



## CHAPTER 7 – Bennett's Dam Projects – Power to the Lower Mainland



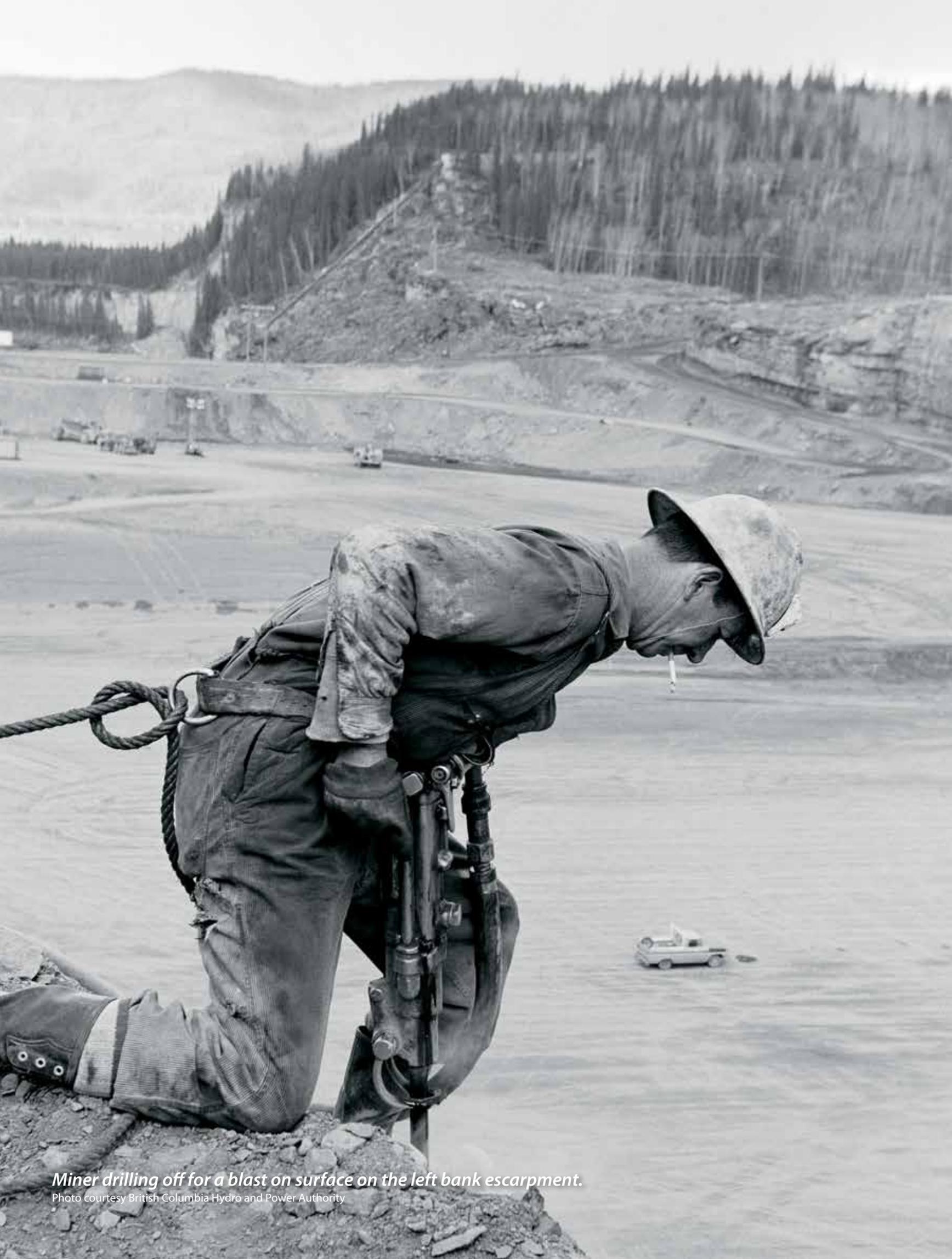
**DURING THE 1960s** British Columbia undertook what remains the greatest building project in its history, dwarfing previous undertakings such as the Kitimat Smelter and the Trans Mountain Pipeline. The Portage Mountain (now W.A.C. Bennett) dam on the Peace River and the Mica Creek dam on the Columbia River were each in their own right what are now called “world class” projects, but building them at the same time made them among the most ambitious construction projects in history. When it was officially opened in 1968 the Portage Mountain Dam was the largest dam in the western world: only the Soviet Union’s Bratsk hydro station dam in Siberia was larger. Mica Creek, when its dam was completed in 1973, was the site of the largest earth-filled dam anywhere in the world.

The dam projects were a product of Premier W.A.C. Bennett’s determination to develop British Columbia’s natural resources as quickly as possible. As noted in Chapter 3, Bennett believed that it was his government’s job to build the infrastructure which would make it possible for private corporations to develop the province’s natural resources. But while he began building highways almost from the moment he came to power, it was not until the 1960s that he was presented with an opportunity to undertake the massive, and massively expensive, hydro-electric projects of which he dreamed.

### **BENNETT’S TWO RIVERS POLICY**

One obvious place to build the kind of dams Bennett wanted was in the Kootenays, on the Canadian side of the Columbia River. The U.S. had already built a series of dams on its side of the international border as part of a system of flood control and hydro-electric power development. To complete its own Columbia River development plans, the U.S. needed Canada to build a series of dams on its side of the international border, thus helping to control floods on the U.S. side of the border and provide hydro-electric power for export to U.S. towns and industry. Desultory discussions between the U.S. and Canadian governments on this question had been underway since 1944 and the United States had even offered to make a contribution towards Canada’s construction costs, although on terms the Canadian government at first refused to consider. Canada felt itself to be in a strong negotiating position, since in the federal government’s opinion, the U.S. needed Columbia River development far more urgently than Canada. The federal government was particularly reluctant to agree to the export of any power from the Columbia, arguing that Canada might later need the power for its own use. This was not, however, the opinion of the British Columbia government: it publicly and repeatedly stated that the Columbia should be developed as quickly as possible in order to promote BC’s industrial growth.

As a mere Premier, Bennett could not compel the federal government to adopt his view, especially since it was a highly unpopular view. Although most Canadians did not oppose building dams on the Columbia, a very large



*Miner drilling off for a blast on surface on the left bank escarpment.*

Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

building them on the U.S. government's terms. But Bennett was able to ignore public opinion and outmanoeuvre the federal government thanks to what was known as his "Two Rivers Policy," a strategy of building dams on the Columbia while simultaneously building a dam on the Peace River in northeastern BC. In 1957, Bennett had signed an agreement with Axel Wenner-Gren, a Swedish industrialist with rather a shady reputation (it included having been good friends with Reichsmarschall



*Bennett Dam powerhouse access tunnel.*  
Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

Hermann Goering), for a grandiose proposal to build a monorail which would open up northeastern BC to development, creating a string of new mines, pulp mills, and towns as well as a major hydro-electric project on the Peace River. The proposal for the monorail with its associated mines and mills quickly foundered, but it had alerted Bennett to the Peace River's tremendous hydro-electric potential. In addition, the Peace was not an international river, meaning the federal government had no jurisdiction and could not interfere with the Premier's plans for it.

Many of the province's business leaders were strongly opposed to building an expensive hydro-electric project on a site as remote as the Peace River. This opposition was led by the province's principal electric utility, the privately owned BC Electric Company, which held a virtual monopoly on the production and sale of electricity in the province. It regarded the proposal as uneconomic and unnecessary, not to mention more expensive than damming the Columbia River. It publicly announced that it would refuse to buy power from the Peace at any price. But the Premier was a master of political tactics and he seldom allowed opposition to his plans to go unpunished. He commissioned a study which reported that damming the Peace would be less expensive than damming the Columbia—but only if the dam were built by a government-owned, i.e. crown, corporation. The study argued that the lower interest rates available to crown corporations would greatly reduce the dam's financing costs, thus making it cheaper to build than a Columbia River dam.

In 1961 Bennett struck. Study in hand and temporarily forgetting about his near-religious commitment to "free enterprise," he nationalized the BC Electric Company. With one blow, he both removed the centre of private

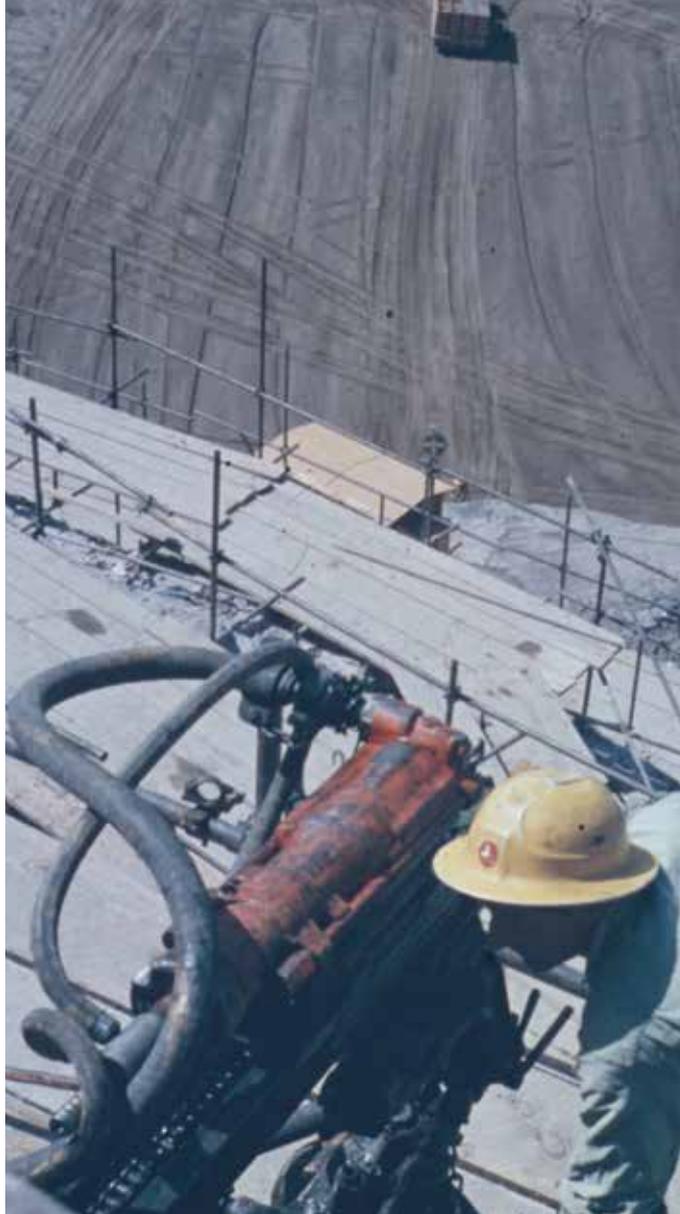


Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

sector opposition to his Peace River Dam and created a ready-made crown corporation, BC Hydro, with all the expertise required to build his dam for him. By removing all obstacles to the construction of the Peace River dam, Bennett had also fatally undermined the federal government's case against exporting power from dams built on the Columbia: much of this power would now clearly be surplus to the province's needs for decades to come. The result was the implementation in 1963 of the Columbia River Treaty, under which Canada agreed to build three dams on the Columbia in return for an allocation for its own use of half the electricity generated by these dams and a formula providing financial compensation for a portion of its construction costs.

### **THE PORTAGE MOUNTAIN DAM**

Planning and surveying for the Portage Mountain Dam had already begun three years before the BC Electric Company was nationalized, enabling construction to start almost immediately. The dam was 600 feet high (183 metres), 1.25 miles (2,000 metres) long, half a mile (800 metres) wide at its base, and 30 feet (9 metres) wide at the top. One



*Drilling and coring at the Bennett Dam.*  
Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority



Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority



*Miners have drilled and blasted the cavern that will become the powerhouse later named after Gordon M. Shrum.*

Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

hundred million tons of gravel, sand, and rock were used to fill its core and the dam alone took four years to build. Its reservoir flooded some 635 square miles (1,650 square kilometres), was 225 miles (360 kilometres) long, and had a shoreline of 1,100 miles (1,770 kilometres), making the reservoir BC's largest lake. The main civil works began in November when LiUNA members from Local 168 started drilling an exploratory diversion tunnel. Seven years later the first power from the Portage Mountain Dam was delivered to the Lower Mainland. The dam's official cost to the people of British Columbia was \$487 million (some \$3.1 billion in today's dollars) and at its peak it had employed some 4,850 workers, as many as 700 of them being Labourers. Its total payroll stood at \$46.2 million (\$295 million today), less than 10 per cent of the dam's total cost.

When it was officially opened in 1968, the Portage Mountain project was still far from complete. Five hundred feet (152 metres) below the dam's left abutment, LiUNA tunnellers had finished work on the world's largest powerhouse, 890 feet (270 metres) long, 67 feet (20.5 metres) wide, and 153 feet (46.5 metres) high. But only three of the project's ten generators were online. It was expected to take another five years and cost another \$240 million (\$1.5 billion today) to install the remaining seven 310,000 horsepower turbines, each capable of generating over 250,000 kilowatts. Yet even as the finishing touches were being put to the Portage Mountain Dam, work was beginning on a second, smaller dam 14 miles (23 kilometres) downstream and only 4 miles (6 kilometres) from Hudson's Hope. This 164 foot (50 metre) high Site One Dam (now the Peace Canyon Dam) is a concrete rather an earthen dam and generates 700,000 kilowatts from four generating units: it was completed in 1980.

## **THE MICA CREEK DAM**

The Mica Creek Dam was one of three dams which Canada had committed itself to building under the Columbia River Treaty. Work on all three began in 1964, when construction on the Portage Mountain Dam was already in full swing. By 1968, two of them, the Duncan and Arrow Lakes Dams, were complete. But the Mica Creek was so enormous that it took another five years—nine years in all—just to finish the dam. It took a further four years to build the powerhouse and install the turbines and generators. When it was officially opened in 1977, thirteen years after construction started, only four of its six generators were operational. Once all six were installed, Mica



*Mica Dam construction of single family accommodation.*  
 Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

Creek would generate 2.8 million kilowatts, 300,000 more than Portage Mountain. (The final two 500 MW generators were installed in 2014 and in 2015.)

The Mica Creek Dam was 800 feet (243 metres) high and required 42 million cubic yards of fill (32 million cubic metres). Its reservoir covered 100,000 acres (404 square kilometres) and drained a catchment area of some 8,300 square miles (21,500 square kilometres). The powerhouse was 778 feet (237 metres) long, 80 feet (24.4 metres) wide, and 145 feet (44 metres) high. At its peak it employed some five thousand workers, as many as seven hundred and fifty of them LiUNA members from Local 168.

The dam alone cost \$330 million

(\$2 billion today) and it was expected that a further \$460 million (\$2.85 billion today) would be spent to complete the project. The combined cost of the Columbia River and Portage Mountain dams was some \$1.5 billion (perhaps \$9.3 billion today) spread over some twenty years.

## THE FIRST AHC AGREEMENT

Premier Bennett was gambling his political career on the success of his Two Rivers policy. He considered it essential that nothing stand in the way of completing the dams on or ahead of schedule and on or under budget. But if the dams were to be completed on schedule, he could not afford any labour disputes on the projects. Although they had no stake in the Premier's success—indeed they bitterly opposed, among other things, his labour policies—LiUNA and the other building trades unions were prepared, for the right price, to guarantee him labour peace. After six weeks of negotiations with Peace Power Constructors, the project's government-owned prime contractor, on February 12, 1962 the Allied Hydro Council, which represented the unions, signed an at the time unheard of ten year no-strike, no-lockout collective agreement. The agreement would cover all government dam work in the province and any disputes which did arise were to be settled by binding arbitration. In exchange, the



Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

government agreed automatically to accept any wage increases and improvements to benefits and conditions the building trades obtained through collective bargaining with its private sector contractors. This was a major success for the building trades' negotiators, since the province-wide labour shortage dam construction was about to create would greatly strengthen the unions' position in future negotiations with their other contractors.

This was not at first apparent to the government. The chair of BC Hydro told the press that the agreement was helping firms cut costs and observed that "If this scheme [the dam] is not successful, we won't be able to blame the unions. It will be the fault of our engineers." Less than three years later, after the rest of the industry signed an agreement providing for free room and board, paid coffee breaks, and a 20 per cent wage increase, the chair changed his tune. All thought of blaming the project's engineers forgotten, he began bleating to the press about how the unions were deliberately sabotaging the province's development.



Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

## **BUILDING ON TWO RIVERS**

Drilling on a pilot diversion tunnel for the Portage Mountain Dam had begun in November, 1961 and less than two years later, on September 16, 1963, a beaming W.A.C. Bennett personally triggered the explosion which broke the plug holding the river back from the project's now completed diversion tunnels. A week later, once the rubble from the explosion was cleared away, work on the dam itself moved into high gear. Premier Bennett had good reason to beam when he opened the diversion tunnels: they had been completed on time and under budget. And throughout the project's construction, he would make it a point to ensure that management understood that meeting deadlines and budgets was his, and therefore their, chief priority.

Fully aware of the importance of satisfying the Premier's expectations, management did everything humanly possible to make the dam a political as well as an engineering success. Men and machinery operated twenty-four hours a day and finding ways to speed-up the work and cut corners on "non-essential" items such as safety was a constant preoccupation. In 1965 management even offered to buy back their newly-negotiated paid coffee breaks from the workers who operated the conveyor belt that supplied the dam with fill. Meanwhile, money for "frills" was so scarce that one superintendent complained that there was a shortage of personnel vehicles and that much of the equipment he did have was second-hand. He told a reporter for the *Victoria Colonist* that he'd "never seen so much used equipment in my life outside a dealer's yard." An engineer told the reporter that if "Premier Bennett walked through that door tomorrow and chucked us a satchel with \$400 million in it, we couldn't move any faster. We couldn't save one day."

## THE CONDITIONS – PORTAGE MOUNTAIN

The Peace River country is notorious for its blistering, blackfly infested summers and harsh winters. The winters were so cold that the drills run by LiUNA's tunnellers had to be kept running twenty-four hours a day to prevent them from freezing up. In the spring and fall the rains were often so heavy that construction virtually ground to a halt as roads became impassable and the giant Euclid earth-movers hauling fill to the dam's core bogged down. On at least one occasion, the site was completely cut off from the outside world after a wash-out closed the only road out. R.L. McDonald, an experienced hard-rock miner and later President of LiUNA Local 1611's Retiree Council, described a trip to the Peace River in 1963 in less than flattering terms: "It was the middle of winter and we were trying to collar a shaft. Cold as hell and completely disorganized, so I buggered off pretty quick from that job."

Although not housed in tents as they had been at Kemano, the camp in which Portage Mountain's workers spent most of their time off-shift did little to make working there more attractive. In November, 1962 the *Victoria Colonist* reporter visiting the site described the superintendent's living quarters as "comfortable but spartan." He noted that meals were "ample but it is a long time between T-bones" and recreation for several hundred workers consisted of one room containing nothing but a ping-pong table. A few months later, an Italian-born tunneller described camp life to Norman Cribbens, a reporter for the *Victoria Times*. "I buy cigarettes, beer, papers, magazines, and film for my camera. I play poker, I go to movies, and dance hall—not much else. Save plenty for when I get laid off and go to Vancouver." The movie theatre and dance hall were both twelve miles away in Hudson's Hope, a village so small it



*Mica Dam tunnel outlet structure showing lining form in place.*  
Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

had no high school. According to Cribbens, the movie theatre was “primitive,” the dance hall just a large shack. Even the local bank was housed in a trailer, ready to leave town as soon as the project closed down.

“The rooms weren’t very big. Two cots, a shelf, a little reading lamp, a table in between you. And you might have had three feet of floor space between the bunks, that was it. And a little closet for your clothes. They were just a trailer set up, you know. They were adequate, at the time, if you had a good roommate. Yeah, I thought it was quite fine. We were used to that type of set up, anyway. ... Lotsa poker games. That was the only activity, really. And on payday, they’d go into Hudson’s Hope. Had a bootlegger there, you know. Stuff like that, guys sit around. There was a bar, bootlegger, bank. It was on the rail, wheels, I think, ready to leave for the next town.”

– R.L. McDonald

## THE CONDITIONS – MICA CREEK

The living conditions at the Mica Creek site, sixty-eight miles north of Revelstoke in the Kootenays, were a considerable improvement on Portage Mountain. BC Hydro decided to build not only a camp for single workers but also a married quarters for the project’s twenty-five hundred workers and their fifteen hundred dependents. The married quarters were in fact a fair-sized village, nearly the size of Revelstoke itself, which even became incorporated under the province’s Municipal Act. The village had its own water, power, sewer, road, telephone and drainage systems. There was also a small business district with a grocery store, a dry goods store, a barber, a beauty parlour, a drug store, a gas station, a post office, and a fire hall. For recreation there was a bowling alley, soccer fields, tennis courts, and even an auditorium for concerts, plays, and musicals.

## THE OVERTIME BAN

Given the conditions under which they lived and worked, it is hardly surprising that the only way the Portage Mountain Dam could attract and retain workers was with higher than average pay. Since the hourly wage rate was established under province-wide agreements, overtime was the only way to achieve this. In 1963, working seven days a week, a tunneller earned about \$1,000 a month. The 1965 contract increased this to \$1,200 a month, or nearly three times the average monthly earnings of construction labourers working in Vancouver. On January 1, 1967, stung by the effect he thought high overtime costs were having on his dam projects’ budgets (though as previously noted, wages represented only 10 per cent of Portage Mountain’s costs), Bennett retaliated by outlawing all overtime throughout the entire province. He justified this particularly ill-considered example of his seat-of-his-



*Mica Dam spillway.*

Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

pants style of governing by declaring that the labour movement made him do it: it had ignored his call for wage restraint in a time of recession and unemployment. Bennett’s little exercise in restricting the hours of work was short-lived. Of the twenty-nine hundred workers who had left Portage Mountain for the Christmas holidays, almost half did not return until the overtime ban was lifted.



*Mica Dam diversion tunnel.*

Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

## **NO STRIKES, JUST WOBBLES**

When the AHC accepted Premier Bennett's ten year no strike clause, he did not realize that the two parties had a very different understanding of what was meant by the phrase "no strike". To the Premier it meant no job action whatsoever, to the unions it merely meant no "interest" strikes, that is an official strike against an employer or group of employers to obtain a satisfactory collective agreement. But in the 1960s, when workers in BC felt that an employer was violating the terms of an existing collective agreement, they did not demand that the union take the matter up with an arbitrator or the Labour Relations Board. They walked off the job.

There is a myth still current that until at least the 1980s, British Columbia's workers were more strike prone than those of any other province. In reality, factoring in the province's higher union density, the number of official strikes in BC was around the Canadian average. What distinguished BC's union workforce from the rest of the country in the 1950, 60s, and 70s was its willingness to conduct short illegal or wildcat strikes, "wobbling the job" as many still called it. It was a practice particularly common in the forest and construction industries. For example, between 1949 and 1959 there were thirty-three official, i.e. legal, strikes in the construction industry and forty-five wobbles. Wobbles were never industry-wide: they usually broke out at one particular work site and seldom spread even to neighbouring job sites. They were almost always triggered by a collective grievance specific to the job site and seldom lasted more than a few days.

The first wildcat at Portage Mountain took place on July 30, 1962, less than six months after the Premier had obtained his labour peace clause. It followed a tunnellers' meeting on July 26 chaired by Bill Milner, later Local 168's Business Manager, at which it was moved and carried unanimously "That if the food doesn't improve, that the members will not work, by 1st of the week." Eighteen hours after it started, Peace Power Constructors agreed to investigate the catering company responsible and the tunnellers returned to work.

There were to be more. As Russ St Eloi, a Vancouver Labour Council delegate from the UA (Plumbers' Union) told a meeting in 1965:

"It's not rosy on the Peace and Columbia like they thought it would be. There is growing dissatisfaction amongst workers over living and other job conditions, contracts are being let to firms which can't properly handle the jobs and taxpayers' money is being used to compile a labour blacklist."

Even the Vancouver Sun's Pat Carney, later a Progressive Conservative MP and then Senator, agreed that there was trouble on the dam sites. In her October 13, 1965 column, she said that there was evidence to support the building trades' charges that management was responsible for deteriorating working conditions, bad labour relations, and the use of "cheap technicalities" in the handling of grievances.

In 1968, nine hundred workers walked off the Mica Dam for three days "because of the unsafe conditions on the job, and because of the safety director." Columbia Hydro Constructors' general manager threatened to fire the strikers, who responded by planning to occupy the project and stage a sit-down strike. The strike was only settled because a WCB inspector visited the site and took action to remedy at least some of the strikers' safety concerns. He issued a stop work order on one of the project's roads because several workers had been injured by slides from the hillside above. He also ordered that Columbia Hydro Constructors immediately begin complying with dust control regulations in the tunnelling portions of the project.

## THE CRAFT

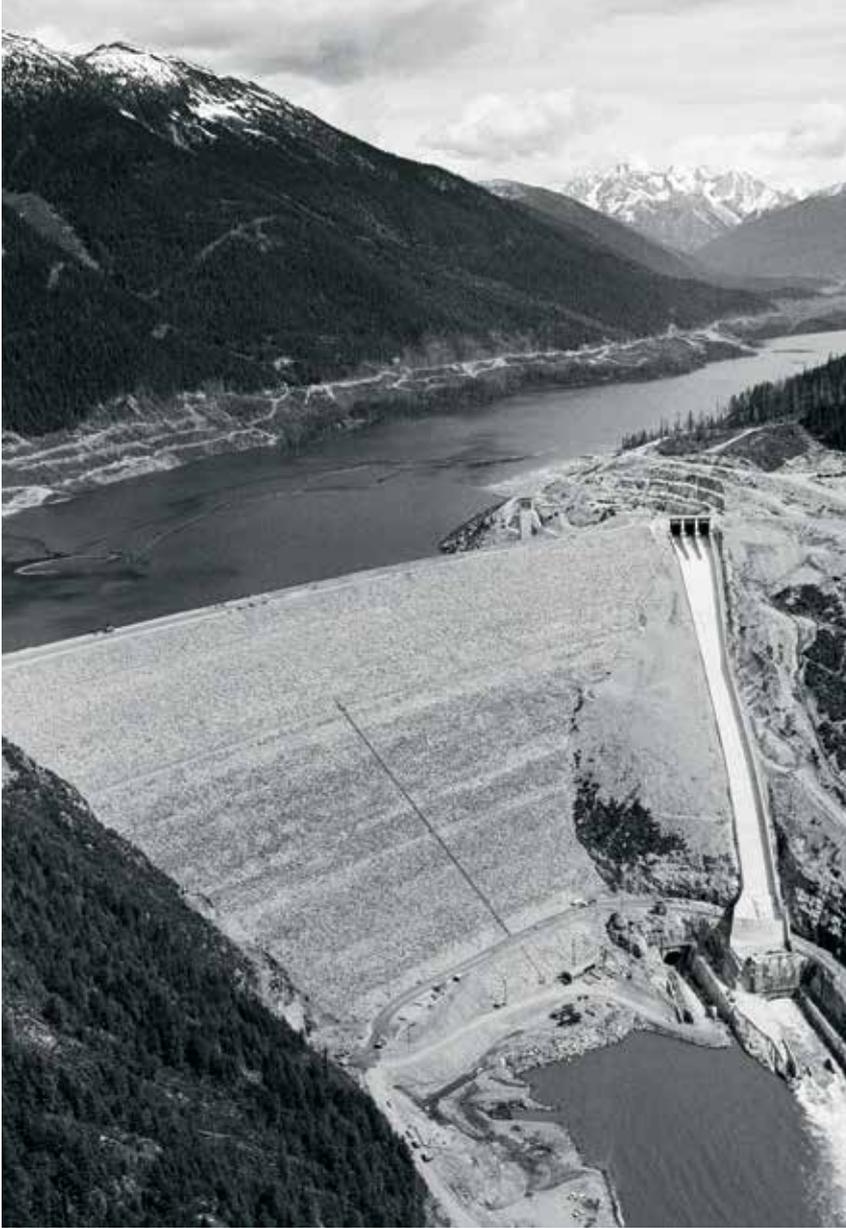
The sheer scale and ambition of the Peace and Columbia River dam projects continue to impress historians and many stories about working on them have been collected over the years. Local 1611's R.L. McDonald was interviewed in 2007 by Meg Stanley for *Voices from the Two Rivers: BC Hydro Pioneers*, a book on the projects prepared by Commonwealth Historic Resource Management. In it, he provides a slightly longer description of his 1963 visit to the site (the original transcription by Eileen Mak has here been edited):

"I was drilling on the bottom ... that's where they'd been going for ten months and they were down 56 feet, which they should have done in a week. So, you know, the equipment wasn't right. We were freezing up. And nobody really cared, it seemed. Everybody wanted to know what we were doing ... Finally, we said, 'Well, just leave us alone and we'll show you what we're doing.' And we stayed there, but there were too many chiefs and not enough Indians. I guess I can put it that way. I think everybody was looking on the point system for themselves, climbing up that ladder. So I stayed thirty days. That's what your contract was. And then I came out."

For the uninitiated, it can be nearly impossible to understand what they mean when construction workers talk about how they do their jobs. But R.L. has a knack for explaining things. Except for "Rock Bolting", the



*Loading explosives on left abutment at Mica Dam.*  
Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority



*Mica Dam 1973.*

Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

explanations below are from his description of the work at Portage Mountain.

**Bench Drilling** “[I]n a shaft, in a small shaft like that, we used to take what you call a six-foot bench. So, you would start out with a starter steel, and the first hole would be roughly at forty-five degrees, and you would fan back with your drill to allow two feet on the bottom of the hole, for breaking. So you would go back, possibly, five holes and you would blast half the shaft. And that would give you a little bit of sump. The other side would be higher, so that the water would drain into it. And when we were drilling, we never had any ‘cause there was no water. But, if there would have been water, you have a little pump set up in your bucket to hoist the water to the surface. Then, the next time, we’d go on the other side, and drill the bench again. ... This is how

you kept your work area clear of water. Because, if you didn’t, you’d have muck going into the hole, and it would be hard to drill and pull your steel out, hard to load, cut your wires, and cause misfires, and stuff like this. So it was a proven system over the years, and always been there. ... Benching they call it.”

**Blasting** “There was four men on the crew and that was, usually, standard in a three-compartment shaft. And the procedure used to be three experienced, and, if you were breaking in a person, you’d have one greenhorn, on the bottom. ... [Y]ou had to drill, let’s say, five or six holes apiece. And when we were all done drilling, you blow the bench, put a blowpipe in to clear the holes, throw all your gear in the bucket, hoist the bucket up to the surface. And you’d have floodlights hanging down, when you’re working. You cut off your electrical power. And then we’d bring down our powder and load. That’s a safety precaution, so they wouldn’t have any caps going off prematurely.”

**Mucking** “Down there we had just one man on the bottom and one on the clam. The clam operator loaded the bucket. ... And when it goes up, a man has to be by it, put his shoulder into it to steady the bucket, so it will not catch the timber and clean them up off the side. ... That’s the biggest worry in the shaft, is something falling on you. One time, I finished drilling and took off my gloves to start loading and my glove was full of blood. I thought, ‘What’s going on here?’ We got up on surface and the first aid looked and I had a little piece of wafer, and it just went down through my oilers, my underwear and that, and stuck on my shoulder. ... He just pulled it out and that was it. But that’s the biggest worry of underground, or down a shaft, is somebody dropping something on you. And you’re very, very cautious.”

**Rock Bolting** “Work at the Mica went quickly because the rock was ‘clean.’ The only slow part was the rock bolting which is inserting a steel rod into a hole drilled into the roof or walls to support the roof or sides of a mine or tunnel.

“We would have to torque [each] bolt. I think it was either twenty-six thousand pound torque or twenty-six ton, I’m not certain. But, you had a ratchet, and when you reached your twenty-six thousand, it would click. You knew the bolt is set. But, if ... the bolt started pulling and it wouldn’t click, you had to pull out and go over again. That’s the only slow work I had there.”

**White Hand** “We wore long-johns, underwear, coveralls, and oilers overtop. With our hard hats and our gloves. And we had insulated gloves. That’s the biggest problem when you’re working these pneumatic drills, air. The drilling and that, it kills all your nerves and you get ‘white hands’. A lot of times, when you’d be loading, you would have to take and shove your hands underneath your armpits to get the feeling in your fingers, to twist your wire or so.” [Note: “White Hand” or Raynaud’s Syndrome is a potentially crippling industrial injury caused by working with vibrating tools and machinery. See Chapter 4.]

**From Burnt-Out to Experienced** “The Peace River, the Mica, and the Revelstoke Projects were the greatest thing for a miner in his forties. Instead of being a burnt-out miner he now became an experienced construction worker. The difference between bulling a jackleg all shift and working on the jumbos was the biggest bonus we had ever received in years.”

## **SITE ONE (PEACE CANYON DAM)**

Chuck Chatten, a General Foreman on dam projects and later Local 1611’s Kootenay Business Agent describes an incident on the Site One concrete dam from 1978:

The contractor used 100 ton and 120 ton Whirley cranes to raise forms during the day and place concrete at night. They had two experienced six-man crews placing concrete on the upstream side of the intake structure, working about 90 to 120 feet above the ground. There was a push on to get the intake finished and we were working ten to sixteen hours a day.

We were topping off a pour with two Whirley cranes swinging in four yard buckets to finish the pour as quickly as we could. About 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning, we’re just finishing it off and the upstream wall started to make a strange sound. I don’t want to say it sounded like a zipper, but the coil rods were popping—pop, pop, pop. There were about 20 coil rods across the upstream wall holding the form to the previous pour and as they popped the concrete pushed out the upstream wall.



Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

Lazar Milisic, we called him Louie Milisic, was the concrete foreman, a first class concrete man, and he saved some lives that night. He was usually a quiet man but he realized what was happening and hollered at us to get away from that form, to get right out of there. As soon as we saw the look on his face, him yelling "Hurry up!" at the top of his voice, a number of us did just that.

But Jack Martins couldn't hear him. Jack was a very short fellow, from Portugal, lived in Chetwynd, about 5'4", stocky and a really hard working guy, always on concrete. He was on the upstream wall running what we call the glad-hand which opened and closed the gate on the concrete bucket. It controlled the pour so you don't dump out four yards when you only need one. Anyway, Jack was still looking up at the bucket-gate, concentrating on opening and closing the glad-hand to keep the concrete flowing, when the coil rods popped open half way up and he got thrown clear off the form and he disappeared over the upstream side of the dam.

Of course we shut the pour down right away. We were in a kind of panic. We'd just lost a man and we figured he had to be dead but we had to try to find him. So we swung the bucket down onto the deck below, we got rid of the glom hook that holds the bucket, and we jumped into a safety skip with a stretcher, myself, Louie Milisic, and our signal man, Rick Barber. We signalled the crane to pick us up and a guy by the name of Dennis Heth, who was the Operating Engineer running the crane—awesome crane operator—swung us over the upstream side of the dam.

The upstream side was pitch black. There was no lighting whatsoever on that side, so the lights from the crane's boom were the only light that we had and they weren't all that shiny. Where we were pouring was about 110 feet or so above the rocks below. The upstream side earthworks were finished and so the upstream dewatering pumps were shut down and three or four feet of water had collected in some places. We could make out rocks the size of small cars sticking out of the water near the vertical wall of the intake.

So Dennis started lowering us in the basket to pick up the body—at least, that's what we thought—and as we're going down lower and lower, Rick and Louie and I were calling out "Jack? Can you hear us? Jack?" No answer. He had a nickname Peanuts because he was a small guy, you know how it is? So we called "Peanuts?" And then we heard this sound, kind of a strange sound, a sort of moaning. We had no flashlights, just the boom lights, so we signalled "Down easy, down easy, down easy" and there's Jack, in one of those puddles. He was holding his arms up in the air, his eyes are like a deer's in headlights, and he says "Mr. Chuck, I am a-born again." Well by the Jesus, we were down there in seconds to pick him up. We got him in the safety skip, him saying "I am okay, I'm a-good", and we got him back onto the trestle.

Dennis and the three of us in the skip are thrilled that this man is alive and claiming to be okay, but we don't know if he's in shock or what. When we got back to the trestle, the ambulance was there to pick him up and get him to the first aid shack. Our first aid attendant, a very large fellow named Tom Crown, he examined Jack and told us that other than a swollen calf, there was nothing wrong with the guy. So Jack went home that night and Lazar pulled out a bottle of very good cognac and we all got shit-faced. That's



Photo courtesy British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority

the story of Jack Martins falling roughly a 105 feet into around 5 or 6 feet of water with rocks sticking up all over. It was one of those experiences where you just can't believe it, but you were there, you saw it happen.

## THE PROJECTS' LEGACY

There is no question that the dams constructed under Premier Bennett's Two Rivers policy were a remarkable engineering and political feat. But whether they achieved the results the Premier intended is another matter.

Building the dams required a masterful juggling act, not just political but also financial. Yet while Bennett reaped the full political benefits of his success, it is less clear to what extent British Columbians as a whole benefited. The Premier himself stated that the purpose of all his dam and highway projects was to build the foundations for bringing prosperity to even the remotest corners of the province. In this, he signally failed to succeed. Mica Creek is no longer an incorporated village and the benefits from the Columbia River dams appear to have bypassed the Kootenays, whose economic base has actually declined since the 1960s. Although not economically depressed at the time of writing, the Peace River region has also seen little benefit from the dams the Premier built there. Apart from the oil and gas industry, a spill-over from Alberta, there has been little in the way of new industrial development in the area. Although the region's main city in BC, Fort St John, has now doubled its population to just over twenty thousand, this hardly compares with the growth on the Alberta side of the border where Grande Prairie, with sixty-eight thousand people, has become the Peace River region's real capital city. It is to Grande Prairie, not Fort St John, that the citizens of Dawson Creek and Mackenzie drive when they wish to go shopping. In the end, it was the Lower Mainland, last on the list of places he claimed he intended to benefit, which gained and grew the most as a result of Premier Bennett's projects.

Although the Portage Mountain Dam was subsequently renamed in the Premier's honour, there is no monument, not even a plaque, at the site honouring the sixteen workers who were killed building it. Many more workers were maimed and seriously injured because of the Premier's haste to see his projects completed. The precise number of the dead and injured sacrificed to build his failed vision will never now be known, but they have an equal right to be considered alongside the era's dams and highways as part of W.A.C. Bennett's legacy.

*[See Chapter 13: Bennett's Two Rivers Strategy - The Price of Success for more on the dams' cost in workers' lives].*



*Portage Mountain Dam, now the Bennett Dam.*

