

Circles of Light

September 2000 – Number 5

Partnering Arrangement a True Success in Nunavut's Large Capital Projects

by Jennifer Lilly

In a place of new beginnings, the federal government and Inuit in Nunavut were determined to find a new way for residents to benefit and prosper from development supporting the creation of the new territory. One of the solutions they came up with was a partnering arrangement to carry out large capital projects. This arrangement met the challenge of gradually providing the new territorial government with the 10 offices and 250 staff housing units it needed in 11 communities throughout Nunavut.

Under The Canada-Nunavut Partnering Arrangement, this work was completed over four years at a cost of \$121 million. The two partners were Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI)

Many First Nations and Inuit communities, especially in rural and remote locations, encounter obstacles to economic development due to infrastructure challenges. Communities need good roads, water and sewer, energy access, and telecommunications links. Building a positive investment climate through economic infrastructure is key to creating a healthy climate for business and investment in the communities.

Construction
under way
in Pond Inlet.



representing Inuit, and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) on behalf of the Government of Canada. The financing came from the commercial private sector, and all work under the arrangement was completed in March, a year ahead of schedule.

As the general contractor on the job, the Nunavut Construction Company (NCC) ensured that as many Inuit as possible were hired and received training. This Inuit-owned company was created through the Partnering Arrangement to build, own and lease the properties on behalf of all Inuit in Nunavut.

Inuit made up 69 percent of NCC's employees. They not only learned the skills, they did the job, stayed on budget and ahead of their deadlines, and accomplished cold-climate construction in one of the world's harshest environments. The end results were high-quality design practices that led to more energy-efficient buildings, and set high standards for Nunavut's construction industry as a whole.

The construction project helped kick-start Nunavut's young wage economy with a mini hiring boom. It resulted in 600 full-time jobs, and

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Indian and Northern
Affairs Canada

Affaires indiennes
et du Nord Canada

Canada 

"Partnering Arrangement..."
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approximately 80,000 apprenticeship hours were logged. Twenty-two Inuit apprenticed as carpenters, some becoming certified journeymen, and 44 others received non-certified training.

"I'm happy about what we've done and I'm really glad for what I've experienced during the construction of the buildings," says **Mark Pitseolak Jr.**, a carpenter apprentice who worked for three years on the Cape Dorset construction site. "I have learned a lot from them."

A key element of the arrangement was the transfer of technical knowledge from Public Works and Government

Services Canada (PWGSC), Canada's largest real estate organization, to Nunavut through the NCC. A technological transfer program was created to transmit knowledge on all aspects of real estate development and management, including investment and financing, design and construction, project management and property management.

"This partnering arrangement between Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and NTI is a true success story in Nunavut," says **Wilf Attwood**, Regional Director General of DIAND's Nunavut Regional Office, where the project was managed in partnership with NTI. "We have tremendous confidence that this success will result in long-term employment and economic opportunities for Nunavut."

The arrangement has also been recognized as a success story by the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships. In November 1999, NCC and DIAND received an Award of Merit in Infrastructure, which described the construction project as standing out among "innovative development partnerships." *



New housing going up in Arviat.

CAP Centre Brings Internet to Nelson House

by **Edwinna von Baeyer**

Every day, the CAP Centre in Nelson House, Manitoba, hums with activity. Here, members of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation — from young children to adults — surf the Internet for information, fun and contact with friends and relations. Everyone is welcome at the Centre, which is also home to Grades 9 to 12 during the school year. It is an invitation that has met with an enthusiastic response since June 4, 1999 when the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation Community Access Program (CAP) first opened. The CAP Centre provides the Nelson House community with affordable public access to the Internet and the skills they need to use it effectively.

This community program is the result of a wide-ranging partnership led by the principal of the Otetiskiwin School in this northern Manitoba rural community. The partnership includes Industry Canada's CAP which is providing \$40,000 over three years to support the operation of the Centre.

Through CAP, the Government of Canada aims to help establish

up to 10,000 Internet access sites in remote, rural and urban settings by March 31, 2001. The Industry Canada program is a key component of the federal government's "Connecting Canadians" strategy to help create jobs, growth and other benefits associated with the development of information technology.

The CAP Centre is supervised by two students — **Cody Anderson** and **Geraldine Spence**. They are both experienced Internet users and network troubleshooters who enjoy helping community members learn how to use the Internet. Anderson likes helping people navigate through the World Wide Web, as well as keeping the network functioning.

Spence says the CAP program has been great for the community, and that she has seen the numbers of people using the facility increase every month. The users range from children playing on-line games or chatting with other children on reserves around Canada, to adults looking for jobs, researching information or even local painters looking at other artists'

work on the Web. As well, many are using the Web to become better informed about current events and the policies and activities of governments and Aboriginal organizations.

The many partners involved in the project reflect its wide-ranging applications in the community. Together with Industry Canada, the partners include the Nisichawayasihk Chief and Council, the Nelson House Education Authority, Otetiskiwin School, the Pathfinder Education Centre, Otetiskiwin Trust, Nelson House Employment and Training, the Nelson House Economic Development Corporation, and non-local partners such as North Central Community Futures Development Corporation, the Mystery Lake school division and Mystery.net.

Above all, optimism is high that the program will help the members of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation improve their social and economic conditions with the help of the Web.

Visit the community's Web site at www.nhea.nelsonhouse.mb.ca *



The Kuh-ke-nah Network of Smart First Nations Has People Talking

by Raymond Lawrence

First Nations people living in the Fort Severn area in Northern Ontario have freed themselves from some major communications limitations by getting themselves connected to the Internet.

“This is a fly-in community with winter roads and barge service,” Co-Manager **Mel Orecklin** says of Fort Severn. “This will bring the communities electronically closer to the rest of the world.”

“First of all, it’s going to give the community Internet access at a reasonable speed,” Orecklin explains. “Right now, there is Internet access in the band office, the nursing station, and the police station, but it’s too slow for kids who tend to get bored quickly. Another component of the Smart Community project is video transmission that will allow us to have pretty much real-time video for meetings and for other exciting things.” Other applications include access to specialists for medical purposes. For example, digital X-rays will allow a medical practitioner thousands of kilometres away to provide immediate diagnostic feedback.

The Fort Severn, Keewaywin, Deer Lake, North Spirit Lake, McDowell Lake and Poplar Hill First Nations submitted a proposal to develop a “Smart Communities” project, winning federal funding as the Aboriginal component of the initiative. Under the Industry Canada program, 12 demonstration projects were selected for funding: one from each province, one from the North and one from an Aboriginal community.

Over the next three years, the Kuh-ke-nah Network will work with its various partners on a range of services, such as access to community-based information, as well as local commerce, governance, training and cultural applications. In the near



The young First Nations people of the Fort Severn area have a lot to gain from Internet access in their communities.

future, other remote communities will be able to use the Kuh-ke-nah Network as a blueprint to develop their own closer links to business opportunities in larger centres.

The impact of the Kuh-ke-nah Network on education will also be enormous. “What they’re going to be doing is introducing Internet-based Grade 9, and then in the future years they’ll keep adding grades. The idea is that in the classroom there is one classroom with one teacher,” says Orecklin. Teachers can then be shared among the six communities. In some cases, they will be able to connect with experts from farther afield.

In a pilot project, the use of Internet technology for the classroom resulted in improved typing skills, better sentence structure, improved spelling, and an overall improvement in written communications.

“Even now, there are people, including myself, taking on-line courses so it will benefit people in the community,”

says Telecommunications Facility Co-ordinator **Madeline Stoney**. Like many people from the area, Stoney had to leave her community to continue her education.

She recalls how until recently, communications among the six First Nations was hampered by a lack of technology. “Communication was very poor, and it took a long time to get information across to another community. At that time, an airline had to deliver paperwork or documents that needed to be signed; therefore, it would take a long time to get anything done.”

The Kuh-ke-nah Network has definitely put an end to those days with its instantaneous access and virtually limitless potential for a better future for all six First Nations.

To access the network and learn more about the community’s planning tools, visit <http://smart.knet.on.ca> ✳

Raymond Lawrence is a freelance writer of Ojibway and European ancestry.

Omushkego Ishkotayo: First Nations-Owned Project Will Bring Power to Remote Communities

by Wendy MacIntyre

Omushkego Ishkotayo is the Cree name of a project set to transform the lives of three First Nations communities along the western shore of James Bay.

“Omushkego” refers to the Swampy Cree people, and “Ishkotayo” to hydro power. By 2002, the communities of Attawapiskat, Fort Albany and Kashechewan will be serviced for the first time by reliable, efficient and affordable electricity.

This First Nations-owned and — operated project will provide the infrastructure needed to open a whole range of opportunity, whether in mining or forestry development, tourism or new housing starts. The addition of a fibre-optics line will also give the three communities access to the Internet, and the potential for long-distance learning, telemedicine and e-commerce.

Since the 1960s, these three communities in Northern Ontario have got by with community generators operating on diesel fuel — an unreliable service that pollutes the air and means costly transportation of expensive fuel over fragile eco-systems.

“The more dependent you are on diesel, the greater the risk of a spill,” says **Ed Chilton**, Project Co-ordinator of Omushkego Ishkotayo, and Treasurer of Five Nations Energy Inc. (FNEI), the corporation running the project. FNEI has a Board of Directors with representation from the First Nations of Attawapiskat, Kashechewan, Fort Albany, Moose Cree and New Post, with support from the Mushkegowuk Tribal Council.

“Omushkego Ishkotayo is breaking ground for further development. We’re developing a process for how other communities can satisfy requirements for safer, reliant electricity with minimal environmental impact,” Chilton says. “There are vast resources and

opportunities in Northern Ontario in the forestry and mining sectors, but nothing happens until the electricity is there.”

The project, which has been five years in the making, began with a study undertaken by the Attawapiskat First Nation, supported by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), Natural Resources Canada and Ontario Hydro.

Omushkego Ishkotayo marks the first time that First Nations communities, the private sector and various government departments and funding institutions have worked together to develop an energy project of this size. Government funding sources include DIAND and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation of the Government of Ontario.

Work is now under way clearing a 30-metre-wide right-of-way for the 270-kilometre power line. The anticipated start dates for power are July 2001 for Kashechewan and Fort Albany, and May 2002 for Attawapiskat.

The construction phase of the project will create up to 100 jobs, says Chilton. As many as 12 full-time positions will be needed, once the local utility companies are up and running.

But above all, the new power line and fibre-optics line will open the way to a full-scale modern economy, with reliable water and sewer services, facilities like laundromats and restaurants, sawmills, tourist enterprises, e-commerce and the Information Highway.



Work is under way clearing a 30-metre-wide right-of-way for the 270-kilometre power line.



Chilton is also working on a feasibility study for greenhouses in the three communities, once the power line is installed. At present, fresh vegetables have to be flown in from the south, and they have a short shelf-life. Greenhouses offering a constant supply of fresh produce would be an enormous health boost in the battle against diabetes. The incidence of the disease is as high as 25 percent in remote communities in Northern Ontario, Chilton says.

“You keep plugging away and persevering,” says Chilton of the hurdles Omushkego Ishkotayo has had to overcome. “But it’s community-supported and community-based. When First Nations produce a project of this size, it’s something we can be proud of.” ✨

Tron Power Tackles the Big Guys in General Contracting

by Jeff Campbell

At first glance, Tron Power's unassuming office looks much like its neighbours' on a quiet street in Saskatoon's airport industrial area. However, the business office of this general contracting firm stands apart in many ways.

Owned by the English River First Nation, Tron is not only booming — it's looking to expand beyond its northern mine construction base.

"Tron, before it was band-owned, was doing maybe two to three million a year. Last year, we did \$21 million, so it's increased by a factor of eight in the last couple of years," Tron's CEO **Tom Jackson** explains.

When English River purchased Tron, the company worked primarily for the uranium miners, Cameco. But with most of the construction work in northern Saskatchewan uranium mines already complete, the First Nation's leaders began looking for more opportunities.

That search led them to the Fort McMurray area where they formed Northern Dene Enterprises Limited Partnership last January. In this partnership, English River has joined forces with Alberta's Chipewyan Prairie First Nation and Whitefish Lake First Nation — Jackson's home reserve — to offer specialized construction services.

The partnership is just the latest venture in English River's economic strategy, in which Tron Power plays a big part. The First Nation's Chief and Council decided on a long-term economic development plan to increase their goals of self-determination and self-sufficiency in 1991.

Purchasing an existing company allowed English River to capitalize on a company track record going back to 1984. Tron had already made itself a player in the construction



Photo credit: Jeff Campbell

Tom Jackson, a member of the Whitefish Lake First Nation, is Tron Power's Chief Executive Officer.

of uranium mines in northwest Saskatchewan, more or less in English River First Nation's backyard.

Jackson, a 23-year veteran of the mining industry, joined Tron shortly after the English River purchase. Like its industry counterparts, Tron is meant to turn a profit. But Jackson says the company is also very serious about its mandate to benefit English River First Nation members, northerners and Aboriginal people. Those benefits flow in many forms.

"Through both Tron's core general contracting business and our other related businesses we put \$2 million back into English River last year," Jackson says.

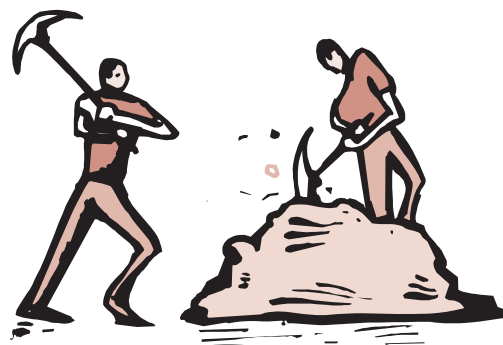
Tron's impact is felt well beyond the First Nation's boundaries. With about 70 people on its payroll and 300 working for affiliated firms, Tron employs a roster of tradespeople, including electricians, industrial and heavy-duty mechanics, welders, plumbers and pipefitters. It also has about 25 apprentices, all northern Aboriginal people, working towards journeyman status on their various projects.

Engaging local people, and maintaining a relationship with a company after the concrete has dried and the pipes have been connected, are Tron trademarks.

Besides its northern Saskatchewan and Alberta operations, Tron even has people working in Kyrgyzstan. Between 20 and 30 tradespeople are part of a five-year agreement to work in the central Asian country's mines. Tron has also recently branched off into new fields, like working with southern Saskatchewan's potash mines, vegetation management and land reclamation, to name just a few.

In the end, Tron's success still depends on its ability to deliver projects on time and on budget. As Jackson explains, "You have to provide a job for customers that they are going to be happy with; otherwise, you won't get a chance again. We're very aware of that, so performance comes first." *

Jeff Campbell is a writer of Métis descent based in Regina.



Lund Hotel Purchase Beginning of Adventure for Sliammon First Nation

by Gabriele Helmig

The Sliammon Development Corporation has big plans for its newly acquired and renovated complex, including the historic Lund Hotel, a marina and an RV park. And why not? Sitting on the cusp of Desolation Sound, at the end of Highway 101 on the Sechelt Peninsula in B.C., it's at the threshold of a breathtaking destination for boaters, divers, hikers, bird-watchers and tourists of all kinds.

The Lund Hotel complex is the latest venture for the development corporation and its president, **Kevin Blaney**, a First Nation councillor. The complex sits on traditional Sliammon territory. Says Chief **Denise Smith**, "I feel very good to be re-establishing the Band in this territory. That's why, when the Elders visited, we welcomed them home."

Ownership of the complex is a joint venture with Powell River entrepreneur **Dave Formosa**, a member of the Sliammon Development Corporation Board of Directors, who has extensive experience in the food and beverage industry.

The hotel, originally named the Hotel Malaspina, was built in 1874 by two Swedish brothers who obtained the first hotel licence issued north of Vancouver.

With Formosa as general manager, and **Steve Tipton**, a Haida from Skidegate, as project manager, renovations on the hotel commenced, even as the ink was drying on the deal. The building was jacked up and new footings and support beams were installed. The heat, fire and electrical systems were upgraded to code. Inside, a new hardwood floor was laid, the pub relocated to its original site, and a spacious lobby created.



View of the Lund Hotel from the water.

Today the building glistens. The 20 rooms have also been given a facelift with new hardwood floors and furnishings and hand-painted murals. Other amenities in the complex, for tourists and locals alike, include a restaurant, a grocery store complete with deli, a post office, a laundromat, shower facilities, banquet and convention facilities, a 54-slip RV park, a fuel dock for both diesel and boat gas, a propane-filling station, a helicopter pad, and three docks for multiple-boat moorage.

Despite the rain, traffic through the hotel lobby was non-stop during this writer's visit. Even in the deepening dusk, fishing and pleasure boats were still being tied up at the docks with the crews streaming up the pathway into the hotel, pub or store.

A few private businesses are also currently operating out of the hotel, with plans in the works for several more.

Plans for the future of the Lund complex include acquiring a boat for tours into Desolation Sound, further developing the marina and the RV park, promoting the conference facilities, and marketing the complex, not just within B.C. or Canada, but also worldwide.

The sky is the limit for Formosa and the Sliammon Development Corporation on this venture, and all involved are justifiably optimistic. But in Blaney's words, "As long as we leave a footprint that exemplifies transparency, integrity and good government for the membership and the people, our job is done and we can move on with a sense of weightlessness and tranquility."

Some of the development corporation's other current enterprises include logging, road deactivation, the leasing of two subdivisions comprising some 100 lots, and the management of halibut and krill licences. ✨

World-Class Injection Moulding Facility Will Ensure Full-Time Employment for First Nation

by Wendy MacIntyre

An environmentally responsible, state-of-the-art manufacturing facility will provide full-time employment for members of an isolated First Nation on Georgian Bay, Ontario. All dividends paid by the company will be directed to a trust fund to be reinvested in the community through social, health, environmental and infrastructure projects.

It may sound like a dream scenario, but in fact construction of this world-class facility is already under way at Moose Deer Point First Nation located 50 kilometres south of Parry Sound. The First Nation-owned company is Niigon Technologies. (“Niigon” means “for the future” in Ojibway.) Niigon will be an injection moulding plant, manufacturing small custom assemblies for technical markets (electronic, automotive, medical equipment and telecommunications) for companies across North America. The groundbreaking ceremony for the plant was held on June 2, 2000.

“What we’re looking forward to is the prospect of having our members employed full-time after they get training,” says First Nation Councillor **Rhonda King**. A referendum on the proposed project resulted in an “overwhelming majority vote” from the community, King adds.

Several community members have already attended the Canadian Plastics Training Centre at Humber College in Toronto to get the training they will need to work at Niigon. Since plans for the manufacturing facility were announced, the community’s educational upgrade program has never had so many applicants wanting to qualify for further specialized training.

Niigon Technologies is a partnership venture involving the Moose Deer Point First Nation, Husky Injection Molding Systems Limited and The Schad Foundation, with financial

The Niigon Technologies plant will supplement its power requirements through on-site fuel cells and solar panels.



Moose Deer Point First Nation youth.



support from the federal government and the province of Ontario.

Husky, established by company president and CEO **Robert Schad** in 1953, will provide equipment and technical expertise and support until the First Nation is able to manage the multi-million-dollar facility independently. The First Nation will provide equity, land and human resources.

Schad, a long-time cottage resident in the area, first proposed the idea for Niigon to First Nation Chief **Ed Williams** because he wanted to give something back to the community. For years, he kept his boat at Moose Deer Point marina which, along with tourism, has been the community’s primary source of employment.

Creating an anticipated 70 full-time jobs in its first five years, Niigon Technologies will mark a welcome advance over the community’s traditional seasonal employment.

The Schad Foundation describes the Niigon facility as a “showplace

of environmental responsibility.”

Coulter Wright, project manager with The Schad Foundation, describes the plant’s environmental vision: “We are trying to show that these types of businesses can and need to work in environmentally sensitive areas.”

The plant will supplement its power requirements through on-site fuel cells and solar panels. Virtually all of the building’s heating and air conditioning needs will be met by waste heat from the fuel cells. The building itself, which includes a cafeteria and a medical office, is designed to blend in with the community setting, using local materials and natural landscaping, without pesticides or herbicides.

The environmentally friendly atmosphere underlines the company’s commitment to create a better future for the community. With its high growth rate, the injection moulding market presents an ideal opportunity for Niigon Technologies to achieve long-term success. ★

Discovery Harbour Centre the Jewel in First Nation's Commercial Ventures

by Diane Koven

The Campbell River Indian Band (CRIB) in British Columbia has only 600 members. Yet in the past few years, it has managed to make a major impact on the commercial core of Campbell River.

The Discovery Harbour Centre, a 37,000-square-metre (400,000-square-foot) open-storefront shopping centre, is the jewel in the crown of the First Nation's growing number of commercial ventures. Built on reserve land, this \$60-million project is a joint venture between the First Nation and Northwest Real Estate Developments Ltd. **Robert Duncan**, business manager for the CRIB, has been involved in the project since its inception. "In 1993 we signed a letter of intent with the Northwest Group of Companies," he says. "We brought the land and they brought the expertise. In 1995, we signed the joint venture agreement. By 1998, the Centre was finished and opened."

That same year, the CRIB was named 1998 Economic Developer of the Year by the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (CANDO). Several years in the planning, the project has proved to be a huge success. In addition to having over 40 tenants in the Centre, the CRIB itself owns and operates a 560-square-metre (6,000-square-foot) art gallery/gift shop in the complex. Called "House of Treasures," it is fully staffed by First Nation members.

Employment opportunities for First Nation members have been a priority since the project began. An employment placement officer was hired at the outset, to identify the types of qualifications that would be required. Community members then got training in several areas, including cashier services, security, and industrial first aid. As a result, First Nation members have benefited from nearly 1,000 new



The First Nation's marina (l.), and (r.) artist's overview of Discovery Harbour Centre.

jobs, ranging from construction to retail. According to Duncan, tenants in the Centre are asked to help with job creation for First Nation members, but there are no hiring requirements or policies.

Perhaps the most dramatic employment opportunity has been for Duncan himself, a former commercial fisherman who, in his own words, "fell into" the job of business manager of what has become an enormous commercial venture that is still growing. In addition to the Discovery Harbour Centre, the First Nation also owns the Discovery Harbour Marina, which is totally staffed by its own members. The First Nation is also working on developing a cruise ship facility, hoping to make Campbell River a port of call. Related plans are under way for a casino/hotel/convention and entertainment facility which, if it materializes, will be a \$25- to \$45-million project.

"We are one of nine successful proposals chosen by the province out of 49 submissions," says Duncan, "and we hope to be able to conclude our negotiations with the BC Lottery Corporation and Gaming Policy Secretariat in the near future."

The First Nation is also in the process of developing a large food store across the street from the Discovery Harbour Centre. To connect all of the various commercial enterprises, says Duncan, "We are working on a Web site to link all of these projects together, with the band as the host."

The CRIB has changed the face of Campbell River. "We have shifted the downtown in Campbell River, and basically created our own downtown," says Duncan. ★

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Portrait

I Believe in Teamwork

Francis First Charger Blood Agriculturalist

by Fred Favel

No sooner is Francis First Charger in a new job, than he's back at school taking another course, most often at Lethbridge Community College. He has excelled in his various endeavours because of his education. He has overseen the construction phase of the \$66.5-million Blood Tribe Irrigation Project, and was an integral part of the Blood Tribe's success in exporting 20,000 metric tonnes of timothy hay annually to Japan and other areas.

Born in 1953 at the Blood Indian Hospital in Cardston, Alberta, Francis First Charger was one of 16 children. The family livelihood was farming. His father worked much of his time off the reserve in either a feed lot or on other farms. In the summer, he would work on the reserve. "We used to cut prairie wool (hay) and sell it to off-reserve farmers," First Charger says.

First Charger grew up in a spiritual environment, speaking the Blackfoot language at home. Although he is a Blood Indian, Blackfoot is the traditional language. The Blood Tribe is a part of the Blackfoot Confederacy also known as Treaty 7, and its reserve is one of the largest in Canada with about 1,400 square kilometres (540 square miles). About 81,000 hectares (200,000 acres) is agricultural land and the remainder is used for hay and pasture. There is also a thriving cattle industry with many sizable ranches owned by the band.

First Charger began school in Magrath, Alberta, an off-reserve community in which his father had found employment. "At that time on the reserve where we lived there were no buses. We didn't even have roads, no electricity. We used kerosene and a fireplace. It wasn't until the '60s that we had electricity, and roads were starting to be built so we had to go off the reserve to go to school."

High school brought a major change in First Charger's life. The school determined that he could not take matriculation (academic) courses as he had not done well in some subjects. However, because his grades were good in business courses, he was put into the business stream. During the second semester, a non-Aboriginal friend asked him why he was not in matriculation. When they compared their grades, First Charger found out that he had scored better than his friend who was taking matriculation. He concluded that his race had influenced the principal's decision. When he spoke to the principal, "He got mad and showed his anger and all that and I walked out and said, 'I'm not ever going to come back to this school!'"

Leaving all of his possessions at the school, First Charger never went back. He took on a number of jobs in the following years, and in 1977 he married Judy English from the Peigan Reserve. She encouraged him to continue his education. Taking her advice, First Charger returned to school and graduated with a general diploma in agriculture technology from Lethbridge Community College in 1982. His wife also enrolled in the program, and she was able to help him with some of his courses and with what he calls "them long words." The Alberta Indian Agriculture Development Corporation, which provided loans to farmers, hired him as an assistant farm advisor. "I think that was the most enjoyable part of all the jobs I have had. I'd get to go out and meet the clients, do reports, see how the loans were."



Photo credit: Lance Scout

First Charger got educational leave to go back to school, and graduated with three more diplomas: farm financial management, crop production and animal production. He was the first student at the college to receive all three diplomas at the same time. He returned to his job, this time as a full farm advisor, and was encouraged to become a management trainee. The general manager befriended him and passed on what First Charger calls the "street smarts" of the business. Three months later, he was offered the position of general manager. Although he accepted the position, he unfortunately had to resign a year later due to illness.

In 1986, First Charger heard that an irrigation project was in the works for his reserve. He applied once more to Lethbridge Community College and entered the irrigation technology and irrigation production programs. He graduated in 1989, adding these two diplomas to his others, for a total of six diplomas in agriculture. Short-term positions with an irrigation firm followed, in soil conservation, soil erosion and materials management. A turning point in his career came when the Blood Tribe Agricultural Projects advertised for an administrator, and First Charger applied for and was offered the position. The irrigation project was in the developmental stages and required someone to make it a reality. Here he held the positions of administrator, controller, contract administrator, acting general manager, and special management and technical advisor.

The irrigation project was no small endeavour. It involved building an irrigation canal, a reservoir and miles of pipeline. It is the largest irrigation project in Canada, and the second-largest in North America.

With about 7,690 hectares (19,000 acres) under irrigation, First Charger could look to new opportunities in agriculture. He got involved in establishing a timothy hay-processing plant, with a view to developing a market for the product. He also helped implement the tripartite agreement with the federal and provincial governments, and the Blood Tribe. And he co-ordinated an agreement between the Japanese clients and his board of directors. Today, the hay-processing plant ships 90 percent of its yield to Japan as roughage for the country's dairy industry.

First Charger is now working as administrator and consultant with St. Mary's Projects Ltd., broadening his focus from agriculture to construction. The company has constructed the recreation centre, social services building and shopping mall, as well as other buildings in the community.

First Charger's personal successes have been realized through his persistent belief in education and the value of teamwork. In reality, he has too many accomplishments to list, but one of his most important life objectives is now being realized. He has come full circle and is farming again, as well as continuing his consulting business. He is also looking forward to buying a few horses: "It's something my wife wants us to do!"

Fred Favel is an Aboriginal writer and communications consultant.



Photo credit: Lance Scout

