

Reference List

Sandlos J, Wiersma Y. Ghost Town: Remembering Pine Point. *Beaver* [serial online]. April 2000;80(2):16. Available from: Academic Search Premier, Ipswich, MA. Accessed January 14, 2013.

<!--Additional Information:
Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <http://search.ebscohost.com.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=3080423&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
End of citation-->

GHOST TOWN: REMEMBERING PINE POINT

It's nothing new in the Canadian experience. Boom towns--an outgrowth of our resource-based economy--are born, and are just as quickly abandoned. But when the remains of industry threaten local traditions and alter an ancient landscape, there is much at stake. And much to be learned.

T'samba K'e. A place name. A name on a map. To find it you drive directly north from Edmonton through mile after mile of cattle country. Five hours of steady driving will bring you to the forestry and farming centre of Peace River; five more to the resource hub (oil and gas, mining, forestry) of High Level. Here, trailer parks dot the landscape and reflect the newness of the place. Ask around, and you may find out that many of these trailers came from Pine Point, a community in the Northwest Territories. Pine Point is also the English word for T'samba K'e.

The townsite is still marked on many road maps of the Northwest Territories. It sits east of Hay River along Highway 5, a remote road that winds through one hundred kilometres of spruce forest near the south shore of Great Slave Lake. There are, however, no signs leading you to the community. There is a radio tower that is visible from the road, some piles of rubble that spend much of the year covered by snow, and a few unmarked roads leading away from the highway. To the casual observer in an automobile, it is difficult to find much evidence of a town. Nonetheless, the town of Pine Point is the place where we are going.

"Slow down! That's where the cop shop used to be," jokes Barry Sanderson, a former resident of Pine Point who now lives in the nearby Chipewyan and Metis community of Fort Resolution. He guides us off the highway and down one of the unmarked roads. "Look out for the kids near the school yard!"

We park in the empty parking lot between the still-visible yellow lines in the middle of "town." Cliff Cardinal, another former resident, points out where a bank, grocery store, drug store, hotel, and bar were located on both sides of the square. When asked how many people lived and worked here, he replies, "too many," as if abstract numbers could

not capture specific memories of the past. Later, we are shown the site of a former golf course, ball diamond, arena, and even a farm, all signs of a once thriving and prosperous community.

Today the town is empty. There are no houses, shops, schools, restaurants, banks, churches, and other centres of community life. There are only empty streets and sidewalks. Gravel driveways lead to grassy meadows; a school crosswalk leads to nowhere. A few weedy plants have begun to poke through the concrete, but the landscape looks remarkably like a suburb without the buildings.

To get an idea of who lived here and why, you must go a little further down the main road and toward Great Slave Lake. Here, the landscape gives way to an astonishing industrial vista. At the end of the road, near an abandoned fuel-storage tank, begins a massive flat moonscape of white rubble and rock that stretches all the way to the shores of the lake. To the northeast, there is water seeping over the rock in all directions. Large numbers of spruce trees at the edge of the wet area are withered and dead. Piles of rubble surround the flat land on three of the four sides (Sanderson points out one that was used as a ski hill by Pine Point residents). Climb to the top of one of these human-made hills, and the story of Pine Point becomes even more clear. Huge open pits dot the landscape for several kilometres in either direction--fourteen can be seen from a high point near the highway--but published reports say that as many as thirty exist in the region. Close inspection of one pit reveals a network of roads leading to the bottom; a stunning emerald lake sits there now, ironically reminiscent of the tourist site of Lake Louise in Banff National Park, Alberta. An abandoned rail bed leads the eye westward toward Hay River and the southern link with the transcontinental routes running east and west through Edmonton. Rather than being tied to the local landscape, as the local native communities have been for generations, the community that once existed here was clearly focused on a single resource, with primary ties to the industrial south. But, like so many of Canada's one-industry towns, Pine Point has become a ghost town.

Opened in 1964 by Pine Point Mines Ltd., a subsidiary of Cominco, the lead-zinc mine at Pine Point was soon shipping a thousand tons of high-grade ore per day. The primary destination of the ore shipments was the Cominco smelter at Trail, British Columbia, but by 1965 ore was also being shipped to smelters in Japan and the United States. An ore crushing and separating facility was soon built, and production was interrupted only briefly in the first six months of 1983 due to depressed commodity prices. The townsite that was built near the mine had a population of nearly two thousand people at its height. It contained, in addition to the structures identified by Sanderson and Cardinal, trailers and houses, a swimming pool, RCMP post, gas station, variety store, bunkhouse for single miners, and an airstrip (with daily flights to Edmonton). In short, every amenity of mainstream Canadian society and culture was imported here by the largely nonnative transient work force when the instant community of Pine Point was established.

By 1988 it was all over. In late 1985, only two days before Christmas, Cominco officials announced that, due to dwindling ore reserves and a drop in the price of lead and zinc, the mine would run flat out while a termination fund

and layoff plan for mine employees was created. In January 1987, the company announced an impending closure of the mine. The town residents left gradually--in January 1988, the company was advertising executive houses in News North for only \$6,000, but in February there were still enough children for the mites hockey team to sweep a local tournament. By July 1988, only one hundred residents remained, and on September 1, 1988, the town was officially closed. Many of the miners relocated to the Hemlo goldfields in Ontario or to mines in Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia. During the last months of the town's life, banners were hung on the local highway sign that read, MAKE AN OFFER, AND LAST ONE TO LEAVE, SHUT OUT THE LIGHTS.

Ghost towns are not an uncommon feature in the Canadian landscape. Northrop Frye observed in a 1976 CBC television special that "Canada is full of ghost towns; visible ruins unparalleled in Europe." Whether it is a former coal-mining town in the Alberta badlands, a closed mill town in Ontario's north, or a declining outport fishing village in Newfoundland, all carry the telltale signs of boarded-up houses and empty streets that mark an abandoned landscape. In this respect, the story of Pine Point is one example of the hit-and-run staples economy that has characterized much of Canada's history. Fifty years ago, Harold Innis outlined the significance for hinterland areas of productive "shifts" in Canada's largely resource-based economy:

Concentration on the production of staples for export to more highly industrialized areas in Europe and later in the United States had broad implications for the Canadian economic, political and social structure. Each staple in turn left its stamp, and the shift to new staples invariably produced periods of crises in which adjustments in the old structure were painfully made and a new pattern created in relation to the new staple.

For those miners who came to the North from the "outside," moving on after a mine expired was, though difficult, simply part of the bargain made as a worker in the Canadian boom-and-bust resource economy. For many Pine Point workers, there were other mines to which one could move and start again. In a 1983 address, R.P. Douglas, a senior vice president of Cominco, summarized the accepted transient lifestyle of a Pine Point miner:

It is interesting to talk to people about Pine Point and ask their views about the community. They all recognize that it cannot be made into a retirement centre. There are no secondary industries, no logging, gas or oil. There is no government. As a tourist destination it would not rate one gas pump. ... As a result they feel that, when the mine runs out of ore, the community will shut down and cease to exist.

Yet, for the native population of the nearby Metis and Chipewyan (Dene) community of Fort Resolution, the ghost town means something entirely different: complete displacement from a landscape they have inhabited since time immemorial. Indeed, one can hardly imagine two adjacent communities harbouring more conflicting ideals than those of Fort Resolution and Pine Point. Fort Resolution is one of the oldest and longest standing permanent settlements in the Northwest Territories; Pine Point was one of the newest and, as it turns out, one of the least permanent settlements in the region. To many people living in Fort Resolution, the South Slave region had been a homeland for

generations; the Pine Point work force lived under the omnipresent threat of expulsion from the landscape. At the time of the mine's establishment, the largely native town of Fort Resolution was isolated, connected to the outside world only by Slave River barges, a tenuous winter road, and infrequent flights in and out of the community. Pine Point, populated by transient southerners, was, from the beginning, connected to the highway system leading south. Pine Point's economy was based wholly on exports to the outside world; the economy of Fort Resolution was largely local and based on the land. Although the fur trade had connected the Dene to global markets for decades, it was an economic activity that was easily incorporated into a subsistence way of life. A large-scale open-pit mine, on the other hand, was a land-use pattern that threatened traditional ways of living off the land.

Why then was a community such as Pine Point established that so clearly did not fit the local culture and economy of the South Slave region? What brought this community of outsiders to the northern landscape? Certainly the postwar development policy played a key role. Faced with the prospect of a global collapse in fur prices, federal government policy in the Canadian North during the 1950s proceeded on the assumption that the traditional trapping and hunting economy was dying. The government felt that native people in the North had no choice but to accept the southern ways of wage employment and industrial development. As Justice Thomas Berger observed with respect to industrial development policies in the North, "southerners are once again insisting that a particular mode of life is the one and only way to social, economic, and even moral well-being." Indeed, officials in the Diefenbaker government, which had embarked on a "Roads to Resources" program throughout much of the Canadian hinterland, promised that the Pine Point mine would be an engine of development for the North in general and a source of employment for local people in the South Slave region. A 1956 report on the economic prospects of a railway linking the as-yet-undeveloped Pine Point area to the transcontinental lines, concluded that "this pattern of economic development appears to the Department of Northern Affairs to be the only one that offers any hope of creating a substantial number of new permanent employment positions for natives" [italics added]. So convinced was the government of the wisdom of the new development policy that they provided \$99.7 million in capital investments to cover the large portion of costs associated with the construction of the project, including the Great Slave Lake railroad, the Talston River hydro project, and the highway development between Hay River and Pine Point.

Sadly, the local economic and employment benefits promised by the federal government did not materialize for the people of Fort Resolution. The highway extension from Fort Resolution to Pine Point was delayed until 1972, eight years after the opening of the mine, so workers from Fort Resolution could not commute to the mine. Those who did move to Pine Point experienced long periods of separation from family and community. There was no native employment policy when the mine opened, nor was there initially a housing policy to assist native families moving to the area. As a result, very few people from Fort Resolution were employed at the mine.

Not only were there few opportunities for native people in the new wage economy, but the mine also had detrimental impact on traditional hunting and trapping grounds in the Pine Point region. In 1977, Mike Beaulieu, a

Fort Resolution resident, made the following comments to the Berger inquiry into the Mackenzie Valley pipeline on the impact of industrial development in the local region:

We, the Dene people, do a lot of hunting and trapping and fishing. Our hunting has decreased a lot due to the construction of the highway, the building of the mine, and the increase of the people from the South. ... Our traditional grounds are slowly being overtaken by these [mine] employees. There is virtually no benefit to be spoken of from the mine.

Contrary to the federal government predictions (and despite lost hunting and trapping opportunities in the Pine Point region), the traditional hunting and trapping economy did not disappear in Fort Resolution. There are still many hunters and trappers who derive at least some portion of their income and diet from traditional subsistence activities. Most people still prefer the taste of "country food" and community hunts are frequent. Food from these hunts is often shared among community members, reaffirming the links people have with each other and with the land.

By contrast, the shattered landscape of the Pine Point area became a symbol of the displacement from the land that southern-style, large-scale industrial development can often impose on a local population. Indeed, Cominco's vague promises to clean up the area after the closure of the mine were never fulfilled. The open pits left behind by the mine were never rehabilitated. Local residents and the South Slave Regional Council (SSRC) wanted all forty-three pits filled in, but the mine balked at the eleven-dollar-a-metre cost of gravel. The flat moonscape of rubble and rock created to cover the tailings pond was never resoiled and shows little sign of growth and recovery. The rubble has blocked off the once fish-laden Paulette Creek, reducing it to a mere trickle, and there are ongoing fears that seepage from the tailings may continue to flow into Great Slave Lake.

A News North article from 1988, the year that the mine closed, pointed to the tailings pond as a chief concern for residents of Fort Resolution. Lloyd Cardinal, a member of the local advisory committee worried that, "if they do a second-rate job [on the clean-up of the tailings pond] and 25 years from now ... it breaks up the environment and affects humans we're the one [sic] who will suffer." Showing an almost prophetic skepticism, Robert Sayine, chief of Fort Resolution at the time, is quoted as saying, "I know for a fact it [the mine area] probably to be impossible to return to its natural state."

A decade has passed since the closure of Pine Point, but the people of Fort Resolution have not forgotten their experience of the mine. A certain bitterness about the mess left at Pine Point still lingers among the local population. As a result, there is a cautious attitude towards any large-scale development projects proposed for the South Slave Region. When asked whether he would support future mining development near Fort Resolution, Sanderson replied with a flat no. Cardinal, however, was more ambivalent: "Well, they buggered up the land already, they might as well bugger it up some more."

Such fatalism may represent a minority opinion in Fort Resolution. A recent public meeting concerning Highwood Resources' plan to develop a test beryllium mine in the northeast corner of Great Slave Lake drew a hostile response from the community. The testimony of local residents began in the early evening and continued until three o'clock in the morning. The public comments included everything from descriptions of wildlife movements in the proposed mine area to evidence of high rates of cancer near Utah's beryllium mines (which presenters had downloaded from the Internet). Resident after resident--hunters, trappers, young mothers, elders, and local government officials--stood up to express their opposition to the project, doubtful that there were significant benefits to be gained from proposed mine. At one point during the meeting, an exasperated official with Highwood Resources assured local people that they had nothing to fear because the new mine "wouldn't be another Pine Point."

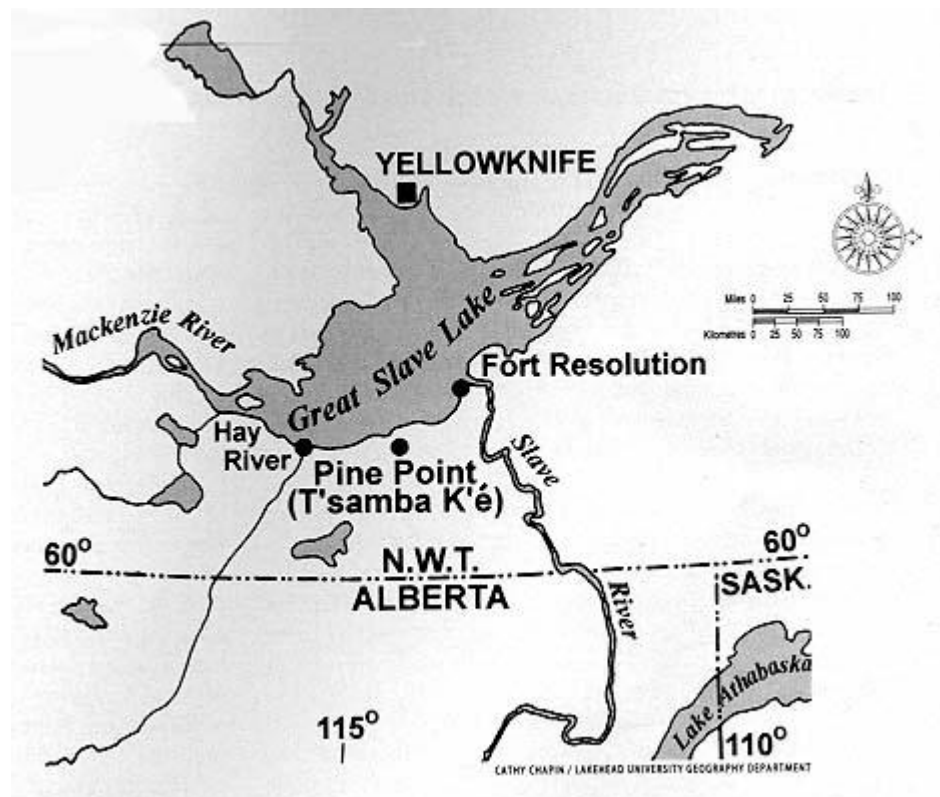
Another Pine Point--words that reverberate across the past thirty-five years of northern history. Words that address future uncertainties. Indeed, the recent diamond-mine developments north of Great Slave Lake are, for those who remember, an eerie reminder of the Pine Point mine. The Ekati mine, owned jointly by Broken Hill Propriety Co. Ltd. (BHP), of Australia, and Dia Met Minerals Ltd., became the first operational diamond mine in Canada early in 1999. Just thirty-five kilometres to the southeast the Diavik operation at Lac deGras, which is owned by RTZ Corp. of London and Vancouver-based Aber Resources Ltd., is scheduled to open by mid-2002. Both projects have met with intense scrutiny from local native people. There are serious concerns about the impacts of diking and draining large sections of major lakes such as Lac de Gras, as well as the lasting impacts of the proposed open-pit mines. Dene at the public hearings for the environmental review panel of BHP expressed serious concerns as to how the mine would affect the land, the fish, and the Bathurst caribou that migrate through the area. They also questioned how the mine would alter their lifestyles. Many felt that the benefit of increased employment did not outweigh the costs of a shattered landscape.

The Diavik mine has escaped the intensive panel review process to which the Ekati mine was subject. Instead, the impacts of the mine are being assessed using a less rigorous comprehensive study under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, a process that requires no public hearings to be organized by the federal government. Business and industry leaders in the North laud the comprehensive study as a more streamlined process, while environmentalists express serious doubt that their concerns will be addressed.

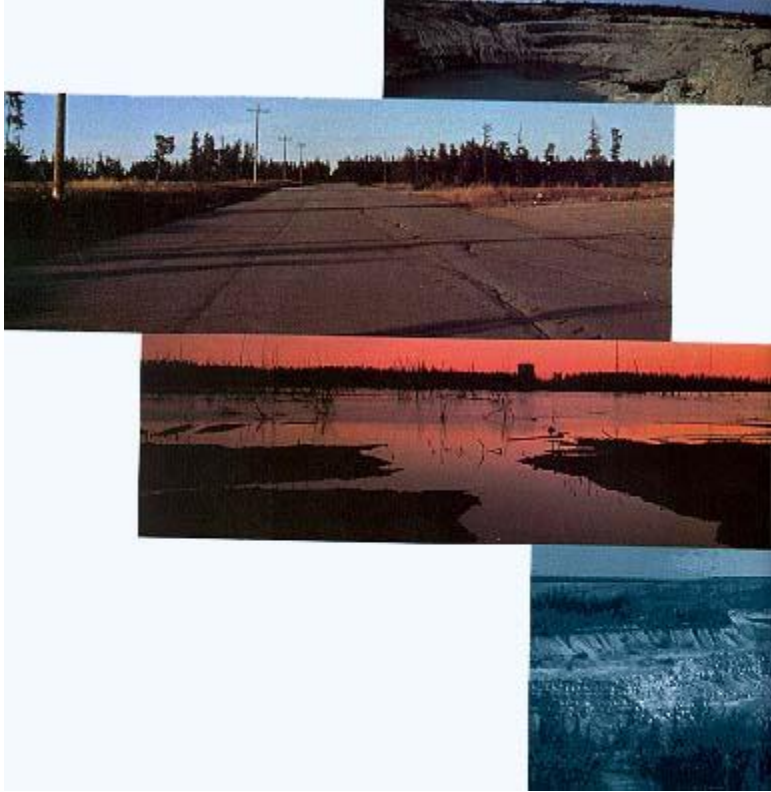
Some things have changed in the thirty years since Pine Point. Diavik has tried to ease concerns by promising to hire a majority of northern and aboriginal workers, purchasing northern goods and services whenever possible, sponsoring job-training programs and scholarships for young people in local communities, and committing money to the development of local businesses and environmental research. Although the mine will be abandoned after only sixteen to twenty years of operation, Diavik has promised that water will be slowly released into the open pits and the area fully restored to "productive fish habitat."

Despite such promises, no one can predict what the future holds for the Dene living in the area around the Diavik and Ekati mines. The new mines may, unlike those in the past, offer local opportunities for wage employment while at the same time respecting traditional values and lifestyles. Perhaps the mining companies can even mitigate the ecological impact of draining lakes and creating huge open pit mines. All of this may be possible. But standing within the shattered landscape and reflecting on the broken promises of the Pine Point mine, one cannot help wondering if lessons have been learned from the past, or if history has a tendency to repeat itself.

The authors wish to thank Clifford Cardinal, Frank Fabien, Barry Sanderson, and Freda Elief of Fort Resolution for supplying information on Pine Point. Special thanks also to Ken Latour for his assistance with photographic equipment.



One can hardly imagine two adjacent communities harbouring more conflicting ideals than those of Fort Resolution and Pine Point.



Deserted streets, abandoned pits and tailing ponds, and a deeply scarred landscape are the eerie artifacts of a small, once-thriving mining community.



Sandlos (above, left) is dwarfed by an immense open pit left behind after the Pine Point mine was abandoned.



Empty streets, sidewalks, and hydro wires with no power source (above) are all that is left to mark the townsite of Pine Point, Northwest Territories.

~~~~~

By John Sandlos and Yolanda Wiersma

Yolanda Wiersma and John Sandlos are former residents of Fort Resolution. John is currently engaged in doctoral work in Canadian environmental history at York University, Toronto. Yolanda is an M Sc. candidate working on the ecology of protected areas at the University of Guelph.

---

Copyright of Beaver is the property of Canada's National History Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.