

# Remembering the File Hills Farm Colony

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**A** boriginal oral histories have largely been absent from colonial and academic narratives about the File Hills farm colony. I argue that Aboriginal oral histories enrich the historical and geographical record, and that these stories — especially about everyday geographies and lives — draw intricate links between stories and place. Stories about everyday geographies and lives not only show distinct connections to identities, feelings, spirits, memories, and histories, but they also constitute a unique history of the colony that is missing from colonial documents. My intentions in this paper are twofold: first, I suggest that engaging with oral histories can “open” histories and enrich methodologies; second, I propose that the oral histories and memories of colonized peoples assist in understanding everyday geographies and lives beyond the constructs of colonialism.

The construction of the colony on the Peepeekisis Reserve in southeastern Saskatchewan created one of the most oppressive and distinct colonial landscapes in North America (Figure 1). Founded in 1898 by Indian agent William Morris Graham, the colony was established under what Ann Laura Stoler calls an “administrative anxiety” over the “regression” of ex-pupils back to traditional ways after completing residential school.<sup>1</sup> The “re-socialisation” and “re-education” of Aboriginal children was not as quick or complete as the government had envisioned. Consequently, Graham, predominantly with the collaboration of Kate Gillespie at the File Hills boarding school and Father Joseph Hugonard at the Qu’Appelle industrial school, selected “certain” ex-pupils from various reserves to be settled on sub-divided land allotments on Peepeekisis and live like non-Aboriginal homestead farmers. Constructing the colony displaced original Peepeekisis members to a small fraction of the land base, where they lived very different lives than colonists. As early as 1910, government records show that Graham’s “experiment” began creating friction and resentment amongst Peepeekisis community members.<sup>2</sup> This friction and resentment erupted in 1952, when some members filed legal paperwork to remove all colonists brought onto Peepeekisis. Two hearings were held, the Trelenburg (1952) and the McFadden (1956), with the latter ruling that

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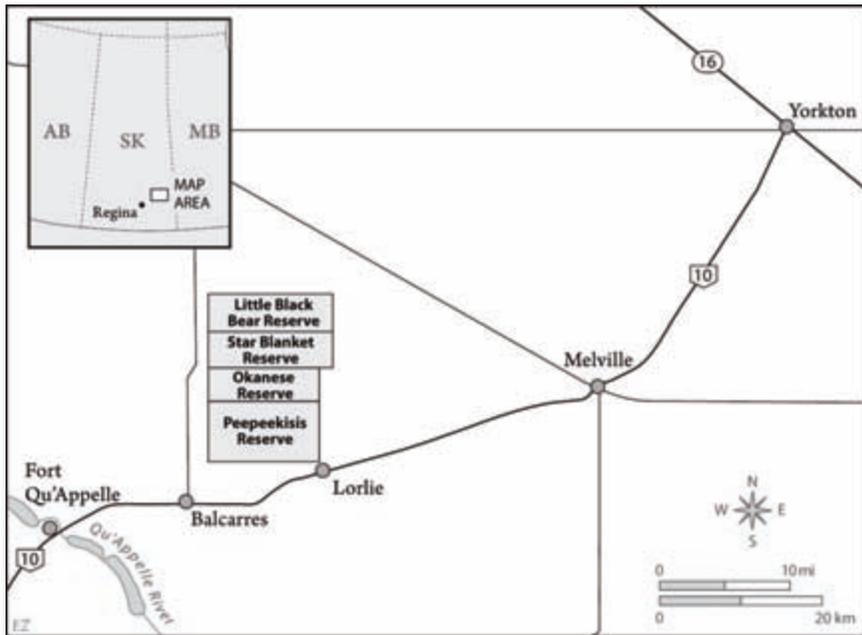


Figure 1. Location of Pepeeekisis Reserve, Saskatchewan, Canada.<sup>3</sup> The File Hills Agency consists of the Little Black Bear Reserve, the Star Blanket Reserve, the Okanese Reserve, and the Pepeeekisis Reserve.

the colonists' settlement on Pepeeekisis was legal and that they could stay.

While the colony existed in government records for approximately fifty years, its effects are still felt on the Pepeeekisis Reserve. Most community members are well aware of the colonial strategies that sought to draw distinctions between colonists and original band members, and they are also conscious of the internal colonization that the colony created amongst Pepeeekisis community members. Today, the Pepeeekisis landscape is largely void of the material structures that were central to the colony's ambitions, but the memories of the colony are maintained within the community.

## Foot-to-ground

At the beginning of this project, the benefits of engaging with oral histories about the colony were not apparent to me. In October 2006, I took a preliminary research trip to Saskatchewan to assess the feasibility of doing my Ph.D. research on the farm colony. Eagerly expecting to find remnants of the colony, I drove around the Pepeeekisis Reserve only to discover a landscape not distinctly different from surrounding reserves. An experiment of this magnitude, I could not help thinking, had to be etched deep in the landscape. As a geographer interested in colonial mechanisms, I was convinced I would see material structures of the colony built to main-

tain discipline and surveillance. My assumptions were far from the on-the-ground reality of the Peepeekisis Reserve. Most material structures of the colony had been burnt or torn down .

The next day I rang the Peepeekisis band office to see if I could talk to anyone about the colony or look at some sort of archives housed by the band. The person on the other end of the line assured me that they did not have any archives, nor did she know if there was anybody to talk to, but if I came back out to the band office, we could chat. An hour later I was in a room with the Peepeekisis First Nations Director of Operations, Martine Desnomie. Somewhat discouraged by not seeing what I thought I was going to see, and not really knowing exactly what shape my research would take, I asked Martine the question: "So, nothing exists from the colony?" She looked at me and said: "the people." Trying to outwit her, I responded with "Of course, I meant materially." Over the next twenty minutes, as people kept popping into her office and she would introduce me to them and say why I was sitting there, I also came to realize that every single person knew something about the colony. Many not only knew the basic history of the colony, but they knew family histories, jokes, and Elders who experienced the colony. This contrasted with my experiences of surrounding communities, such as Fort Qu'Appelle and Regina, where most people had not heard of the colony. The story of the colony would not be revealed in a narrow definition of material landscape, but would emerge clearly from an approach to landscape and place that included the people, their oral stories, and the effects from the historical events on the Peepeekisis Reserve.

A reconsideration of the literature also created a number of research-altering moments. In particular, geographers' interest in post-colonial literature and what Chris Philo described as a "preoccupation with immaterial cultural processes, with the constitution of intersubjective meaning systems, with the play of identity politics through the less-than-tangible, often-fleeting spaces of texts, signs, symbols, psyches, desires, fears and imaginings," no longer seemed to be the most important component of colonial projects.<sup>4</sup> Within historical geography, recent debates within the field have examined the analytical relevance of the colonial imagination compared to the "on-the-ground" workings of colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Cole Harris has most persuasively argued that we need to study the site of colonialism. For Harris, understanding the ground workings of colonialism is vital, especially since colonial discourse that was stated and supported in the metropole only became partial truth on the ground. Understanding the complexities of the imperial mind, Harris argues, is not exceptionally useful, but comprehending how colonial powers operated and how effective they were is crucial for evaluating colonialism's geographies.<sup>6</sup> Jane Jacobs has also convincingly argued that postcolonial theory is grounded in difference and that its theoretical underpinnings do not easily link to the "specific, concrete and local conditions of everyday life."<sup>7</sup> Attention to colonized people's everyday geographies and lives is lacking within post-colonial studies. Subsequently I would add to Harris's and Jacobs's

critiques that the bifurcating nature of postcolonial theory does not lend easily to the stories, spirits, feelings, and personal histories of colonized peoples. So, how do we, as historical geographers, overcome this? Engaging with Aboriginal oral histories re-positions the focus of postcolonial studies to the "on-the-ground workings of colonialism" and everyday lives, while attempting to understand colonized people's experiences and perspectives.

Although geographers have generally been slow to engage with oral histories, what work has been done shows an intricate link between everyday geographies, places, stories, and lives.<sup>8</sup> Lewis Holloway and Phil Hubbard have discussed the importance of everyday places and geographies to ordinary lives. They argue that it is not adequate to examine the importance of place in ordinary lives, but research "needs to be grounded in an investigation into the way that people's movement and behaviours centre on a set of local, 'everyday' places whose importance has often been ignored or downplayed in geographers' rush to develop large-scale 'grand' theories."<sup>9</sup> Trevor Barnes has argued that when studying the lives of people, scholars need to focus on "a set of social and biographical processes (lives told) rather than a set of final accomplishments (lives lived)."<sup>10</sup> The lives told approach, Barnes suggested, permits the reconstruction of history because we are linking individual biographies to their practices and wider social context.<sup>11</sup> Catherine Nash and Stephan Daniels have argued that there is an intersection between the geographical and the biographical, an overlapping in the spheres of spatiality and subjectivity, self and place, and positionality and identity. The art of geography and biography, they contend, is intricately connected, and this relationship of life histories constructs "life geographies."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Laura Cameron pointed out that places act as the "memory device" for our stories, and we write stories to make sense of places and of our histories.<sup>13</sup> Involvement in society generates, valorises and locates memories.<sup>14</sup> Human experience is embedded in places and stories, and how one person feels about a place or understands a story will never entirely parallel another's.

Geographers along with other scholars have also identified the importance of narratives to societies and the social power storytellers hold. Who tells stories, what stories are remembered, in what forum stories were told, how stories still exist, the places people talk about, and the life history of stories are what make historical culture dynamic.<sup>15</sup> Storytellers have a great social power, and their stories might exist "between ideology, myth and reality."<sup>16</sup> People, as William Cronon noted, naturally tell stories "with each other and *against* each other in order to speak *to* each other."<sup>17</sup> Narratives, whether written or oral, inevitably change over time. Their focus and detail are altered. Their moral purpose shifts.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, stories hold a dynamic relationship to the past and present, the collective and the individual, and they are susceptible to remembering, forgetting, manipulation, appropriation, dormancy, and revival.<sup>19</sup> Cultural memory is intricately linked to power.<sup>20</sup> Oral history, Cameron argues, is not for replicating the

past in “the way it really was” but is a technique for gathering historical and rhetorical power.<sup>21</sup>

Engaging with oral history to reconsider postcolonial studies is both a methodological and theoretical endeavor. Historical geography has largely been anchored in examining historical documents.<sup>22</sup> Geographers have critically assessed documents by considering the context in which they were written, the “addresser” and “addressee,” the intentions behind them, and so on.<sup>23</sup> However, within the field of historical geography, there is clearly a move to open up the field to new sources and methodologies. Gagen, Lorimer, and Vasudevan’s *Practising the Archive*, in particular, points historical geography in new directions, including towards such methodologies as sound and memory analysis.<sup>24</sup> Although I have a deep suspicion of colonial documents, and the fetishizing of them, I would never declare them irrelevant or argue that they should be ignored. Comparing documents to oral histories will not provide simple “truth” or standardize histories, but considering the two together will help enrich history.

## Documents, stories, and memories

Narratives about what happened on Peepeekisis are contentious. Government documents present a story about the colony that comes primarily from the perspectives and experiences of William Morris Graham and Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) officials. A thorough review of these documents reveals a narrative riddled with contradictions, revisions, and legal and ethical infringements. Scholars have constructed a narrative shaped by these documents.<sup>25</sup> Although some scholars have briefly engaged with written oral histories, their analysis is not particularly critical, as they tend to treat the colony as a key moment rather than a process with continuing effects in Canada’s colonial history.<sup>26</sup> Within the Peepeekisis community, narratives not only discuss the oppression and brutality experienced, but they also present a unique look into the everyday geographies and lives of community members that are largely missing from archive documents.

## Colonial and academic narratives

While archive documents about the colony are useful for their insight into colonial strategies, the document narrative is in constant flux. Even the start date of the colony is ambiguous. Graham maintained in Indian Affairs Annual Reports from 1910 and beyond that Fred Deiter was the first member of the colony, settled in 1901. The record trails show otherwise. Canadian government documents indicate that within six months of taking the Indian agent job at the File Hills agency in 1897, Graham started transferring residential school ex-pupils to Peepeekisis.<sup>27</sup> However, the most telling information comes from a 1902 Annual Report where Indian Commissioner David Laird wrote that Joseph McNabb and George

Little Pine had been farming under a colony scheme on Peepeekisis for some three or four years.<sup>28</sup> This point might seem inconsequential, but it in fact reflects larger issues. Were Graham and Laird attempting initially to hide the construction of the colony from the Department of Indian Affairs? Even later accounts of who was being let onto the reserve show a disconnect between the ground and Ottawa. For example, in 1905, the Presbyterian Church approached the department about admitting an ex-pupil from the Swan Lake Reserve to the colony. The Superintendent General of Indian Affairs thought it brilliant to bring ex-pupils from reserves outside of the File Hills to the colony, but he understood that the colony was only taking ex-pupils from the File Hills agency. Of the eleven pupils admitted to the colony in 1903 and 1904, only five of them were from the File Hills.<sup>29</sup> Did the Superintendent not know where all the ex-pupils were being transferred from and the potential consequences involved?

Documents also raise numerous ethical and legal questions. First, the sub-division of Peepeekisis in 1902 and 1906 to accommodate colonists displaced original members of Peepeekisis to approximately 7,600 of the reserve's 26,624 acres.<sup>30</sup> Under Treaty 4 negotiations, a family of five received one square mile of reserve land.<sup>31</sup> The DIA made no such arrangements to obtain additional land for colonists. Second, the transfer of ex-pupils grew increasingly dubious with time. In the late nineteenth century, it was customary to gain the consent of the band that an Aboriginal person wanted to transfer to as well as their original band. This procedure was ended with one memo from J. J. McLean to J. A. McKenna in 1902, in which they agreed that the consent of the original band was not necessary. Questionable transfers may have been prevented if this system of Aboriginal self-governance had not been undermined.<sup>32</sup> Initially, Graham had to rely on original members to sign transfer forms, but these forms are problematic. As a 2004 Peepeekisis land claim pointed out, the transfer forms for some of the early colonists had signatures of original band under the section labelled "Councillor."<sup>33</sup> The Peepeekisis Reserve, after the death of Chief Peepeekisis in 1889, had no formal leadership, thus no councillors.<sup>34</sup> Other transfer forms are questionable because the dates of the official transfer appear to be altered, and as time passed the selection of new colonists became more and more influenced by existing colonists, who were under the manipulation and control of Graham.<sup>35</sup> An agreement in 1911, however, is the most flagrant strategy to undermine Aboriginal self-government and disregard ethical responsibilities. Graham noticed growing resistance and resentment among colonists and original members over admitting new colonists. Transfers, Graham noted, were causing "trouble" on Peepeekisis. To circumvent the voting procedure, Graham persuaded Ottawa to offer the people of Peepeekisis \$20 each to accept an agreement that would allow the DIA to settle whomever they wished on the reserve. The first vote failed; the second, under unknown circumstances, passed.<sup>36</sup> Graham knew that the colony was causing resentment, and it was part of his ethical and fiduciary responsibilities to do no harm.

Stories told by visitors to the colony illustrate important ethical

and legal transgressions that are largely hidden in government records. Soon after the colony inked government documents, a discourse surfaced that referred to the colony as an “experiment” or “scheme.” The use of this language is deliberate, and it goes well beyond describing the colony as an “experiment” or “scheme” to prevent regression of ex-pupils. Graham’s collaboration with Hugonard and Gillespie resembled more of a large-scale eugenics project than a benevolent colonial “experiment.” As American anthropologist David Mandelbaum found in 1934, the “experiment” was racialized. Mandelbaum learned that Graham primarily selected boys of mixed blood, and colony clerk White told Mandelbaum that there was a “definite color preference in the marriage among the Indians of this reserve.”<sup>37</sup> Lighter skinned ex-pupils were “good catches” and ex-pupils with pure Aboriginal blood were “shelved or married at a later age.” Mandelbaum could not prove this statistically, but felt it was credible.<sup>38</sup>

Visitors to the colony also raised vital questions about its “success.” For the Canadian government, the colony was a source of a pride—a colonial showpiece that Royalty and U.S. government officials visited to witness Canada’s “successful” management of Aboriginal peoples. Governor General Earl Grey thought the colony such a great idea that he donated a plaque to hang annually in the home of the top wheat grower.<sup>39</sup> Secretary of the American Board of Indian Commissioners, Frederick Abbott, visited the colony and returned home to argue that the American government needed to develop a colony like Graham’s.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, many newspapers in Canada wrote articles about Graham and colony.<sup>41</sup> Although visits from government officials and the media perpetuated the colony’s positive public image, other visitors were more critical. In 1922, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, a long-time friend of Graham, wrote a letter to Reverend S.H. Middleton explaining that visitors were given misleading tours that went only along certain “beautifully ‘prepared’ route[s]” with wheat and oats fields to showcase self-supporting Indians.<sup>42</sup> Mandelbaum found the colony looked good on paper and only because it was a money pit. He believed that there were only three or four good farmers amongst all the graduates of the schools.<sup>43</sup> While a limited number of scholars have written a few articles and book sections about the colony, their work is anchored in government documents and primarily focuses on the intentions behind the colony and its function within colonial Canada. Sarah Carter has written the most about the colony. Her work effectively demonstrates how the colony was a colonial “showpiece” for the Canadian government.<sup>44</sup> The colony was supposed to be a solution to the “Indian problem,” but, as Carter argued, it neither represented the ordinary lives of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, nor did it entirely assimilate colonists. John Milloy, James R. Miller, and Jacqueline Gresko have noted how the colony was a scheme to stop residential school ex-pupils from “regressing” back to traditional ways of life.<sup>45</sup> While these arguments are important for offering a critique of the colony, reliance on colonial records has prevented these scholars from getting into the field and understanding the affects and effects (both historically and contemporarily) of the colony.

## Aboriginal narratives

The Peepeekisis community has been active in recording narratives of the colony. Eleanor Brass's book, *I Walk in Two Worlds*, is perhaps the most well-known and cited piece of work about the colony.<sup>46</sup> Brass, who was the daughter of Fred Deiter and one of the first babies born on the colony, first captured the everyday life of colonists. While Brass's book was not overly critical of the colony, in a later interview she spoke more frankly about the heavy-handed rule of the colony.<sup>47</sup> More recently, the video *To Colonize a People: The File Hills Farm Colony* and the Peepeekisis First Nation land claim have been more critical of the colony and the government's role in its construction.<sup>48</sup> The video and claim not only express the perspectives and experiences of community members and how the colony has impacted the band for many years, but they take the government records to task by questioning many of the issues discussed above. With time, largely neutral (or unexpressed) views of the colony appear to have grown more critical.

Oral histories, however, most effectively preserve memories of the colony. When I returned to Saskatchewan to officially start fieldwork, I had a list of burning questions. Many of them were as simple as: What do you know about Graham? What is your family history? What do you remember about everyday life? I heard many stories about the brutality of Graham's rule, and people were pleased to tell me memories about their everyday life. But I was also keen to understand who knew stories, why stories were told, and what places and people were given importance in stories. What I found was a far more intricate connection between everyday geographies and stories/memories. In many ways, stories about Graham and his abuse of power were somewhat unspecific. They always had a central point (please note the fire story below), but details about the time of events and people in attendance were ambiguous. Many of these stories have been highly fragmented over the years because of the way Graham ran the colony and the internal colonization that persisted for so many years. There is, as Julie Cruikshank might argue, a social life to these stories that gives them such a great complexity.<sup>49</sup> Memories about everyday life, however, were quite vivid and more geographical. This geographical nature is extremely significant because it shows an embodiment of the historical and contemporary. Many people's geography – the way that they view their own identity, history, and lived-life – is in the geography of the reserve. As Elaine Stratford pointed out, bodies are neither ahistorical or acontextual, but I would add that neither are people's geographies or memories.<sup>50</sup> The way people on Peepeekisis remember today is a complex weave of the historical and the contemporary.

## The legacy of the colony

When community members spoke directly about the colony, Graham's legacy dominated most stories. Their stories, for one, largely question Graham's financial management of the reserve. Most Peepeekisis

community members are sure that Graham became wealthy off their labor and grain production. The permit system is of particular interest because most community members not only saw it as a source of control, but they saw it as a calculated strategy to steal band members' money.<sup>51</sup> Greg Brass's father, Campbell, told him that Graham and his wife, Violette, came to the File Hills agency with little more than a two-wheeled wagon and within three years became rich by using band farm equipment for his own farm. How much money Graham accumulated is impossible to determine, but records show that Graham owned large tracts of land and became one of the top producing farmers on the prairies.<sup>52</sup> Fraudulent use of the permit system is also connected to one of the most widely known stories on Peepeekisis about a fire destroying the Indian agent's home. According to oral histories, the office and garage of the house caught fire, which included most, if not all, of the financial records. A couple of people from the reserve rushed to the house to help put out the fire but were stopped by the Indian agent. I heard or read this story a number of times, and the details of who served as the Indian agent at that time, who was there to help put the fire, or when the event occurred, has never been exactly the same.<sup>53</sup> However, this story clearly has a main point: there was a fire and it destroyed valuable documents regarding the finances of the band members.

Graham's abuse of power and his use of brutality to manage the colony are the most common themes in the stories. Campbell Swanson stated in an affidavit that he wanted to leave the colony because he felt that Indian agent Dodds was not giving him enough money from his grain production.<sup>54</sup> Graham told Dodds to send Campbell to jail for thirty days if he left. Campbell left and went to Pasque Reserve, where the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) arrested him. According to Campbell, Graham stated: "Keep the Indians broke, without money and step on them. You can do what ever you feel like with them." Oral histories of numerous Peepeekisis community members highlight abuses of power that involved threats of jail, forms of punishment, and intimidation. Many community members knew that Graham functioned as police, judge, and jury. His legacy is largely one of a dictator. Perhaps the most widely known story is about Graham's jailing of a man pretending to be drunk. The man was actually a non-drinker and trying to entertain some younger people, but when Graham noticed him staggering, he threw him in jail for thirty days without questions. Again, this man's identity is not clear from the stories I heard or read, nor is this the most vital point. But what is important is the way Peepeekisis community members remember the abuse they endured, and how this cruelty is part of a narrative that many community members know and tell each other.

Oral histories about oppression and brutality on the colony are significant for illustrating how the past resonates to the present. Upon asking Gerry Desnomie when the colony ended, he stated: "the colony has never ended in people's minds."<sup>55</sup> The internal colonization and the effects of the colony speak loudly. People are also aware that they were experimented on. Ben Stonechild stated: "Graham called the colony an 'experiment' ... so,

he experimented with people."<sup>56</sup> Although James Dempsey argued that Graham had a mixed reputation among Aboriginal peoples, this is less true on Peepeekisis.<sup>57</sup> "Some Indians," Peepeekisis community member, Greg Brass, stated, "are going to hell just to see Graham again."<sup>58</sup> It is clear that Graham was respected little in the Peepeekisis community, but his workings have been long felt.<sup>59</sup>

## Everyday geographies and lives

Stories, like lives, are dynamic and fragile. While researching a book about Peepeekisis band history in 1992, Dr. Oliver Brass regularly told interviewees, "You'll live forever now," after completing their sessions. Brass passed away five years later, and the stories he gathered still exist.<sup>60</sup> Had Oliver not interviewed many of the people he did, many stories would have been lost due to death and memory loss with age.

The fragility of stories about everyday geographies and lives became very apparent to me while in the field. I grew aware of this fragility because oral histories about everyday geographies and lives on Peepeekisis have been rarely documented, and people who lived through the colony are increasingly passing on. During interviews, when I began hearing similar stories about Graham or other aspects of the colony, I always asked people what they remembered about their life on Peepeekisis, or what they knew about their parents' life. This question typically brought a smile, followed by a struggle to remember long ago. Many people seemed surprised and happy with this question, as they are primarily used to people only asking them about the colony for legal cases or constructing colony histories. What people told me about their everyday geographies and lives was a truly fascinating glimpse into the connection between stories and places that greatly enriches the history of the Peepeekisis Reserve.

Places in the community and community events are prevalent in many oral histories. During interviews, I always presented interviewees with a present-day map of the reserve that showed little more than roads and where people's home are currently located and asked them to show me what they knew about the colony. Some people discussed their geographic perception about the east (colonist) and west (original members) divide. However, the substance of these conversations were regularly grounded in places, such as "The Hill," "Bacon Highway," "Under the Pines," "The Agency," and Lorie, Saskatchewan. Greg Brass told me about Treaty Day and how it was held at the old agency near the Okanese and Peepeekisis border until 1953. Treaty Day was a huge event, when all four bands of the File Hills gathered together. People got dressed up in their best clothes. The old agency had a ball diamond, and sports days were held there.<sup>61</sup> After 1953, Treaty Day was moved to the "The Hill," where, as Gloria Deiter remembers, they had sports days, but "The Hill" was also a place for socializing. Henry McLeod, who came to the colony in 1908, ran a booth at these sports days, where he sold ice cream and pop.<sup>62</sup> Gerry Desnomie, likewise, remembers the sports days on "The Hill," but he has memories of

going there after church for lunch. "The Hill," which is now where the Peepeekisis school is located, fostered socialising and became a significant place for community spirit.<sup>63</sup> "Bacon Highway" is another site significant to many people's memories. The Highway, which ran diagonally north-west to southeast on Peepeekisis, was named this because the band members who helped construct it were mainly paid with food rations (which always included bacon). The highway is also important because it ran to the boarding school, which was located "Under the Pines," near the north-west corner of Peepeekisis. For many young children of the File Hills, the boarding school harbors many tragic memories of its own. The town of Lorlie, which is now a ghost town but used to stand near the southeast corner of the reserve, is dear to the memories of Gloria Deiter because as a child she would go there with her father. He went to the curling club and she skated outside. To warm up, Gloria went inside and sat around an old stove, where men smoked cigars.<sup>64</sup> In the 1950s, Lorlie became the central place of opposition to the construction of the colony, as the Trelenburg and McFadden hearings were heard here.

Community members also figure prominently into the stories. Fred Deiter, one of the earliest colonists, is remembered by many people. An anonymous community member recalled the early days when Fred had to haul grain to Indian Head, Saskatchewan, going through the Qu'Appelle Valley. Fred took a couple of teams of horses because the journey was so intense, especially when climbing out of the steep Valley. This community member also fondly recalled that Fred never rode a horse, unless he sneaked away to a sweat ceremony.<sup>65</sup> Gloria Deiter remembers the beautiful pine trees that Fred planted from his house to Lorlie. Many times after church, they would sit under them and eat lunch.<sup>66</sup> Gerry Desnomie remembers stories about his grandfather, Henry McLeod, and how he kept transferring from residential school to residential school, until ending up at Qu'Appelle industrial school. Gerry joked that it seemed that every school he attended seemed to burn down. The Qu'Appelle school did not burn while he was there, and Henry had an arranged marriage. Henry wanted to join the colony, Gerry stated, but Graham did not want him because Henry was missing an arm and Graham thought him unfit to farm. After some years of working for farmers, both on and off Peepeekisis, Graham let him onto the colony.<sup>67</sup> Dwight Pinay, whose grandfather was "kidnapped" and brought to the colony by Hugonard, told me how his father, along with Vince Bellegarde, became some of the first Indian Indian agents in 1959. When young, Dwight remembers playing in the ration houses at Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan. These ration houses were no different than ration houses on other reserves. They housed old RCMP coats, blankets, shotgun shells, tents, tea, sugar, canned meat, potatoes (occasionally), and flour that were distributed to Aboriginal peoples in need.<sup>68</sup>

On the other side of the reserve, stories tell how different life was for original members. Don Koochicum remembers living in a sod house until 1951: "We," Don stated, "were poor." The northwestern part of the reserve, Don remembered, was a beautiful forest, and he hunted and got

game there.<sup>69</sup> Don's father died when he was 29 of tuberculosis and living was hard. His grandmother, to make ends meet, used to throw potato peelings on the roof of their house and let them grow through the ceiling for another food source. Talking with Oliver Brass, Don discussed how elders and his grandfather knew about the future. They knew that Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginals were going to be living together some day. Change came quickly; he remembers the first time his grandmother saw an airplane in the sky and ran into the house to grab her pipe and started praying. It was during the war, and his grandmother thought the Germans bombing them.<sup>70</sup>

The oral histories discussed above are important for engaging with community members' experiences and perspectives to enrich the story of the colony. While their non-legal nature may or may not supplement a land claims case, they are undeniably a source of human history lacking from many current Canadian history narratives. They reposition the significance of narratives, places, and people in the history and geographies of those affected by the colony. The narration of geographies, lives, feelings, and spirits carry great weight in decolonizing history and the researcher's epistemology. Can oral histories be problematic? Yes, to a certain extent. Many of the stories combine earlier and later memories from the 1900s. Moreover, these stories do not always have a prevailing opinion about the construction of the colony. In some cases, people are quite ambivalent of its success and whether or not Graham had good intentions. But the resounding conclusion is that colony was an experiment conducted on people and that its effects have been detrimental. These oral stories are no more problematic, subjective, revised, and reworked than written documents. We are a storied people, and the means by which a story is conveyed — whether on paper or told — should not dominate the discussion.

In many ways, I am still contemplating the oral histories I heard. To enhance organization and comprehension, I have omitted some. The anger, pain, and confusion over what this colony did to this community runs deep. Much of the same sentiment is directed towards Indian Affairs policy and the government's disregard for the obligations and the working relationship of Treaty 4 that so many Aboriginal peoples hold dear to their identity as a people. There is also a spirit, a pervasive generosity, amongst the people I interviewed. Transcripts and recorded oral histories do not always show this generosity and spirit of kindness and sharing. The sound of a kettle boiling and someone making tea, a common background noise in Oliver Brass's recorded interviews and a typical sound heard during my interviews, reminds me of the generosity of so many people who spent hours with me, telling me their oral histories and personal feelings.

## Conclusion

Oral histories that discuss unjust Indian agents or everyday geographies and lives are not unique to the Peepeekisis Reserve. What happened on Peepeekisis, however, was unique and not duplicated anywhere

else in North America. Graham's strict management and intimidation not only caused fear but it intentionally kept people divided – and it still does. Historically, Graham divided people to keep “uncivilized” Aboriginal peoples away from the “civilized” colonists. Graham attempted to keep people separated by limiting house visits by women and keeping men working in fields. Strict rules, fear, and intimidation caused fragmentation in narratives, especially about colonial brutality; people could not come together often and did not feel free to express themselves. As Joseph Desnomie stated “Here on the reserve if a group of four or five were standing together, you approach them and started to talk about Graham they would all start walking away one by one till you were standing all alone. It's [sic] only lately they talk about him openly.”<sup>71</sup> Today, when Gerry Desnomie stated that the colony still exists in people's minds, he is alluding to the residue of this colonial “experiment” and how it has become internalized within many people. There is a friction and resentment between colonists and original members about the construction of the colony and who should be compensated in land claims. Ultimately, everyone has been victimized, and this victimization has reached across many generations and still persists today.

This manuscript, like the stories, has a reason for being told. Theoretically, I wanted to address how the postcolonial lens can address everyday geographies and lives by engaging with oral histories of colonized peoples. Methodologically, I am advocating for historical geographers to put foot-to-ground and go outside of the wall of archive collections. Collaborating with Aboriginal peoples is a more ethical approach to research, and it helps decolonize narratives.<sup>70</sup> Oral histories are not perfect, and the criticisms are well known.<sup>71</sup> Documents are not perfect either. What I have attempted to demonstrate here is the intricate connection that narratives have with everyday geographies, lives, spirits, and feelings. The colonial construct of the colony has not extinguished human agency, and many Peepeekisis community members' identities and histories are embedded in this place called Peepeekisis.

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## Notes

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40. *Indian Affairs Annual Report*, 1915, 22. Reproduced from Library and Archives Canada's website ([www.collectionscanada.gc.ca](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca))
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51. See Maureen Lux's *Medicine That Walks: Disease, Medicine, and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880-1940* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto, 2001), 149, 151, and 164-5 for more about the permit system. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the permit system dominated the economic lives of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Permits, which were required to sell grain, wood, produce, milk, and so on off of reserve, had to be obtained from the Indian agent, who could use their discretion in issuing them. When selling grain, for example, an Aboriginal farmer would get a permit and then take their grain to an elevator. The elevator issued the farmer a receipt for how much grain they brought in, and the money from the grain sale was later given to the Indian agent for distribution.
  52. E. Brian Titley, "W. M. Graham: Indian Agent Extraordinaire." *Prairie Forum* 8:1 (1983): 25-41; Also see the Cummins land maps (1920 and 1922) in the Saskatchewan Archives Board. Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada for how much land Graham owned.
  53. In particular, see Cruikshank's *The Social Life of Stories*, xii-xiii.
  54. First Nations University of Canada. Eleanor Brass' personal papers. Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada box 2 file 9. Dodds took over as Indian agent of the File Hills in 1904 when Graham was appointed Inspector for South Saskatchewan Inspectorate, and then Indian Commissioner in 1918. Although he was not the Indian agent, he was still involved with its workings, and Dodds continued the colony "scheme."
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  56. Ben Stonechild, interview by C Drew Bednasek, Peepeekisis Reserve, Saskatchewan, Canada, 2007.
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  58. Greg Brass, interview by C Drew Bednasek, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, 2008.
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  60. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Oliver Brass and his sons Campbell and Philip Brass. Campbell and Philip still have all of their father's work and were very gracious to share it with me.
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  67. Gerry Desnomie, interview by Bednasek, 2007.
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