

CHAPTER SIX

KITIMAT AND STEWARTKITIMAT

Kitimat was founded in 1953 by the Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan). One of the more remote parts of B.C. was chosen because it was only here that sufficient hydroelectricity could be generated to make the smelting of aluminum possible. The production of aluminum requires enormous amounts of energy - 20,000 kilowatt hours of electrical energy per ton - enough to satisfy the residential requirements of the average household for almost a decade. For this reason, aluminum is often referred to as a "packaged power". (Robinson, I.M., 1962.) The raw materials for aluminum extraction form a relatively minor part of the total costs of the industry and it is therefore economically viable for Alcan to import them in bulk by sea from countries as distant as the West Indies, and Latin America.

Alcan has been involved in the electrolytic aluminum smelting business since the turn of the century. It built its first smelter at Arvida in northern Quebec. In the late 1940's it became evident that the cheap hydro-electric energy there would become increasingly expensive because of the expanding industrial growth of Quebec; the company decided to expand to northern B.C. where the two essentials were present. First, a huge potential for generating electricity and second, the possibility of developing an ocean port. But six separate engineering tasks had to be successfully completed before the metal could be produced.

First, the largest rock filled dam in the world was constructed at the eastern outlet of the Nechako River to create a 340 square mile reservoir. Second, a ten mile tunnel was driven through the mountain barricade of the Coastal Range to create a waterfall sixteen times as high as Niagara. Third, a powerhouse was carved inside the mountain at Kemano to convert the energy of the rushing waters into electric power. Fourth, a fifty mile transmission line was erected over mountains and glaciers to carry the power to the smelter. Fifth, a smelter was built at Kitimat at the end of the Douglas Channel, together with a townsite to house the service workers (and their families) required to run the pot-lines; and deep-sea docking facilities were constructed to permit import of the raw materials. Finally, a road and railway were built by the provincial and federal governments from Kitimat along the Kitsumkalum-Kitimat valley, joining the Canadian Northern Railway, and the provincial highway system, at Terrace 40 miles to the North. Each of these tasks was a major operation in itself. (Robinson, 1962: 21.)

The smelter and town of Kitimat were built at the head of the Douglas Channel, a twisting deep-sea fiord which penetrates 70 miles inland and ends in a river delta broad enough to accommodate the smelter, the pot-lines and the town of Kitimat. This delta is about 5 miles wide and stretches north to Terrace, about 45 miles away. All that existed at that time was the Indian village of Kitimaat, some distance away, and which because of its relative remoteness, had remained self-sufficient.

The production of aluminum is a complex and highly industrial process, and requires a large labour force with a fairly conventional mix of semi-skilled and skilled workers, few of whom could be recruited locally. This area is, however, very remote from Canada's urban cities. The direct distance to Vancouver is over 400 miles, but because of the mountainous terrain, road distances are close to 1,000 miles, and even ocean distances are considerable. No airport or even an airstrip has ever been built at Kitimat.

The company thus faced the necessity of designing and building a whole "instant community".

The Vice-President in charge of properties wrote that the experience in Arvida, Quebec, had lead the company to conclude after 30 years of ownership there, that it was better to avoid building a "company town" and to sell the towns personal and commercial real property to employees because of:

our conviction that property owners are happier
and consequently more stable employees.
(Eberts, 1958:12.).

Many company towns including Arvida have had notoriously bad labour relations as a result of the fact that the employer, by retaining all property rights, is also the landlord and the dominant or even exclusive, local commercial entrepreneur.

Alcan's intention was to create what was seen as the most attractive aspect of larger southern cities, their suburban environments, and eliminate "undesirable" central city elements in the process. To achieve this end, before embarking on the building of the town, the company spent more than \$100,000 on consulting with a wide range of city planners and social experts. The tradition and assumptions which were fashionable at the time and were accepted by these advisors were those of England's "Garden Cities", with some borrowing from the experiences of American towns that had been built in Greenbelts during the 1930's. The appropriateness of these traditions, which had evolved in more temperate climates, and for populations whose most fundamental problem was overcrowding seems never to have been questioned. Kitimat has a fairly severe winter climate with very heavy winter snow, an annual rainfall more than three times that of most of Britain, and piercingly cold winds. Nevertheless, the town was laid out as a series of small, self contained suburbs with wide streets, low residential densities and conventional house types set on circular roads, cul-de-sacs, and linked by pedestrian walkways. Buffer zones and greenbelts separate them from each other. All land use was severely segregated, with planned shopping and service areas separated from the

"ideal" residential neighbourhoods. Today, one of the most striking characteristics of Kitimat is the physical segregation of the neighbourhoods, which are themselves separated from the City Centre. This is located at the connecting point between the low land where the industrial plants are, and the higher, residential areas.

Because planning experience in the past had demonstrated that where neighbourhood centres were allowed to develop the main centre had never developed well, the Kitimat developers also decided deliberately to "under-develop" the proposed neighbourhood centres from the beginning in order to focus all commercial and social needs on the City Centre. The extensive and imposing City Centre is composed of a variety of pedestrian malls, squares and parking lots. It contains downtown retail and business functions, some space for cultural entertainment, civic facilities, the hospital, hotel accommodation and one of the city's highschools. However, local citizens complain that the local merchants are protected from competition by the zoning provisions of the Master Plan, and offer inferior selections of goods at prices which are higher than they need be, even in the North. It is true that the commercial land was sold as quickly as possible, but all subsequent building has had to conform to the strict zoning regulations.

Although the company did not want the problems inherent in owning and running the town, it did want to retain control over the wider framework within which the town evolved and its members functioned. The town's "Master Plan" was evolved and imposed extremely stringent municipal planning and building regulations on all who lived or built within its range. Its area was exceptionally large. In order to ensure that no unsightly ribbon development or substandard housing was built, Kitimat was incorporated not as a city municipality, but as a district municipality. While Alcan only needed 12,000 acres for its plant and town site, the district boundary was set to include 41,000 acres (65 square

miles), all of which is covered by the Kitimat Master Plan. Also, the timing and programming of future development is, of course, influenced to a large extent by the decisions of Alcan's Board of Directors, who evaluate the prospects of the industry itself, and have retained ownership of all undeveloped land.

A number of individuals have found the sense of all pervasive controls which are so evident in Kitimat unacceptable, and have chosen to live in Terrace more than 40 miles away. (B.C. Regional Index, 1978:657.) Terrace is a vigorous, expanding, competitive town and to many Kitimat workers is a haven to which they can escape periodically. Even a quarter century after its creation, residents describe Kitimat in various ways as isolated, too self-contained, too controlled, and fundamentally still artificial. Kitimat's stringent building code has also wrought some hardships on certain small but important categories of local enterprise. Small shopkeepers, young families beginning business ventures, part-time workers, are all excluded from the municipality because of the high cost of housing and because of the company policy regarding eligibility for living in the town. Thus, there are relatively few small, commercial enterprises or service industries in which resident women, the young, or the part-time worker can obtain employment. The town lacks the social and economic vitality which seems to be both the cause and the effect of business competition, and the provision of a wide range of services for and by local people. Most workers in Kitimat have few, if any, alternatives to working for the two large local employers. They cannot diversify their economic activities locally, and few can imagine a satisfactory life there after they reach retirement age.

Municipal government has, since the beginning, been nominally in the hands of the town's citizens. However, the people who stand for election as Reeve and Councillors

tend, overwhelmingly, to be Alcan employees of managerial and white collar status. In 1953, the first Reeve of Kitimat was asked whether the Council would ever consider scrapping the Master Plan, and replied,

Alcan wants Kitimat to be a perfect city. They're the people who will pay most of the taxes, we'd be fools not to agree with them. (Bodsworth, 1954:7.)

This is as true today as it was then.

While the town has a wealth of recreational associations, it is conspicuous for the absence of the substantial political grass roots movements which are so evident in many other cities and towns of the North. Currently Alcan is proposing to embark upon Kemano II, a further set of major engineering manipulations of the interior valleys of the region. There is growing and articulate opposition from all local communities, including Terrace, because of the adverse effect on the environment, and particularly the fish runs. These protests are not echoed in Kitimat and while this may be partially attributable to the expectation that the town would benefit from the expansion of the smelter, it is as likely that this is another example of what is widely recognized to be a pervasive political apathy in the town.

The extensiveness of voluntary associations has been linked by observers not only to the need individuals experience to make friends in a city of strangers and "be busy", but also to the fact that there is widely felt to be a lack of real self government. People who would perhaps normally choose to be active in municipal affairs seek outlets for their creative energies by participating in community activities rather than on the town council. Some also, of the most active and therefore most frustrated workers, undoubtedly prefer to live in Terrace.

The for-ones of Alcan have faltered during this last 25 years. In 1956-57 there was a large drop in the world price of aluminum, and nearly 1,300 people were laid off,

either indirectly or directly. At that point, the population was about 9,000. Alcan wanted to diversify the economic base of the town and persuaded the Eurocan Corporation both to build a large pulp mill and to log extensively in the area. This caused a growth in the population to about 11,800 in 1971.

The Master Plan which incorporates the dominant values of the two major employers, also has a critical effect on the practical living arrangements between and within neighbourhoods in Kitimat. Since they are separate, discrete, and ranked in terms of the elevation, they also coincide with class and status distinctions. In 1962, I.M. Robinson, in a remarkably perceptive analysis of four New Industrial Towns on Canada's Resource Frontier, made the following observations which, because they have been completely confirmed by all the fieldworkers on this project, are worth quoting in full.

The pattern of social stratification is based on the hierarchial ranking of employees in the company's organization. Social status corresponds closely to the position or job held by the employee in the industrial operation. The fact that almost all the residents are also employees of the same firm eliminates the subtle gradations and vagueness of social stratification in a more open society. Families are easily and rigidly classified according to what position the breadwinner holds with the company.

Across the incipient class structure based on the employee's position and status within the company hierarchy, there is superimposed a [further set of social divisions], based on nationality, religion, and language.

The allocation of jobs follows the dominant Canadian mores of placing English-speaking Protestants, French-speaking Catholics, and new immigrants in an hierarchical order; the managerial, professional, technical, and clerical jobs go to Anglo-Saxons, while French Canadian and other ethnic groups traditionally receive the jobs requiring a lower level of skill and training in the industrial hierarchy. Such distributions of peoples among jobs are severely blurred and concealed in anonymity of any

ordinary city or town. But, in small one-industry towns, . . . the allocation of jobs according to an hierarchical social order becomes highly visible and obvious; moreover, the various religious and ethnic groups in the community are likely to become acutely conscious of their place in the job stratification.

Because housing in these towns tends to be of uniform quality, one of the visual marks of social distinction in urban-suburban areas is eliminated. Instead, social stratification is reflected in the location of different groups within the community. It will be recalled that . . . the towns [were] planned as a set of homogeneous residential neighbourhoods, usually delineated on the basis of natural physical barriers. The different neighbourhoods very quickly became typed as having a definite class makeup. Houses of the upper socio-economic groups (the managers and other officials) are grouped together at the top of the hill with the best view. In descending order are found the houses of key technical personnel and supervisory personnel, followed by white collar salaried office workers, and then by those of the hourly-rated wage earners. And, because these occupational (or social) classes correspond roughly with language and religious groupings a doubly noticeable impact is given to the residential areas.

(I.M. Robinson, 1962:84-85.)

In Kitimat, this class structure is also closely allied to ethnic divisions and both are reinforced by residential segregation. Pot-line work is dirty, and potentially dangerous, and since the beginning, Alcan has recruited peasants from Portugal to occupy these jobs. While no separate Census category is available for people of Portugal origin, they nevertheless have a considerable impact on Kitimat because they constitute 17.2% of the workforce. (Algar, 1974:49.) Until recently, company policy has been opposed to the provision of education in basic English for the wives of those men, who have therefore had few potential means of escaping the social and economic structure of the ghetto-like suburbs in which they live.

The next occupational group recruited was that of semi-skilled labourers, truck drivers, etc., most of whom were emigres from Eastern Europe. The skilled labour force, electricians, machinists, etc., have been recruited largely from Western European ethnic groups and in particular from West Germany. Younger members of management such as engineers or accountants are mostly Canadian, and hope they are merely doing their "stint" in Kitimat, before returning to the East. The highest levels of management are composed of English-speaking Canadians, and sometimes also men of either American or British origins. They tend to be on rotation already, and spend time both in Arvida, and in the Head Office in Montreal.

This coincidence of the class and the ethnic structure has been described by informants as one of the basic causes of the bitter strife characteristic of the community in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Some of this generalized interethnic antagonism finally focussed on the opposition between labour and management, and there was a serious strike in 1974. Since then the management of Alcan, but not of Eurocan, has become more receptive to criticisms of management assumptions and practices. They have, for instance, made a sustained effort to recruit and hold Native labour, both skilled and semi-skilled from Kitimaat village. However, the Master Plan with all its constraints remains in place, virtually unmodified.

Most observers who look beyond the attractive suburban surfaces of Northern B.C.'s "perfect city" find significant evidence of higher rates of a variety of social pathologies than are evident in other northern settlements. Most striking is the extreme privatization of most residents' lives. At the subjective level, people repeatedly describe themselves and others as lonely, unhappy, unable to find real friends, bored, unable to find real outlets for their skills. The town and its life are frequently described as

artificial, and people state that they want things to be more "real". Objectively, the alcoholism rate is reputed to be amongst the highest in the territory. There has been a 17% increase in the consumption of alcohol in Kitimat in the last 3 years. (Skeena Manpower Development Committee, January 1978:29, Phase One Committee Report.)

The population distribution is typical of any one-industry town with a high labour turnover. There is an excess of young men, and few eligible young women in Kitimat. One of the consequences of this is that young men in their twenties establish relationships with quite young girls in the high schools, and this is a source of family disruption and sometimes unplanned pregnancies, which become a problem for the relevant educational and social agencies.

There is in fact a problem which teenagers as a whole feel they share. The head of the student body of one of the local high schools commented recently:

A community centre could also serve other community needs. At the present time there is no place where young people can congregate to play records, dance or even talk. Most restaurants in Kitimat discourage teenage customers because they sit too long and order too little to make it a paying proposition. Since we lack a facility to meet these needs the common complaint is "there is nothing to do". Often the only thing that young people can do is drive around (if they are lucky enough to have a car) and to drink. There appears to be a great number of young people who abuse alcohol and/or drugs as an alternative to boredom. Others resort to vandalism of public and private property.

(Skeena Manpower Development Committee Report on Project Design Phase, 1977:22.)

The functioning of the schools is a repeated subject of community concern, debate, and quite often hostility. During 1978, Dr. R.A. Lockhart did research for the North West College at Terrace on the Functioning and Future Prospects of the Educational System as a whole in the area. He concluded that the root cause of this heightened tension

was not due to any profound difference between the organization and functioning of the schools in Kitimat and elsewhere in the region, but rather to the fact that since so few alternative informal educational and socialization mechanisms exist in the community, the concerns and anxieties of parents focus on the only institution there is, the formal school system.

However, the single most important indicator that workers find the conditions in Kitimat unsatisfactory is the labour turnover rate. Alcan was sufficiently concerned about a turnover rate of 67% in 1973 to conduct an investigation of the reason why workers left the company. (Alcan, 1974.) Alcan's annual turnover costs at that time were in excess of \$200,000. The turnover cost per hourly paid employee exceeded eleven hundred dollars. The highest rates recorded were for males under 25 years of age, and the sex imbalance in Kitimat must be considered a contributing factor. The report also noted that of those married employees who quit 57.7% said their wives were willing to take a job if one were available. Since in the same enquiry the wives of Alcan employees stated that personal isolation and the climate were their greatest disappointments, it would seem that lack of local employment for women contributed to the labour turnover of their husbands.

In the North West as a whole the rate of participation by females in the labour force is lower than the provincial average of 40.4%. This suggests that there are, comparatively, fewer employment opportunities for women in the North West. But these formal unemployment statistics do not highlight adequately the situation of women in Kitimat and other isolated resource extraction towns. Here women simply give up looking for work and no longer register with Canada Manpower. It seems clear that women do face an inequity in the area of gainful work, and that this is, in very large part, due to the sex stereotyping of jobs in resource-based

industries. "Women cannot train and compete for jobs if they are branded 'For men only'". (Farstad, 1975:67.)

This situation is confirmed in the research undertaken by the Skeena Manpower Development Committee in 1977. This states that a number of families leave Kitimat because the wife hates it. There is little work for women, and the work that exists is difficult to reconcile with domestic roles because of the general lack of day care facilities that can be afforded by the less affluent workers.

Since 1973 the turnover rate has declined, as can be seen from Table 4. These figures must not, however, be assumed to imply that workers are satisfied with either their work or their living conditions. The Skeena Report states:

Since basic conditions seem unchanged, . . . a likely prediction is that when business conditions return to high levels of activity, turnover (and turnover costs) will again rise to their former levels.

(Skeena Manpower Development Committee Report on Phase One Labour Instability, 1978:29.)

The Master Plan effectively prohibits the growth of a variety of small local businesses or employers, who might offer both workers and their wives a variety of alternatives by which they could earn their living or supplement it. Thus economic independence in the sense in which this concept is defined in our model is noticeably absent. So also is political efficacy. The situation upon which Robinson commented in 1962 is still present:

A situation has developed at Kitimat where the company ostensibly has no direct voice in municipal affairs, but nevertheless is accused of political influence through subterfuge.
(Robinson, 1962:156.)

Social vitality is also low. Ethnic and class divisions reinforce one another. The town, the population of which is, after all, only approximately 13,000, is zoned into smaller and smaller sub-settlements within the major

TABLE 4

 LABOUR INSTABILITY

 KITIMAT

Industry or Occupation	1973	1974	1975	1976
Logging, Wood production, Pulp	100%	47%	44%	26%
Mining and Smelter	67%	61%	34%	37%
Utilities	57%	437	157	6%
Governments	50%	106%	58%	57%
Hospitals	27%	22%	25%	19%
Schools	31%	32%	28%	20%

Source: Skeena Manpower Development
Committee Report on Phase One
Labour Instability, 1978.

settlement, and its members share little sense of a common community interest. The difference between Kitimat and almost all the other communities of the North is palpable.

The North West Report, commissioned in 1977 by the British Columbia Government states the situation with particular clarity:

Economically, Kitimat is relatively wealthy compared to other communities in the region and the Province. . . . Thus the aim of "development" in the Kitimat area, whether individual projects or social or economic in their primary orientation, must ultimately relate more to the improvement of the social health of the community than to its economic well-being.

(North West Report, 1977:216.)

STEWART

Stewart, while it has also been a "company town" for important periods of its life, is significantly different from Kitimat. The reasons for this are in part historical. The community has roots, however slim, in the nineteenth century. The impact of the great copper mine, the Granduc, lasted for only a short time. Stewart has experienced the most extreme case of "boom-and-then-bust" in the area since World War II, rather than an extended period of company domination. But most importantly the locally oriented people who have chosen to stay with the town have a clear understanding of the fact that they have to have some important influence on the nature of future impacts, and are well organized to this end.

Stewart is situated at the head of the Portland Canal, a deep water fiord that penetrates the interior in much the same way as the fiord at the head of which Kitimat was founded. In the nineteenth century it was an important hunting and fishing area for the Nishga Natives of the Naas Valley. The fiord is so narrow and steep that there is no land with agricultural potential although people do grow successful gardens. The local timber resources are

extensive, but difficult to log because of the extremely precipitous terrain.

In 1898 gold seekers flooded through the area, on their way to the interior, and in 1902 gold was discovered locally. In 1910 a full-scale town was in place, with a population of 10,000, a main street of stores, four blocks of settled homes, and many hotels. Four steamers a week docked at the two large wharves. But by the beginning of World War I the local gold mines were depleted, and the population of the town dropped below 100. In the next three decades further deposits of gold and silver were found and mined and the population expanded somewhat. But the longest and most permanent of these impacts, the Big Missouri Mine, closed in 1948 and the population again dropped to approximately 350 people.

In 1964 the Granduc mining company undertook to develop a copper mine on the Leduc ore body, and this involved the driving of an 11.6 mile tunnel to provide access to it. The company also built a number of houses in Stewart for its employees. The population again expanded to between 2,000 and 3,000 people, but this phase lasted only until the early 1970's when world copper prices fell drastically. There were successive cutbacks in the production of the mine, and in June, 1978 the mine was closed. During the winter of 1978-79 the population of the town dropped below 1,000 people.

In 1979 the whole Granduc property, which local people said had cost \$130 million was sold for a rumoured \$8 million to the Esso Corporation. During the fieldwork period the local population were waiting to see what would occur next.

The people who had decided to stay at Stewart when the Granduc closed down demonstrate a real commitment to the community. The population includes many families who value the quality of rural life in the north west, and wish to remain in a community which they view as congenial in part because it has a communitarian ethos. The Mayor of Stewart,

Mr. Ian MacLeod, is well known throughout the North West for his articulate defence of the community and effective use of the media to this end. He observed to us that many of the underground mine workers who had left the area after the Granduc reduced production have written asking if it is possible to come back, because they value the beauty, the life-style, and the excellent hunting and fishing which Stewart provides.

Mr. MacLeod speaks for a community which is solidly organized in support of him on the issue of how a town such as Stewart must struggle to gain a variety of economic resources rather than depend exclusively on one large corporation which is controlled by outsiders. He sees the local timber as a resource which can be exploited, but the town insisted that if it were to be logged that a saw mill should be built in Stewart to provide more jobs. As one informant put it, "it makes no difference to us whether the jobs are exported to Vancouver or Japan, we still lose them if we can't get a local mill".

The community has also considered the possibility of developing some secondary processing, for example, turning asbestos from Cossar into insulation, but the distance from markets makes this uneconomic. Because secondary processing seems in most cases inappropriate, the local community members have become determined to be more directly involved in the control of the ways in which primary extractive industries which do locate locally conduct themselves. They want a variety of extractive industries so that no single company such as the Granduc can in future totally control the occupational opportunity structure. One of the politically active local people expressed it in this way:

When a closure happens again, and it will, inevitably, at Alice Lake or elsewhere, when the big multi-national corporations pick up their marbles and go home, they cannot be allowed again to leave small local communities

of people to face paying local costs associated with servicing the workers of these large-scale operations. If the company wants an expanded school in Alice or in Stewart, or wherever, they will have to pay for it. (Interview, Summer:1979.)

Another local industry which may be further developed is the tourist trade, but this will depend in significant part on an improvement in the ferry service between Stewart, Prince Rupert and the Queen Charlotte Islands. It seems likely that this will eventually occur, perhaps as part of the Queen Charlotte-Prince Rupert Ferry connection which is explored in more detail in our section on the Queen Charlotte Islands. What is clear in Stewart, however, is that should such a connection be established this community will be as prepared as possible to deal constructively with the subsequent impacts.

In summary, Stewart is a town which has been repeatedly subjected to the roller-coaster ride of a boom-or-bust dependency on primary industry. But it has retained a core of people who are committed to the community and its survival and who have organized socially and politically in order to attempt to reduce their future vulnerability to this economic cycle. The community exhibits social vitality and political efficacy at high positive levels, and is working to expand its degree of economic control over locally based enterprises, regardless of who owns or controls them.