

Flooding Renata

May 1, 2013

Hi Thomas,

Thank you for this lovely essay about the 3 Gorges Dam. Where did you find out about it?

Did you know that a dam in BC flooded the town in which your Great-Great-Granduncle lived? His name was Jacob (like yours), but people called him “Jake”.

He and his wife lived in a small town called Renata on the Arrow Lakes of the Kootenay region in BC. They had a farm there with a lovely orchard of apples, cherries, pears, and peaches and a big garden of vegetables and flowers. I remember visiting the town when I was a bit older than you – maybe 14 or 15 years old (about 1958). We slept in an old yellow school bus that they had fixed up like a camper. They used it during the fall for farm workers to live in when they came by for the harvest. I have included a photo of it. I remember finding it strange because it had a side door near the back.



Down the road from the farmhouse was an old wharf where a paddlewheeler would dock. They used a paddlewheeler in those days because they had a shallow draft (ask Zachary what that means if you don't know) so the boat could come in very close to the many shallow spots along the Arrow lakes. The most famous of those sternwheelers was the Minto – pictured here in this photograph. It is docked at the wharf just in front of my Great-Uncle Jake's farm.



The Minto was one of the last steam sternwheelers being used (it was taken out of service in 1954). Her sister-ship, the Moyie has been turned into a national historic site of Canada and it sits in Kaslo – the town where my brother Bob and his family live. Have you ever been there? If you have ever been to Penticton, you might have seen the S.S. Sicamous – another sternwheeler of this era (but a bit bigger than the Minto and Moyie).

I remember that the only way to get to Renata was by a small cable ferry about the size of the one that runs near our place (between Laval and Ile Bizard). We drove from Nelson, through Castlegar, and on a small windy road along the edge of the lake. At the end was a barge with a small tugboat attached. It would hold a couple of cars and take us across the lake to the dock at Renata. It was then only a short walk to Great-Uncle Jake's house and a few minutes beyond to some of our other relatives.

It was a great place for kids. The swimming was great and there were many hikes with adventures along the way. I remember hiking up the creek that ran down to the lake, past the small little dam that the townsfolk had built to supply their water (through a large pipe that travelled down to all the houses), and on up to the tunnel on the train tracks. The creek itself was a wonderful playground – with a waterfall and pools to entertain us for hours. After all that hard play, it was such a pleasure to head back home with a juicy peach in each hand or even a fistful of cherries from the orchards that filled the delta.

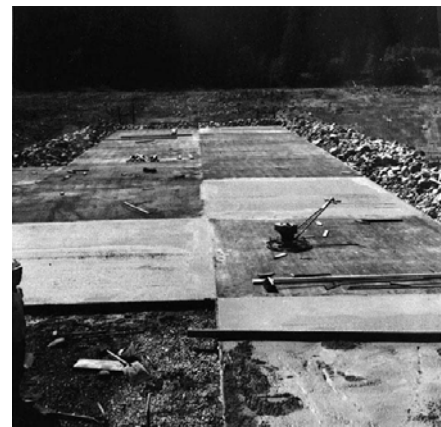
In the 1960s the BC Government was busy building many roads and infrastructure throughout the province. One of its plans was to build a dam on the Columbia River – an important river that began in the Rockies and flowed through Canada before heading into the United States. In 1968, construction began on a large dam on the river to provide hydroelectricity and flood control. The dam created a huge lake behind it – and in the process flooded a number of towns (including Renata) along the old lakeshore. It wasn't as big as the Three Gorges Dam, but it had similar effects on the people who lived upstream from it.

A number of towns were destroyed or relocated before the flooding. In Renata, only two were moved (by barge). The rest were burned. The contractors wanted to completely destroy the houses and cut down the trees that would remain under water. This was done so they wouldn't be a navigation hazard after the flooding. This is a common problem in flooded sites. If the houses and trees are not cleared one can't go out in a boat after the flooding, because if one of the old trees comes loose it can shoot up to the surface like a missile and destroy anything in its path. Here is a picture I found on the web where a woman from Renata is sitting outside her house as it burns.



One of the big problems they had in Renata was with the graveyard. There were two main problems. The first was that the families of the people buried there (like us) would not like it if their ancestors were simply flooded. The second was that the water tends to loosen the soil and there was the danger that some of the bodies would float up to the surface. Nobody liked the idea of having half-rotten corpses floating around on the lake!

The solution they chose was to pour cement over the graveyard so nothing would float. This picture shows them covering the graveyard with cement before flooding it. Two of the people buried there are your Great-Great-Great-Grandfather and Grandmother. Your G-G-G-Grandfather was Jacob (P.) Reimer (you can ask your mother if you were named after him) and his wife was Maria (Epp – she remarried after Jacob died). Their graves are weighted down with cement and there is a marker at the churchyard in Robson that commemorates them (I have put a photo of that marker along with one of Jacob and Maria at the bottom of this letter). You may remember my story of Jacob – in



which he was bit by a snake and almost died except for the nursing of his childhood sweetheart (Maria). You can read it via: <http://billreimer.net/workshop/personal/documents/PJReimerHisStory3.pdf>.

So you can see – like you say in your essay – there are a number of outcomes from hydro-electricity that are not always an advantage. I wonder how many people think of this when they turn on a light switch (or listen to their ipods)!

Love,
Bill



Maria Schmidt (Reimer, then Epp)



Renata Grave marker at Robson



Jacob P. Reimer