap you down like you don't know anything. But that's not true. We know a lot about what goes on, on the land.

Lorraine Rekmans: The experts won't come back because there are no resources to extract.

Georgena MacDonald: I guess what I'm suggesting is that we need experts. We need experts on our side to give us choices. I realize after [what's happened] that we shouldn't have done it. But we've done it. I look at humanity like bacteria on a culture plate that's spreading and

spreading out. And the people on the edge gradually get overrun and the colony dies. They've run out of space and time. And this is symptomatic of human populations. We're being choked by our own waste.

Comment: That's one model of humanity. There are others that might come into play, that might suggest that you've been naive and immature about power. We can consult people who know this land, who have been here a long time to try to correct some of the mismanagement and mistakes that have been made. There is not just the one model that should be in place.

Judy Stevens: I really think that we need to simplify what we're talking about, not that any of us is intellectually lacking because we're not. In the aboriginal view, everything is cyclical and reciprocal. What we take, we give back. What we give, we receive back. The reason the circle is so strong as a symbol is because there is no beginning and no end. When the Europeans hit North America's shore, their worldview was scientific and linear and it does not allow for any variation to that theme. So the Hopis prophesied it eons ago. The moment we walked on the moon, there was going to be a very big change and it was happening before we walked on the moon or even had a telescope to look at the moon. The point I'm trying to make is that aboriginal people, whether from Japan, Lapland, or Cutler, have always been the original caretakers of this turtle island of this mother earth, because they never left the Garden of Eden, they're still in it. It's those of us who have paler pigmentation and [whose] ancestors came along with the combined theory of science evolution, technology, and mathematical ability, who say anything that can be proven must be proven. That's a load of crap. If my ancestors and Esther's ancestors met with a modicum of respect for each other which Esther's people had and perhaps some of mine had, our society would have been extremely different.

Lorraine Rekmans: We talk about experts. We all know that we went into that room and we had a sense that we were women, we were lay people, we were poor and not poor, we were just lay people. We had common sense, we had logic, we had a desire to do good, and we had an open mind. The thing is that we realized that we were not going to come up with one solution but there were going to be many solutions and our solution would never be static, that, as we learned more, we would adapt our method of preferred management and move on as we

learned, that we never, ever, thought we would come up with the answer immediately, that we were willing to work toward the answer and draw from the knowledge--be it traditional ecological knowledge [or] scientific knowledge--to combine all those things in a holistic way. And we believed we could do it without the expertise but that we could move on a road to develop the expertise and acquire that for ourselves as just regular folks. And that's where I say experts are good if regular folks are working with them.

Judy Stevens: The simple symbolism is important, the circle versus the line.

Georgena MacDonald: Can I ask if you want to go to the Hague [Peace Conference] and try to represent the problems here, what we can do in the circumstances? There are all these organizations in the world doing scientific analysis and you have to have days and understand a lot of math and then there is us. How do we communicate, get them to get off their jargon?

Esther Osche: We need someone to go to the Hague and stand up and say, "When you think you can eat money, when you think you can eat money, then come back and we'll have this talk."
Isn't that what it's all boiling down to? Economics are driving the whole thing. We talk about it in our way in our own locale to control it. It's overall world strategy. Nothing is slowing this machine down because it's so connected to what's going on in the world economically. Jobs.

You're talking about taking down the hierarchy. You're talking about a next-to-impossible mission, if you really wanted to clean this up and reverse this damage and try to move on in a more sensible fashion to the future for the sake of our offspring and those not yet here. How are we going to do that unless we take a bigger strategy which means dismantling [the whole system].

I don't know how can this girl [Lorraine] live in this town [Blind River]. This town wanted that refinery. I know what's going on here with the health of people. I know what's going on with cancers. I know what's going on in the Missasauga First Nation when they had the spills and what showed up in the stools of the young people and the old people. I know about this stuff. But the community here in Blind River wanted this. How do you live in a community, try to promote views on controlling this situation, and try to change the situation somehow, and still be able to go outside and do your shopping? It can't be fixed.

Lorraine Rekmans: You know what I do. I take my shoes off. I take my socks off. I walk down to the shore of Lake Huron on the sand. I find the oldest oak tree I can find and I give it a big hug. I walk down the sand and I think, my grandmother walked here and my great-grandmother walked here and one day my great-great-grandchildren are going to walk on this sand. And this is my goddamn home and I ain't leaving. And they bring all their garbage in here and they can spit in my face in the grocery store. I spent so much of my life being afraid. I walk downtown. I will take on the Ministry of Natural Resources. I will take on AECB, Cameco Corporation. I don't care anymore.

You know where I found my strength, in a rock. Some one brought me a rock from Birch Island. My grandfather was from Birch Island and he brought me this rock. I kept that rock and I held that rock and I won't let go. I won't move. I'll hold that rock. This is my homeland. I take strength from that. I draw my strength from the sand on the beach where I walk. I can just visualize that my feet may have landed on the same places where my ancestors have walked. When I look at those people who look at me, I look at them right in the eye and say, "This is my land, this is my bio-region. And my home is big. It goes all the way to Birch Island. I have a really large home."

"Nobody ever told us that uranium was hazardous to your health."

"Nobody ever told us that uranium was hazardous to your health."

Henri Groulx and Linda Groulx
with their daughter Lorraine Rekmans

Recorded at the home of Henri and Linda Groulx in Elliot Lake, Ontario on January 15, 2000. Henri Groulx worked for Denison Mines from 1955 to 1990 including 12 years underground. Linda Groulx grew up on the Serpent River First Nation Reserve and has suffered from a brain tumor. Their daughter, Lorraine Rekmans, also participated in this conversation. The afternoon began with a discussion of Steven Vasilev who is launching a suit to recover losses from his property interests due to mine closures. He has realized it is a huge struggle and is now organizing to include a miners' class action suit against Rio Algom and Denison to recover compensation for cancers and workers compensation. The Workers Compensation Board realized there would be so many cancers in Elliot Lake that they had capped off the compensable claims and denied claims after they had reached their cap.

Henri Groulx

People of the Atomic Energy Control Board should have informed the people of the risks involved.

Linda Groulx

You had deer. You had all kinds of food. You had everything. It was rich.

Linda Groulx: So many of them died they can't keep track of them. I grew up on the reserve there, right next to the acid plant which went in in 1957. Where the acid plant was built there used to be a fence there and there were wild horses. It was so different then. After the acid plant it was full of sulfur and on our way back from school we'd jump in the sulfite piles. We just played in it. We didn't know any better. On a windy day the sulfur would just blow in our faces.

Henri Groulx: Sulfur smells like piss. How could you play in it.

Linda Groulx: It was a nice color. We didn't know any better.

Henri Groulx: Before the mines came in there was lots of logging through here. The logging didn't do that much damage. There was only a wagon road, then a trail. The river system would float the logs down. They built the highway when the mines came in 1958. In Quirke Lake there used to be commercial fishermen. After the mines started in 1958 they pulled out, because the fish would go away because they were putting that stuff in the lake. They put the tailings in the lake. They weren't supposed to but the runoff killed all the fish. After that the fish were all gone. Old Happy Dimock used to fish there for lake trout.

Linda Groulx: Dad came up here. Had a trap line up here where the hospital is on Elliot Lake.

Henri Groulx: Elliot Lake and McCarthy Lake were full of fish too at one time. They still fish in it. Herbie went fishing in there, pulled out a big pickerel. It was all full of scabs. All kinds of camps were there before the mines started. Hunting and fishing camps. They would leave their boats hanging on the trees.

Linda Groulx: My son Dave came home one time with a fish from Angel Lake. It had two heads. He brought that fish home and I said, "I don't want that fish." He said, "Cut one head off that's all." That was about four years ago or maybe five years ago.

My dad used to only work periodically. We used to go picking berries, take a lunch, and go in the morning up to Victoria Mountain past all the lakes up on the hill and we'd go up there all day and pick berries. Some blueberry buyers would come by and buy all the berries. We'd buy groceries with the money and make jam. That's what we used to do during the days in the summer.

I remember when I was little my mom had two gardens on each side of the creek. Each one was about fifty foot square. We used to pull weeds. It was a hard life.

Henri Groulx: We lived outside of town and always had a great big garden. My dad worked in the bush as a lumberjack. He was in the army in WWI and WWII. In the spring he would farm and then put away food for winter in a root cellar. We always had a nice warm house. My dad piled up wood in the shed. School wasn't all that far either. We always ate good.

Linda Groulx: We didn't eat that good. My mom gave us lots of vitamins. Our dad would go into the bush in daytime. We had to haul wood when we came home from school. We piled the wood on the sleigh and only cut what we needed. My brother and I pulled the sleigh. It was homemade with steel runners on the bottom.

People out there [on the lake] would fish pretty steady and they would come by and sell it. We never had a fridge. Mom got electricity when I was sixteen after I was married and they moved into a house. We lived in an old shack before that with just a bedroom part and a kitchen part. And that shack was kept up with paste and paper. It was cold in winters. In the morning we took the water and put it on the stove because the water was frozen. We had to break up the ice to wash our face to go to school in the morning.

The government ran a public school on the reserve from preschool to grade eight. After eighth grade they sent you away to high school. They boarded you out to different families. I went to the Sault [Saint Marie] for a while. I wanted to be a teacher but I was too much in love.

Henri Groulx: I grew up in Chelmsford and started to work when I finished grade ten at age sixteen. I just started to work. There was no way to get to high school in Sudbury. The mines opened up in 1953. I started in 1955. Denison was still under construction. I started to work at Milliken and worked there for six, seven months. I didn't like it, so I went to work for Denison. I worked as a laborer and in warehousing. At Denison I worked a warehousing for I long time and then I went underground. The warehouses had all the materials, various things like a hardware store. I knew what somebody wanted.

I didn't like working at Milliken there because they were all Englishmen from England. All English people acted like the army, very regimental. They hired anybody that came to the gate.

Linda Groulx: My father worked at the acid plant.

Henri Groulx: They had twelve mines going around here in 1957. There was always a big turnover. There were three shifts steady stream of people coming and leaving. Lots from Timmins and New Liskeard. At lot of immigrants too, people from Portugal. The English people for Rio Algom were the bosses.

Stephen Roman ran Denison. He was Ukrainian, the big boss, and wasn't there. He only came once a year to pick up the profit and leave and go to Toronto. He built the big Ukrainian Catholic Church in Toronto. Thinks that's going to get him to heaven. I don't think so. More than that, he was a thief that guy, a crook. When he first came to Canada in 1933, he had about $3500 in his pocket. He was bullshitting people saying he was broke. He bought a piece of land. Then he got all the other Ukrainians around Oshawa that weren't well educated and he pulled all their money. He'd be the one investing all their money. When he invested in Denison he wasn't playing with his own money. He had controlling interest all the time.

There was a story about Roman and Hirshhorn. Before the war Roman was involved in delivering Jews to the Germans. When he came here he went to see Hirshhorn to get some money from him for prospecting. Hirshhorn, who was Jewish, said, "Don't waste my time."

Hirshhorn put the money up for the original prospecting up here. He came from New York in the '30s with a million in his pocket. He said, "I'm open." Rio Algom [which bought out Hirshhorn] had more money and bigger crews. Roman was too cheap to buy anything. He wouldn't even buy his geologist a canoe to get around with.

But Denison didn't have too many Englishmen. They treated me fairly in a way. When I went underground the conditions were better. Before that it was worse. In 1973 they had a walkout in Denison over safety issues and then things got better. They had to put portable toilets underground. Before that you used to just have to go in the corner. They used to call him "the honey man," the one who cleans the toilet, "Your shit is my bread and butter."

I was out of work for about a year in 1969. Then I came back to work underground for about 12 years. They brought me up to the surface to work in the planning office, give me a title there called "materials coordinator." Didn't give me no raise though. I had a chance to go back on staff but I didn't trust them. I was always a person, when I work, I tell them the way it is. Call a spade a spade. Between '57 and '70, I was warehousing. I knew the conditions and heard the guys complaining. I was better off on the surface.

Linda Groulx: I figured he was making a good living for us. I didn't think about the working conditions or what might happen.

Henri Groulx: Nobody wondered about nothing until a few years later when people started getting sick. People close to you, you know. You heard Joe Blow died but it didn't matter until it was people close to you. It started happening in about '67, gradually.

Linda Groulx: We started reading in the paper about somebody we knew who had died. Somebody younger than us.

Henri Groulx: Back in '62 or '63, a guy name Boland, he couldn't breathe. He had lung cancer. He could breathe in but couldn't push it back out again. His lungs were too weak to push it back out. After that I heard he was gone [had died]. I guess he was gone when I seen him.

This house [where we live now] was built in 1959. Some of the lakeside houses were built earlier, then they came this way. We lived in a trailer for about six months in 1962. Before that we rented houses from Denison. Houses were sold through the company.

Linda Groulx: We rented from Denison. We didn't want to owe them anything. I worked in almost every restaurant downtown, and the hospital, and the old age home. Later on I knew what was happening with people's health.

When Lorraine started working for the paper it really scared me. She was so into it. I was afraid they were going to get back at her, that's how scary it was. At one time her car even caught on fire mysteriously and I thought someone had set it. She was really aggressive in her writing, and I really think they wanted her to stop because they wanted an environment for people to come in you know. It's pretty scary. I didn't know how dangerous uranium was. Now I think it maybe did have something to do with the tumor. There are a lot of people like that.

Henri Groulx: One guy was working underground named Joe Bossy. A good guy. He never smoked or nothing like that. I started talking to him, shooting the shit, he was a pretty nice guy. Later on I asked, "Where is that Joe?" They said, "Oh, he's dead." In a matter of five to six months he was dead. He looked all right when I was talking to him. This was 1975-76. Another couple lived next to us. Remember those Germans? He used to change me in the mines. He was gone. We could always go to the bone yard and count them.

Lorraine Rekmans: I was doing an article on infant mortality. We counted the kids' graves.

Henri Groulx: Before that they didn't even have a funeral home.

Lorraine Rekmans: Remember I did that article and I went to Stats Can [Statistics Canada] and I wanted mortality stats for the Algoma district and I was getting information for Elliot Lake. The infant mortality was 7% - 10%. Then for two years the data is missing. Then it drops down to 7% again. I called them and I said, "How come there's no information for these two years?" They said, "It's not available. We don't have it." "You have infant mortality for the last 30 years except for those two years?" Even at 10%, infant mortality is high.

Linda Groulx: Now they say the breast cancer here in Elliot Lake is high.

Henri Groulx: In 1960 the population in Elliot Lake was only about 6000, down from 30,000, and then it went back to 20,000 again. In the '50s there was no road from here to Mount Lake. They came from Iron Bridge. From here there was no road to Laurentian Lodge. People had to walk in.

By 1957, '58, ' 59, there were 30,000 people here. In '59 the Yankees announced they wouldn't buy more uranium. Stopped the contract. Denison extended the contract for five years. The [Canadian] government agreed to stockpile some of the uranium. Rio Algom did the same thing. They started shutting down the mines Lacnor, Panel, Canmet.

By 1953 people would come in and camp where the airport is now. They camped with whatever they had. The companies had trailer parks.

Linda Groulx: About fifty families were living on the reserve when I grew up.

Henri Groulx: The mines must have the employment records. I was in a union for a little while. Denison had the Mine Mills Union and then they switched over to United Steel Workers. The men changed the conditions themselves but the union took the credit. When they had the protest in 1973, it was a wildcat strike but you couldn't call it a wildcat strike because you could be charged. So we called it a protest for safety conditions. Eligh Martel from the NDP [National Democratic

Party] was the only politician that showed up on the picket line. The protest was in 1973 when I was working underground. We were protesting ventilation, restroom conditions, working conditions, the right to refuse unsafe work like rocks hanging over us and not waiting to work until after a blast. You have to clear out, let the air clean out.

Nobody was really aware what uranium could really cause. We were protesting working conditions. The Ham Commission (mid-1970s) was when we started to know about the diseases it causes and the radon gases. They knew but they weren't telling us. I was a steward. I would hear anybody with a grievance. In 1963 I was in the union. After that I never cared about the union. The people who hung around the union hall were the sick, the lame, and the lazy. All they do is complain for nothing. You do your job. If you have a legitimate grievance it's ok. But if you don't want to do your job you find a reason not to work.

In 1973 I came to the picket line once. It was a good holiday, the smelt were running in Spraggue. The smelts are not good now. Before, you used to get big ones. Now they're no more worth picking.

Linda Groulx: We used to come from the school. There was a creek where we used to get about five big ones and fill the lunch pail. Now there's none there.

Before the [acid] plant there was an apple tree I found one day and it was this high [six feet] and the apples were that big [five inches]and I filled my skirt with the apples and brought them home to my mom. My mom said, "Where'd you get those apples?" I said, "Across from Gertie's." Mom said, 'Maybe that's her tree." But I didn't think she knew that tree was there. It was right by this rock. Behind there we used to go swimming. It was called Frenchtown. We used to go down there. There were cherries hanging down and apple trees all around. We'd go swimming and look in the water and it was so clear and sandy and blue. Now it's not very good.

Dad used to go up to Camp Lake by Victoria Mountain to get deer. The camp was there for ages. Dad used to guide a lot of people from the States. They hunted bear, moose, deer.

Henri Groulx: Back in those days [early 1900s] they [the government] gave my grandfather the land. You had to clear so much of it. He was a conservative. That's how he got that job as postmaster.

Lorraine Rekmans: Some history's coming out about Chinese migrant workers who were building the railroad. They were being tortured and

abused so they tried to dig tunnels to escape. They found those tunnels.

Linda Groulx: Here's a picture of my father. Look at the size of that bear.

Henri Groulx: Tourists used to come from Ohio and Michigan to hunt for bear. Now the population is bigger, people have better vehicles to go to the bush. Before you used to have to walk in. You could only get one moose and work like a bugger to bring it home.

Linda Groulx: You had deer. You had all kinds of food. You had everything. It was rich.

Lorraine Rekmans: There's a joke: if a tree falls in the forest and nobody is around to hear it, does that mean the company still has to pay?

Linda Groulx: When we went to school we had to learn poems by heart. There was one I really liked. "I love to lie awake and hear the pitter-patter of the rain. I make believe it plays with me, tap tapping on the window pane. In daytime too, I love to hear the raindrops dance upon the street. They dance like fairies gay with crystal slippers on their feet." That was when I was in grade two.

Henri Groulx: [on the Denison Mine] You go down in a cage hundreds of feet. The shafts were 3000 feet, some of them. They [the miners] got down there by sweat. They started from the top and drill for ten feet and then blast and dig that out. They'd get so far down and then put in a lift. They went right down to 1300 feet before they put in any kind of tunnel.

[Looking at a 1989 article entitled "Two men admitted to the Hall of Fame owe their place in history to uranium."] That Hall of Fame [honoring Denison and Roman] is a farce. They didn't go in the mines, they just got the money from the mines.

Lorraine Rekmans: I went on a tour underground and was under there about ten hours. I went down about six o'clock in the morning in Denison. I was traipsing around in the mine and almost got injured about three times. I was standing by a door with a rock crusher and a piece of rock caught me right on the neck. See that red mark there. Another time I almost fell down a mill hole. They had all this loose rock.

I was up watching this guy with a jack drill into the rock. I was standing where they had all this shale, loose rock, and I started slipping, lost my footing. I was sliding down this slope and there was a big hole and a few sticks in the ground that caught my coverall. I said, "What is down there?" He said, "A lot of rock, maybe a truck."

Henri Groulx: Denison did trackless mining. Went to the bottom and then dug all over. They did a chemical analysis to find the vein. They put in a diamond drill to decide if it was worth digging. It was more dangerous. When they improved the conditions they put in better ventilation and limited the hours so you couldn't be down more than eight hours at a time or work more than forty hours a week. There was some protection available. Places were marked, "Do not enter without a breathing mask." Sometimes they closed down the whole place for a period of time because the radiation levels were so strong. You were warned not to go in. We had uranium and thorium but there was not a big market for thorium.

I worked as a mechanic and worked in the drill shop repairing the drills. The drill shop was 2600 feet down. We had a big fans, one drawing the bad air out and the other pumping fresh air in. The Denison mine was up at Quirke Lake. I drove up there every day in a car pool. All my friends are dead, most of them, I think, from the mine. Some of them died from heart attacks, some from lung cancer. There's a few left, most of them are gone. Some of them moved away. I go downtown, I hardly know anybody anymore. They're all newcomers now. Can't do anything, "The horse is gone out of the barn now." People of AECB [Atomic Energy Control Board] should have informed the people of the risks involved, when you don't know about it. Nobody ever told us that uranium was hazardous to your health.

By 1973 the workers were not aware of the hazards of uranium. They were protesting the working conditions. It was about 1975 that they had the Ham Commission. You came to the steelworkers hall and they asked you questions. They didn't tell us about cancers. The workers compensation [board] then made you take chest x-rays, all the lungs of the miners. It was a Dr. Antroshin. I don't know what kind of a doctor he was but he practiced medicine for the government.

Linda Groulx: I had to go there too to get a chest x-ray. I asked, "What was that for?" It was when I worked at the old-age home.

Henri Groulx: You had to go for a chest x-ray every year but they wouldn't tell you anything. They might tell you had a spot on your lung and that you shouldn't go underground but by then it was too late anyhow. For a miner it's probably the only thing he knows anyway. That clinic went on for a long time. No matter which mine you worked in, in Ontario, you had to go for a chest x-ray. It was compulsory. In the '50s it was a government thing for all mines. They wouldn't tell you until it got too bad. Wherever you started to work you had to get an x-ray.

The only thing I got from Denison is a pension, so many years service, so many dollars. It's enough to survive, not luxury, existing, existing. As my Dad used to say in French, "Some people are living, some of them survive, some of them exist."

Linda Groulx: Most of Henri's family were politically wise.

Henri Groulx: They were conservative. Pearson, a liberal, was the prime minister when the mines were open. My uncle went to work for a mine at Port Radium before the war. He was a diamond driller. After he left the army he had a big watch on his arm, a radium watch. He had radiation burns. All his hair fell out. He had big blotches of hair falling out like he had chemotherapy.

Lorraine Rekmans: A Cree woman from Rabbit Lake told me her husband worked in the mine. They had a shift and then they'd come out. He came home and his hair was falling out.

Henri Groulx: Radiation was high at that mine. One guy who worked there said you weren't allowed to bring nothing home. You don't take your clothes home like we did here. I used to bring my clothes home to wash them except for my coveralls.

Linda Groulx: I used to wash them in my washer. I didn't know. I used to wash the kids' clothes with them too. Your long johns were full of holes.

Henri Groulx: I was never interested in being a farmer. I worked a little bit with my dad in the woods in the springtime. There were always flies, a thousand million mosquitoes. I didn't want to work as a lumberjack either.

Linda Groulx: You said there were flies in the mines. Big black ones.

Henri Groulx: There used to be flies underground. I don't know where they came from. One time we went one place there had been a mine before and we broke through there. There were great big flies. Looked like big horse flies. I didn't say nothing. My friend didn't say anything either. If I said, "Did you see those flies?" He might have said, "I don't see nothing."

One time I was coming to work from Serpent River. There were four or five of us coming to work together. There was a great big light in the sky. I didn't say anything because I thought someone might say, "What? You been drinking to much?" It was an airplane landing with more workers.

Linda Groulx: Henri came from work one day and said, "I think I died and went to hell. There were big flies down there. The size of a dime."

Henri Groulx: I thought there might be a body down there. I didn't look any further. I thought somebody was missing. You can't imagine how black it is down there. Walking around in mud and rock with chicken wire holding all those rocks there. All the surface buildings are knocked down now or sold for scrap. Some of the equipment they left underground.

There is a steelworkers retirement group. I'm not part of that. They have a dinner every year and invite Rickaby who was the manager. Rickaby was a manager when Colin Benner was there. How Benner got his job was something else. His dad was a geologist for Roman. He went later to manage a coal mine, to Westry, Nova Scotia where twenty-six guys got killed. Accidents always followed.

The first few years we'd always lose one a week. Rocks were loose, a cave-in killed three at one time. Big mistake by Denison.

Linda Groulx: [Looking at a scrap book of news articles.] I was saving all Lorraine's columns but I didn't get some of the good ones.

Lorraine Rekmans: Tell us about your grandmother.

Linda Groulx: I loved my grandmother. She had a big family. Grandpa was a great trapper. He was a rich guy compared to most people. He'd go trapping in trapping season, and she was a hard worker too. She used to make her own maple syrup and jams. She used to sew and make quilts. She baked bread, cut bulk wood. She used to make our slips and stuff out of flour bags. She used to dye them and make shirts. Bloomers made out of sugar bags used to always give us a rash.

She could read. I don't know where she learned to read. I remember going there and she had a sparsely furnished house, a little house. She had a big bed with those porcelain things. My brother and I would go there. She lived alone after her husband died. She'd make us kneel down and say our prayers and she'd read her Bible. She was really strict. She'd speak English to us but in front of anyone else she would speak Ojibway. She was shy in front of people to speak English. I speak enough Ojibway to get by if I had to.

My mother wouldn't speak Ojibway to us because she didn't want us to hear the arguments between her and my dad. So then she said, "The Ojibway language is not going to be the main language you're going to be learning out in this world. It's going to be English so it's no use learning Ojibway." I learned what [Ojibway] I know from listening to other people when I was a kid and what I picked up. I guess I have a good memory.

There's one thing my mom always laughs about. One time I said, "Pete LaPoint got picked up by the cops last night!" She said, "How did you know that?" I used to hide behind the stove and listen. I'd sit behind the stove and listen to her gossip. She'd say, "Get out of here." They were picking up Indians all the time. I can speak a little bit of French too.

Henri Groulx: You know a lot of French. I grew up speaking French. My mother spoke English a bit but she didn't want to speak it because people would laugh at her accent. It was all French where I grew up. The whole town was French. In school they hardly taught any English. The only English we learned in school was from a book about Queen Elizabeth the First. We learned English in the street and reading books. We called them "blimeys", "blokes", the ones that worked for Rio Algom.

Linda Groulx: Most of the people who came to Elliot Lake, they only had a suitcase. They were really broke. And now they stick their noses up like they're really proud.

I wanted to be Chief because I wanted to be there for the people. But those council women really made me work.

Loreena Lewis and Gertrude Lewis

Loreena Lewis and Gertrude Lewis share the same surname, but they are not related. They also share a common interest in community development and community spirit. Both have been active members at Serpent River First Nation for a long time, serving on volunteer committees and as representatives in band government. Both have seen the Elliot Lake mines come and go and the environmental impact this development has had on their community.

In the 1970s both women were active in forcing the government of Canada to hold industry accountable for environmental degradation at Serpent River. In the 1950s the First Nation was host to a sulphuric acid plant owned by Noranda. The Department of Indian Affairs signed a 99-year lease with the company that left behind a legacy of contaminated soils.

Gertrude and Loreena have been active since the 1950s and continue to stay involved and on the move, even now, more than 45 years later. Both have very busy schedules and still support their community by serving on various committees and providing support for their extended families and friends.

This interview was held September 23, 1999 at Serpent River First Nation where Loreena and Gertrude talked about their experiences in trying to bring government attention to the environmental problems in their community. They spoke about a time when Serpent River was governed by the first woman chief and an all woman council.

Loreena Lewis: We went to many meetings and tried to do so many things. You get tired. They still didn't do a perfect job. It still smells at the Pow Wow grounds.

Loreena Lewis: You can't build houses there. They did so many soil testings here it wasn't funny, the money they spent on soil testing.

Gertrude Lewis: When Keith and Earl came back home they went even further with this work.

We'd go hand out pamphlets on the trans-Canada highway. We stopped cars at the crossing. We got support from Mississauga First Nation. They sent people down. There were lots of people there supporting us. We reached a lot of people.

Now we are planning to blockade this plutonium shipment [projected by the United States and Canada. This stuff is not safe. We have things in this world that we have no control over. Storms, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and severe weather around the world. What's our country going to be like if we have anything like this happen with this plutonium around. There could be an earthquake around those uranium mines.

Loreena Lewis: With the acid plant and the tailings running into the Serpent River, we couldn't use the Serpent River anymore. There was no more fishing and no more swimming. There were problems in our bay with sulphur. The people went to swim at Serpent River because it was nice and clear but it was full of Uranium 226.

We went to the assessment hearings in Sudbury and the Northeastern Ontario hearings and we put in our reports. They didn't want us to tour the mine sites with the others. They took people from the hearings but they didn't want to take us. They didn't want us to go.

Gertrude Lewis: But then someone fought for us to go. They said we should be allowed to go.

Loreena Lewis: Of course everything was nice and clean when we got there.

Gertrude Lewis: At the acid plant the men used to clean it up when the big shots came by to visit. We saw the tailings ponds the first time we were up there. There were no sprinklers on and the dust was blowing around in the air. The mine employees were running around like crazy and turning on the sprinklers.

The MOE [?]lawyer told us that pond went right into the Serpent River. He explained that to us, not the mining companies. There were these piles of dead animals around the tailings ponds. There were beaver rabbits, all kinds of animals, some piled on top of each other. There may have even been dead deer or moose lying underneath them, they were piled that high.

Loreena Lewis: The dead birds are what I remember the most. They are what I noticed so much. There was this one bird, you could see the trail he made. You could see his tracks and then he was just lying there dead.

Gertrude Lewis: And the dead lakes. There were ten dead lakes in that area.

Loreena Lewis: We heard about the McCarthy Lake camp. This man lost his camp and all his business because the fish were dying. There are sad stories about people who lost things trying to build business but couldn't because of the mines. And we thought we were lucky being at the end of the Serpent River.

We went to a lot of meetings. You get real sleepy hearing the same things over and over again. We worked with a lawyer from the National Indian Brotherhood. There was Toby Vigod and Lloyd Tataryn. (*author of Dying for A Living, Deneau & Greenberg)*

Gertrude Lewis: Maurice Foster (Liberal Member of Parliament) did quite a bit for us. He was trying to do the best he could. Homer Seguin (USWA [?]-Health and Safety) tried to help us too. He just put an ad in the Sudbury paper about plutonium. He's retired but still at it. He told us that they had some safety equipment at the mines but the men never got to wear it. It was just piled up at the mines. There was also that guy who was an NDP [?]from Sudbury. He tried to help us. I feel bad because I can't remember his name.

Loreena Lewis: Now it's going to be bugging me too, that I can't remember his name. We felt we could do as well as any man could. We were not easily pushed around. We went and followed them around in the dirt.

Gertrude Lewis: We took a guy from the MOE down to the shore. He was sneezing all the way. We took him to the drainage to the lake and showed him all the yellow stuff coming into the lake. I used to swim there as a kid. It bothered me to see that stuff.

Loreena Lewis: There were apple trees, gooseberries. There was swimming and a nice sand beach. Then there was nothing.

Gertrude Lewis: Oh boy, when we were fighting we fought.

Loreena Lewis: We used to hang our washing out and it would be red from that dirty old plant. Our clothes would get holes in them. The dust looked red like blood. That stuff would blow around.

Gertrude Lewis: Sulphur fires would flare up once in a while. They would just start to burn.

Loreena Lewis: There were no trees. It was all bare. They had to plant trees.

Gertrude Lewis: CIL[?] called to come in. They took over from Noranda mines. A man from CIL came and walked around the site with someone from MOE. We took them on a tour. We made them jump up and down those rocks, we made them climb.

Loreena Lewis: When we were younger we could climb those rocks better than them. We were dressed better too. They came with their shiny shoes on. We knew how to dress.

Gertrude Lewis: I didn't feel comfortable with those men from the mines.

Loreena Lewis: I didn't feel comfortable with the fellas from the mining companies either.

Gertrude Lewis: After Loreena's term was over I went to another hearing. There was a lawyer there from Rio Algom. He was confused and kept saying, "Isn't that right Chief Lewis?" He would address me as Chief Lewis and I would not answer him. He kept saying chief. I kept saying nothing.
Peter Johnston was chief at the time. Peter said, "It's Chief Johnston. We only have one chief." That's how much they paid attention to us.

Loreena Lewis: (laughing) They keep trying to talk me into running for chief again. I retired from my job two years ago. I keep saying I am off.

Gertrude Lewis: Loreena was a good chief.

Loreena Lewis: When I was chief I told my family I had to treat everyone in the community equally. I told them at work I was chief and not "Mom."

Before I was chief I served on council for six years. You used to get six dollars a month for council service. Once I lost my job, because I was away on council business. I wanted to be the Chief because I wanted to be there for the people. But those Council women really made me work.

Gertrude Lewis: No rest. It's a lot of work and you can't please everyone. Sometimes people come along with what they think are new ideas, but they are actually old ideas that never worked the first time around. Sometimes there's fighting.

Loreena Lewis: When we worked on this, some people in Elliot Lake were supportive and some were not. Some people were just like robots.

Gertrude Lewis: For Elliot Lake the mine expansion was a boost for them. They built new homes. For us it was being cautious and asking them not to expand until they could find a safe way to get rid of the waste. They were thinking more of the benefits from expansion.

Loreena Lewis: It was probably the same way we felt about the plant when it came here, that there would be jobs and benefits. The plant agreement was signed in the early 1950s. I was not involved.

Gertrude Lewis: I was there when we fought for women to have a vote. I nominated the first woman councillor. I nominated Irene Meawasige.

I went to all those band meetings with the company and with Indian Affairs. It was about 1954 when they asked for a 99-year lease. We had two young fellas asking questions. The company had lawyers and they asked if the band should get its own lawyer. Indian Affairs said, "We have all the lawyers we need in Ottawa," but when we needed them, they didn't have them any longer.

Loreena Lewis: I remember the plant was already going up when Keith was a little boy. (laughing) We were walking by and I was holding Keith's hand. We walked by and I say Alec Day in a big hole in the ground. His face was all dirty. It was just black. All you could see was his white teeth. He had perfectly straight white teeth.

Gertrude Lewis: He said he always brushed his teeth with charcoal. You should have seen how nice his teeth were.

I went up to Elliot Lake once then when it was a trailer town. The only thing you really saw around here were the acid trucks turning onto the highway all night long. Business was really booming then. I had the post office here. I was never so busy in all my life.

Loreena Lewis: I married in 1952 and started working on committees as a volunteer. I volunteered at the church. That's how I got started. I was fundraising at church bingos. I have been busy all my life. I used to clean the church with Martha Pelletier. I remember being so proud of how we used to get that floor so nice and shiny. I used to help with Sophie McGregor at the rummage sales.

Gertrude Lewis: It was always the women. We dealt with the schools in Elliot Lake. All women would go to meetings and sit on committees. It was always the women. I used to wonder where our men were.

We were so busy all the time and now we can't quit. We don't know what to do with ourselves except keep working.

Loreena Lewis: Now, if I had a lot of money I would go to bingo and say I'm off. I retired. I used to work for the Wheel Inn [grocery store]. I used to babysit for the teacher, her four kids, four of them. I went back to school twice, once to become a community health nurse. These women kept telling me to get to it. (laughing) I was the community health nurse. I quit two years ago.

Gertrude Lewis: She always wants to do something for someone all the time. She just likes to help people. She still goes out to help when people call her.

Loreena Lewis: I just like to help.

Gertrude Lewis: Yeah, I raised all my kids in the post office. I married and moved back here. I belong to committees, church group, the homemakers club. We even got into trouble with the church group. (She giggles).

Loreena Lewis: I still help out with my grandchildren. I babysit them and make sure they always have a good meal.

Gertrude Lewis: And now... I'm into line dancing.

Loreena Lewis: Things weren't as fast then as they are now.

Gertrude Lewis: It seems that you are on the go steady. Back then, we used to visit people. We didn't phone.

Loreena Lewis: But if people are moving fast around you, you start moving fast too. And the meetings, they go on steady.

ESSAY

Feeding the Monster
Lorraine Rekmans

Feeding the Monster

Lorraine Rekmans

"I was a snake woman. I danced to Indian chants."
- Irving Layton

I call this essay "Feeding the Monster," because I envision people as very busy beings. I see the business in shoveling coal out of the earth into an ever blazing furnace. I see people busy cutting down trees, feeding them to an insatiable paper mill. I see people driving wood and rocks and water to and fro, up and down Canadian highways every day. I see natural resources leaving and leaving, going to God knows where. I imagine that there is a very large monster somewhere who is eating all this stuff. I imagine that this monster likes to eat tonnes and tonnes of uranium. He is never satisfied. He is never full. He is always hungry.

I begin to write this essay because I have to tell my story. I have to explain to my children and grandchildren what we are doing here and why we began feeding the monster. I am sitting in the dining room of the West Georgia Hotel in downtown Vancouver, staring at the chandeliers and the mahogany walls that are covered in brass ornamentation. I am waiting for a bowl of soup, contemplating the West Georgia Hotel, its past, its history, and what it symbolizes to me. I am part way through a book on the history of the fur trade in Canada and the corporate influence of a London-based company that shaped a nation.

I want to talk to the author. I want to ask him so many things. I want to know if the London Committee men who ran the Hudson Bay Company ever came to sit here in the West Georgia Hotel. I want to know about this chair that I sit on and if maybe one day long ago, one of those faceless men ever sat here in this very spot staring at these same walls and waited for a bowl of soup. I want to know more about those men who shaped my history. I wonder about those men from so long ago who determined my destiny, who built my country, who traded with my ancestors. But, I will never know them. I will likely never have an opportunity to meet the author either. My questions will fall on the silence of a well-written page.

I want to know if this splendid building was built to impress these well-to-do folks from London. I wonder if they were duly impressed with the wealth of this country and all that they could

exploit. I see them sitting here, ghosts from the past, licking their greasy chops, smacking on their greasy fingers, talking about all the beaver pelts that were sent to London.

I am writing this out of a sense of responsibility. It has been suggested to me that our stories need to be told for the benefit of our children and grandchildren. Our stories, after all, will be their legacy, their history. I thought about writing, and I guess I do have some responsibility to future generations. I want to let them know that we did think about things and we did feel things. I want them to know us as people with names, and faces, and lives. I don't want their questions to be unanswered. I think that today will be our history, like every day that has passed before this one.

I know from my own experience of trying to piece together the events of our checkered past as a nation and as Aboriginal people that I relied heavily on the history of these white men who tell the stories of what happened. I found that I ended up with more questions than answers about my own ancestors who were vaguely mentioned in the history texts of Canada. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know how they felt, how they reacted, what they talked about. A lot of it was never written down. People relied on an oral tradition.

The oral tradition of my grandfathers and my grandmothers was broken by the influence of a colonial power and the residential school system that was imposed on Aboriginal people. People stopped talking. They stopped telling their stories. The white government tried to enslave and assimilate Aboriginal people into the European traditions and culture. It was all a part of Canada's scheme to create one big melting pot of culture. There was an entire experiment to "civilize" Aboriginal people. People were discouraged from speaking their own language and practising their own traditions. They were like square pegs being forced into round holes. Some people were flexible. Some people became round. Others remained square. Some people got bent out of shape trying to fit into the mould. Some people got lost and some people just gave up.

Anyway, I look back on the past and I see that there were so many questions about what happened to the people I call my ancestors. I wanted to know how a lot of things happened. I was angry. I saw the state of our lands today, and I saw the disparity in our Aboriginal communities. I saw people dependent on a government welfare system, and I saw people broken- hearted and lost. I saw environmental degradation, radioactive waste, lost

homelands, lost wildlife, no access to trees, no access to lands, poverty, drunkenness, anger, humilation, shame, and sorrow.

I wanted to know why. Why did they let these things happen? Why did they let their children be dragged off to Jesuit-run schools? Why do we have to piece together the mystery of who we are as Aboriginal people? Why is our language dying? Why are we losing the battle to live in harmony with our lands? I have come to the frustrated conclusion that as people, as human beings, the "noble savage" was not infallible. We did partake in the history of this country. We were participants. Sometimes we were willing, sometimes we weren't, and sometimes we merely stood by and observed. Sometimes we trapped thousands of beaver for the Hudson Bay Company to buy a few blankets or a rifle or a nice shiny pot. Sometimes we drank too much brandy and fought each other, and sometimes we wept. But sometimes we laughed and shared what we had, and sometimes we even invented new things.

In short, my ancestors are human beings. They shared in all the joy and splendour of a vibrant race of people who were in the process of evolving. The evolution of our people was, and is, a process. We are growing and changing every day. As the drum beats and the sound resonates through the air, the process of evolution goes on. We were not a static people, and we adapted to changes in our environment, and we did the best we could. Once I figured this out, I wasn't angry any longer, and I began to see how we react to situations around us, and how we change, and how we grow. I wanted to share this with you, because I want you to know how I feel about writing this down. I want you to know that I felt lost by not knowing. I felt sad that I lost the connection to the people of my past. I felt cheated that I could not benefit from the knowledge of their experiences. I write this mostly for my children. One day they will have questions. One day I might have to explain how we came to this place in time, where we have nuclear bombs, radioactive waste, spent fuel rods, genetic deformities, and wastelands.

My stories are about uranium. But they are about something more than a radioactive mineral. My stories are about people and about oppression, about fear and about corporate colonialism, and about hope. The story is a circle. This story is about a journey around that circle.

We have to go back. I have to go way back to explain to you who I am and why I do the things I do. This is not a story about

some obscure subject of history, nor about some unknown person. This is my story about uranium, this is my story about real things that happened to me in my life. I want to tell you about the things that I saw, and the things that I know, and feel. I want to tell you about my passion for you as the next generation and the love that I have for you and the hope that I have for your future. This is partly a story about things that are done to us. But this is more of a story about who we are, who we can become, and what we can do.

My early years formulated much of who I am today. The history and the legacy of my ancestors has shaped me. Without a doubt my childhood experiences were a direct result of the disintegration of the social fabric and the social values that people had before a time of violence, hatred, and exploitation. What has happened to our families is not reflective of the times when families were needed and all individuals were a treasure and valuable component in the quest for survival.

Aboriginal people were subjected to many shameful humiliations and exploitations. Somewhere down the line, Aboriginal people came to depend on the new immigrants. Somewhere things changed. The relationship between two distinct trading partners became imbalanced. Eventually the relationship eroded and became sick and perverse. The newcomers to the land had gained the upper hand and had determined what was best for the current inhabitants. To make a long story short, one thing led to another. There were infringements on rights and lost lands and lost means to sustain Aboriginal people. Without land, there could be no opportunity for growth and development. An atmosphere of dependency developed. Governments thought the solution to the Indian problem would be assimilation into white culture. There was a silent policy that spelt out cultural genocide in very civilised terms. There were residential schools introduced to teach little brown Indians how to be little brown white Christians.

Systemic sexual abuse in residential schools somehow made its way into the treasure chest of my legacy. It was past down from generation to generation. My legacy became the shame imposed on us by a white majority, some who had really strange ways. My shame came from having a relative take liberties with my life and my body. To make matters worse, the shame of having dirty brown skin also became my inheritance. The shame of surviving sexual abuse in silence became my heirloom.

As a survivor, I grew up pretty cynical and skeptical. You might wonder what this all has to do with environmental

degradation and uranium and nuclear weapons. I think that your outlook on life has a lot to do with how you deal with things, how you approach your life and the planet you live on. I will explain as best I can how I have reached the conclusion that nuclear weapons, and nuclear waste and uranium mining are much like abuse. I will explain how I see the parallel between what has happened to me as a female Aboriginal person and as a human being on this planet.

Because of what happened to me, I believed that everyone had an ulterior motive and that there was a secret agenda behind everything. I guess you could say I was a little paranoid. I learned not to trust anyone, very early in life. I grew up and walked through this world with heavy-lidded eyes, watching everything. My experiences made me question everything and I trusted no one. As a result, I grew up to be a very curious and inquisitive person. I wanted to know the "why?" of everything. I also grew up to be very silent. But yet, internally, I struggled with many questions about the things that were going on around me. The silence choked me. I had lost my voice. It had been frightened out of me completely. I went through life afraid and silent, and afraid of the silence. My voice had been pushed way down deep inside me. My cries were muffled. My pain was hidden, deep down inside my heart. I couldn't speak. My voice was weak and pathetic. I had been told to keep silent and I listened.

Yet, inside, the questions raged. "Why is the sky blue? But why do the provinces in Canada control the harvest of timber on all the lands? Why are they called Crown Lands? Who is the Crown? Why are Aboriginal people poor and hungry? But why do Aboriginal people not share in the benefits of the harvest? But why do Aboriginal people continue to plant trees for ten cents a tree when they will never cut them down for large profits, like the large white corporations? Easily, I found many questions to keep me busy. I saw many disparities and many inequities between white and Aboriginal people. I knew something was wrong. But I didn't know why.

As I grew older, I realized a need to find my voice. I needed a safe place to stand and ask my questions. I believed I wanted to become the "intrigued journalist." I imagined walking around with a notebook, asking questions of everyone and writing down the answers. One of my professors always told me there are two sides to every story. He said, "Check your facts, do your research. Don't believe everything someone tells you." Imagine that, he felt the need to warn me, forever the one who believed there was a scandal or a scam lurking behind every corner.

I grew up in a small uranium mining town called Elliot Lake. I really didn't think much about uranium or what it was. It was just there in the ground. The miners dug it out of the ground. I never really asked why. Probably because it was right there under my nose all the time, I didn't think much about it.

My father worked in the mine. He repaired the drills that people used to drill the rock. He was called a drill doctor. He was gone every morning before the sun came up. I only know that he would pack his lunch-pail every night so meticulously. I remember being fascinated with how neat his lunch-pail was. He had his salt and pepper in the same corner every day.

Sometimes when he came home he would sleep before dinner. We all knew he was very tired from being underground all day. One day, he came home and he had a piece of rock in his lunch-pail. We all marveled at it around the dinner table. It looked like a piece of round rock shaped like a dowel. It had different colours in it. It was a drilled core from the mine. It was a piece of uranium right there on our kitchen table. I think we all fought over it and who would get to hold it and look at it up close. I don't remember if we even washed our hands before eating dinner. We were so excited to see the uranium. As far as I know, we never even asked what it was used for. It didn't even occur to me that it was strange to see grown men digging up rocks out of the earth for money. After all, we did grow up watching the Flintstones, and Fred worked in a quarry moving rocks around all day.

One day, a man came from the Atomic Energy Control Board (AECB). I thought he said he was from ABC. It sounded like Alphagetti to me. It sounded like some kind of tasty sugary sweet cereal. ABC-Alphabets, sugar crisp. It sounded good. He had a little box with a little plug- in cord and told my mother that we had to keep it in our house. I was in grade six. I was about ten years old. This was in 1973. Our house didn't have a basement. He had wanted to put it in the basement but we didn't have one. He plugged the little black box into the wall in the back room where we hung our coats and kept our shoes. The room was just off our kitchen. The box stayed plugged in for a while. It was supposed to draw radon gas out of our house. But one day, my mother unplugged it, because it was making too much noise and it was using too much hydro. My mother said it was wasting hydro. We also had electric heaters in our house. My dad eventually bought an oil furnace to help keep the bills down.

It wasn't until I was 23 years old that I discovered what that box was. I found out it was a radon fan. The levels of radon gas in Elliot Lake were high and the AECB wanted these fans installed in the homes to draw the gas out of the homes. I couldn't figure out why this box was placed in an unventilated room. I couldn't imagine that it would draw anything out of our home except for maybe the hydro. If it was drawing any radon gas, it was probably just redistributing the gas around inside our homes. A scientist told me that radon gas is a heavy gas. It hovers about three feet off the ground. If the fan was on, it would probably suck up the gas and spew it into the air over and over again. It wasn't vented outside. I think if we had a basement, the fan would have sucked the radon gas out of our basement into our kitchen maybe. I think if this is true about radon gas hovering three feet off the ground, then AECB were foolish to be sucking it out of our basements. I was 23 when I found out about this.

As a child, I never gave a second thought to uranium. We were surrounded by it every day. It was what put food on our table. We had a large nuclear atom at the entrance to our community. We had the Radon Daughters baseball teams and the Nuclear Figure Skating Club. Every summer we had a Uranium Festival. At Elliot Lake it still goes on, to this very day. In the summer time, Denison Mines, the company that my father worked for, would sponsor a picnic and give us free hot dogs and pop.

When I finally stepped away from Elliot Lake and went to college in a non-nuclear town, for the first time I was exposed to uranium in a new way. There were radioactive jokes when I told people where I came from. People would tease me about glowing green and being radioactive. It seemed as if all the people in the world knew a joke about Elliot Lake and I was oblivious. I met people who were involved in peace marches, people who wanted nuclear disarmament, people who talked about Love Canal. It was like I had been lulled to sleep in a little uranium town called the Uranium Capital of the World. I felt like I had been slapped in the face and had been rudely woken by the rest of the world.

Elliot Lake town officials were subservient to the corporate interests. The large foreign-owned mining companies were everyone's bread and butter and we should have been grateful to them. They buttered the bread on every table. I never heard such awful stories about uranium until I left town. The people in the community would rejoice if the price of uranium went up and frown if the price was down on world markets.

Pretty much the most notorious people in town were the members of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), the union that represented the miners at Elliot Lake. Again, in my 20s, I discovered that this union was willing to challenge the large corporations on health and safety issues.

Once I had left town, I discovered a lot of things I was ignorant of. I learned about nuclear weapons, Hiroshima, silicosis, radon gas, low-level radioactive waste, nuclear power plants, nuclear medicine, the disaster at Chernobyl, Love Canal, radiation badges, urine tests, and yellowcake. I was flabbergasted. It was as if I had been living in a uranium dream and woke up to a nuclear nightmare. Sometimes things look clearer from far away.

Upon arriving back in Elliot Lake after college, I had secured a job as a reporter for the town newspaper. One summer day, I decided to take my two boys to the Nuclear Museum in town. We went into the museum and looked at all the displays. I saw a vending machine with little plastic bubbles in it which were filled with pieces of rock. The sign said you could get a piece of uranium for 25 cents. There was a barrel there labelled "Yellowcake.". It was like an oil drum with a plexiglass cover. Inside was a yellow powdery substance. I would never have noticed it except that my oldest son, Chris, had moved the plexiglass cover aside and had reached into the barrel. I have to believe that this was not yellowcake. I have to believe that this was only a display. I shook my head in disbelief and we quickly left the museum.

I was anxious to have my first job. Quickly, I delved into all issues. I was a new reporter and I was anxious to tell any story. Especially those stories about the triumphs of the underdog. I had pegged the mine officials and the town mayor and council as the culprits in this great masquerade of the Uranium Festival. How could I ever bound around and relish in the celebration of another Uranium Festival ever again, after I had seen the destruction and the terror inflicted on the victims of Hiroshima? The world as I knew it had ended and would never be the same for me again.

I know that I can never capture or express in the written word the pain that I felt upon my awakening, the tragedy of my instantaneously being cured of this disillusionment. This escapes description. I felt sick. I felt stupid. I wondered why I just accepted what was, without question. I lived in a community that lived and breathed uranium dust and radon gas every single day and thought nothing of it.

I felt really stupid. I felt as if I had been duped. I felt duped by those people who have and want more. I was angry at the greed and the audacity of an industry that could exploit this resource and allow it to be used to create such destruction. I had been cradled in the bosom of the great Uranium Capital of the World. I had been lulled to sleep by the dream of another nuclear reactor sale and increased profits for the company mines. They gave us a turkey every Christmas. They gave my dad new work boots once a year. Miners got a bonus for digging the stuff out of the ground faster. We were eating the turkey and the dressing and the potatoes, while the runoff from the mine waste was seeping into our water system and poisoning our animals. The experts and scientists were always reassuring us that the stuff wasn't dangerous. They told us that levels were safe. One mine official professed that you could drink the water coming out of the tailings spouts.

I had to know what was going on. I had to figure this out. I had to know what happened to me. I had to rediscover where I lived and who these people were. I had to uncover all that I had missed. I felt as if I had been in a dark room full of books and finally someone turned on the lights. There were a lot of things I did not understand. Even now, I question my own abilities to understand the different systems of measurement for exposure to radioactive material. Every day, I am reminded by the experts and by the scientists that I only have a limited understanding of the physics around nuclear energy. Every day, the experts remind me what an idiot I am.

I question the merits of a system that uses many different types of measurement for different purposes. There are working level months, pecilcuries, alpha rays, beta rays, radon gas, low levels, ionizing radiation, etc. As far as I can recall, there was no instruction in school detailing what radiation was, what nuclear fission was. It was never explained to us as young students in a uranium mining town. I had many questions. Scientists would provide answers. If I was a nonbeliever, I was labelled an "anti-nuke" which is a terrible thing to be in a uranium mining town.

Getting back to the newspaper, there are a few stories that stick out vividly in my mind. I remember my first summer job during college was at my hometown newspaper. There was a senior reporter who covered a story about thorium being moved from one storage site to a waste management area. The AECB called these WMAs. I wondered about it. What was it? Is it a place where waste is managed? What do people manage to do with radioactive waste? Anyway, I will get to that later.

So, the story was that thorium had been stored in a shed at the old Nordic mine site. Nordic Mine had closed down and it was the townsite for a few homes and a trailer park. There was a tailings site there where my husband, as a young boy, flew his kite and played ball.

It seemed that this thorium was improperly stored in this shed and had to be moved to comply with government regulations. The thorium was stored in barrels, like oil drums. The AECB came to town to supervise the move. A few mine workers loaded the barrels onto the back of a truck while the AECB in their white suits and headgear looked on. The mine workers wore their standard hard hats, safety boots, and work gloves. The senior reporter for the *Elliot Lake Standard* went out to get pictures of the event. He had pictures showing who was who at the site. The truck motored along through town, past McDonalds and out to the waste management area. Apparently the barrels were thrown into the WMA and they would not sink. As told to me by a member of the USWA, one AECB worker shot the barrels with a gun so that they would absorb the water from the WMA and eventually sink. This was joked about as AECB's new modern waste management technology. There was an entire nonchalance about the whole affair. It just struck me as bizarre behaviour. I finally discovered that a WMA was originally a lake. It had been explained to me that tailings and waste from the mine site were dumped into a "natural basin" and managed. The WMAs looked like deserts covered in very fine white sand or dust. They used to be lakes and were filled to the brim with mine tailings. I did walk on them and take pictures of this desert in northern Ontario, the land of a million lakes and green trees and wild animals. Here in the centre of this serene picturesque landscape was such an anomaly as to boggle the mind.

The story continued. The mine workers who loaded the trucks were subsequently subjected to urine tests to check their levels of exposure. They were found to have high levels of thorium in their urine. Later, I remember, the senior reporter contacted them and mentioned that he had pictures of the entire affair. He did speak to them about the possibility of legal action. I know that when later he tried to contact them again, their phones had been disconnected and it was rumoured that they had left town.

I was appalled at the explanation of the whole concept of a WMA. Now remember, I am not a scientist nor am I an expert. But what I saw was this. A company had too much waste and decided that a lake was a good place to dump it in. They decided this way

back in the 1950s and continued the practice until 1990 and after, suggesting that a natural basin was ideal to contain the waste. Now, I know that lakes come from somewhere. I know that water comes into them and leaves them by several pathways. Water comes from the sky and from the ground to fill up our lakes. I figured the waste in the lakes would be contained insomuch only as mother nature would allow. But the experts allowed this dumping to continue. The AECB issued a licence to these companies to operate. The AECB licence allowed for a certain amount of runoff into nearby water systems if there was too much rain. We had things like acceptable levels which were defined by the experts and the scientists. I always questioned the merit of this system. The AECB charged the mine companies licensing fees, so that the AECB could monitor their activity. It would be like me paying you to look out for my behaviour.

I figured that these companies were wasteful and destructive. I figured that the AECB was not much of a monitoring body, because it lacked total independence from government and from industry. I looked at my home and all the waste in our backyard. I was told that it was more than 200 million tonnes of radioactive waste. I cannot even fathom one tonne. This story is incredible. It is unbelievable that mine and government officials would drive a pickup truck full of thorium through town, past McDonalds, past our schools and our downtown core, and mindlessly dump it into what used to be a lake.

Often the town boasted its prowess in mining. I know now of the false pride which was instilled in the people of my community. A strange sense of accomplishment that was derived from flooding the world markets with a radioactive substance. As I watched and learned and read, it became evident to me that mining uranium was not as lucrative as it was portrayed. The Ontario government provided limitless and seemingly endless subsidies to Elliot Lake's uranium mines. The government even agreed to stockpile the stuff while the bottom dropped out of the world market in the 1960s.

Mine companies received subsidies to offset the cost of implementing air-ventilation systems underground for the miners. Our tax dollars were being used to offset industrial costs. The foreign companies walked away with the profits. I couldn't believe what I read in the company annual reports declaring huge profits and record-producing years. Those huge profits and dividends to the faceless shareholders came at our expense. But remember,

they gave us a turkey every Christmas. I hope the shareholders are enjoying their dividends which were earned at great expense.

The mines argued for a considerably long time and at great legal expense that mining uranium did not cause lung cancer. Finally, they lost the argument and had to implement changes in the mine air-ventilation systems. They were gracious enough to do this, as long as the government would pay. Now, I had assumed through logic, that these foreign-owned companies were greedy, wasteful, destructive, and liars. I pretty much had summed it up in my first year of watching them as a reporter.

Weekly, I would call the AECB and pester the local staff. I have to admit that some of the staff were conscientious people. I would ask them to explain to me the concept of runoff. I would ask for tours of the tailings sites. I wanted to know why the Ministry of Natural Resources had to restock trout into Quirke Lake. I wanted to know why acidic levels changed because of mine spills. I wanted to know what was going on. I wanted to know why the Ministry of the Environment had to step aside for the federal government to regulate uranium mining. I wanted to know why provincial environmental laws did not apply to uranium mines. Finally, I pestered them so much that the staff agreed to provide me with a weekly report on any unusual occurrences at the mine. Every week, in the paper, I printed a weekly spill report. Some people in town started calling me names. I was called the "little spill freak." I was labelled as a "Greenpeace lover." I think the term today is a "granola-eating tree hugger." I really didn't care. I had been called a lot of names before, and I had suffered many types of abuse by people who were closer to me than mine officials or government staff. I just didn't give a damn. I had a sense of logic and I wasn't going to let go of it for anything.

I had to hang on for dear life. I was being bombarded with scientific studies and information and articles written by experts. There were Miners Health Studies, Infant Mortality Statistics, Women's Health Studies, Studies on Beaver and Radium Uptake in Wild Animals, Leukemia Studies on Children Living Near Nuclear Facilities. I scanned these like cheap novels. I assumed they were cheap novels. I read about the effects of cumulative dosage. Exposure from your microwave, from x-rays from your doctor, from x-rays from your dentist, from airplane flights, from your tv, from your computer, from the tailings in your neighbourhood, from the radioactive dust blowing over your community, from the particulate in your drinking water, from the mine waste rock used as landfill

under your homes, from the radon fan blowing radon around your house, from the uranium on your dinner table. There seemed to be many cumulative sources. I was afraid to calculate my own personal exposure levels. I was skeptical about the scientists who scoffed at the cumulative exposure concepts. I was sceptical because I knew there were truths other than science. I heard about electromagnetic fields before they were introduced as a scientific concept, from an old Indian woman in northern Ontario. She told me a simple story. The berries would grow. Then Ontario Hydro built the power lines across Indian lands, and then the berries would not grow anymore under the hydro lines. I thought quite simply there were scientists who knew the specifics of what should be happening under scientific law, and then there were the people who saw what was happening on the ground, in real time, in real life.

Cumulative effects of ionizing radiation. Humm, now there is something that every lay person understands. I read the BEIR V report. I think it stands for the Biological Effects of Ionizing Radiation. I will tell you one thing I know for certain. Elliot Lake has been studied to death. I have never seen so many studies on a group of people living in one community in my entire life. I thought Elliot Lake was one big petri dish in the world science lab. One scientist told me that he was considering a study to look at the placenta from mothers at Elliot Lake. He said his study of beaver from around the tailings sites revealed that radium did concentrate in the reproductive organs of beaver. I know that scientists get money to do these studies from the AECB. I know that if the AECB finds anything untoward, they likely wouldn't announce it to a public at large.

The other thing that struck me as odd was that people in town didn't seem to know they were guinea pigs for these nameless scientists and experts. No one seemed to know they were being examined under a microscope. There were high levels of heart disease and uterine and ovarian cancer. The health officials, the experts, told me that it only seemed that the numbers were high, because "the population was small and any anomaly would throw the stats out of whack." It was not statistically significant. Now, as far as statistics go, I believe they are insignificant. But people, my friends, are another matter entirely.

As time went on, I heard the Atomic Energy Control Board was calling for a study on the teeth of children who were born at Elliot Lake. I sent my children's baby teeth to these scientists. I received a letter assuring me that they found no traces of

radioactive material in my children's teeth. I read the letter sceptically and felt I would never know the truth.

During my brief time at the newspaper, I wrote many articles. I wrote about practically everything that was going on in town. At one point, the Canadian government had launched a project to try to find a home for nuclear waste that came from southern Ontario. The government actually invited communities to host this waste in exchange for compensation. Many small towns were actually competing for the waste. I followed this federal panel around shamelessly forever. I went to all their meetings and wrote down all their comments. I checked and double-checked on what they said to us and on what they said to other communities. I compared notes with other reporters and discovered that these folks didn't seem to know what they were doing or why. Eventually, this group went away. The nuclear waste at Port Hope is still where it was.

I wrote many personal columns. I was quite pleased to have my own personal column. I was still a young journalist and it was quite an honour to have space in a newspaper to talk about things that were on your mind. I wrote many anti-nuclear pieces about the failing reactors in southern Ontario. I criticised Ontario Hydro for telling people that energy demand projections showed we needed more reactors. At this point, I knew, we could not manage the waste that our reactors were currently producing. So, I asked the public, "Why should we build new reactors if we have nowhere to put our waste?" My views were sometimes completely out of sync with what the mayor and council of the community were trying to do. I did get criticised a lot by the mayor and council. I was told to stop portraying my community in such a negative light. I wrote about the concepts of energy conservation as opposed to supporting the construction of a new reactor. Remember, the readers were digging uranium out of the ground. They were praying for markets, and I was advising against establishing new markets for uranium. I wrote and wrote and wrote. I actually got into the groove of finding a little bit of a voice. I criticised the mine companies, I criticised and parodied Ontario Hydro and their failing safety record at Ontario reactors. I criticised the USWA for its inability to protect mine workers. I just went on and on with whatever was on my mind. I was actually having a really good time. It seems that the column may have generated some newspaper sales, people were talking about things, and I was having fun. I wasn't making much money, but I was happy to have a voice. My

column was entitled, "Can We Talk?" I thought it spoke to the issue of free speech and losing that old ghost of fear and silence that still loomed over me.

One day, two men came into our little newspaper office and wanted to speak to the publisher. They wanted to meet me. They wanted to know if my column was syndicated. They were from Ontario Hydro. I really did not think much of it at the time. I was young and I thought, "Okay, so maybe they don't like being criticised so much, oh well, too bad for them." They invited me on a tour of their reactors so that I would be informed of what I was writing about. I guess they were trying to tell me that I didn't know what I was talking about. I guess they were trying to say that I was not an expert so maybe I should shut up about reactors and nuclear issues. I guess I was too stubborn to listen. I guess maybe I just didn't like to be told to be quiet. I had heard it before.

I was a little bit angry. I saw these two white men in nice suits in my hometown telling me that reactors were a good thing. I also saw the waste in my backyard. My first thought was, "good for whom?" I was lucky at that time in my life to be young and to be naive. I had a friend who was my fellow reporter. She was a good friend who helped spur me on. She joked with me and we laughed a lot even though what I was writing about was sad. One councillor wrote a full- page article in a competing newspaper to condemn me. He called me "that intrepid journalist." He was being sarcastic. I had to look up the word intrepid. It meant fearless. I was too naive to be afraid. I really didn't think about fear. I was too impassioned. One day, I had a strange feeling that I was being followed. Everywhere I went, there seemed to be the same man, in the same car, reading a newspaper. I questioned my own observation, so I asked my friend to come with me for one day to see if she noticed anything strange. Without a doubt, there was the same man, in the same car, reading a newspaper everywhere I went. I just shrugged it off.

One day, there was a change at the newspaper. I had a new editor. My column was cut. I was very sad at losing this outlet. I was probably a little vain about my right to speak out every week. I left the paper shortly afterwards. During this time, the mine companies were getting ready to close their operations at Elliot Lake. They were letting workers go. The ore grade was too low to mine and the market price was poor. I just saw people getting ready to leave town and go on to mine some other mineral somewhere else. I saw the mine officials leaving town. I saw the waste they

were leaving behind. I imagined a big moving van. I wished it would come and haul the waste away to wherever these mine company officials were going. But it didn't happen.

Then I found a job as editor for an Aboriginal newspaper. I was so excited. I moved to Blind River. Blind River was home to a federally owned nuclear refinery. Eventually it was sold to a French company. I think it belongs to Uranez. The refinery in Blind River is now called Cameco. It is about five to six kilometres away from my home.

In 1991, Cameco had an accident. There was an uncontrolled release of radioactive material from its stacks. This accident took place over a 24-hour period on a long weekend. I just thought it was typical of the uranium industry to have an accident and be unable to report the accident or discover the accident in time. This radioactive dust blew over a First Nation community which is located almost directly under the stacks of the refinery. This plant releases nitric acid, radioactive particulate, and sulphuric acid every day. But the AECB determines safe and acceptable releases for Cameco. The AECB does not have a presence in Blind River. They locate their offices in Ottawa, which is an eight-hour drive from Blind River. Most nuclear industries do self-compliance monitoring now and issue reports to the regulatory agencies.

In my travels, I met many people working to stop the spread of this nuclear disease. I was invited to Saskatchewan to speak to Aboriginal people who were located near the site of a proposed uranium mine. I cautioned these people against the environmental degradation that uranium mines impose.

I was invited by the Inter-Church Uranium Committee. I visited many communities in northern Saskatchewan. I spoke to a few First Nation people on my trip and told them of our experiences at Elliot Lake. During this tour, people from Cameco Corporation were following me and taking notes at these town hall meetings. I was a little bit uneasy. My favourite saying was, "These people creep me out." I just continued on and pretended they were not there. Then, I spoke louder and even more forcefully, hoping they would write down everything I said, and maybe it would start sinking into their nuclear-happy brains. I knew that they loved their company and they loved the nuclear industry and they believed it was a good thing. They beleived it was good clean energy, better than fossil fuel and better than burning wood. I didn't think it was so clean. I saw the waste. I knew my community had lost ten lakes. I

knew that my father was beginning to cough. I knew that he had to spit in a jar so it could be analyzed for lung cancer or silicosis from mining uranium. I knew that many of my father's friends and coworkers were dying of cancer. I didn't think uranium was so clean. I didn't think that nuclear bombs were worth anything. I didn't think uranium was worth paying the price of stillborn children at Elliot Lake. I didn't think uranium was worth my father's life. He worked all his life to feed us. I tell him he was dying for a living. I wanted these company people to hear me. I wanted to talk louder.

About this same time, I began a healing process in my life. I began to dig deeper into myself and find my voice. I wanted to find the voice of that small child who was too afraid to cry out. I needed to reach inside my soul and find the words that would heal me. I learned about how afraid I was. I learned about how I tried too hard. I learned many things about myself that I didn't know. I often liken it to a car that is running on one cylinder. I was missing a few parts. On my healing journey, I found these parts. I began to discover all the things that were me. I found my power in my voice. I found my power in my own words that described what was happening to me and to the world around me. I learned that I was beautiful, and that I was a creation of God. I learned that the Creator loved me. I discovered the Great Mystery. I discovered the beauty of what the Creator had built on earth.

I was amazed at how many things I was able to do, especially being a car that ran on only one cylinder. I figured that once all my parts were working, once I had found my true voice, I would be able to do so much more. I was excited. I was looking forward to the rest of my life. I had found a serenity and an honesty and openness. In my healing I discovered what abuse had done to me. I learned how I had been silenced by fear and oppressed by something that was bigger and more important and more knowledgeable than me. I immediately recognized the similarity between what had happened to me as a child and what was happening to our planet and what was happening to us as people. We were told to be quiet because we were not the experts. While we remained silent, the experts and the corporations pressed on with their environmental degradation and oppression of us. We stood by uncertain and afraid to speak up, to speak out, and to say, "Hey, what you are doing is hurting me. What you are doing is hurting my planet." I was a child when these terrible things happened to me. I was not an expert at life. The adults who hurt me were more knowledgeable than me. I drew a parallel between

my personal experience as a woman and our experience as people on this planet. I figured people were doing things for their own benefit and telling us to be quiet.

People were digging uranium out of the ground and walking away with the profits. The uranium was getting sold to nuclear reactors and then turned into energy for more profits. The uranium was processed and sold for nuclear bombs for profit, war, and destruction. Millions were being spent. Millions of dollars were leaving my community. We were left with the garbage.

As a woman, with a new voice and a few women friends who also had voices, made presentations to the federal panel on uranium mine decommissioning. This was the first time in the history of our country that uranium mine decommissioning was being subjected to a federal public hearing process.

The mines had proposed to put a water cover over the tailings and leave. I had some things to say about this, as did my friends. We suspected that the hearing process was a sham, but we participated anyway. We had to speak out. The mine tailings are flooded now.

I have many more stories about the healing journey. I said this story was a circle, or the journey around a circle. I meant it was a journey back to the beginning, back to the time when I had a voice. I journeyed back to the time when I was not afraid. I learned how to be brave again. I learned how to speak up and take control of my life. I learned how to say no. I learned how to say, "I don't like this, it's hurting me. Stop."

Many of us have been silent for a long time. We have been told to be quiet, because we do not know all the details of the scientific information possessed by the experts. We essentially are told that we are too stupid to know anything of any significance on our planet. We are told ridiculous things such as, "Oh, the mine waste is fine, it is contained, don't worry."

It is as if we have been listening to lunatics. What has happened to us? Why are we listening to lunatics. What good is a nuclear bomb? What country and what people are we hoping to defend? The poisons that seep into our water system and the tailings' dust in the air around us will kill us slowly and silently. Who will be left to defend, if we all die of radiation poisoning?

"Have a Vision Not Clouded By Fear"
Lorraine Rekmans
March 1999

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This homeland stands as a microcosm of the nuclear age. We are wise to listen carefully, for these stories of loss and suffering are told with sympathy urging us to face the crucial dilemmas together.

Nuclearism adds a very long and fundamental dimension to earlier assaults on life, land, and resources. Damage from the fur trade and logging is recoverable. Nuclearism, however, marks the culmination of the system of exploitation for short-term profit. We have a choice. We can unravel common problems or bludgeon our way to common oblivion.

The details given here help lead to solutions. For example, the health and environmental problems come not only from uranium mines, mills, and tailings, but also from the acid plant, the bulk oil storage, the refinery, and continuing threats. Responsibility lies with all these industries and with both the Canadian and U.S. governments which supported and ordered their deadly products. In addition, the patterns of institutional compartmentalization and unheeded experimentation lead to lies and avoidance rather than solutions. These people and lands can not be discarded without sacrificing us all.

Basic fairness and justice demand that we end the foolish practices and repair the damage. Thorough compensation and cleanup would cost only a fraction of the $5.5 trillion the U.S. has spent developing, using and threatening to use nuclear weapons. Our recommendations are:

- Continue recording and transcribing the stories of Serpent River First Nation and north shore leaders, elders and activists.
- Assemble and demand a right to all information related to health and the environment compiled by governmental or private research organizations, contractors or subcontractors.
- Train local people in reliable and accurate monitoring of all radionuclides and chemical toxins in impacted areas.
- Clarify all cleanup and waste classification standards and methods.
- Institute proper compensation for radiation and concomitant toxic chemical exposure through radiation exposure compensation acts and treaties. Schedule national and international hearings.

- Impose strict liability and financial accounting on all past and present nuclear and related contractors and agencies.
- Establish effective communication among affected groups.

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- Restoring the Nuclear Free Great Lakes Basin, The Peace Education Center, 423 Albert Avenue, East Lansing, MI 48823, USA.

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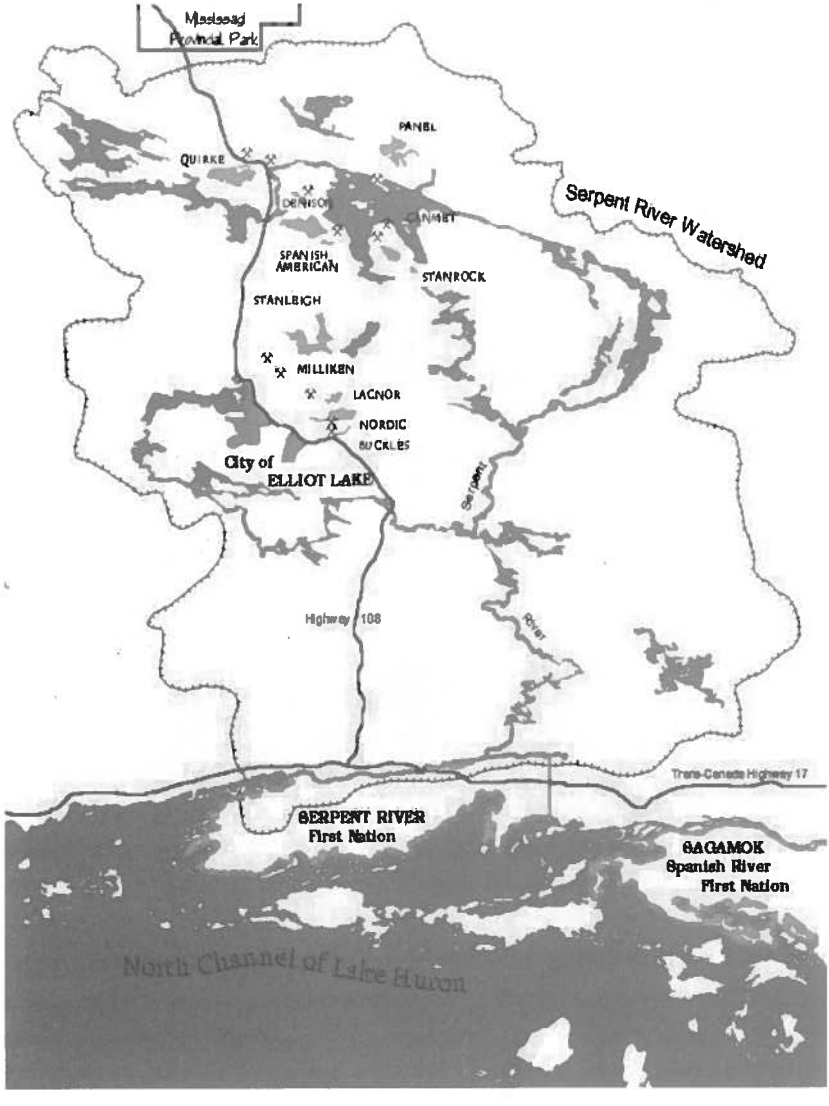
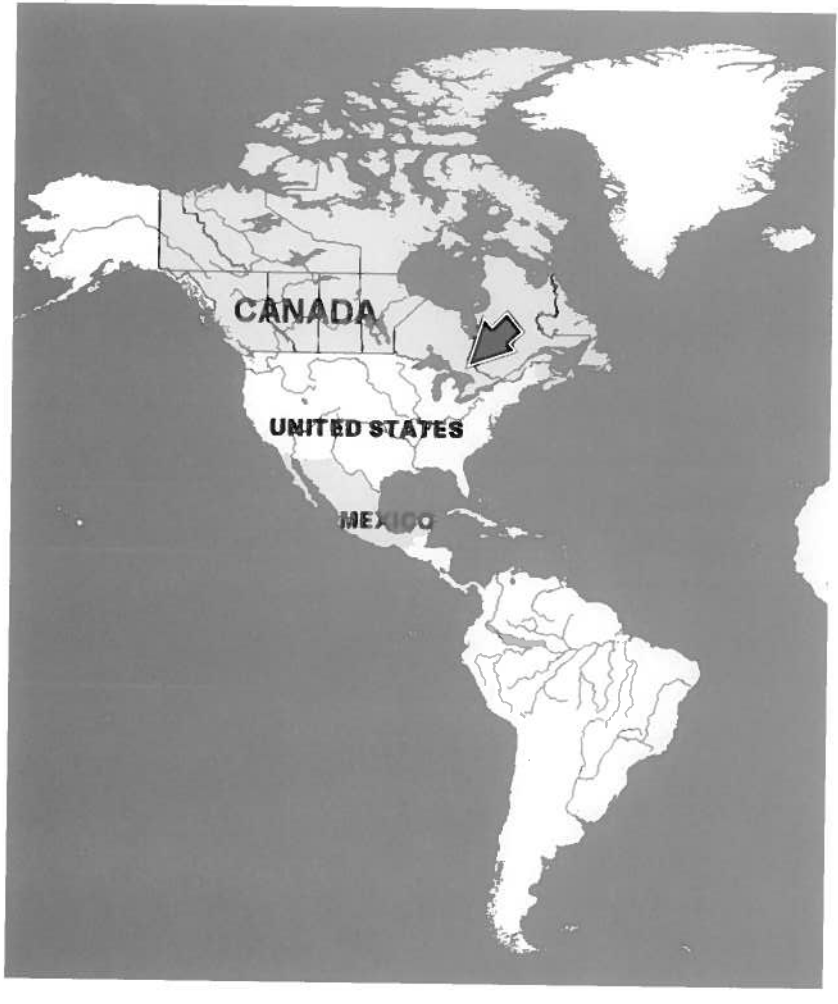
THE SERPENT RIVER WATERSHED



THE GREAT LAKES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