



History Program
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**“Beneath the Waters:
A Microhistory of Ootsa Lake,
a Northern Eurocanadian Community,”**

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ABSTRACT

The building of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railroad across Canada in the years prior to the First World War led to an unprecedented degree of non-aboriginal settlement in northern British Columbia. Thousands of euroCanadians flocked to the North in search of inexpensive agricultural land, spreading out and creating communities in even the most remote sub-regions adjacent to the railway corridor. This thesis explores the development of one such community, Ootsa Lake, from its inception shortly after the turn of the century through to its displacement fifty years alter. The community, composed of the four settlements of Wistaria, Streatham, Ootsa and Marilla along the north shore of Ootsa Lake, was flooded out by Alcan's Kemano project in the early 1950s. By looking back through the oral testimony of twenty-six former residents, this thesis examines how the settlers came to know, use and appreciate their environment in ways that defy conventional academic wisdom about non-aboriginal communities in northern British Columbia history. Such wisdom paints a picture of non-native sojourners who travel to the North in search of fortune and either succeed in the purpose or leave shortly thereafter in defeat. Yet the experience of the Ootsa Lake settlers suggests an altogether different story. These settlers quickly discarded any notions of economic grandeur an learned to adapt to their abundant, yet often harsh, environment. A strong dependence upon ths surrounding landscape coupled with extreme geographic isolation, brought about a subsistence/barter economy and a relative absence of wage labour and currency. Consequently, the Ootsa Lake settlers were able to build a viable, multi-generational community that survived largely outside of the boom and bust economic cycles that have haunted 'company' and resource-based towns in the provincial North. As such, the history of the Ootsa Lake settlements, long forgotten beneath the waters of the Nechako Reservoir, provides an insightful look into the development of northern British Columbian society.