

Voices of Kouchibouguac

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In 1969 the Canadian and New Brunswick governments reached an agreement for the creation of a national park on the province's eastern shore, roughly 100 kilometres north of Moncton. The establishment of Kouchibouguac National Park could only take place, however, after all of the residents--over 1200 in total--were removed from their lands. Such expropriations constituted the norm for creation of national parks at the time, and the New Brunswick government--which would be responsible for the actual removal of the residents -- was willing to go along, believing that this was a way to improve the lives of the population of Kent County, by any standard one of the poorest places in Canada. However, no one asked the residents what they thought, and in the years that followed, while most residents quietly left in order to start their new lives, often in nearby communities, others resisted--sometimes barricading the park or resorting to acts of vandalism. The most prominent of the resisters, Jackie Vautour, refused to leave his land and remains within the territory of the park, a squatter who provides a living link to this story.

The expropriations at the heart of the Kouchibouguac story have reverberated in various media over the past forty years. To a considerable degree, the story has been constructed as an Acadian one: most--but not all--of the *expropriés* were Acadians and the conflict emerged at a time of a redefinition of Acadian identity, part of a *révolution tranquille acadienne*. As Acadians were insisting upon recognition of their distinct identity--a process that led to New Brunswick becoming the only officially bilingual province in Canada--the cause of the *expropriés* became a metaphor for the plight of Acadians more generally, a people whose pivotal historical moment had been its eighteenth-century deportation, the first modern example of ethnic cleansing. In this context, the Kouchibouguac story has provided the focus for documentary films, theatrical productions, novels, and music. However, little historical research has been carried out, and the testimony of those who were removed has not been collected in any systematic way, the story of Jackie Vautour often crowding out the less dramatic, but no less significant stories of the vast majority.

One of the goals of my project, *Kouchibouguac in History and Memory*, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is to allow the voices of the *expropriés* to be heard. Working in collaboration with Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, this project will collect the life stories of expropriates who still live in the shadow of the park. This documentation will provide a source of information for the book that will be produced, and which will also take advantage of the rich archival sources at the

Provincial Archives of New Brunswick and the Centre d'études acadiennes of the Université de Moncton. These archives primarily tell the story of the creation of the park from the perspective of the official mind. However, they also provide occasional glimpses--by means of letters written to government officials--of the perspectives of the *expropriés*, glimpses that can be further developed by allowing the expropriates to speak for themselves.

In addition, the digitized interviews will serve as a major source for the creation of a web-based map of the park as it existed prior to 1969. In preparing the territory for the expropriations, careful surveys were made of the territory, so that it is possible to work from the maps that were created and embed within each holding a variety of information about a world that has been lost. The archival record, thanks to the careful expropriation files created by the New Brunswick government, document the lives lived by the residents and include photographs of many of the houses that were destroyed as well as the ones that became the new homes of the *expropriés*. The interviews will also become another part of the record, so as to return the voices to a virtual reconstruction of the territory of the park as it existed before 1969. This part of the project has been influenced by Joy Parr's effort to virtually reconstruct communities destroyed by the building of the St Lawrence Seaway.¹

Finally, I have begun to explore the possibility of using the interviews so as to return the voices to the actual territory of the park. In this case, the project has drawn inspiration from the work of Toby Butler, among others.² Parks Canada has conducted trials of a GPS-based handheld device at several of its parks, and is looking for other locations where the technology might add to the visitor experience. Until fairly recently, the relationship between Parks Canada and the former residents of the park has been fragile, not a surprising situation given the expropriations that made the creation of the park possible. However, time has healed some old wounds, and over the past few years new connections between the *expropriés* and the park have developed, including collaboration in regard to the creation of a new Visitor Centre that will open in 2011 and which will include reference to the painful circumstances that gave birth to the park. I am hoping that this new environment will allow me to work with both the residents and Parks Canada to return the voices of some of the expropriés to the actual sites of their former residents by means of technology that might also permit a visitor to see photographs on their hand-held device of both the person speaking and the home that once stood where today there is a park.

¹ http://megaprojects.uwo.ca/iroquois/OldIroquois_content.html

² <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649360601055821>