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Knowledge Network

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Réseau de connaissances des
Autochtones en milieu urbain

RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY

Western Research Centre

Name of Project:

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

Research Start-up Summary and Abstract:

Smithers, a small town in the interior of British Columbia, is a community whose history was shaped both by the First Nations people of the area and settlers who migrated to the region. While first founded as a railway town in northern British Columbia, Smithers was built on lands already occupied by the Witsuwit'en Nation. This project collected information relating to the 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. In the late 1960s, municipal development in this area displaced the community, then commonly known as Indiantown. While the Witsuwit'en people worked hard, they struggled with marginalization and discrimination and had unequal access to the services and opportunities in the town of Smithers, which were enjoyed by White settlers. In 2015, the town of Smithers and the Office of the Witsuwit'en partnered to create a shared history project, which recognized the Witsuwit'en people's contributions and struggles in the Bulkley Valley and in Smithers specifically.

Engagement Objectives:

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 1920 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.

Main Contact:

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