

Community stops uranium mine in British Columbia

In Genelle, BC, this summer, residents decided they didn't want uranium mining. Sally MacKenzie and Nancy McRitchie detail their struggle.

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"If uranium mining was dangerous, they wouldn't be doing it." "You're wasting your time, you'll never stop them." "It's the government, they do what they want."

People in Genelle don't believe this any more, but they have heard this reaction ever since they started investigating the uranium exploration threatening their watershed.

Ordinary law-abiding citizens have become aware of, and organized against, uranium mining. What they are doing has reached the ears of thousands of people.

Genelle does not look much different from Montrose, Blueberry or any other small community in southeastern British Columbia. But during the past five months, people here have banded together in a way a lot of them did not think possible.

With a population of 500 the community has guarded a picket line 24 hours a day, published a weekly newsletter, organized a raffle and a bingo for fund raising, met with government officials and educated themselves and their neighbours about the dangers of uranium mining and nuclear power.

Things have slowed down now. Gardens are being rescued from the weeds, kitchen floors are being washed for the first time in weeks, kids are finally getting to the lake and some families are even taking vacations.

"It looks a little brighter now that they've stopped drilling but we're still watching and we're going to continue watching. What we're wanting is the government to stop uranium mining altogether," says Helen St. Marie, a local resident for 37 years.

Officially their problem didn't exist. While their houses were being shaken from the blasting on the site, a mines ministry official told them that there was no activity in that area.

It was last fall that people in Genelle first noticed blasting on the mountain behind their homes. But it wasn't until the spring that they finally got together to talk about it. On April 6th 120 people attended a community meeting to discuss their concerns. An ad hoc committee of 15 persons was formed to draw up a statement of principles and to gather information about their legal situation and the uranium exploration.

For the next couple of months the Genelle Action Committee went quietly about their work. They contacted the West Coast Environmental Law Association in Vancouver. They studied the Mineral Act, the Mines Regulations Act, the Health Act and the Atomic Energy Commission Regulations. They contacted the Kootenay Nuclear Study Group for information on uranium mining and nuclear power. They discovered that the claim was held by the China Creek Uranium Consortium, a group of five small companies backed by large multi-nationals. The consortium had hired Manny Consultants Limited (Emmanuel Amendolagine) to do the exploration.

The committee requested meetings with the mines inspector in Nelson and a representative from the Water Rights Branch.

But officially their problem didn't exist. While their houses were being shaken from the blasting on the site, a mines ministry official told them that there was no activity in that area. "There's a lot of hogwash going around somewhere," said George Addie, geologist for the department.

They turned next to the Kootenay Boundary Regional District for support in their dealings with the provincial government.

The KBRD passed a motion to investigate the situation in Genelle and to request J.B. Laing, Nelson district mines inspector, to meet with the Genelle Action Committee. The KBRD discussed the Genelle situation again later but the issue was tabled and they have not yet taken a stand.

A week later, on May 24, the long awaited meeting with Laing took place. "For the first time, I think the mines office implemented provisions already in the act for public protection," said Tom MacKenzie, one of the Genelle residents who went to see Laing.

"But the Mineral Act gives a free miner the right to trespass wherever he wants. He legally has the right to come into your front yard and explore for uranium. Most people don't own the mineral rights to their property. We had no legal rights to protect our watershed even though we'd been using it for 36 years."

About this time the barricade was erected across the access road that the mining consortium had been using. Built of scrap lumber, it bore a single sign saying—WARNING NO TRESPASSING, WATERSHED AREA signed by the Genelle Improvement District and the China Creek Water Users Committee.

On June 30 the barricade was removed to allow a local equipment operator to do road repairs as requested by the department of mines. "They worked on the road for a day or two and as soon as it was passable they took the drill rig up," MacKenzie said.

By the third of July, the barricade was replaced and there were guards on it. People

realized they couldn't trust Manny Consultants to respect their rights or government agencies to protect those rights.

About 25 people met at the barricade the next Saturday morning, July 8th, to discuss a proposal from Manny. Essentially Manny offered to guarantee a safe water supply for Genelle residents. The offer was vague and unenforceable in court.

The small group who attended a second meeting that evening at the community hall were unhappy with the proposal but the low turnout seemed to indicate that community support was fading.

"By Saturday night I felt if there weren't any more people in the community who cared that that maybe we'd have to accept their phony proposals," said MacKenzie, who had been negotiating with Manny and his lawyer. "Our solicitor told us the offer was worth almost nothing and by Sunday night we were stalling for time."

It was at this point that the tide of events turned. Norman McGregor, a member of the original ad hoc committee, explains: "We'd been away for the day Sunday and we stopped in to see Tom (MacKenzie) on our way home. He looked tired and discouraged. He said they

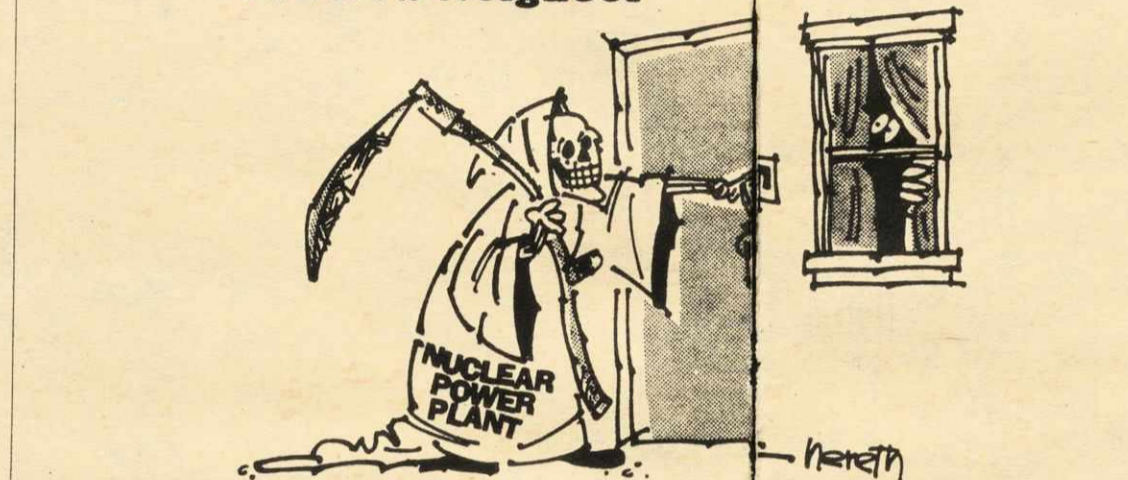
hadn't agreed to let them go up the hill but he didn't think we could stop them.

"We knew they were planning to go up the hill (to the drill site) Monday morning. We stopped at the Grants on the way home and got Ellen out of the swimming pool. She said she'd start phoning people right away to be there tomorrow morning. Then we dropped in at Min Nicholson's across the road and she started

The first of a series of newsletters had been published to take the Genelle story to other people in the area. A raffle was organized to assist the raising. A film night was being planned to help Genelle and other communities learn more about the dangers and problems of uranium mining and nuclear power.

These and many other things were under-

The New Neighbor



phoning. We came home and Herb set off down the road to tell people and I got on the phone. I told everybody I called to phone somebody else. The phones must have been ringing all over town."

Three hours later Norma was back at the MacKenzies with a list of 50 picketers who would be there the next morning.

And Monday morning the bulldozers came. Face to face with 50 people sitting determinedly in their path. No longer would the responsibility for their watershed and community be held in a few hands. Everyone had to take the initiative in this fight if there was to be any chance of victory.

That was the morning the police first arrived. For most it was their first confrontation with the law. "We were scared. People had never been confronted with this situation. We didn't know what to expect. You think maybe you should go when the police arrive. Until you get angry enough," said Norma McGregor.

For five hours the crowd faced the bulldozer. The police talked, explained and negotiated and in the end three persons were arrested for refusing to leave the road when ordered to.

"I felt if I had got off the road then I may as well have gone home and stayed there. It would have been like conceding that they were right and I don't feel they were," said Brent Lee, one of the three who were arrested.

"I wish we could all have seen our way clear to sit together with them," said Helen St. Marie.

Every day more of Genelle was drawn into the fight. "In the first couple of weeks (following the arrests) I'd be in the garden and all I could think about was the barricade and I'd have to go up to check that everything was all right. But after awhile I got to know there were other people who were just as concerned as me," said Herb McGregor, another of the three who were arrested.

The picket at the barricade became the focus of all the activity. At first picketers came and went at random but this soon grew to an organized system of day captains and contact lists. At the first full meeting of the picket committee, it was obvious they had not stopped at picketing.

neatly stacked in the lift net. "I almost cried watching the second load go out. I was running up the hill as fast as I could and the only thing I could think about was getting to the site before the helicopter came back. When I got there I just sat down on it. It was the only thing to do. If those samples were going, I was going with them," declared Ellen Grant, who was also a picket captain.

A small army of RCMP officers moved in the next day to escort the remaining drill cores and the drill off the site. Fifty police sat sweltering in the rented bus while 17 more drilled among the incredulous citizens. The drill cores had somehow vanished during the night and the drill was the only thing the police did escort through the grim and taunting crowd that parted to let them pass.

"They don't just move 50 or 60 police at a moment's notice," said MacKenzie. "I'm strongly convinced this was a political move engineered from Victoria."

"It made it appear our confrontation was with the police and it's not. It's with the legislation. It was a terrible waste of taxpayers' money," said one angry woman.

The drill has not returned to the Genelle area and most people expect that it won't in the near future. That does not mean the fight is over. The waterways in the entire West Kootenay area have been marked for exploration for uranium. Genelle residents know that it's not just their watershed at stake but the whole issue of uranium mining in British Columbia.

"If we could go and tell them (people in areas where they might start drilling) what we know and what we've done it might speed the

whole process up. By the time you get to know all the information it might be too late," said Patty Palmer, a picket captain.

The people in Genelle learned a lot this summer: "I've been concerned about the misuse of uranium. The nuclear wastes that are created as a by-product to the energy production are very dangerous and hard to contain and they remain radioactive for a very long time," said Dave Carter, an active resident. "The best way to stop nuclear power is when it is still in the ground."

Talking about the actions that people have taken, Patty Palmer said, "I guess it's breaking the law but I never considered it that when you're fighting for your life and your kids and your land. If I was the only one doing it I probably wouldn't but you know you've got people to stand by you."

Helen St. Marie is now "a little unhappy with the government." "There must be other jobs they can create that are not dangerous to the land and our health. They seem to want it for more than the money. What I am afraid of is the atomic bomb."

The feeling of self respect and determination that the Genelle people have gained in their new unity looks like it will remain, and they speak about continuing the fight against uranium mining in B.C.

"The ore here only has a half pound of uranium per ton. In the Beaverdel area it's running 40 pounds to the ton. That's where the real fight is going to be," said Eric Taylor.

Says Herb McGregor, "If everybody would get involved, there would be no uranium mining in B.C."



A social movement

by David Langille

"The Movement for a New Society is a far reaching network of small groups working non-violently for fundamental social change. We are developing an overall analysis of present society, a vision of a better world, a sustained non-violent struggle and a program rooted in changed values and changed lives."

Norman Walsh was here to speak about the Movement for a New Society (MNS) last Wednesday evening and I felt better for having attended. This funny, friendly little guy facilitated a dynamic and well orchestrated learning experience high on participation and interaction. One couldn't help being impressed with MNS if it produced such sociable, efficient and analytical leaders armed with effective group process techniques.

Walsh himself has been a playwright and producer, a one time school principal and is now co-ordinator of the Canadian Friends Service Committee. A graduate of Carleton and Yale, he began civil rights work in the American South, rebuilding churches burnt by the Ku Klux Klan. His concerns cover a wide range of contemporary problems. One of his recent projects was a documentary on mercury pollution and its effects on the Cree and Ojibway cultures in Ontario. He is now travelling across the country serving as a facilitator for CFSC and demonstrating techniques "whereby people can take control of their lives to act effectively on

their concerns and convictions."

The Movement began in 1960 after a group of Quakers had sailed the yacht Phoenix to Vietnam to deliver medical supplies to the war victims. Knowing half the supplies were destined to relieve suffering in the North, the U.S. Navy would not allow the first half to be delivered to the south. Despite the press coverage which helped spark U.S. citizens' resistance to the war, those involved felt frustrated with their 'bandaid' action when 'surgery' was needed. They committed themselves to in-depth study and analysis trying to get at the causes of war and decided to live together communally so as to free up time and money for the significant changes.

MNS is no longer a Quaker Movement, but has grown to include 95 houses in a network spread across the U.S., with many more groups affiliated in the U.S., England, Japan, India, etc. All are involved in developing a shared analysis of the present society, a revolutionary vision of a better world, creative action and movement building. Unlike many movements for radical social change, they seek to be structurally non-violent—egalitarian, democratic and decentralized. The network includes small direct action collectives working on specific issues and movement task collectives which do such things as non-violence training, analysis and research, communications and outreach.

No doubt Norman Walsh would most like to communicate the techniques or processes that MNS has developed. They do not seek to proselytize their movement per se but see themselves as a small group of people developing their analysis and sharing a vision for long term change, yet struggling where they can to improve conditions and raise consciousness in the here and now.

Their analysis recognizes that war is but a single manifestation of the injustice pervasive throughout world society. They seek to avoid piecemeal approaches but look to the interaction of political, economic and other factors so as to change the basic conditions underlying militarism and exploitation.

As Walsh says, "clear analysis is needed because things are happening differently than we are being told. We need pertinent, accurate information and easy access to it." MNS has developed macro-analysis seminars as a do-it-yourself self-study technique whereby groups of people can gain a better understanding of their world and decide their goals and strategies in a democratic manner.

The MNS vision which Walsh presented spoke well to the situation of many frustrated university intellectuals and "would be" or "has been" activists. He felt that we needed "to drop away from the security of abstraction and rationalization." We can overcome despair through sharing common visions and analysis and then carefully prioritizing

our actions. He warned especially that we not let ourselves fall prey to "analysis-paralysis". Too much wordy bullshit and not enough action.

"Any one of us can get burnt out working on social issues. We need to learn how to stay on top of this heavy stuff." Walsh pointed out several techniques the Movement has developed whereby members can vent their frustrations and handle their anger. Peer counselling is one method whereby MNS people can keep in focus and not let emotional conflicts get in the way of clear thinking.

The struggle which MNS envisions demands the emergence of a mass movement. It would be based on non-violent ways of resolving conflict and include consciousness raising and the development of alternative institutions and life styles. Non-violent action would be the main weapon and could range from symbolic demonstrations to non-violent coercion and intervention.

MNS Action began with the rebuilding of community in a crime ridden corner of south west Philadelphia such that the streets are now safe and the police have asked MNS to help train their force. MNS was also behind the blockade of munitions ships bound for Pakistan during the Bangladesh war. In this instance, 8 canoes helped close the port and ultimately help change U.S. foreign policy. Walsh carefully stressed that the action began weeks previously when MNS people won the