

## REGIONAL ELDERS ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION

### ELDER INTERVIEWS

The following provides the views and concerns of the members of the Regional Elders Environment Commission as expressed in individual interviews during the summer of 1992. The Commission is made up of elders from the Sucker Creek, Driftpile and Swan River Bands. The Elders Commission was put together in response to the approved expansion to the Alberta Special Waste Treatment Centre (ASWTC) at Swan Hills in order to monitor and discuss the expansion and the plant operation. Except where noted, the following are direct quotations as recorded on tape.

In order to combat the notion of the Swan Hills as "relatively uninhabited" as often reported during the expansion hearings, section (1) describe some of the traditional activities of the elders in the Swan Hills. Section (2) serves to express the elders' impressions of the Natural Resources Conservation Board (NRCB) after participating in hearings of the board in the winter of 1992.

#### Charlie Willier, Sucker Creek Band (July 17, 1992)

- (1) I have been trapping in that area over there (the Swan Hills) ever since I was sixteen when I got out of the convent. I went with my dad on pack horses. We built a cabin over there. We were familiar with all that Swan Hills area. We have been trapping there for so many years, until all these people, oil companies, this and that....private roads; you can't even travel on them to get to our trapline.

We had to go by horses in the fall. About 45 to 50 miles south from here, where we live at Sucker Creek. That was an old forestry pack trail that we followed. Old forestry ranger made a trail right to that Wallace Mountain, they used to call it; Now a days its Goose Tower....After they put that tower there, then they called it Goose Mountain. So we have been trapping there all our lives, including my Uncle Dan Willier; he had a trapline over there. Old Francis Willier; all them people from Sucker Creek, their dads had a trapline over there....That's the way they have been making a living out of that Swan Hills area. There's not only Sucker Creek; from there on joining traplines from Driftpile for my dad and them....right pass the Swan Hills. Joe Giroux had a trapline next to my dad's and my uncle's trapline. That would be west of that waste plant.

(We would) come and stay a week, set up snares over there (in the Swan Hills) and then we go back and visit them in a week's time. We would find frozen coyotes, lynx...everything was rich at that time over there. Marten, and fisher; there was all kinds of squirrels, weasels...rich population of moose...you could see them every place around the river.

Now they started putting poison there (the ASWTC); there will be nothing there for our future generations if the fur goes up again. That's why we're against this thing.

We used to go pick blueberries from the south side of Swan Hills. We would go there with the women and bring back berries for the winter.

We would camp right there at the Freeman River; and them lakes east of there. There are all kinds of lakes with beaver and muskrat. Beautiful country at one time, before the white man come and destroy everything we had over there; our livelihood, our fur, our hunting ground, our berry picking. Everything is gone now; I don't know what our future generation is going to do. It's already spoiled.

There are lots of herbs over there that grow on top of the mountain...We're scared to go take it out; maybe its contaminated.

- (2) We were taken (treated) like Indians; they (the NRCB) don't take our words. On account of that big money that's promised to them.

This is just a small outfit there (current ASWTC). Already they say you can't fish along...the fish are not good to eat on Edith Lake and all them little lakes surrounding there. It must be something wrong with that little one (current ASWTC). What about the big one that's going to be put there.

They (CSAL) didn't give us straight answers. A lot of things were hidden; just to get an expansion.

They (the NRCB) didn't give us enough time, only one month.

There was three judges sitting in front over there. It seemed for me, they were judges or something. And they talked to each other...and come up with a decision. Three old men sitting in front of the table. I think they were judges from some place...the city. The people of Swan Hills, they had their lawyer sitting with them. He cross-examined, just like a court...It was like a real court case, the hearing. It's the way they operated. And they didn't tell us if it was approved, or what. And finally about a month after they approved it...by 80% of Swan Hills

people want that expansion to go on, so that is what those judges go for, 80%. We were only about 30 people from Sucker Creek. We got outvoted from there I guess, I don't know; That 80%. Swan Hills people wanted that waste plant to go on, for their pocket money.

We tried to appeal that thing that we lost (the NRCB decision), but its too much money; we don't have that money. We sure would like to appeal it, but our lawyer said it's going to cost you like hell. So that is where we stopped.

There are a lot of reasons why we don't want that toilet to be built right at the edge of our reserves. It's (the ASWTC) just like a huge toilet. People from all over Alberta, over the border, they come and shit there and go back. That's what I told that Minister (Honourable Ralph Klein during visit of July 19, 1992 ). That's the way it looks like to me and all of us Indians.

Probably there is no compensation if something spills on our roads.

They (CSAL) classified that "wasteland" and that's why the government approved it (the ASWTC)...That's why they got the permit to make that first one there. They never mentioned there was traplines, and things, and Indians living close by....They said there was no people around there. They should come to the reserve before....see the people trap.

Senator Joe Willier, Sucker Creek Band (July 17, 1992)

- (1) Before I got married I had a trapline here (the Swan Hills), and I have been married now for 62 years. 328 is my number on my trapline.

This is the First Nations, all this area here (looking over map of the Swan Hills area)...we've been trapping. These people (CSAL) said that there was nobody there before, that they found that place there....no, no. They said on the paper that they found a strange country, wild country, that's where they put that (the ASWTC). Nobody was living in there, nobody ever live there before. What about these 500 people living there before the waste plant, what about these people all around us, Smith, High Prairie, Valleyview, Fox Creek, Whitecourt, Fort Assiniboine? How many thousand people live there? How many thousand kids? How many thousand animals, livestock, wild animals? They just said they found that country, new country, like nobody was living there before. He's lying. I told him, what do you call him, that big shot (the Honourable Ralph Klein), I told him about it and he just shake his head.

We used to go up there (the Swan Hills) with the family... Camping and then move out again, hunting...at the Freeman River. We kill a moose, dry some meat and share it with maybe five, ten families up there. There was no white people up there...Now hardly anyone is a trapper, Indian trapper. Too many oil companies all over. You can't go trapping up there. If you leave your traps through the winter, somebody will bother your traps, or run over them with a skidoo. What's the use in trying to trap in there now. It's been logged out; no timber, nothing left.

First Nations was here before; before anybody, not even the white man. The minister (Treaty 8 Commissioner), at the time the first treaty was signed (Treaty 8), the minister told him take the bush, you know the country; you can make a living there trapping, hunting...The Minister said anybody bother you, or white people, the police will be here to look after you; that's yours. Queen Victoria bought the land but she sent somebody. When we signed the treaty...the minister we had rights to hunt and trap for food. He said this bush, I didn't bought that bush; that's yours. I just bought six inches, just enough to turn over. I never bought the bush. The bushland is supposed to be First Nations....That's what they called the crown land; you can hunt on the crown land. Now they started to make that new law, occupied land....You can't go in. Oil company put in that law.

You can't even trap in here (the Swan Hills) any more. The forestry roads and oil all over here now; you have to get out of there.

- (2) I think the lawyer got scared we were going to lose (an appeal), and we got no money to pay for lose.

It's \$60 million, that's what they are fighting for, the money...they don't think about the people, the kids, the wildlife; just that pile of money....They're not going to spend that \$60 million on the workers; some in the lawyer's pocket, some in the bigshot's pocket....\$60 million taxpayer's money.

Bill Willier, Sucker Creek Band (July 17, 1992)

- (1) So I can't see why they say nobody ever went up there (Swan Hills); they've been trapping there all through their lives, the old timers.

They tried to tell us that nobody ever been up in that Swan Hills Country. Well, they have been logging up there, some of them....I guess McCrae logged quite a bit over there.... he had saw mills up there, around House Mountain.

They (Swan River Band) cut across the Swan Hills from Kinuso on a trail, a wagon trail. There were people going through there before they even discovered oil. When they discovered oil, the oil companies starting staying there in trailers... started to build a little town (town of Swan Hills). There is nobody there that's a permanent resident, so they stay there to work the plant. When somebody dies they go home; they take the body home from where they come from....Lawrence Willier found only three graves.

- (2) They (CSAL) told us all nothing should happen; it's pretty well safe. Now we heard that they had a blow out (Incident at Swan Hills July 5, 1992)....They were telling us, it's pretty safe, all monitored; if anything goes wrong they will know it right away. Well, they didn't know it.

He (Jerome Slavic, Council for First Nations) done his best; but you know, fighting against the government is pretty hard. The provincial government is in that (the ASWTC) too, so its pretty hard.

The guys on the board (NRCB), maybe they get paid....that's what we figured....get paid by the company; they can do that.

That Chairman there, he wasn't too happy about it. He wanted to go on our side that time; but what can he do. The others made a decision....so many against one. Oh, it's pretty hard. The government is in there. It's pretty hard to fight them; they've got lots of money.

Eva Laboucan, Driftpile Band (July 29, 1992)

note Eva did not want to be taped. The information contained in section (1) is paraphrased from discussions. The comments contained in section (2) are direct quotations.

- (1) Eva Laboucan uses the Swan Hills extensively to gather medicinal herbs, plants and roots, such as strawberry bush, sage, common yarrow, muskegapwe, and upsagi wushgosh, in order to treat or prevent a variety of ailments. Within this region, many of these medicinal substances can be found only in the Swan Hills.

After Eva Laboucan was married, the family spent their summers camping along the Little Driftpile River. The families would travel by horse team along ranger trails up into the Swan Hills. The men would hunt moose, while the women gathered blueberries, huckleberries, and cranberries near the river.

Eva Laboucan's brother, Dan Willier, used to spend all his time up in the hills. Eva noted that he would spend all winter up there except for a couple of weeks around Christmas. Dan Willier was made famous for catching a giant grizzly known as "Big Dan" which was housed at Al Oming's Game Farm in Edmonton. Dan Willier claims to have been the first to find oil up in the Swan Hills.

- (2) I don't think they (the NRCB) even listened to our concerns. We were concerned about the people's health. We were not thinking about just ourselves; we were concerned for the Swan Hills people too.

All that waste comes down; it cannot stay up there.

They (the NRCB) thought we were stupid. They did not see what we were talking about. All they thought about was money. We were concerned for the people....They do not see what we see. That's why we had Ralph Klein up into the bush and down to the lake (visit by the Minister July 19, 1992) to see the way we live....It's going to take a long time for them to understand us Indians; they think they know us, but they don't.

They (CSAL) said everything was safe. And now they had that accident not too long ago (Incident at Swan Hills July 5, 1992). I'm not threatening anything, but something has to give up there, the pipes, something.

The white people (the NRCB) talked. We didn't talk, we just listened. I don't know what they were; maybe judges.

They (CSAL) test mice, but I told them, we don't eat mice. And why do they take the moss from underneath; they should test the moss on top.

Harvey Giroux, Driftpile Band (August 4, 1992)

note Harvey did not want to be taped. Certain parts of section (1) are paraphrased from discussions. The comments contained in section (2) are direct quotations.

- (1) In his twenties (fifty years ago), Harvey had a trapline in the Swan Hills with a partner. They trapped mainly lynx, fox, and coyote. Says Harvey, "years ago, before the oil rigs were out, we were out there hunting and trapping. The creeks were pure. Now today, you can't even drink that stuff; no pure water.

Before the ASWTC was built (about ten years ago), Harvey and his brother-in-law, elder Sam Isadore, used to camp for

three or four nights up near the present day site of the ASWTC, in order to hunt moose and gather medicinal herbs and roots. Their camp area was arrived at by taking the Windy Lake road (entrance road to the ASWTC) past Windy lake to the end of the road. In that area, Harvey would collect roots, tree bark, herbs and plants to treat such illnesses as fever, kidney stones and spina bifida.

Says Harvey, "now since that plant is there, we just give up. We choose a new spot, near Virginia Hills. We thought something might happen. We dig out roots, eat bark....we were scared of the poisons. We use herbs for treating ourselves, our children, grandchildren. We get supply for the whole winter."

- (2) We had a concern about health and the future.

They (CSAL) thought nobody lived there (the Swan Hills).

Something is gonna happen there pretty soon. They can't run forever. Especially in the wintertime when trucks are transporting that stuff. Sure they will clean it, but they can't clean it 100%. In the spring, that stuff will run down to the lake.

Roy Giroux, Driftpile Band (August 11, 1992)

- (1) My registered trapline hits right at the edge of where that Little Driftpile (river) hits the Driftpile (river).... marten; weasels are hardly worth anything; coyotes. I go up from here; check traps two, three times a week. I used to stay up there for a week or two. I haven't done it the last couple of years, cause I seem to get a cold awful quick. That's the biggest problem; I hate to have a cold. I like going out in the morning here and be back at night; you know you're going to have a good place to sleep.

My line (trapline) didn't run up in there (Swan Hills) that far, but I poached a lot on other guy's traplines; and that is up in the Swan Hills area.

I hunt all over that place there, Swan Hills. I was a guide; had a guide license for about twenty years....You gotta, kind of, grow up with them animals to know their habits, and what have you. Like the moose; I go over there and I call them; by golly sometimes I call in two, three one night. You don't kill them all because their touchy, they're very smart when you call them. But there's quite a few I knock down too. When I was guiding, I'd leave the hunters in one spot when you get an answer. It (the moose) will come right straight. They hit that spot where you're at. I used to

leave those American hunters there and I would go back maybe 200 yards and make a call like the cow being chased away. The bull would come right to the American hunters. They would either knock him down or they would miss. Nine out of ten times they would miss; they get buck fever. They have these real powerful rifles, made for elephants.

There are very few bulls. Like in Swan Hills, there's no bulls over there at all; you couldn't buy a bull moose.... The government will never stop these hunters, American hunters, whatever coming in, cause they make good money. They make very good money and that's all they're worried about. They don't care if the moose all get killed off.... They get \$250, \$300 for American hunters to come in here and hunt; that's what the government is after. It's not worried about the bulls. If they're all gone, they don't give a hoot. When I was guiding for these American hunters, if I take out four, I do my best that they get two; two out of four. You do something; there are lots of things to do so they won't kill that bull. You scare that bull, or make a fault by yourself, like stand up or move around.

Well the roads, it's (the Swan Hills) so open; you can drive all over the place. These trikes, three wheelers, four wheelers; whoever invented them machines should have been shot before he finished them. Them are the ones that are causing most of the trouble. The government has been talking about making laws (for them) not to be used for hunting; that you can't carry a fire arm....but it's never come up.

This logging business; clear cut. Boy oh boy, it used to be so lovely. When there is all of this clear cutting all over the country here, there is going be no game anyway. Where in the hell is the game going to be at. They're not going to stick around, like farm cattle sitting out in the open.

I was in the Swan Hills when you couldn't even see two trailers together in one place. That's when they starting coming; I was there before that. The Moosehorn, the Swan (rivers)....we hunt up in there. That Freeman river; water is clear, the cleanest looking river....Take your tea pot and get some snow; put in the fire and you got the best tea. Now it's not even safe to drink any of that water up there in the Swan Hills....Except for that Freeman River; its still beautiful.

- (2) They (CSAL) told us the good parts, and the bad parts, of course, they kept to themselves....I told them, the first meeting, look at that, these guys will tell us the good parts; I said, they're not going to come in here and tell us that thing blows up, or a truck spills....they won't tell us that. That's just about what happened all the way.

Nothing is supposed to happen. Then I heard that they had a blow up there (Incident at Swan Hills July 5, 1992), and three guys ended up in the hospital. What was supposed to be perfect wasn't perfect.

There was only one Indian that was allowed to talk - Jim Badger.

We worked hard to get a petition on the reserve against that plant (the ASWTC). I don't even know what the hell happened to that petition. Everyone signed here that they didn't accept that extension to that plant; thousands of names there. What happened to those names?

The only thing they (CSAL) are after is the money.

They (CSAL) say this land was useless, that nobody used it. By golly, I've been in there.

Them people living there (the Town of Swan Hills) are just temporary residents. Twenty-five years from now there will only be a half dozen people. They don't even bury their dead up there.

Lina Twinn, Swan River Band (August 6, 1992)

note Lina did not want to be taped. Certain parts of section (1) are paraphrased from discussions. The comments contained in section (2) are direct quotations.

- (1) Lina Twinn used to spend time with her husband on his trap-line on the eastern slopes of the Swan Hills. She used to spend some of her time picking berries (blueberries, saskatoon berries, and cranberries) and maintaining the camp. But she says, "I don't know if I would want to eat them berries now, because of the poisons."

In talking about the state of health on the Swan River Reserve Lina said, "now all the kids have asthma - I really think it's from the plant (the ASWTC). I don't know; we never had anything like this before that plant opened."

- (2) They (CSAL) are not listening to us. They are very ignorant people. It's our lives they're damaging. They don't care.

They (NRCB) never heard a thing. Before we even went to that court there (NRCB hearings), I knew we were going to lose, by the way they were acting; their attitude; they whisper; they laugh. I know what discrimination looks like, sounds like. I know from school. That's why I knew we weren't going to win.

(We should) pour it into their damn heads that that is our land. Now they have more hunting rights than us. They have the right to put that plant there.

I would have spoken, but I don't have enough education.

If I had spoken, I would have asked them (CSAL) what they are doing to us. Does that damn plant mean more than us human beings? I don't think so.

Even without an education I would give them a good go. I could see they were wrong. They are only worried about the money. Keep the tax money, but leave us alone; leave the poor sick kids alone.

It's a cruel world now. It's money wise; too damn greedy.

Gene Davis, Swan River Band (August 6, 1992)

- (1) I used to trap near Shannon Creek....I was maybe seventeen or eighteen. I used to hunt squirrels near Moosehorn river.

I still go hunting every once in a while; not that often.

- (2) The lawyer (Jerome Slavic, Council for First Nations), he was saying we're going up hill all the time; pretty tough.

No matter what happened, we would have lost.

They (NRCB) gave it a lot of thought.

Jim Sound, Swan River Band (August 6, 1992)

- (1) My dad had a trapline up there at mile 9. Somewhere up the road to Swan Hills. That highway has been redone too many times. That old road used to go along the river (Swan River). When I was young I used to go with my dad. He used to go trapping and I stayed with him. He had a little cabin, him and another fellow, Bernard Potts. They went their separate ways and I stayed home. They would come back and I would stay up all night and watch them skin. I was the cook. Just boil the meat that's it; bear meat. They were trapping for squirrels, lynx, coyotes. That was the way they made their living.

I would like to go back to live the way I was brought up; no power bills; no water bills; no nothing. All we had was that kerosene lamp, wood stove....We never had hot water; we had running water, but we had to run and get it all the time.... Now you can't drink it.

(2) I was very interested in that (NRCB Hearings). I never been in to anything like that. There was a lot of interesting things; how they go about it....Too bad it went the wrong way....I could sit through those things and listen, and never get tired. I went to courts and all that, for people drunk, or something like that, but this was something the people were fighting for. That was something to me.

They (NRCB) listened well.

My concern was when they (CSAL) were dumping that thing a mile down (deep well injection). Where the hell is it going? We asked that, but we never did get an answer. I'm still thinking about that. Jes, it's a mile down; that's just about level with us over here. It's gonna come out somewhere. There are underground rivers, so if it ever hits one of them its gonna go somewhere.

They (NRCB) had a break, and that other lawyer come out with a big smile and said hello to me and had a few words. I said 'are you working hard?' 'Oh, ya' he said, 'working hard. This is having fun, not work.' He was having fun. I think he must have already know before time (about the decision). He didn't have a worry in the world. That Slavic (Jerome Slavic, Council for First Nations), he was like a blank wall.... They already knew what was going on, but they had to go through all this thing, because this lawyer of ours was making big bucks and he had to show something.

He (Jerome Slavic, Council for First Nations) is a smart lawyer....If somebody asked me to go say something over there (in the NRCB hearings), no bloody way. I tried that when I went to a Nechi course. I did good when I had the people right around, but as soon as I stand up....We sit in a circle and, you know, talk, and I was talking to everybody. But then when I got up to talk my two minutes, alone in front, that was the time I didn't know what the hell I was saying. I had that thing all memorized, but as soon as I got up there, boom....See that's our problem. We never do these things....We never speak. There were hundreds of people in there. They're (Council; CSAL; and NRCB) not scared to speak.

A lot of us are not that educated, and they use them god damn big words, and we don't even understand what they're talking about. You can use simple language and come out with the same thing. But them, they use great big language; the letters are so long we don't know what the hell they're talking about. I bet ya through that hearing, a lot of us didn't understand half of what was going on.