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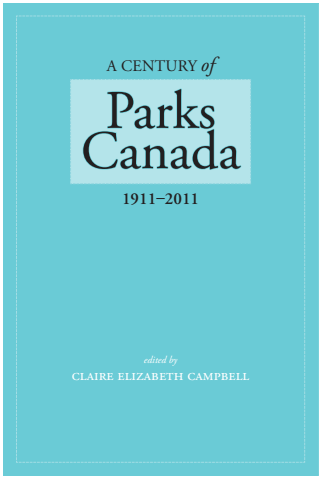

A CENTURY OF PARKS CANADA 1911-2011

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"A Case of Special Privilege and Fancied Right": The Shack Tent Controversy in Prince Albert National Park

Bill Waiser
Department of History
University of Saskatchewan

Former Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien had the reputation as a street fighter, someone known for his steely resolve in advancing the government's agenda, even in the face of fierce opposition from both the right and the left. In fact, during his lengthy parliamentary career, he is probably remembered for retreating only once, when as a young minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development in 1970, he publicly withdrew the Trudeau government's controversial White Paper on Indian Policy. It was not the only time, though, that Chrétien backed down during his early ministerial career. That same year, he met face-to-face with representatives of the Waskesiu Tent Cabin and Portable Cabin Association in an effort to defuse a growing local protest over a development plan to eliminate these semi-permanent structures from the Prince Albert National Park [PANP] townsite campground. But instead of holding to the federal plan that had been a decade in the

making, Chrétien offered to review the attrition policy in light of the local situation. The National Parks Branch never regained the initiative.

This debate over the existence of shack tents and portable cabins in Saskatchewan's first national park might seem puzzling, if not confusing, in that most Canadians readily assume that national parks exist for the benefit and pleasure of all visitors, not just a select few. But private cottages have always been one of the defining features of the Waskesiu townsite. Indeed, Canada's national parks have struggled for the better part of their existence with a dual identity as both nature preserves and recreational playgrounds. This double purpose, a common theme in Canadian national park literature,[1] has often pushed and pulled national parks in two different directions. One author has even claimed that the two-sided mandate has been "the constant, unresolved problem at the heart of park history."[2] But for the generations of people who made Waskesiu their summer home, there was no such "unresolved problem." With many of the same visitors returning season after season, there developed a strong sense of community, especially among the shack tenters who came to identify their interests and desires with those of the park. This attitude not only applied to summer campground policy, but also to what actually went on in the larger townsite – to the point where recreational interests triumphed over any sense of ecological integrity. Any attempt by Ottawa to challenge this situation was regarded as gross interference by a distant bureaucracy which, in the words of one long-time park resident, "did not appreciate the needs or wishes of the people who use the park the most."[3]

Saskatchewan's Playground

Private dwellings have existed in Canada's national parks since the late nineteenth century. The 1887 legislation that set aside Rocky Mountains (later Banff) Park allowed for villa or cottage lots that, in the words of Conservative Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, would be "leased out to people of wealth, who will erect handsome buildings on them."[4] The prime minister also insisted that park tenants be granted long-term, minimal-payment leases, or, at the very least, first right of renewal; otherwise, without something approximating security of tenure, Macdonald maintained that people would be reluctant to invest money in suitable dwellings and probably visit the park

less frequently.[5] So began the policy of allowing private cottages in national parks, and they became thereafter a regular fixture in most townsites. Those in Prince Albert National Park had been erected even before the park was created. In 1914, in an effort to protect the timber and water resources of the boreal forest immediately north of Prince Albert, the federal government set aside the present-day southern half of the park as the Sturgeon River Forest Reserve.[6] The regulations allowed for the recreational use of the reserve in specially designated resort areas, where summer lots would be made available for an annual fee of five dollars. It was not until 1924, though, that a summer cottage subdivision was established at the Big Beach area (also known as Primeau's Landing) along the southeast shore of Red Deer (later Waskesiu) Lake. Even then, access to the site was difficult, and the few cottagers were lucky if they could travel the 100 kilometres from Prince Albert to Waskesiu in one day.

A solution soon presented itself in the form of a defeated prime minister.[7] When Liberal leader William Lyon Mackenzie King lost his seat in the October 1925 general election, Charles McDonald, the newly elected MP for Prince Albert, offered to step aside.[8] But the safe seat came at a price. The local Liberal riding association, which included members of the Prince Albert Board of Trade, wanted a national park established around Waskesiu Lake. It was a logical request for the city that billed itself as the gateway to Saskatchewan's north,[9] but there were also personal interests involved. Several prominent citizens held permits for summer lots at Waskesiu and believed that the area would receive the needed improvements, in particular a good road, only after it had achieved national park status. What really clinched the deal, though, was the prime minister's belief that a national park would enhance his popularity in the riding and guarantee his continued support at the polls.[10] Once King had handily won the February 1926 by-election, it was time for him to honour his side of the bargain. The Prince Albert people were not disappointed. They not only got a national park in the area they wanted, but had the deciding say in size (1,377 square miles) and name (Prince Albert) of the park, established by Order-in-Council on 24 March 1927. From the outset, Tommy Davis, the provincial MLA for the area, boldly predicted that "The Park is going to be a grand thing for Prince Albert.… It is going to preserve in perpetuity a great playground … a playground which is totally different from the prairie area of our province."[11] But there was much to be done to

bring these words to fruition – from laying out a park townsite and building an all-weather road to advertising the new park and getting ready for visitors (typical of the era, as John Sandlos shows). In particular, the Parks Branch decided to reserve the so-called Big Beach area for campers, now occupied by Forest Reserve lots, and create a new summer cottage site at Prospect Point, a height of land immediately to the west. The subdivision offered an unrivalled view of the lake and it was not every day that someone had the chance to live next door to the prime minister (King had been given a cottage for his role in creating the park). But the high costs of construction, particularly when a cottage could be occupied for only a few months each summer,[12] meant that most park visitors had to make do with the 150 public campsites that had been underbrushed and cleared at Big Beach for the 1928 summer season. Even then, the campground proved too small, and over the next few years the area was gradually enlarged to accommodate several hundred cars.[13]

A Tent, a Car, and Some Elbow Space

The creation of Prince Albert National Park was followed three years later by the passage of the *National Parks Act* (1930). Whereas earlier legislation had allowed resource development within park boundaries, national parks were now defined as inviolable spaces of nature "dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education, and enjoyment" and to "be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."[14] This wording in the 1930 act has been hailed as "the foundation upon which all subsequent ecological protection [in national parks] has been based."[15] But the legislation also confirmed the traditional role of parks as serviced recreation areas. In fact, despite this new emphasis on park ecology, the priority in Prince Albert National Park in the early 1930s continued to be the development of the townsite and the provision of visitor accommodation. By the end of 1932, only eight cottages had been built in the Prospect Point subdivision because of the building requirements. The Waskesiu campground, on the other hand, was severely overtaxed. At one point in July 1931, there were 3,800 people under canvas trying to share the 480 camping lots. Park Superintendent James Wood described the scene in a letter to Harkin later that fall: "tents were jammed so closely together that at

times it was impossible to get between them."[16] One solution to the problem, put forward by the Prince Albert Board of Trade, was to set aside an area in the townsite where cheaper cottages could be erected. Ottawa was cool to the idea as long as lots were still available at Prospect Point. As a compromise, though, a number of people were allowed to erect tent houses, or "shack tents" as they were popularly known, in a designated area of the main campground. These were knock-down structures with sectional wooden floors and walls that were hinged or bolted together, and a canvas-covered frame roof.[17]

In 1932, the campground was still congested – "just big enough," in the words of one visitor, "for a tent and a car and some elbow space."[18] One of the reasons for the popularity of the Waskesiu campground was that the only highway to the park ended there; it literally was the end of the road. The townsite was also something of an oasis in the northern wilderness, where families of modest means could forget about the outside world and enjoy a few carefree weeks; it was as if the Depression and the deteriorating economic situation did not exist. But the park was also relatively difficult to reach during the early years of its existence. Unlike the mountain parks, which were served by the railways, there were no direct highways from neighbouring provinces or from the international boundary to the park. Those who visited the park consequently came largely from central Saskatchewan, from within a 150-mile radius that included Prince Albert and to a lesser extent Saskatoon.[19]

That Prince Albert National Park served essentially a local clientele had a profound impact on park development. The National Parks Branch had anticipated from the beginning that canoe tripping on the park's many lakes and rivers would be the major recreational activity and that the townsite would serve as a starting point and supply base. But most visitors to the park in the 1930s and 1940s were families who spent their entire vacation in and around Waskesiu. And because of the relatively short summer season and the prohibition against staying in the park during the winter, it made little sense to expend money on a more substantial cottage when a shack tent would do. It really did not matter if the structures were draughty or unsteady, or that the furniture was crude or unstable; all these families wanted was a cheap place to stay for the summer season. Over time, shack tents led to a sense of community. Segregated on a row of blocks that had specifically been set aside for them in the campground, the shack tents essentially comprised a

Fig. 1. Shack tents in the Waskesiu townsite campground offered an affordable family summer holiday. [Courtesy of Prince Albert National Park Collection, Parks Canada.]

small town within the larger townsite. People came to know one another as neighbours on a first-name basis, particularly since they were allowed to occupy the same lot summer after summer. This sense that Waskesiu was a perfect place for an affordable, family-oriented holiday was captured by a local reporter who visited the campground in 1938. One man roused from his hammock described Prince Albert as "the best damn playground between the Great Lakes and the Rockies."[20]

Not everyone was pleased, however, with the cottage situation at Waskesiu. The Prince Albert Board of Trade, which had always taken a lively interest in the park, believed that the national park building regulations were encouraging people to build cottages elsewhere in the province and hence losing business for the city.[21] The board of trade consequently decided in 1936 to push again for a new subdivision for cheaper cottages. The Parks Branch remained opposed to the idea. In an internal memorandum on the topic, National Parks Commissioner James B. Harkin insisted that conditions at Waskesiu did not warrant special treatment. "If any cheaper type of cottage were allowed," he noted, "the character of the park area would be no better than that of areas where no Park Regulations are in effect and the whole advantage of development under National Parks supervision would be lost."[22]

The Prince Albert situation was different, though, in that it was the prime minister's riding. And so, instead of turning down the proposal, Thomas Crerar, the Minister of the Interior, instructed his department to come up with a solution. Two years later, the Lakeview subdivision, an area for cheaper cottages along the lakeshore, was carved out of four existing blocks of the main campground. Superintendent Wood, for his part, hoped the Parks Branch would not stop there and suggested that it was also an opportune time to remove all shack tents from the campground over the next few years. "Personally I would be glad to see them done away with," he advised Ottawa. "A camping ground with numerous tent houses is far from attractive."[23] But federal officials, sensitized to the Prince Albert situation, were not foolish enough to resolve one contentious issue only to create another. Besides, it was assumed that people occupying shack tents would probably opt for a small cottage lot.

A Park Institution

The coming of the Second World War temporarily eased the demand for accommodation in Waskesiu, as park attendance fell by two-thirds from its pre-war high of 30,000 visitors. But once the war was over, Saskatchewan people flocked to the park in unprecedented numbers. By 1949, attendance at Prince Albert exceeded 50,000 and then steadily climbed through the decade. The average daily townsite population during the 1958 season was 5,200 people – more than the total attendance in 1928. Although Waskesiu had always figured largely in park development, it never dominated it to the extent that it did in the 1950s and 1960s. The large influx of visitors placed a severe strain on accommodation facilities and ultimately led to crowded conditions at Waskesiu that were clearly at odds with the values and purposes commonly identified with national parks.

The Parks Branch responded to the explosion in park visitation by creating two new subdivisions for moderately priced cottages in the townsite: Lakeview 2 in 1946 and Lakeview 3 in 1951. But the real problem area remained the crowded campground. As park attendance started to rebound in the late 1940s, eighty new lots were added to the campground. This was followed in 1953 by the commencement of work on a seventy-two-lot trailer area that was intended to free up more space in the campground. What was completely unanticipated, however, was the phenomenal expansion in the number of shack tents. By the summer of 1950, there were 412 shack tents in the Waskesiu campground, a 25 per cent increase from the previous year. A small number had also popped up in the campground at the Waskeiu Narrows. National Parks Controller James Smart did not even like their name, let along their use, and instructed the new park superintendent, B.I.M. Strong, to employ a more dignified term such as "cabins" or "house tent" when referring to them.[24]

Ottawa soon had a more serious challenge on its hands. In early July 1950, R.D. Kerr, secretary of the new Prince Albert National Park Shack Tent Owners' Association, presented Strong with a 274-name petition requesting that shack tents be allowed to remain on their campground lots year-round. The petition noted that the existing storage facilities could not handle the steadily growing volume of shack tents, that the structures and their contents were often damaged during their removal from the campground, and

Fig. 2. By the 1940s, the shack tent community had become a park institution. [Courtesy of Prince Albert National Park Collection, Parks Canada.]

that the owners would take better care of them if they could be left standing year-round.[25] It was not the first time the question of leaving shack tents on the campground had been raised; the issue had come up every few years. But the sharp rise in their numbers, together with the problem of dismantling, storing, and then erecting them all each year, however, forced the shack tenters to take concerted action. They formed themselves into an association, drew up and circulated the petition, and solicited the support of both the Prince Albert and Saskatoon boards of trade. They also had an unlikely ally in Superintendent Strong. Whereas his predecessors would have been happy to rid the park of the structures, Strong believed that the Waskesiu shack tenters were "an institution" in the park and that the owners had "a legitimate complaint." He suggested to Ottawa that the shack tents be converted into what he called "portable cabins" with permanent walls and roofs and skid foundations for towing.[26]

The National Parks Branch's initial reaction to the petition was to say no. Controller James Smart was worried on two counts: that the public campground would be taken over by permanent cabins, and that allowing the owners to occupy the same lots year-round might give them some preemptory right to the property. But upon reflection – and the application of some political pressure from the town of Prince Albert[27] – Ottawa softened its stand. It still refused to allow shack tents to remain on the campground year-round but, at the same time, proposed the creation of a separate "tourist camp" where private families could erect small inexpensive cottages[28] – exactly what Harkin, now long retired, had fought against in the early 1930s.

This portable cabin scheme seemed to please all concerned parties and, over the next year, the details were worked out. Two blocks in the campground on the east side of Waskesiu Drive were set aside for the erection of small (fourteen feet by twenty feet), single-storey cabins to be based on one of five government-approved plans. These structures could be left on the same site year-round but had to be built on skids so that they could be moved if necessary. The lots themselves (forty feet by fifty feet) were to be awarded on a draw system and occupied on the basis of a twenty-dollar seasonal camping permit. No individual was allowed to hold both a portable cabin and a shack tent lot. In an attempt to reduce the number of shack tents, preference was given to existing shack tent owners in the awarding of portable cabin lots

– their names were drawn first. The Parks Branch was also willing to allow shack tents to be converted to portable cabins.[29]

The first draw for portable cabins was made on 28 March 1951. The scheme proved an immediate success – there were more applicants than available lots – and within three years, a further five new blocks had to be added. The portable cabin development, however, had no impact on the number of shack tents. As families moved from the shack tent area into portable cabins, their places were simply taken up by others. What this meant by the summer of 1956 is that the number of spaces specifically set aside for tents in the Waskesiu campground dropped to a mere fifty-eight sites. Shack tents and portables, in the meantime, occupied 616 lots, or more than two-thirds of the available campground space, including the trailer park.[30] It appeared that the weekend camper might have to be placed on the endangered species list.

J.R.B. Coleman, the new national parks director, wanted shack tents – what he derisively described as eyesores – to be phased out completely at Prince Albert. But the question of what to do about the Waskesiu campground could not be handled so easily, or so brusquely for that matter. During a visit to Saskatoon on 30 June 1956, a parks official was privately warned that "changes in the shack tent arrangement … could only result in wide scale trouble."[31] The new Prince Albert superintendent, Harry Dempster, concurred. Asked to study the "camping problem" at Waskesiu over the summer of 1956, Dempster prepared a comprehensive, thoughtful memorandum in which he repeatedly advised against any action against the shack tents if Ottawa wanted to avoid an emotional, acrimonious public battle. "It seems to me that the shack tent problem is one that we are stuck with," he mused, "and the main thing to be done is to make up our minds that they will be with us at the Waskesiu campground and how best to control them with the least amount of trouble to ourselves and to the occupants."[32] What Dempster had in mind was placing an absolute limit on the number of shack tent lots, as well as warning the owners that the structures could not be rented. Beyond that, he believed that the best alternative was to find a new location for (regular) tenters on the outskirts of the townsite and, ironically, away from the lake.

But the National Parks Branch's new planning section,[33] intent on keeping Canada's so-called special places special, was not prepared to be so understanding. In an internal 1958 report on future planning considerations for

Prince Albert National Park, Chief Planner Lloyd Brooks identified several "problem" areas. He argued that Prince Albert's principal use as a kind of regional holiday resort was not in keeping with its status as a national park. He also warned that the number of short-term visitors to the park, and hence the demand for camping spaces, would sharply rise over the next few years. Brooks' most damning remarks, however, were reserved for the private structures in the townsite. "The present spectacle which confronts the visitor is not a pleasant one," he seethed, "this is a misuse of a national park, a misuse at the expense of the more legitimate short-stay visitor whose tax dollars have made possible through subsidization, the present favoured position of the shack tenter, portable cabin owner, and summer home owner at Waskesiu."[34] Brooks' solution was a complete redevelopment of the townsite to provide for more, cheaper accommodation and day-use facilities – minus the shack tents and portable cabins.

These comments marked a shift in Ottawa's opposition to Prince Albert's shack tents and portable cabins. Whereas the semi-permanent structures were usually criticized for monopolizing the Waskesiu campground at the expense of other park visitors, they were now being portrayed as a special privilege in a place that had been formally set aside for the benefit and enjoyment of all Canadians. But before attempting to do away with them, Gordon Robertson, the deputy minister of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, decided to visit the park to assess the situation firsthand. The senior bureaucrat was pleasantly surprised by what he found at Waskesiu, even going as far as to report that the shack tents and portable cabins "look thoroughly respectable and undoubtedly are providing a great many people with a cheap and healthful holiday."[35] But he too questioned whether individuals should be allowed to benefit from what appeared to be semi-proprietary rights in a national park on the basis of a seasonal camping permit. Robertson consequently called on the Parks Branch's planning section to give the matter "a good deal of attention … so that we can work out a suitable policy."[36]

The planning section was ready with an answer by early 1960. Its document put into words the sense of frustration that the National Parks Branch had felt about the issue for the past few years. On the opening page, it described the situation as "a case of special privilege and fancied right … unjust to other citizens and taxpayers … and a contradiction of national park

purpose."[37] The report then went on to argue that the structures, although important in the early years of park development, not only dominated the Waskesiu campground at the expense of the growing number of short-term visitors, but also interfered with the orderly development of the park by occupying areas that were better suited for public day-use facilities. In short, the structures had no place in a national park: "The settled pattern must be undone."[38]

Like Deputy Minister Robertson, however, the planning section realized that shack tents, and to a lesser extent portable cabins, were an entrenched tradition at Waskesiu – an undeniable part of Prince Albert National Park's history. So any new program of redevelopment would require "enlisting the understanding and cooperation of the present occupants."[39] The report therefore recommended that the elimination of shack tents and portable cabins should proceed in stages over a five-year period with as little disruption as possible. It also advised that alternative forms of accommodation, attractive to local long-term visitors and yet still in line with national park purposes, should be in place before any redevelopment got underway. The ultimate aim was to turn the Waskesiu townsite into a visitor service centre.

The shack tent/portable cabin report was delivered to Robertson in February 1960 and approved in principle three months later by Alvin Hamilton, minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources in the Diefenbaker government.[40] Parks Branch Director Coleman then ordered the planning department to work up a preliminary redevelopment plan for the Waskesiu townsite.[41] In the meantime, he urged that construction start immediately on 105 low-rental cabins at Waskesiu that in turn would allow the department to establish new day-use in facilities in the campground area now occupied by shack tents (between the main beach and Waskesiu Drive). "The time has arrived," Coleman announced, "to provide facilities for all park visitors which are more in line with today's and tomorrow's needs and demands, and more in accordance with national park purposes."[42] Hamilton's successor, Walter Dinsdale, however, was in no hurry to proceed with these changes, particularly since the Prince Albert riding had been represented by Prime Minister Diefenbaker since 1953.[43] Instead, he decided to visit the park personally during the summer of 1961. There, Dinsdale was clearly made aware of the sensitivity of the issue, for it was subsequently decided that local individuals and groups should be advised and consulted about any long-term

development plans for the park.[44] One summer park resident sensed victory and in an act of defiance attached a fixed roof to a shack tent. When this violation of campground policy was ignored, several shack tents began being stored over the winter as whole units.

Public Land for Private Individuals?

The question of private residences in a national park setting soon spread beyond the boundaries of Prince Albert National Park. Residential areas for regular park visitors had been allowed to take root in a number of other national parks. The Banff and Jasper townsites, for example, had become just like any other small town (as C.J. Taylor shows in the next essay); while Riding Mountain had shack tents too. By the mid-1950s, though, the Parks Branch finally began to question the wisdom of this policy when measured against the spirit and intent of the 1930 *National Parks Act*.[45] Liberal Northern Affairs and National Resources Minister Jean Lesage, for example, reminded Parliament in August 1956 that "parks are preserved for the people of Canada as a whole for very special purposes, not for the inhabitants of one area."[46] This sentiment was evidently shared by the new Progressive Conservative government, which prohibited the establishment of any new lots or residential subdivisions in national parks as of July 1959. Walter Dinsdale, in fact, was moving towards a wholesale review of national parks and their role in meeting the growing recreational needs of Canadians just before the Conservatives were bounced from office in 1963.[47]

The matter was taken up, though, by his Liberal successor, Arthur Laing. The new minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources was disturbed by the fact that park lease holders paid ridiculously low rents yet made huge profits when the property changed hands. He also believed that it was improper for individuals, who were fortunate enough to live near a national park, to enjoy these special privileges.[48] "It is not the purpose of the national parks," he lectured the House of Commons in June 1963, "to provide summer residential subdivisions, cottage lots or shack tent areas for the exclusive use and possession of private individuals." A little more than a year later, the Liberal government gave substance to Laing's words in a new *National Parks Policy* statement. Under the new policy, all private residential occupation of

national parks was to be gradually eliminated; only those persons who worked for the park or provided an essential service would be allowed to stay. "National Park land is public land," Laing stated in September 1964. "It must be used in a way that clearly contributes to public enjoyment and service, not for the private benefit and convenience of individuals."[49]

The minister's stand was favourably received across the country, especially by wildlife groups and park organizations that were worried about the disappearance of Canada's wilderness heritage. Perhaps his staunchest supporter was *The Globe and Mail*. In a strongly worded editorial, entitled "Render to Canada ...," the newspaper argued that "the parks belong to all Canadians, here, now, and yet to come.… No individual should be allowed to stake claims in them for their private enjoyment or their private profit. Mr. Laing should have the support of every Canadian in reclaiming this vital heritage."[50] Residents and business people in western parks, on the other hand, mounted a determined campaign to derail the program with the aid of their parliamentary representatives. Laing refused to back down in the face of this criticism and, in an August 1965 letter to all holders of residential leases in western parks, repeated his department's objective to acquire gradually all existing private summer homes.[51]

It was against this background that the redevelopment plans for Waskesiu were finally completed in 1967. Given the flak that the Branch and the Department had taken over the past two years, park officials knew that the proposed changes, particularly the decision to do away with shack tents, portable cabins, and cottages, were certain to generate controversy. But they were more concerned that park attendance would more than double over the next fifteen years – as it had already between 1950 and 1965 – and that the strain on the Waskesiu campground would only get worse until steps were taken to provide new facilities. In fact, steps had already been taken to ease the congestion by clearing a new 100-site campground, known as Beaver Glen, just northeast of the townsite in 1964. The planners were also privately confident that any protest could be kept to a minimum if the proposed changes were carefully explained to those affected; it was all a matter of how the issue was handled.[52] It would certainly be a test of the National Park Branch's new policy about citizen involvement through public consultations and hearings.[53]

The Waskesiu redevelopment plan was formally presented by Alex Reeve, National Parks Assistant Director, at a public meeting in the townsite theatre

on 12 August 1967. Reading from a prepared text, Reeve first outlined how park use had changed over the past decade: more people were visiting but for shorter periods of time. He then went on to argue that new facilities were required in areas that were currently being used for other purposes. The first of these targeted areas was the row of shack tents on the lakeshore side of Waskesiu Drive. To free up this part of the Waskesiu campground for new day-use facilities, Reeve announced that only those shack tenters or their spouses who held a valid camping permit at the end of the 1967 camping season would be allowed to occupy a campground lot in subsequent years, provided they continually renewed their camping permit each spring. Those shack tenters who failed to keep their camping permit in good standing or decided to sell or otherwise dispose of their shack tent would no longer be eligible for a lot. This attrition scheme was expected to lead to the eventual relocation and consolidation of the remaining shack tents to the east side of Waskesiu Drive on blocks *L* to *Q*, and thereby enable the park to go ahead with the redevelopment of the immediate lakeshore area. A similar policy would then be applied to portable cabin owners, effective 30 September 1970. In the long run, it was expected that these structures, like shack tents, would gradually disappear from the Waskesiu campground and be replaced by new trailer sites and additional campground facilities. Curiously, the idea of building rows of cheap rental cabins – something that planners had earlier deemed essential to townsite redevelopment – was shelved until it could be proven that there was a definite need for such accommodation. As for the more substantial cottages in the Prospect Point and Lakeview subdivisions, they were to be acquired by the government in the distant future upon the expiration of the leases.

The initial reaction to the Waskesiu redevelopment plan was one of shock and dismay. Many shack tenters feared that they were about to be summarily evicted and, over the next few days, Prince Albert National Park Superintendent John Malfair was kept busy explaining to permit holders that they would not be forced to give up their privilege of occupying a campground lot. Despite his assurances, the mood quickly turned to anger. Many of the owners of shack tents and portable cabins had been patronizing the park for decades – in a few cases, generations – and had come to regard themselves as the backbone of Waskesiu. They had seen the park evolve from its simple beginnings, had invested considerable time and energy in building

Fig. 3. Portable cabin owners were prepared to fight the National Parks bureaucracy to keep their special accommodation privileges in the park. [Courtesy of Prince Albert National Park Collection, Parks Canada.]

and maintaining their summer homes, and had deep-felt memories of their holidays at Saskatchewan's "poor man's paradise." Going to Waskesiu each summer had become part of the natural rhythm of their lives. The shack tenters and portable cabin owners were therefore outraged by the suggestion that their long and intimate association with the park no longer mattered and was, in fact, detrimental. There were also upset by the apparent inequality of the scheme: cottage owners would not only be left alone for several years but also receive financial compensation.

The Waskesiu Tent Cabin and Portable Cabin Association lost little time organizing a campaign to stop the redevelopment plan. It lobbied Saskatchewan's members of Parliament and the provincial Legislature for assistance. It flooded the park superintendent with written objections to the plan. And it drew up a petition, which argued that shack tents and portable cabins were

entirely in keeping with Prime Minister Mackenzie King's 1928 dedication of Prince Albert National Park to "the average man." As far as the Association was concerned, "we [should] be permitted to continue as we have done in the past and that additional space, as and when necessary, be developed elsewhere in the 1500-odd square miles of park property to accommodate future day and week-campers in increasing numbers."[54] The thought of eliminating shack tents to make space for expensive trailers and motor homes seemed a contradiction, if not a betrayal, of the reason for the park's creation.

The petition was formally presented to Arthur Laing on 17 November 1967 by Association President Mrs. Mary Jackson. As the diminutive homemaker left for Ottawa armed with hundreds of signatures, her departure was depicted in the *Prince Albert Daily Herald* as a kind of David-and-Goliath encounter. Laing, for his part, refused to be drawn into a public spat and simply reiterated his ministry's determination to proceed with the redevelopment plan. The stalemate continued until the following summer when the young, promising Jean Chrétien took over the portfolio in the new Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau. Seizing upon Laing's departure and Trudeau's emphasis on participatory democracy, Mrs. Jackson immediately wrote to Chrétien and urged him to reconsider the redevelopment plan. "Our aim," she told him, "is to achieve a development of Waskesiu townsite … that is for all Canadians and equitable to the pioneers of the Park and their successors." She also complained that the association was particularly upset over the former minister's repeated refusal to discuss the matter and called on Chrétien to visit Waskesiu. Was it not, she asked coyly, "Prime Minister Trudeau's wish that Cabinet Ministers of his Government … learn first hand the problems that face local groups?"[55]

But any hope Jackson might have had that Chrétien might be persuaded to rescind the attrition policy for shack tents and portable cabins was quickly dashed. In a revised policy statement, issued shortly following his appointment, he made it quite clear that the private use of public lands was at odds with the purpose of national parks and that he was intent on pursuing the policy of his predecessor. "We are trying to improve the park experience of all visitors," he wrote former Prime Minister Diefenbaker in October 1968 about the plans for Waskesiu.[56] By January 1970, however, Chrétien's attempt to revise national park leasing regulations through a new Leaseholds Corporation bill was being successfully challenged in the courts.[57] He consequently

began to have second thoughts about the wisdom of implementing the second phase of the Waskesiu plan: the portable cabin provisions. This seeming change of heart made National and Historic Parks Director John Nicol apoplectic. In a heated memo to Chrétien's senior assistant deputy minister, Nicol pointed out that after answering "almost 150 Ministers' letters as well as telegrams and petitions on the topic … the portable cabin owners appear to have finally accepted our point of view. If we are to back down now, we will undoubtedly cause more of a furor than when the 1967 announcement was made."[58] In fact, a number of portable cabin owners had already sold their structures on the assumption that their days in the park were numbered. He also warned that failure to proceed with the portable cabin policy would provoke a storm of protest from shack tent owners. Since 1967, the number of shack tents had dropped from 375 to 305, and it would not be fair to these former park residents to discontinue the policy. For Nicol, then, it was not a time to have doubts.

Chrétien, on the other hand, decided to try to assuage local concerns and finally accepted Mrs. Jackson's invitation to meet with the Tent Cabin and Portable Cabin Association in Prince Albert. The association used the February 1970 visit to present Chrétien with a lengthy brief that essentially argued that, despite the National Parks Branch's forecast of a tourist boom, Prince Albert remained a regional national park serving a regular group of local visitors. Chrétien, in response, told Mrs. Jackson that the policy would remain unchanged. "The purpose of the redevelopment plan of 1967," he reminded her, "was to make all land in the National Park available to visitors rather than have any park land alienated for a select group of people."[59] He also took issue with her suggestion that his department was forcing residents out of the park and stressed that park redevelopment would take place over several years as visitation increased. He did, nonetheless, concede that the new policy might leave portable cabin owners at a disadvantage because they had made a greater investment in their structures than shack tenters. He consequently promised that his ministry would take "another look at the situation."[60]

What People Really Want

The review of the Waskesiu redevelopment plan led to a number of changes. During the summer of 1970, the department decided to delay the implementation of the portable cabin restrictions – originally to start on 30 September 1970 – for another year. This one year's reprieve was designed to defuse some of the anger over the policy. In order to mitigate the potential financial loss to portable cabin owners, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development also agreed to purchase at market value any structure that became available after the policy went into effect. Otherwise, the same regulations that had applied to shack tents since 1967 were to be in force. Finally, in an effort to forestall any future charge that portable cabin owners had received preferential treatment, the department decided in January 1971 that shack tents could be left standing on-site year-round, as well as serviced with electricity at the owner's expense. With these changes, the metamorphosis was complete. Structures that were initially intended to serve as temporary campground lodging now took on all the trappings of a permanent cabin, albeit on a smaller, cheaper scale.

These various concessions were intended by the department to be a kind of olive branch. Henceforth, it expected to be able to proceed with the phasing out of the shack tents and portable cabins with little protest.[61] The strategy quickly came undone, however, with the spring 1971 release of the Prince Albert National Park Provisional Master Plan. Based on the assumption that there were already a number of purely recreational areas already in existence in Saskatchewan, the management scheme suggested that Prince Albert National Park's future was as a "national wildland park."[62] The three major park biomes – boreal forest, aspen parkland, and southern grasslands – would be set aside for wilderness hiking, canoeing, and camping, while roads and activity centres would be located to facilitate access to these areas. By the early 1970s the Parks Branch increasingly was using such ecological characterizations for national parks across the country (as Taylor, George Colpitts, and Olivier Craig-Dupont note in their essays).

Although the plan for Prince Albert did not make any specific references to the redevelopment of the Waskesiu townsite, it inadvertently helped the cause of the Tent Cabin and Portable Cabin Association. Since 1967, the association had been complaining that "their park" was under attack by

Ottawa bureaucrats who had no understanding of Prince Albert's uniqueness (a similar complaint was made by residents of Kouchibouguac, as Ronald Rudin shows). The Provisional Master Plan now appeared to be further evidence of this insensitivity, particularly the proposal that motor boats be banned from Kingsmere Lake, one of the more popular fishing lakes in the park. The association had also been clamouring for a chance to voice its opposition to the attrition policy at some kind of public forum. That opportunity was now made possible thanks to the two days of public hearings on the Provisional Master Plan that were scheduled for late June in Regina and Prince Albert. Whether Ottawa realized it or not, the issue was far from settled.

Saskatchewan political leaders were the first to castigate the Provisional Master Plan. "It is a place for the people … not a playground for bureaucrats in Ottawa," a sanctimonious John Diefenbaker thundered a few days after the plan was unveiled. "These people are trying to tell us out here in the west what we want."[63] Saskatchewan deputy premier Davey Steuart said much the same thing, calling the proposals "another example of their stupidity and lack of concern for what people really want in this area."[64] This criticism was carried over into the public hearings. The plan did have its supporters, but these individuals and organizations, such as the Saskatchewan Natural History Society and Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation, were dismissed as misguided tree-huggers who did not appreciate Prince Albert's importance as a family park. Some briefs argued that the proposed plan did not take into account the regional nature of the park, a fact ironically confirmed by Ottawa's own statistic that 86 per cent of all visitors to the park were from Saskatchewan. Others, conveniently forgetting their own privileged position, complained that the plan catered to a small minority of wilderness enthusiasts and was prejudiced against those who used their leisure time to pursue other, more sedate activities. The Tent Cabin and Portable Cabin Association ridiculed the idea that only 5.2 square miles of the total 1,496-square-mile park area were to be reserved for intensive use. It seemed as though the plan was another step in an attempt to take the park away from the people. As one woman sarcastically observed, Ottawa was spending $5 million "to make a wilderness area into a wilderness area."[65]

The federal government's response to the public hearings on the Prince Albert National Park Provisional Master Plan was not announced until four

years later. Although the shack tent and portable cabin attrition policy remained in place during this period, the delay was probably not deliberate. Park planners not only had to rethink the Prince Albert proposals in light of the public reaction but were also busy preparing management plans for a number of other parks at this time. The uncertainty as to what might be the outcome of the hearings, however, did not help the strained relations between long-time park residents and park officials. Nor did the government response once it became public in the spring of 1975. Parks Canada had now decided that new low-rental accommodation would be developed as shack tents and portable cabins disappeared.[66]

The dispute was far from over. Still smarting from the reception of the Provisional Master Plan, Parks Canada pledged that there would be further public consultation regarding the future development of Waskesiu. This process started in June 1975, and the long-expected showdown between the two sides occurred two months later during an August meeting in the former Terrace Gardens Dance Hall in Waskesiu. Parks officials knew beforehand that the meeting might not be a friendly one. But little did they expect that the meeting hall would be packed to capacity and that those who were unable to get in would be lined up outside anxiously waiting for their turn to speak to the planning team. The meeting was intended to initiate public discussion on a wide range of planning issues affecting the townsite. From the outset, however, the speakers maintained that the attrition policy was the only issue and refused to discuss anything else. "We get the impression … these hearings are just a sham," said Mrs. Jackson. "Are you really going to listen this time or once again just go through the motions?"[67] Another portable cabin owner suggested that the attrition program "amounts to public harassment of the people who built the park." This feeling was echoed by another speaker who warned, "If there have been decisions made … which affect our livelihood and they aren't what we want they will … be changed."[68] One parks planner who had been on the job for only six weeks probably wondered whether things could get any worse.

This emotionally charged meeting finally prompted Parks Canada to forsake its attrition program for shack tents and portable cabins. Over the next few months, the park superintendent, the executive of the Tent Cabin Association, and park planners met on a regular basis to devise an alternative concept for the townsite. It was eventually decided in early 1977 that a fixed

number of seasonal permits (448 in total) would be made available for these structures. The planning team justified this retreat from the 1967 Waskesiu redevelopment policy by noting that shack tents and portable cabins "have a longstanding tradition in Waskesiu and are acceptable to the majority of park users." Equally significant was the admission that "no 'higher use' was required of the lands" at that time.[69] This was largely because attendance had not grown as expected. Fewer people visited the park in 1976 than had nine years earlier when the attrition policy was announced. Most remarkable, however, was Parks Canada's willingness to bend the principle that private use of park land was wrong in favour of giving into local opinion.

Conclusion

In 1988, the *National Parks Act* was amended to provide for the better administration and operation of Canada's special places. "Ecological integrity" now became the watch phrase for park management and visitor use in the late twentieth century. But once again, the experience in Prince Albert National Park suggested that local entrenched interests trumped any new national parks legislation. Two recent examples will suffice. Although shack tents were converted to portable cabins and higher rents eventually introduced to better reflect market value,[70] running water and sewage were installed in the portable cabin area *before* an environmental impact assessment study was undertaken. These same cabin owners were also part of a larger Waskesiu group that successfully lobbied Parks Canada to spray the townsite with *Bacillus thuringis* to stave off a spruce budworm infestation – against the wishes of the park superintendent, who resigned over the issue. That these summer cottagers have become so powerful, so influential, in deciding park policy in the townsite is largely a consequence of the circumstances behind the creation of Prince Albert National Park and its popular use over the decades as a regional summer playground. Perhaps the local newspaper put it best: "The PANP – which originated and was promoted by Prince Albert citizens – is … 'our' park."[71]

Notes

1 See, for example, Leslie Bella, *Parks for Profit* (Montreal, Harvest House, 1987), and, most recently, Paul Kopas, *Taking the Air: Ideas and Change in Canada's National Parks* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

2 Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 15. MacEachern calls this double purpose, "preservation and use," and suggests that it is more useful to look at both aspects in terms of "intervention" (156).

3 Quoted in *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 2 July 1971, 3.

4 Canada, House of Commons *Debates*, 3 May 1887, 245.

5 Liberal John Platt took issue with Banff becoming "a very nice health resort of the wealthy people of this country" and insisted that other Canadians "ought to receive an equal benefit with those who have influence." Ibid., 246. See also Bella, *Parks for Profit*, 114.

6 The 729-square-mile Sturgeon River Forest Reserve stretched from the Sturgeon River Valley on the west to the third meridian on the east and from the line between townships 57 and 58 (taking in most of Red Deer or Waskesiu Lake) on the north and a slightly irregular line between townships 52 and 53 (that excluded all possible agricultural lands) on the south. Established under the provisions of the *Dominion Forest Reserves and Parks Act* (1911), it was one of fifteen reserves that the federal government set aside in Saskatchewan.

7 For the full story behind the creation of Prince Albert National Park and the role played by Mackenzie King, see B. Waiser, *Saskatchewan's Playground: A History of Prince Albert National Park* (Saskatoon, 1989), chap. 4.

8 Mackenzie King never forgot McDonald's generosity and appointed him to the Senate in 1935. But the Prince Albert pharmacist was too ill to take his place. McDonald has the dubious distinction of being elected to the House of Commons and appointed to the Senate and never having uttered a single word in either chamber.

9 G.W.P. Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century, 1866–1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1966), 245.

10 LAC, Manuscript Division, William Lyon Mackenzie King papers, Diaries, 20 April 1926.

11 LAC, Manuscript Division, William Lyon Mackenzie King papers, vol. 167, 121011, T.C. Davis to W.L.M. King, 28 April 1927.

12 Thirty-eight lots in Prospect Point were made available in June 1928. Each applicant was required to erect a cottage with a minimum value of $1,000 within one year. Before construction could commence, however, the plans and specifications had to be approved by the Parks Branch. Upon the satisfactory completion of the structure, the lot holder was issued a standard forty-two-year lease with the option of renewal. The seasonal rental fee was $10 for the period from April 1 to October 30. For the balance of the year, the structure could not be occupied.

13 This work was plagued by a large patch of muskeg just back from the beach. Indeed, future prime minister

John Diefenbaker was well within the truth when he referred to Waskesiu as "that mosquito park offered to Prince Albert as a reward for the election of Mackenzie King." Quoted in *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 19 August 1949.

14 D. DeBrou and B. Waiser, eds., *Documenting Canada: A History of Modern Canada in Documents* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1992), 299.

15 Kopas, *Taking the Air*, 33.

16 RG 84, vol. 587, file PA36, J. Wood to J.B Harkin, 15 October 1931.

17 Shack tents could remain on the same spot in the campground for the summer on the basis of a seasonal camping permit. This privilege cost a mere two dollars per month in 1935, the equivalent of the daily rate at one of the park hotels. By 1937, the shack tent fee had doubled, but it was still an incredible bargain.

18 University of Alberta Archives, Karl Clark papers, K. Clark to no name, 16 November 1932.

19 Despite a concerted effort to advertise the park in the United States and the larger Canadian market, in particular Alberta, 92 per cent of the visitors in 1950 came from Saskatchewan.

20 Quoted in RG 84, vol. 18, PA109, pt. 3.

21 On 15 December 1933, the Prince Albert Board of Trade reviewed the matter of park residences with J.M. Wardle, supervisor of western parks. *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 16 December 1933.

22 RG 84, vol. 1744, file PA25, J.B. Harkin to J.M. Wardle, 20 March 1936.

23 Ibid., J. Wood to Controller, 18 November 1937.

24 Ibid., vol. 1751, file PA36-1, pt. 1, J. Smart to B.I.M. Strong, 25 July 1950.

25 Ibid., PANP Shack Tent Owners' Association to B.I.M. Strong, 30 June 1950.

26 Ibid., B.I.M. Strong to J. Smart, 25 July 1950.

27 Ibid., J. Smart to B.I.M. Strong, 1 December 1950.

28 Ibid., 5 September 1950.

29 Ibid., "Conditions Governing Portable Cabin Lots on Campgrounds at Waskesiu," 1 March 1952.

30 Ibid., vol. 1750, file PA36, pt. 4, G.H.L. Dempster, "Report on Control of Camping Facilities, Prince Albert National Park," 7 November 1956.

31 W84-85/407, box 16, f. PA36-2, "Matters Taken up with Director Hutchinson in Saskatoon on June 30, 1956."

32 RG 84, vol. 1750, file PA36, pt. 4, G.H.L. Dempster to J.R.B. Coleman, 21 August 1956.

33 In 1957, a new planning section was created within the national parks service. This move was part of a general trend within the Canadian federal service towards greater professionalization and specialization. It was also a recognition of the increasingly important role that planning had assumed in the operation of the national parks system.

34 *Planning Considerations-Prince Albert National Park*, report n. 7, Planning Section, National Parks Branch, 15 December 1958, 2–3.

35 RG 84, vol. 1749, file PA28, pt. 2, R.G. Robertson to J.R.B. Coleman, 11 August 1959.

36 Ibid.

37 L. Brooks; J.C. Jackson; H.K. Eidsvik, *Shack Tents and Portable Cabins Proposed Program*, report n. 1, National Parks Branch, 1959, 1.

38 Ibid., 5.

39 Ibid.

40 RG 84, vol. 1749, file PA28, pt. 3, J.R.B. Coleman to R.G. Robertson, 11 August 1959.

41 The planning section initially contempated eliminating all private residences in the park, including those in Prospect Point and Lakeview (1–3), in favour of a variety of rental structures.

42 RG 84, vol. 1749, file PA28, pt. 3, J.R.B. Coleman to R.G. Robertson, 21 December 1960.

43 Prince Albert has the distinction of being represented by three prime ministers. Sir Wilfrid Laurier won election in Quebec East and Saskatchewan (Prince Albert) in 1896 when it was possible to run in more than one riding; Laurier chose to represent Quebec East. William Lyon Mackenzie King held the riding from 1926 to 1945, while John Diefenbaker represented Prince Albert from 1953 until his death in 1979.

44 RG 84, vol. 1749, file PA28, pt. 3, J.R.B. Coleman to R.G. Robertson, 29 December 1961.

45 Kopas, *Taking the Air*, 37–38.

46 Canada, House of Commons *Debates*, 2 August 1956, 6884.

47 Bella, *Parks for Profit*, 114–15. A 1962 planning section document proposed that park residences be restricted to those serving the visiting public.

48 *Debates*, 26 June 1963, 1618.

49 *Debates*, 18 September, 1964, 8194.

50 *Globe and Mail*, 2 August 1965, 6.

51 W84-85/496, box 2, form letter from A. Laing, 25 August 1965.

52 RG 84, vol. 1750, file PA28, pt. 5, A.J. Reeve to J.H. Gordon, 12 July 1967.

53 Kopas, *Taking the Air*, 67–72.

54 Ibid., vol. 1753, file PA36-1, "Petition Regarding the Proposed Waskesiu Redevelopment Plan, Prince Albert National Park," 2 September 1967.

55 W84-85/496, box 2, M. Jackson to J. Chrétien, 15 July 1968.

56 Ibid., J. Chrétien to J.G. Diefenbaker, 30 October 1968.

57 Bella, *Parks for Profit*, 117–18.

58 W84-85/405, box 17, J.I. Nicol to J.H. Gordon, 17 February 1970.

59 Ibid., J. Chrétien to M. Jackson, 13 May 1970.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., box 18, J. Rae to D. Clark, 22 January 1971; J.I. Nicol to R.P. Malis, 9 February 1971.

62 *Prince Albert National Park Provisional Master Plan* (Ottawa 1971), 11.

63 Quoted in *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 5 May 1971.

64 Quoted in *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 5 May 1971.

65 Ibid., 2 July 1971.

66 *Decisions Resulting from the Public Hearing on the Provisional Master Plan for Prince Albert National Park* (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1975).

67 Quoted in *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 18 August 1975.

68 Ibid.

69 *Waskesiu Visitor Services Plan, Prince Albert National Park* (Winnipeg: Parks Canada, 1977), 133.

70 Up to 2007, owners of portable cabins paid $350 per year for a twenty-four-week camping permit. Effective 1 April 2007, portable cabin owners were given a forty-two year, seven-month residential lease (April to October). The leaseholders pay rent based on the appraised value of the land (not the cabin and/or any improvements). T. Schneider to B. Waiser, e-mail communication, 11 March 2009.

71 *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 30 April 1971.