



# Behind the Scenes in Mayo and Mining

Mayo, July 2016

## Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elders' Opinions on Mining and Community History

Stories collected between June 2015 and March 2016  
Full text of the presentation with pictures

by Gerti Saxinger and Susa Gartler

Gerti Saxinger/Susa Gartler, University of Vienna/Austria  
“LACE-Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Extractive Industries”  
is a joint project with the Yukon College, Lakehead University, University of Vienna,  
the SSHRC research program ReSDA: Resources and Sustainable Development in the  
Arctic and the Yukon Government (Department for Economic Development)

 [facebook.com/mobileminingLACE](https://facebook.com/mobileminingLACE)



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada



Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada



Canada

## Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elders` Opinions on Mining and Community History

*Presentation of the Results of Interviews held between June 2015 and March 2016*

*By Susa Gartler*

**G**ood evening! It's wonderful to have so many people here tonight! Some of you already know my colleague Gerti Saxinger and me from our last visit this past winter. For those who do not know us: Gerti and I are both based in Austria, at the University of Vienna. We are Anthropologists. Gerti is a senior scholar and I am a doctoral student writing my dissertation on the subject of cultural revival in the context of mineral extraction in the Yukon Territory - with a special focus on Mayo and the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun (NND). We were both born and raised in Austria, a country with many mountains, rivers, and lakes. We live and work in Vienna the capital of Austria. I am very grateful that I can be here today on the traditional territory of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun.



Gerti and I first came here two years ago with a project idea on community life and mining in the Yukon - primarily in Mayo. We suggested this idea to the **Na-Cho Nyäk Dun** (NND) First Nation and the **Village of Mayo**. We were interested in conducting a 3-year study.

The project is called **LACE** or **Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Yukon**. It is funded by the **Yukon Government** and the **Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)**. We collaborated closely with Joella Hogan and the **NND Culture and Heritage Department**. Our project is part of a research initiative called **ReSDA (Resources and Sustainable Development in the Canadian North)**. Our partners are **Yukon College, Lakehead University** in Ontario, and my host university, the **University of Vienna**.



### Behind the Scenes in Yukon Mining

Mayo, 5th of October 2015  
5:30 pm Curling Lounge

**Work, camp & family life  
in Yukon mining today**

Stories collected 2014/15  
Full text of the presentation with pictures  
by Gerti Saxinger and Susa Gartler

Gerti Saxinger/Susa Gartler, University of Vienna/Austria  
"LACE:Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Extractive Industries"  
is a joint project with the Yukon College, Lakehead University, University of Vienna,  
the SSHRC research program ReSDA: Resources and Sustainable Development in the  
Arctic and the Yukon Government (Department for Economic Development)

[facebook.com/mobileminingLACE](https://facebook.com/mobileminingLACE)



The first time I came here with Gerti in summer 2014, the NND chief and council and also the village of Mayo agreed to our project. We have so far focused on the lives of miners and the interaction of the mining industry with communities such as Mayo.

Gerti presented the main findings last fall in the community hall.

We are now about to finish the **Mobility Companion Guide**, a guide for people who want to enter the industry.



sults with you. I will give a short presentation on the topics that came up during the interviews and I would like to ask you to discuss these topics with me afterwards. These findings are also published in a booklet that I have brought with me. The full interviews with the Elders will be collected in a separate booklet and we hope they are of interest to the Elders themselves and the greater community. We hope they will also prove to be valuable to the cultural heritage collection.

It covers a variety of topics for communities and miners' families, detailing how to cope with a multi-local and transient lifestyle in the industry.

During my last stay in June 2015, the chief and council asked me to speak to their Elders about how they believe mining has changed and affected their lifestyle and community. So, during last summer and this winter, I talked to several people on this issue. Today I would like to share the preliminary re-



Let's see what the Elders wanted to talk about when I asked them what their opinions were about mining and how it has affected their lives.

Their answers were quite varied, depending on when and where the person grew up, if they had any personal ties to the mining industry (for example a job or a husband who worked in Elsa), but also if they went to residential school or lived "in the bush" for a long time. In her presentations last year Gerti spoke about issues that came up in relation to mining. Today, I do not want to talk only about mining but about other issues the Elders raised as well.

These issues concern the future visions of the community and its history, which – as you know – was not always peaceful and free of concerns. I would encourage you therefore to ask questions if something is unclear to you at any time. I would be glad if we could have a discussion afterwards and am keen to hear your responses and opinions about what came up in these interviews.



## The Old Village...

I usually started the interviews by asking about the Elders first memories of the community. As you can expect, the Old Village across the river came up many times. The Na-Cho Nyäk Dun people became sedentary only after the mining booms at the turn of the 20th century. These booms turned the village of Mayo, where the Mayo and the Stewart Rivers meet, into a transportation hub. First Nation people became part of the cash economy and, in 1915, built their own village across the river from the current town. The Federal Government intervened at this location in the early 1950s and a forced move was undertaken from what is now the Old Village to the east side of Mayo.

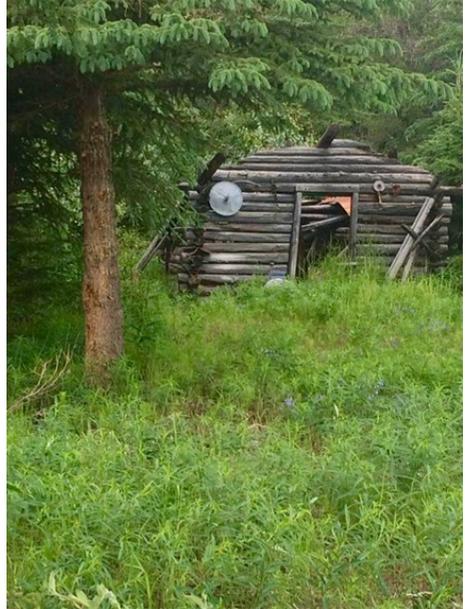
Life in the Old Village is often remembered as a good life: *“To me we were a pretty happy family, even though in springtime we had to live in a tent while my dad and brother were out trapping. We didn’t say we’re cold like today ...We didn't say oh, I grew up so poor, you know. Maybe we didn't have*



*everything like today, but my mum and dad made sure we got everything. We got enough to eat and we got enough food for the winter to get us by. In winter time they went to Mayo Lake and Ethel Lake to get fish.”*

Childhood seemed to be carefree:

*“We used to have lots of fun down there, we didn’t think about the town, we never thought about candies or anything because we’ve never seen them, we just lived the bush life. You know berries and stuff like that.”*



Another said:

*“I loved the living in the village, it was fun. We were always out doing things and never idle and we had our chores like we had to carry water from the river to the house and chop wood and stuff like that. We went to pick berries and we were always busy. And everyone took care of each other, they shared their meat, you know. No one went hungry.”*

## ... and Relocation

Accounts of the relocation are sometimes met with regret or framed as a mistake:

*“We used to live five miles down the river from Mayo, it used to be a First Nation village down there. They tried to get a pump for us, so we could have clean water. We have been drinking river water and all the sewers (also from Mayo) went into the river. They told us to move. We should have just stayed and instead we listened to somebody telling us what to do.”*



The time when people moved to Mayo is primarily remembered as the time when people’s eating and drinking habits have changed:

*“After everybody moved into Mayo, that’s when they started to eat bacon and eggs and turkey and ham and all that.”*

I have also heard pork ribs mentioned symbolically a number of times when people were discussing this move away from wild foods such as moose, caribou, and berries towards store bought meat and other groceries.



Many people quit drinking a long time ago, and it is this agency, the fact that they are now in control of their lives, that most interview partners emphasized:

*"I am still thinking about what a wonderful time we had at the trapline. I've been busy tanning moose skin. All my family were wearing moccasins. I was just a good mother. When I was young I used to drink. I should have been a good mother to my kids and look after my kids, I was sorry after that. But right now, must be about 50 years, now I never touch it, no drink or wine, nothing, no smoking. It's good to be clean every day."*

Many of the Elders told similar stories. Settler food and beverages were not the only things that were brought in to people's lives by the steamboats coming in from Whitehorse.

## Steamboats

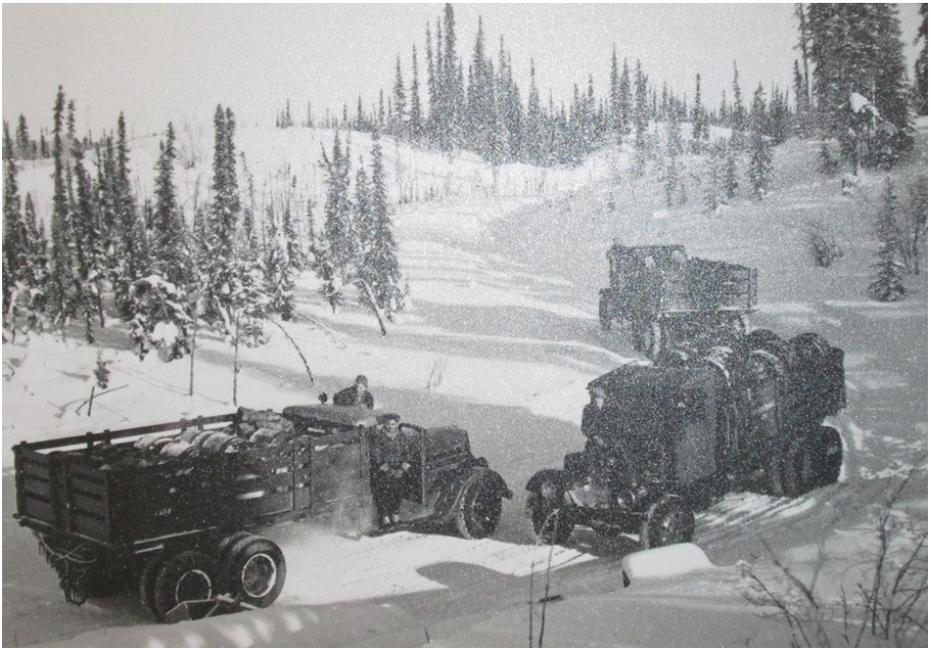


In fact, one of the first memories of many interviewees connected to the mining history was the big paddle wheelers or steamboats coming in to Mayo during the summer. These boats would load the galena stones and ship them to southern destinations. *“Well, I remember the boats coming in on the Stewart River picking up the ore bags and the whole front street was full of ore bags. This is what I remember and we used to play on them and you know, we watched the boats coming in and that’s my earliest memory of the mine.”*

The memory of the mine is also connected to a culinary memory when people tasted foreign foods for the first time. The First Nation men earned money loading and unloading the cargo:

*”Yeah, the first time we saw new people on the steamboats coming in, it was the only time men made a Dollar. They all came to Mayo. All the men from the First Nation, they loaded and unloaded the steamboats. When the steamboats went by the village, they used to throw apples and oranges to us. It didn’t matter how far out on the river, we still went out and grabbed it. It was the first time we tasted things that we’ve never seen before. So anyway, men made a few Dollars to buy groceries for their family.“*

Working on the steamboats, helping to unload staples and load the ore was one of the few opportunities for First Nation citizens to work for wages – until the time the Klondike highway was built: *“Keno Hill Mine was built at the time when the road opened and when the steamboats stopped coming in – it changed quite a bit. No more fun to see the steamboats going by. And then there were trucks, ore trucks, coming in and stuff like that and then they went right back out from camp. There were the Keno Hill trucks and White Pass trucks coming in.”*



## Elsa

In the following years many male NND citizens worked in the mining community of Elsa, approximately 50 km from Mayo, taking along their wives and children. This went on until the United Keno Hill Mine (UKHM) was shut down in the 1980s. While both settlements were rather independent in terms of infrastructure there were numerous ties between Mayo and Elsa. Many First Nation people married and/or had relations with incomers or so-called “displaced persons”, as the miners were called: *“After my brother got older he got married down here and then he moved up to Elsa and started working up in the mine. And my sister married a miner and he stayed in Elsa. She stayed up there in Elsa too.”*

Not all memories from this great influx of outsiders were fond ones: *“The influence that the mine had on the First Nation people, I don’t think it was good because it was mostly alcohol related, you know and the guys from the mines would come down and ply the women with alcohol...It just seemed like there were lot of foreign men... As you get older then you realize that they are there to work. They were called DPs at the time, ‘displaced persons’.”*

Summing up the early and intense association of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation with the extractive industry, Chief Simon Mervyn recalls:

*“On a extremely cold day you could hear the noon whistle from Elsa, right from the village, that’s thirty miles away. So all the folks knew what time it was. Pretty*



*cool. I remember that. And all the mining gear and all the implements that the mines required came up by steamboats! So, our association, my peoples association, with the mining industry goes back long ways and it was huge.”*



## Residential Schools, Resistance and Resilience

As I said earlier, the history was not always free of conflict and many participants chose to share some stories about the residential school era too. It has been a long and difficult road for this dark chapter of Canada to become known. It was kept hidden by the Federal government for many years.

Many Natives fought to have their stories heard and only recently has the history been acknowledged through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and their 94 recommendations. It was not the goal of this research to go into depth regarding these experiences. But, the lack of acknowledgment of this history for so long is what has been additionally damaging for many survivors. The Native Residential School system meant abuse for many of the students who went there and a loss of language, culture, and identity. It also constituted an experience of separation from close and personal bonds: From parents, children, from knowledge of ones' culture, from a happy childhood.



Nevertheless, there are also plenty of instances of resistance, like parents hiding their children from state agents, knowledge being transmitted informally or connections forged that were ultimately useful in the negotiations with Canada for self-government. Many survivors have gone through a process of personal healing, and are now proud and acknowledge the knowledge their ancestors held.

*“I love myself now. I love that I accomplished everything I could. ... and I’m proud to be First Nation again. Like I said, I wish I had learned more from my grandma and my mum. I wish I would have listened more to my mum when she was talking about the old days “*

A lot of knowledge is re-learned today in courses, informally on the streets, in uncle’s and auntie’s retreats, during culture weeks and festivals. But even throughout the residential school era the knowledge of living on the land continued to be transmitted to children. For example, kids were taught informally outside of school or they picked up knowledge during summer or were even hidden from state school agents.





One remarkable account of resistance and resilience was told by Betty Lucas:

*“I told my husband: I’m scared. I said we are going to go to jail over taking our kids out of public school. I thought the government was my boss - I was scared of them. After all, I thought, they are not my boss. So we went to a trap line and we have been living there for 23 years. Then my husband became the teacher. He taught all our boys how to hunt and showed them how to skin moose and cut down all the meat and how to take care of themselves. And we were teaching them how to fish and how to trap too. There were a few white people living with us, they showed us how to plant a garden. We got a big garden at Nogold. We got a greenhouse and it was filled up with vegetables and we got lots of fish for the winter and dry meat and fresh meat. We were doing very well.”*

Not only did the Lucas family hide their children, Betty's account also describes how settler technologies such as gardening were adopted and put to use. The practice of small-scale gardening has gained new importance in recent years with private greenhouses and community gardens appearing in many backyards and communities. This is partly also in response to food-security issues and the wish to provide local communities with fresh supplies of fruit and vegetables in this Sub-Arctic region.

## Together and Seperate

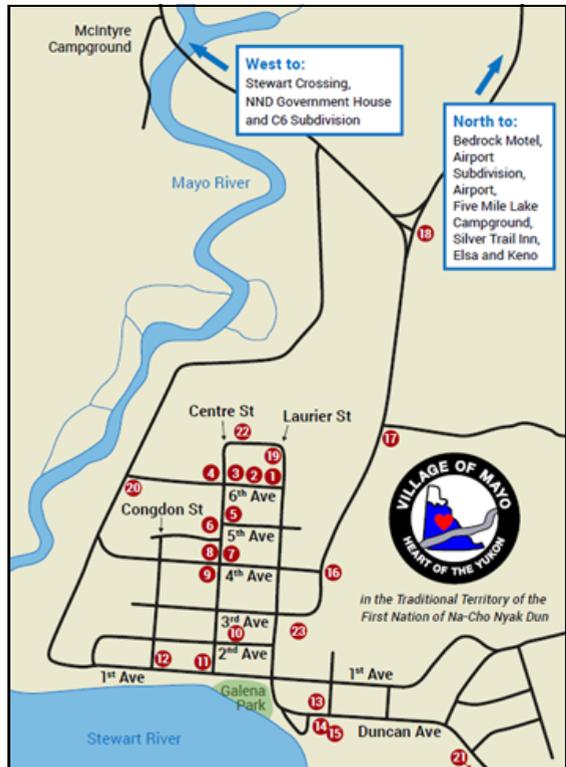
In the interviews, there are several references to what one could call the "cold apartheid" period prior to the settlement of land claims and First Nation self-government. This period was marked by the forceful separation of First Nation citizens and non-First Nation citizens, illustrated in the following: *"Well, when we were growing up we were not allowed to go to the white people's school. My older sister and I never went to school. Some of my other brothers and sisters went to Carcross residential school. They did not take us to Carcross so we were raised in the village."*



Or someone remembers:

*“When I was a boy, I remember hanging on to my grandma’s skirt, standing in line at the store. The Indians on this side, Whites on this side. It’s hard to erase those things. And: You Indians take your hats off! You know, when you’re talking to White men. Don’t talk to White man! Oh geez it was tough in those days.”*

There is a great deal of connections today and most people get along very well with each other. However, the ghost of this era seems to still haunt village life. I think this separation is still visible, for example, in the spatial segregation between the ‘East End’ and the C6 subdivision where mostly First Nation citizens reside and ‘Downtown’ Mayo as well as other areas which are mostly populated by the offspring of settlers. It is also apparent in the social fabric of the community, when some events are attended by a only a single group of people.



This is also noted by one of the interviewees who explains how this era still affects his feelings about the relationship between First Nations and Settlers:

*“You see, we do have an Elders center, but the thing is, the intermingling is difficult, seeing as we were assimilated, seeing as how we were treated by the white man. Over the years, our Elders, they are the ones who remember that. And they just stay away from that, you know. They try to mingle. Like I’m an Elder too now, but I am not bothered going to these things, because I know deep down how they think, how they feel, you know.”*

Perhaps you are wondering why I chose to include this quotation, because perhaps not everyone feels this way. Also it does not seem to be connected directly to mining at the first glance. I chose to include it not only because they appear in the interviews, but because it is these social relationships that were imported while the extractive industry exported silver to southern regions across the globe. This is sometimes forgotten when people speak about the history of the Yukon.



## Jobs

Now we move onto more contemporary issues related to mining. The shape of the extractive industry has changed significantly during the last decades. There has been a shift away from mining towns such as Elsa (which is abandoned today) towards more shift-work operations, where mine workers are flown, driven, or bussed into the temporary remote camps. The following are the most common concerns of Elders with contemporary mining in the traditional area of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun: Jobs for First Nation citizens, relations to mine workers and pollution, and degradation of the environment. Today NND people are employed in the mines nearby, like in the Alexco or Victoria Gold Corporations. Comprehensive Benefit Agreements between the First Nations and the mining companies are in place. Still, the Elders think critically about jobs for the community:



*“You know when they build a mine up here, they should always ask the First Nation boys to see if they want a job. They usually get somebody from out of town, and then you don’t even get to know them. We tell them you got to watch: you got to watch the creek water and we tell them don’t cut up all the ground, because we got to pick berries.”*

There are several NND First Nation miners and other locals employed in nearby mining operations – provided these mines are active at all. But, these quotes express a concern that there are not enough employment opportunities and that there is little or no interaction between the in-

coming workers and members of the community. Also it shows a strong concern for the environment in relation to subsistence activities such as berry picking.

It is generally acknowledged that many people depend on the extractive industry for income and job opportunities: *“We need it. We haven’t got much here in this area except industries like mining and maybe timber, you know. We are worried about the environment and the land – like the Peel. We are fighting for the Peel because we don’t want too much mining up there. But we need it. I just have to say we need it. I can’t see us surviving without resources like that.”*



This statement also underlines the fact that elements of settler ‘culture’ are appropriated when considered useful: *“I would say that mining as a whole has been beneficial in a sense that we learned a lot, I mean we got welders and electricians and all that sort of thing.”*

Future expectations include that companies engage even more actively with the local population and provide training and other benefits. Indeed, the boom and bust nature of mining means that there is no guarantee for long-term jobs and investments – this is the reason why other options such as gardening, (culture) tourism and agriculture are being discussed by many people. But it is widely acknowledged that mining has a long history in the community and it is seen in a very positive light, provided it is ‘done the right way’: with a concern for future generations.

## Animals, Pollution and Access to the Bush

Some of the Elders are worried about the impact of mining on animals, their habitat, and traveling patterns of people and animals:

*“It was different when I was growing up but now it has changed because the people don't move around anymore like they used to. Now they got a house in town and only in the fall time they hunt and get enough meat for the winter. It's not the same anymore, we're surrounded by mines - I think the moose and caribou, they move far away.”*

Others also shared their concerns regarding pollution and reclamation of Keno Hill and Elsa: *“If they clean up the tailings ponds and show that stuff can grow there or reproduce something else, I think it might help. But it's really a fine line. Because they'll tell you one thing and they'll do another. All the contamination from the water has been there for just about a hundred years, because it comes from the mine going down; and some is natural, some is unnatural.”*





The opportunities for hunting that arise through increased access due to mining roads were also mentioned several times: *“We were travelling up at six in the morning one time and this moose was just going to jump out and I could just see his face and I could touch it. That’s how close it was right there.”*

Access through roads means not only access for locals, but also access for hunters coming from other areas, outfitters, and potential access for state institutions and tourism development. Access and pollution, I believe, have two dimensions: On the one hand it is a personal and immediate concern regarding access to wild foods or physical health when waterways, the ground and thus animals and berries are polluted by human engagement with minerals. On the other hand however, presenting one’s group as ‘caretakers’ of the land and having an intimate knowledge of it adds a moral justification to land-claims and thus reinforces First Nation sovereignty.

## Conclusion

Many different issues have been raised in the interviews that I presented during the last half hour. Among them are the Old Village, relocation, the steamboats, Elsa, togetherness and separation, resilience and resistance to Residential Schools, jobs, pollution and access to the bush. It is very important to me to know what the community – all of you – think about these topics. This is why I would now like to conduct a discussion. I am especially interested in which direction you think the research should go in the future.

Last, but not least, I would like to say thank you to everyone who contributed, especially all the Elders! This spring we worked closely with Josephine Hager and Florence Pilon, who were great companions. Thank you to all the people who helped me today and all the people who are so warmly welcoming me and Gerti time and time again over the last two years.

**Mussi Cho!**

**Susa**



**Disclaimer:** I see my collaboration with the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation as part of the building of relationships with outside institutions based on the exercise of autonomy of the NND FN. This presentation describes events, materials, people, animals, and places that carry meaning for the participants of the study in terms of the period of change starting in the early 20th century up until today. It contains direct quotes from NND Elders. It is a written version of an oral presentation delivered in Mayo in July 2016. Quotations of this paper should indicate the following reference:

Gartler, Susanna (2016) Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elders' Opinions on Mining and Community History. Presentation of the Results of Interviews held between June 2015 and March 2016. University of Vienna.



