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Western Research Centre

## *Final Report*

# *Shared Witsuít'en-Settler Relationships in Smithers 1913-1973*

**2018**

## *Western Research Centre*

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The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, the UAKN, is a community driven research network focused on the Urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The UAKN establishes a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship and knowledge mobilization. For more information visit: [www.uakn.org](http://www.uakn.org)



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Canada



**Shared Histories**  
**Witsuwit'en-Settler Relationships in Smithers**  
**1913-1973**

**Project Report, June 2017**



*View of Smithers, looking towards the Babine Mountains, circa 1920. Bulkley Valley Museum Collection.*



*Main Street, Smithers. Bulkley Valley Museum Collection.*

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## Summary

Smithers has always been a community with a shared history. While first founded as a railway town in northern British Columbia, it was built on lands already occupied by the Witsuwit'en. Witsuwit'en people living there made key contributions to the Bulkley Valley's development. Witsuwit'en people worked hard, but had unequal access to the services and opportunities enjoyed by white settlers. They also struggled with marginalization and discrimination. In 2015, the Town of Smithers and the Office of the Wet'suwet'en partnered to create a shared history project recognizing the Witsuwit'en people's contributions and struggles in the Bulkley Valley, and in Smithers specifically.

For the past year, a research team working under the direction of Dr. Tyler McCreary, an assistant professor at Florida State University, has been collecting information relating to a community of Witsuwit'en people who lived in Smithers from the 1920s up until the 1970s. For most of this period, this community was centered around what was then known as Fifth Avenue; today, this area is a frontage road that runs along Highway 16 – specifically the section that runs between the Sandman Inn and the Aspen Inn. In the late 1960s, municipal development in this area displaced the community, then commonly known as Indiantown.

The goal of the research team was to understand this specific aspect of Smithers' history better. How did people come to live in Indiantown? What was it like to live in Smithers as a Witsuwit'en person during the early twentieth century? What was the process of Indiantown's displacement? In order to do this, the team collected information from a variety of sources, including newspaper articles, government documents, court records, aerial photographs, and family photo albums. The team also interviewed 59 people from both Witsuwit'en and settler communities who had memories of Indiantown and/or early Smithers.

During the interview process, the research team agreed to distribute a report of its findings to each interview participant. This document contains a broad summary of the information gathered by the team. To keep this report concise, much of the information and many of the anecdotes gathered during the research process were not included here. However, this report is not the final product of the research team's efforts. Work is well underway to produce a comprehensive text which will share more of the information and memories gathered. The team will be announcing more specifics in the months to come.

If you would like to get in contact with the research team for any reason, please send an e-mail to [smitherssharedhistories@gmail.com](mailto:smitherssharedhistories@gmail.com) or phone Tyler McCreary at (850)-273-1530.

# Origins

## *Colonial Visions*

While Smithers was built on Witsuwit'en traditional territories, its historic development began with speculative schemes designed thousands of kilometres away. In the late nineteenth century, surveyors laid out townships for settlement across the province, and railway development opened new frontiers to development and created tremendous



*Mary Mooseskin Jim hauling railway ties for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. Photo courtesy of Violet Gellenbeck.*

fortunes. The Canadian Pacific Railway had built a transcontinental railroad to southern British Columbia, but a northern route offered faster trade to Asia. The Grand Trunk Pacific (GTP) Railway sought to capitalize on this opportunity. Prior to construction, GTP purchased land in areas that it designated for town sites and planned to use town lot sales to quickly recover the cost of investment in railway construction. However, land speculators also wanted to capitalize on the impact rail development had on local land values, purchasing land along the route of the rumoured railway. To avoid these inflated land values, GTP selected Smithers as the divisional point between Prince George and Prince Rupert, naming the community after Alfred Waldron Smithers, the head of the company in England. The town was a swamp, but GTP nonetheless commissioned the initial plan for town lots to follow the standardized model of railway towns.

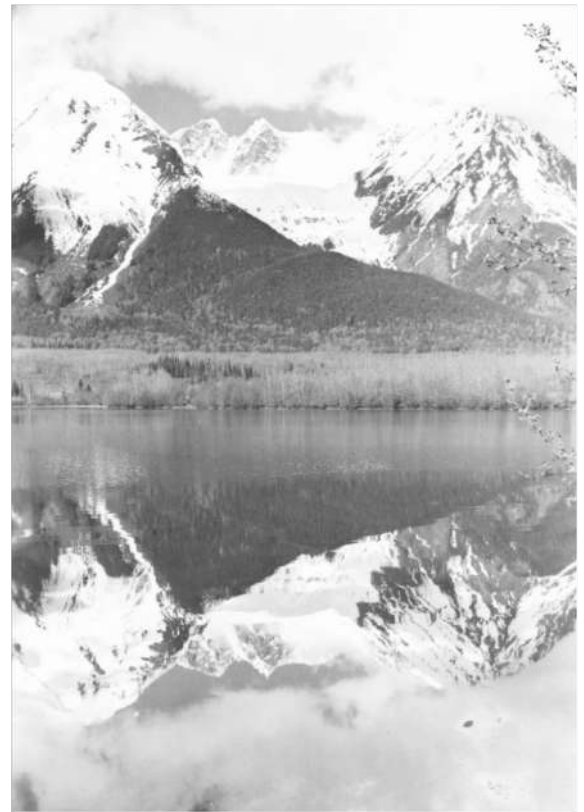
Boosters of northern settlement projected a vision of the region as a resource frontier. Construction of the railway enabled the development of northern economies based on resource exports. Approaching the land as a resource to be exploited, provincial government policy fostered the development of agriculture, forestry, and mining. Smithers became a local hub and attracted people looking for jobs and opportunities. However, northern settlement never proceeded as quickly as initially forecast, and the early northern resource economy relied upon First Nations workers as well as immigrants.

## *On Witsuwit'en Land*

While the colonial dream of northern resource development imagined lands in the Bulkley Valley as empty and available, the Witsuwit'en already had been sustainably living for generations as an organized society in the area. What settlers referred to as the Bulkley River had been known for

generations of Witsuwit'en as the Widzin Kwah. Witsuwit'en oral histories situated the Bulkley Valley within a distinct set of cultural meanings and traditional values. Tasdliz Bin, which settlers would later rename Lake Kathlyn, was known as The Boiling Lake. The name references a story in which Witsuwit'en warriors used heated rocks to bring the lake to a boil and capture a lake monster that had eaten two girls. The Witsuwit'en storied landscape presents a different world than that of resource and property speculators. Rather than seeing the natural world as a dominion to exploit, Witsuwit'en stories portray a complex world in which humans have to negotiate relationships with entities in the non-human world.

Within Witsuwit'en traditional society, the land and its stories belong to specific house groups and clans. House groups – matrilineal kinship groups led by a lineage of hereditary chiefs – structure Witsuwit'en society. Seymour Lake takes its name from Big Seymour, who held the hereditary title C'oligit within Cas Yikh (Grizzly House) of the Gidimt'enyu (Bear Clan). As C'oligit, Big Seymour was responsible for C'inulh K'it territory, in which Smithers was built. Big Seymour maintained cabins at Seymour Lake and Tasdliz Bin (Lake Kathlyn), as well as in Hagwilget. Another Gidimt'enyu hereditary chief in Cas Yikh, David Francis, also had a cabin at Tasdliz Bin. Holding the hereditary title Wos, David Francis was responsible for the land south of C'oligit's territory around Tyhee Lake and was also known as Tyhee Lake David. In the 1921 Canadian census returns, Tyhee Lake David is listed as a resident in Smithers, alongside his wife Sarah David (nee John) and daughter Mary David. These Gidimt'enyu families did not come to Smithers, but rather Smithers came to the territories on which they already lived.



*Tasdliz Bin, 1927.  
Bulkley Valley Museum Collection.*



*Chief Wos (David Francis).  
Telkwa Museum Collection.*



*Jack Joseph with his two sons, John and Frank, outside what is now known as the Central Park Building. Bulkley Valley Museum Collection.*

### *Colonial Displacements*

If some Witsuwit'en families occupied the Smithers area prior to settlement, others came to Smithers because of colonial policies. While provincial land policies created opportunities for settlers to claim the land, it limited First Nations people who were both denied title and refused the right to claim land like the settlers. Instead, First Nations space was bounded to a set of small reserves. While numerous Witsuwit'en families sought to homestead land, they struggled to achieve legal recognition by settler authorities. Many families were forced from their homesteads. Some moved to newly created reserves while others came to town poor and dispossessed. In the 1921 census, Celina Thomas is listed as a resident of Smithers with a yearly income of \$200 (a low income even in that era, as the census returns showed an average income of

\$1390 among Smithers residents that year).

Similarly, Canadian government regulation of Indian status pushed some families off reserve and into town. Through the Indian Act, the Canadian government imposed legislation dictating how Witsuwit'en people lived. Nationally this legislation outlawed traditional practices such as the potlatch and the sun dance (a practice of the First Nations living on the prairies). For the Witsuwit'en, this meant the banning of the balhats – a form of feast governance similar to the potlatch. It imposed an elected band system and installed appointed chiefs the government believed would collaborate with settler leaders. Under the band system, membership was determined on the basis of patrilineal descent rather than traditional Witsuwit'en practices of matrilineal descent. Witsuwit'en women who married settlers lost their status under the Indian Act and their rights to live on reserve. The children of these unions were similarly denied membership in the Indian Act bands. Moreover, through a process known as enfranchisement, federal Indian agents stripped Witsuwit'en people of Indian status and band membership when they determined that they had obtained a 'sufficient degree of advancement' to integrate into settler society. Numerous Witsuwit'en families affected by these laws and policies were forced off reserve and came to live in town.

These government policies had tragic personal consequences. When 19-month-old Kenneth Bazil died of pneumonia 1941, he could not be buried on reserve because his father had been enfranchised. Instead he was separated from his family and buried in the Smithers cemetery.

Kenneth's sister, Charlotte Euverman has decided that she will be buried in Smithers as well so her baby brother is not alone.

## Intersecting Lives in Smithers

### *Making an Urban Witsuwit'en Community*

Relationships between settlers and Witsuwit'en in Smithers were complex. There were points of connection and forms of institutionalized discrimination. It was difficult for Witsuwit'en families to find a place in town because of racial discrimination. In a meeting on October 8, 1926, the Village Commissioners discussed a public petition requesting a bylaw banning 'Indians or other colored people' from owning property in Smithers. While the local authorities lacked the jurisdiction to enact such a restriction, they communicated their desire to block 'Indian' land sales to the provincial authorities. However, in 1927 L.S. McGill, a local barrister, and the GTP entered into agreements to sell land to Philip Austin, Jack Joseph, and Louie Tommy. In 1928, Jimmie Thomas and Selina Thomas also bought properties for their families. Two blocks away from these properties, Abraham Nikal owned a lot as early as 1923. The tax assessment records after 1930 disappeared; however, based on later Village Commissioner meeting minutes, it appears that

eventually nine families held titled lands along 5th Avenue (the present day Highway 16), where Witsuwit'en people were making a space for themselves on the fringe of existing municipal development. This is the neighbourhood that would become known as Indianatown.

In the 1930s, all but one of these titles (that of Louie Tommy) reverted to the Crown for unpaid taxes. Witsuwit'en families in town had protested that although they were charged educational taxes, the school refused to serve their families. They staged a tax revolt, refusing to pay taxes for services they were denied. On the basis of these unpaid taxes, the government took back title to the majority of their lots. Through the years, municipal officials continually

Assessed Person's Name & last known address	Blk	Lots
L.S. McGill, Smithers		
Ag. Sale Selina Thomas Smithers	130	3-4
Ag. Sale Jimmie Thomas Smithers	130	9-10
L.S. McGill, Smithers	130	25
Ag. Sale Jack Joseph, Smithers		26
G.Y.P. Deopt-bo	130	27
Ag. Sale to L.S. McGill		28
Ag. Sale to Philip Austin Smithers		
Howard Beadle	130	22
Go Westminster Bank		23
173 Victoria St London Eng.		
G.Y.P. Deopt-bo	130	33-35
Agreement of Sale to L.S. McGill, Smithers	130	36
		34
		32

Town of Smithers Assessment Rolls, 1927.  
Photo courtesy of Bulkley Valley Museum.



sought to remove Indiantown from the Smithers townsite calling it a blight on the municipality. Perceiving Indiantown as out-of-place in Smithers, local officials lobbied the police, Indian Affairs, and the military to remove it. However, Witsuwit'en families in Indiantown stayed, refusing various offers to exchange their homes for new reserve lands outside of town. Rather than defining their community by municipal titles, many Indiantown residents understood their community as bordered by Queen Street to the south, Chicken Creek to the north, Fifth Avenue to the west, and the Bulkley Valley District Hospital to the east. Through the simple act of building homes, urban Witsuwit'en established their claims to a place in town. In the 1950s, Duncan David, Charlie Isadore, and Charlie Foster (an Englishman who married Irene Isadore) repurchased Indiantown lots to prevent dispossession. Indiantown remained their home.

### *Negotiating a Mixed Economy*

During the creation of Smithers, Witsuwit'en labour was essential. Jack Joseph and Louie Tommy helped clear the land Smithers was built on. They also, along with countless other Witsuwit'en, manufactured and transported railway ties for the creation of the GTP rail line. Witsuwit'en labour continued to be imperative to early resource and service industries in Smithers. Despite concerted efforts by promoters advertising the Bulkley Valley, large populations of migrants had not arrived. Moreover, newcomers tended to focus on well-paid railway jobs. There was a need for lower paid labourers. Witsuwit'en workers were important to the development of the forest and agricultural economy. Shirley Joseph remembers numerous Witsuwit'en working in the early forestry industry, including her father Louie Joseph who worked as a sawyer at the mill where the Smithers golf course is now. He continued working in the bush

until 1966. Witsuwit'en were also employed in jobs that helped maintain the health and cleanliness of the population, working as domestic and hotel cleaners. Julie and Mary Tom, for example, looked after elderly settler housewives, including the Raymond and White families. Julie Tom looked after the Hetherington children. Other First Nations – including Violet Gellenbeck, Dorothy Derek, Amelia and Marion Dennis, Sue Alfred, Clarence Williams, Betty Egan, Lucy Rose Bazil, Charlotte Euverman, Christine Holland, Kathleen Tom, and Catherine Michell – worked as hospital staff, starting in the late 1940s and continuing until today. Some cleaned, did laundry, and others helped in the kitchen and aided nurses and orderlies.



Joe and Mary Tom.  
Photo courtesy of Charlotte Euverman.



*Sophie Joseph and family at the Joseph's home at MacDonald Lake.  
Photo courtesy of George Joseph.*

Although Witsuwit'en people lived and worked in Smithers, they did not abandon their relationships to their traditional territories. While Duncan David and Charlie Isadore had long-term jobs working on the highways, many people worked seasonally in different kinds of economic activity. Jack Joseph, for instance, moved seasonally between town, a Joseph family

farm on Jollymore Road, and his traditional hunting territory around MacDonald Lake. Working seasonally enabled Witsuwit'en people to maintain connections to their territories. They engaged in a mix of economic production, including wage labour, subsistence farming and harvesting, and the production of traditional crafts for local markets. This complexity demonstrated how Witsuwit'en families both maintained traditional economies and participated in emerging labour markets associated with the settler economy.

Participating in labour markets also did not cause Witsuwit'en people to abandon the balhats or feast. In the early years, the monetary economy was not dominant. Prior to contact, Witsuwit'en people had well-established forms of exchange mediated through the balhats, in which people took part in reciprocal gifting. Within Witsuwit'en society, while people belong to their mother's clan, their father's clan also carries responsibilities. It is the responsibility of the father clan to ensure that a person has the necessary resources both in life and in death. The person's clan later recognizes and repays the father clan. Tanned moose and deer hide, beaver, lynx, and marten pelts were common gifts up until the 1960s. While the items of exchange have changed over the past century, the principles of the 'anuc niwh'it'en (Witsuwit'en laws) continue to be practiced in balhats. Maintaining these dynamic relationships of responsibility is central to maintaining social status and respectability within Witsuwit'en society.

The fur trade introduced new forms of bartered exchange with newcomers to the territories, but this supplemented rather than replaced Witsuwit'en gifting through the balhats. With the arrival of settlers, Witsuwit'en people interacted with the newcomers through bartering, as well as buying on credit. While the new credit economy was distinct from the relationships that governed traditional practices, Witsuwit'en people took their debts seriously. Despite their relative poverty in comparison with the settler community, Witsuwit'en were remembered as people who reliably paid off their debts.

### *Policing the Boundaries of 'Civilized' Society*

While the town shopkeepers generally treated Witsuwit'en customers well, there were forms of institutionalized discrimination. Through Indian Act provisions banning the potlatch, the federal government tried to restrict traditional cultural practices. There were different responses within the Witsuwit'en community. Many people continued to participate in matrilineal balhats ceremonies discreetly on reserve. Witsuwit'en people also sought to protect the moral character of the community, working with police to maintain order. Jack Joseph became renowned for his work with the police upholding law and order in the frontier town. Notably, these two positions were not always antagonistic, as many Witsuwit'en people tried to live well in accordance with both Witsuwit'en and Canadian law. Louie Tommy kept up with the tax payments on his Smithers property and remained active in the balhats system, holding the hereditary title Ut'akhw'its (a title he inherited in 1945, after the death of Round Lake Tommy in 1944).

As settlers tried to limit Witsuwit'en participation in white society, Witsuwit'en at times struggled as outsiders to the Smithers community. Some restaurants such as Heggie's Cafe - banned Witsuwit'en patrons, and had police arrest Witsuwit'en who demanded service. Other establishments prided themselves on their racialized hiring practices. Stewart's Cafe advertised "All White Help" in the Interior News until the mid-1940s. Smithers residents also remember separate entrances for First Nations in places such as the

Smithers Hotel. In 1935, downtown merchants even petitioned Town Council to bar any First Nations or people of Asian descent from starting businesses on Main Street. Similarly, in the first half of the twentieth century, the Indian Act banned status Indians from going to bars or drinking alcohol. When staff at Heggie's Cafe refused to serve Rita David and her husband, Rita wrote a letter to the editor which appeared in the Interior News. This touched off a public debate about Heggie's Cafe "No Indians" policy - a policy the staff at the time publicly denied but many

(Letters should be short and must carry the name and address of the writer. Pen names may be used if requested. The editor may edit letters for brevity and grammar. Opinions expressed not necessarily those of the editor).

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### Letters to The Editor

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Dear Editor,

Not long ago my wife and I went into Heggie's Cafe for supper, and we were told they were not allowed to serve us—because

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we were Indians. It was so humiliating, it hurt us so much. After all Indians have feelings too, they're human beings no different from white people, only we have dark skin. It is not dirt, it's our natural color.

Something should be done about this "no Indians allowed" business. Of course we're allowed to dine in every other restaurant in town. But still, it is not right for these people to look down their noses just because we have dark skins. Inside we're like everybody else, kind and sincere if you'll only give us half the chance, and besides, the "Indian's money is just as green as the white man's money."

Sure some Indians get drunk and make a disgrace of themselves, but that doesn't mean every red skin is that way. If the white people will look closely enough, they'll be surprised just how many "Indians" live clean decent lives, if I say so myself, there are more good than bad, just as it is with the white people.

Mr. and Mrs. Peter David.

*Rita David's letter to the editor.  
Interior News, July 24, 1963.*

Witsuwit'en remember. Rita wrote her letter in 1963, demonstrating that discriminatory rules remained in place well into the century.

Negotiating these forms of discrimination, Witsuwit'en customers came to frequent the more accepting Chinatown restaurants. In Chinatown - located around where the bowling alley is today - Asian and First Nations community members made a distinct space for themselves. Places such as Wing's Cafe and Smithers Bakery created an inclusive space, and enabled people to enjoy life in the town. Chinatown businesses also provided employment and Tom's Laundry, a Japanese-Canadian-owned laundromat, employed a number of Witsuwit'en, including Hazel Mitchell.

### *Uneven Access to Services*

Witsuwit'en families often had limited access to the schools and hospital and received discriminatory treatment when they could access services. Access to education was denied to First Nations youth in Smithers in the early years; children were either channeled into residential schools or denied an education entirely. As education shapes opportunities later in life, uneven access to education had the effect of



*Bulkley Valley District Hospital circa 1950.  
Bulkley Valley Museum Collection.*

further marginalizing First Nations people. However, Witsuwit'en families fought for better education for their children. Witsuwit'en families in Moricetown established a reserve day school, Indiantown families finally had their children accepted to the Bulkley Valley public school system, and Moricetown band leadership negotiated the establishment of a Catholic day school for settler and Witsuwit'en children in Smithers. But even as they won access to integrated schools, Witsuwit'en students still struggled with discriminatory application of rules and racist treatment by settler students. Fred Tom remembers being the target of racial slurs and schoolyard fights because of his Witsuwit'en heritage. Many others remember painful childhood memories of being singled out by their peers, both on and off the playground. For years few Witsuwit'en graduated, restricting their opportunities to take part in the more highly skilled parts of the economy. However, Witsuwit'en perseverance has slowly won educational rights and built the foundation for educational improvements.

Similarly, inequality in healthcare shaped people's physical capacity to work, receive education, and pursue opportunities in life. For years, the hospital separated white and First

Nations patients in different wards. When a new hospital was built in 1934, its board of directors wrote a letter to the local MP, Olaf Hanson, asking his support in obtaining a \$15,000 grant from the Indian Department. They claimed that ten beds of the forty bed hospital were “exclusively used for the treatment of Indian patients” and that the Indian Department should provide “a just share of the appropriation”. When this separation began to erode, some settlers took issue. In February 1945 an editorial in the Interior News decried the use of “the best private rooms” for a pair of First Nation patients. Some prominent members of the community wrote to express their disapproval of the editorial, but its existence showed that second class treatment of First Nations was the norm.

Death certificates attest to the alarming regularity with which Witsuwit'en people died of treatable illnesses. For example, Kenneth Bazil (mentioned above) developed pneumonia at 19 months while his family was working at North Pacific Cannery in 1941. His mother took him to the Prince Rupert Hospital, but the doctor was dismissive and said there was nothing he could do to help her son. Kenneth's mother loaded her children onto the train and travelled back to Smithers. However, it was too late: Kenneth Bazil died as he was being admitted to the Smithers Hospital. He was just learning to walk.

At other times, healthcare discrimination led to tragic miscarriages of justice. Violet Gellenbeck remembers how her grandfather, Mooseskin Jim, received inadequate care after suffering a stroke. Later, when he had a run-in with the police, the authorities misdiagnosed him with a mental illness and sent him to the Provincial Mental Hospital in Essondale without consulting with his family. He died there under circumstances that have never been made clear to his descendants.

However, hospital reforms provided greater equality in care and the hospital became one of the early settler institutions employing Witsuwit'en women. As with schools, once the hospital integrated and Witsuwit'en people were accessing more services and work, new issues of interpersonal discrimination emerged in the ways Witsuwit'en people were treated. For example, many Smithers residents remembered a separate entrance and waiting room for Witsuwit'en people at medical clinics and Rita David remembers being forced to sit on boxes of medical supplies while she waited for her appointment. Yet through a determination to improve conditions, discrimination in healthcare and healthcare jobs is slowly decreasing.

### *Cross-cultural Celebrations and Connections in Play*

More positive relationships developed through sports and community agricultural exhibitions. In the early years of the Smithers fall fair, Witsuwit'en handcrafts were put on display in the annual exhibition. A lauded aspect of the fall fair, the Witsuwit'en display was an instance in which Witsuwit'en culture was celebrated and Witsuwit'en community members could display their cultural distinctiveness with pride. Other community celebrations such as the Telkwa Barbeque showcased physical athleticism; First Nations jockey Lizette Naziel won local renown for her skill in horse racing.

Sport provided an opportunity Witsuwit'en people to demonstrate their equality with (or in many cases superiority to) settler community members. In *Niwhts;ide'ni Hibi'it'en*, Mélanie Morin identifies the members of early versions of the Moricetown and Telkwa Witsuwit'en baseball teams. The original Moricetown Cubs included Peter Alfred, Francis Alfred, Dick Naziel, George Naziel, Tommy Michell, Alec Tiljoe, Peter Bazil Sr., Frank Bazil, Mathias Morris, Bill Morris, John Morris, Pat Joseph, and Big George Joseph. A picture of the Telkwa team, The Tigers, included Alec Thomas, David Alec, Francis Holland, Andy George, Bill Holland, Sam Pierre, Pete Holland, Andy Pierre, Charlie David, Jim George, Fred George, and Jim Thomas. Later Moricetown Cubs teams included Dan Michell, Pat Namox, Henry and Andrew Alfred, Adam Brown, and Gordon Joseph. Sport became an important place for people to connect, and Witsuwit'en community members could build pride and strength in their identity. However, the fact that Smithers teams in the period remained racially segregated, with Witsuwit'en people playing on the Moricetown and Telkwa baseball teams, also indicated enduring racial boundaries.



*George Joseph playing on a tricycle near Fifth Avenue.  
Photo courtesy of George Joseph.*

## **Divergent Paths of Development**

### *From Economic Diversity to Dependency*

From the 1930s to the early 1970s, industrial changes marginalized First Nations people economically, despite the importance of Witsuwit'en workers in the early years. Many European

migrants moved to Smithers after World War II, providing more local white labour. While this was a period of economic growth in the Bulkley Valley, there was decreased relative demand for First Nations labour. Simultaneously, technological change in resource sectors made production less labour intensive and more highly routinized. This had major impacts on Witsuwit'en traditional sustenance economies. Increased rates of production in forestry and fisheries diminished the availability of traditional foods, while standardized work schedules made it increasingly difficult for First Nations people to move between traditional sustenance activities and wage labour. The tension between the modern and traditional economy was further exacerbated as the government restricted First Nations fisheries in order to enhance the haul for commercial operations. Dispossessed of wage labour and sustenance opportunities, First Nations were increasingly reliant on state provision of welfare.

### *The Developing Urban Divide*

If changes to the broader economy are one part of the story of the further marginalization of Indiantown, postwar shifts in municipal development in Smithers are another. Infrastructural development – particularly the introduction of water and sewer systems – began to transform the community but did not include Indiantown. Changes in Smithers reflected broader changes in the governance of municipalities in Canada. In the early decades of the twentieth century, working class neighbourhoods often developed informally and were only belatedly integrated into the fabric of towns. However, from the 1930s to the 1960s, an evolving legal structure standardized municipal development. The Canadian government dramatically changed how towns looked through introducing first building codes and later the system of home financing.

Increased enforcement of building codes in Smithers altered the shape of the town. Smaller homes without exterior finishing disappeared, and increasingly luxurious homes only available with debt financing emerged. Without access to essential services, Indiantown appeared increasingly deprived in comparison to other neighbourhoods. The lack of access to water and poor fire prevention service led to numerous fires and the shrinking of the Indiantown community. Such fires destroyed the homes of Joe Tom, Charlie Pete, John Joseph, and Marion Austin. Joe Tom's family briefly returned to their old property and set up a tent in protest. They maintained the Town had burnt their house down, but after staying one winter they too would eventually move on. Decreasing racial discrimination enabled economically successful Witsuwit'en families to move to other neighbourhoods, while other Indiantown residents moved to Moricetown where improved services were available on reserve.

### *Municipal Redevelopment and Community Loss*

Following years of municipal neglect and denial of essential services, Indiantown was a site of considerable deprivation. Ignoring their own role in producing the conditions in Indiantown, town authorities targeted Indiantown for a program of municipal redevelopment. Increased

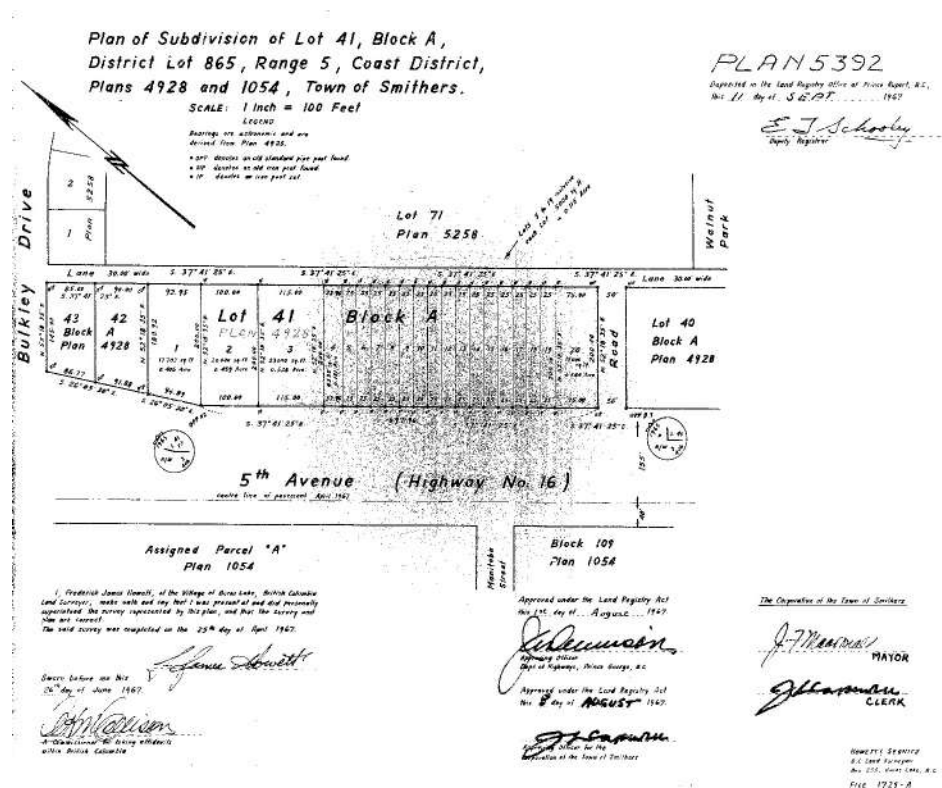
immigration and economic growth created optimism about prospects for the future. With significant investments in municipal infrastructure, the elected government of Smithers decided that the town would develop most efficiently if developments were planned. To encourage well-designed growth, the town hired a planner to rezone and redesign the Indiantown area. This occurred without meaningfully consulting the resident

families. Smithers arranged the purchase of the titled Indiantown lots from the families and estates of the Witsuwit'en owners, and bought the surrounding lots from the Crown. The Witsuwit'en families without title were evicted.

The Witsuwit'en community in Smithers was fractured. While some upwardly mobile Witsuwit'en families were able to find housing in town, many people were pushed to another part of the municipal fringe: notably cabins on Kathleen Casler's property outside town. Some joined a group of Witsuwit'en who, for years prior, had been living in cabins along the north end of Tatlow Road. Others abandoned the town and moved to the reserve. While life in Indiantown was hard, leaving made many former residents' lives harder, and many remember their days there with fondness.

## Conclusion

To understand the present, it is necessary to examine the historical conditions that led to it. Refusing to engage with history obscures the context that led to current relationships. While settler society has often conveniently forgotten the historical discriminations that produced enduring forms of inequality, First Nations communities remember the record of past injustices. Conflicts over history regularly impair relationships and trust between First Nations and settler authorities. For years, the Town of Smithers provided no official acknowledgement of the history of Indiantown. However, local leaders had the vision to re-engage with the story of Indiantown as



*Subdivision Plan of Lot 41, Block A or the 5th Avenue area.  
Bulkley Valley Museum Collection.*



a local part of a national conversation about recognizing the historical treatment of First Nations people in Canada. While this does not immediately resolve historical injustices, it does create opportunities for dialogue and learning about how we carry the past. Ultimately, it is necessary to re-engage the past in order to create the potential for a new and different future - particularly through the education of youth. The hope is that this research project will help develop a historical framework to understand the shared history of Smithers settlers and Witsuwit'en people, to see how that history affects current relationships, and to increase understanding between the various communities that make up the Bulkley Valley.

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