

The Great Fire of 1997

The Night the Lights Stayed On

report and transcripts compiled by

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Midnight Arts

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Yukon Development Corporation Oral History Project

The Great Fire of 1997

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Acknowledgments

Many thanks are due to the people who made this oral history project possible. This project developed from an idea by former Yukon Development Corporation board chair, Lorne Austring, and was supported by the YDC board and by Chief Executive Officer, Duncan Sinclair. Mr. Austring believed that the actions of the Yukon Energy staff during the near disastrous fire of 1997 and the subsequent rebuilding were not only important milestones in Yukon Energy history but also key events in Yukon history. He felt that a record should be made of this time documenting the actions of the many workers involved in fighting the fire, keeping the lights on, then spending long days and months rebuilding.

An initial list of contacts was compiled with assistance from Duncan Sinclair, Darlene Morgan, executive assistant of YDC; and Donna Mercier, communications consultant with Yukon Energy. My first interviewees also suggested other people who might be good informants. Apart from a single reticent exception, all of those contacted agreed to share their memories of that time. In all, I spoke with eighteen people including firefighters, plant operators, electricians, engineers, managers, the former YDC/Yukon Energy board chair, a reporter and even a photographer who was recording the blaze from the other side of the river.

Background information about the fire and related events came from a variety of sources. Darlene Morgan loaned me a file entitled “YEC, Oct. ’98, Fire Anniversary” which contained much useful information. Shelley Dixon at the Yukon Energy library gave me access to their binders of media clippings. Clive Sparks, chief of the Whitehorse Fire Department, donated copies of his fire logs from the night of the fire, a list of people working on the fire and a simple plan of the generating plant. Mike Hannah provided a copy of the written statement he prepared shortly after the fire. Joyce Bachli of Mega Reporting Ltd. did an excellent job of transcribing the interviews.

My immense thanks to all those agreed to share their memories of that hectic time on tape then took time to carefully review the transcripts. I particularly appreciate their patience in carefully explaining to me, a complete neophyte, the basics of electrical generation and distribution. It has been fascinating to learn so much about the operations of this essential utility and how a small group of ingenious and resourceful people kept the lights on during a time of crisis.

Helene Dobrowolsky

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Abbreviations

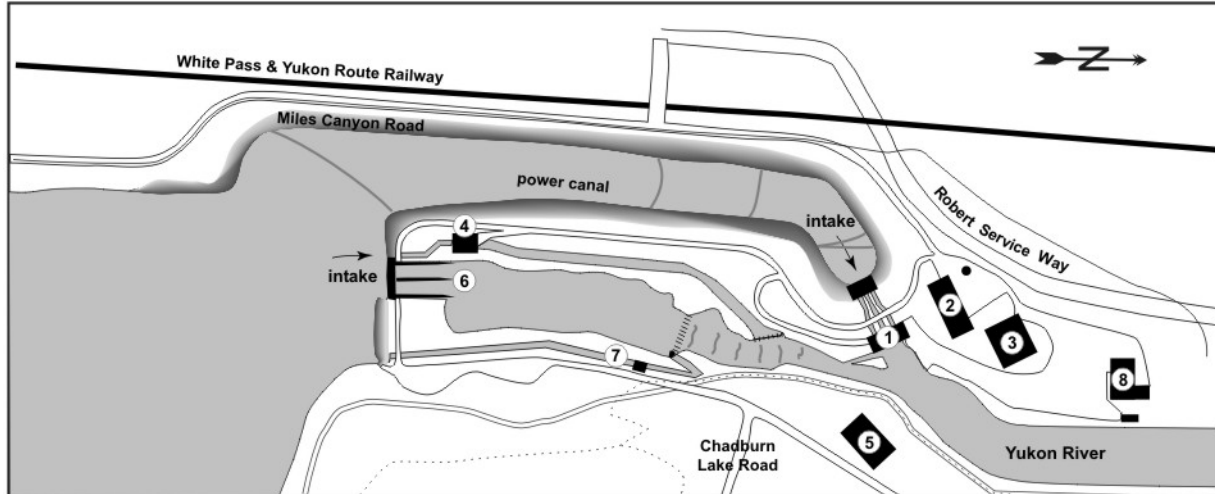
DTO	diesel turbine operator	SCC	System Control Centre
EMO	Emergency Measures Organization	SCADA	Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition
GRA	General Rate Application	SOE	Sequence of Events
kv	kilovolt	vars	volt amperes reactive
NCPC	Northern Canada Power Commission	WAF	Whitehorse-Aishihik-Faro grid
NWTeI	Northwestel	WH 1-4	The four hydro turbines at the Whitehorse Rapids site: Whitehorse 1, 2, 3 and 4. These were named in the order they were built.
OH&S	Occupational Health and Safety	YDC	Yukon Development Corporation
P-125	former generating plant containing the three turbines WH 1, WH 2, and WH 3	YECL	The Yukon Electrical Company Limited
RTU	Remote Terminal Unit	YG	Yukon Government
S-150	Whitehorse Rapids Substation		
S-171	Riverside Switching Station		

Directions

For the purpose of these interviews, we've been assuming south to be upriver of the site, north downriver, west toward the escarpment, and east across the river towards the fish ladder.

Site Plan

Whitehorse Rapids Hydroelectric Facility



1. Generating Plant (P-125 containing turbines WH 1-3)
2. Diesel Plant
3. Whitehorse Rapids Substation (S-150)
4. Fourth Wheel (WH 4)

5. Riverdale Switching Station (S-171)
6. Intake
7. Whitehorse Fishway
8. new Administrative and Technical Services Building

Introduction

For the Yukon Energy Corporation, the year 1997 was memorable on several counts. The small utility had decided not to renew its contract with Canadian Utilities Limited and Alberta Power Limited, the corporate entity that had, for 10 years, handled the generation and distribution of the Yukon's energy supply. Instead, Yukon Energy was moving to "direct management," taking on responsibility for operating its own assets. This meant that, within in a few short months, Yukon Energy had to hire a new workforce and take on the many functions needed to make the company fully operational, from engineering to employee benefits to billing. Anvil Range Mine, the territory's largest energy customer, had shut, re-opened and, near the end of 1997, there were indications that it might close down yet again. Finally, there was the great fire that destroyed the generating plant by the Whitehorse Rapids Dam. As former board chair, Ray Wells, later stated, "It was the perfect storm."

The following summary provides a general background to the more detailed information and impressions that can be found in the interview transcripts. Bear in mind, however, that this is an overview and many story elements have not been included.

Background

The structure, which has been variously referred to as the "hydro plant," "generating plant," "Whitehorse Rapids hydroelectric plant," and "P 125," was completed in 1958 by the Northern Canada Power Commission at the same time that the Whitehorse hydro dam was commissioned. Originally it housed two hydro turbines, known as WH 1 and WH 2. A third turbine, WH 3 was added in 1969 and housed on the east side of the plant. The building itself underwent a few extensions over the years. An office addition was constructed on the south end of the building in 1986 and, in 1992, the System Control Centre was moved into the building. Another addition, on the southeast, completed in 1996, housed the offices of the Yukon Development Corporation and the Yukon Energy Corporation.

In 1987, the Northern Canada Power Commission had devolved its Yukon assets to the Yukon Government. The corporation formed to take over these assets, now known as the Yukon Energy Corporation, in turn licensed the management and operation of these generating facilities to the Yukon Electrical Company Limited (YECL). By 1997, YECL was managed by Alberta Power Limited, one of the ATCO group of companies. The Yukon Energy Corporation was a subsidiary of another Yukon government body, the Yukon Development Corporation (YDC).

At that time, both YDC and Yukon Energy were jointly managed by a President and Chief Executive Officer and answered to separate boards of directors. The year 1997 proved to be one of great challenges. The contract with YECL was up for renewal. After negotiations proved unsuccessful, it was decided that Yukon Energy would moved to "direct management," that is, it would take over the responsibility for operating and managing its own assets. The Faro mine, the territory's largest energy consumer, had shut down in June and then re-opened in late October. Due to continued financial troubles, the mine owner, Anvil Range Mining Corporation Ltd., closed for good at the end of January 1998.

Fire!!

Early in the morning of October 30th, 1997, while working in the system control centre, operator Mike Hannah heard a door alarm. This was soon followed by several other major alarms including one indicating the presence of water in the oil of hydro turbine WH 3. Hannah began “lowering” the load on the unit, in preparation for taking it off line.

Hannah then called his supervisor, Guy Morgan, reporting an emergency and asking him to come to the plant to investigate. As he was hanging up, there was yet another alarm – a fire alarm. He relayed this information to Guy. Immediately afterwards, at 2:53 a.m., he called 911 to report the fire to the fire department. Mike then went to check the situation in the rest of the plant. When he opened the door at the top of the stairs, smoke was billowing out of the main building. Before leaving the plant, Hannah took the three hydro plants off line and transferred the power load to the Aishihik plant.

By the time he was finished, the smoke had already reached the control room. The SCADA (System Control and Data Acquisition), the sophisticated computer system that controlled the Yukon’s entire power system, 23 hydro and diesel generators, had to be abandoned and there was no longer a visual record of the analog values, voltages and outputs of the various plants.

Hannah evacuated from another door, leading directly outside, then scrambled up the bank behind the building. By this time, flames were already erupting from north end of the building. Many have since commended Mike Hannah’s presence of mind in removing the three hydro units from the grid while under great stress and imminent personal danger. Had he not done so, there would have been a major blackout.

Keeping on the Lights

As Guy Morgan drove to the site he called two colleagues: Ken Sawyer, leadhand of the diesel turbine operators, and Doug Smith, leadhand of the line crew of the service department. Both arrived on site about 3:30 a.m. They in turn called other crew members to the site. Some YECL managers – Les Boisvert, Ric Seely and Hector Campbell – were in Faro when they heard the news and immediately headed for Whitehorse.

Morgan unlocked the gates to the site for the first fire truck then picked up Mike Hannah. They manually raised the gates on the dam, because, as Guy later stated, “we have to spill water. It’s just driven into your head as an operator, that if you don’t, well, then we have more problems than a fire. We’re going to overtop the dam.” Mike Hannah then set up in WH 4, the fourth wheel, which had its own small building upriver from the generating plant, and began operating part of the crippled system. Morgan then woke up the operator at the Aishihik plant to inform him that he was now “basically in charge of the power system.”

In the meantime, Doug Smith had arrived on the scene and raced up the stairs to the burning operation centre, convinced that Mike Hannah and Guy Morgan were still inside. He realized it was unsafe to open the door but it wasn’t until he was telling a firefighter that were people inside the building that he got a call on his radio from Guy Morgan assuring him that everyone was safe.

The next step was going into the substation – the main feed for Whitehorse – and shutting down any high voltage feed by opening the breakers connected with the hydro plant and disconnecting the hydro units from the grid. By then other crew were starting to arrive at the site including lead mechanic John Greer; electrician Al Hammond and Al Hebrada, supervisor of technicians.

SCADA electrician Bob Burrell came onsite and immediately began working to re-establish communications, beginning with setting up a radio in the building housing WH 4. The telephone system to Aishihik had been destroyed, so initial communication was by radio, then also via a SAT phone that was sent to the site with a relief operator.

While hurrying to the dam, Ken Sawyer stepped into a hole and sprained his ankle. After hobbling around for an hour, he was sent to the hospital and ended up off work for two weeks. This was the only casualty from the fire. Firefighter Dennis Blaker did experience some chest pains that night, but it was determined that these were muscular rather than heart-related, so he just went back to work.

For the next several hours, the territory's power was maintained by a makeshift system of two-way radios and telephones. Guy Morgan improvised a control centre in a company truck mainly because it had a radio. Using the radio and a telephone, he communicated with operator in Faro and with Mike Hannah in WH4. Mike in turn relayed information to and from the Aishihik operator. It was crucial to ensure that there was enough power on the system before the great surge that would come when Yukoners got up to prepare for another working day. The most efficient way to do this was to contact the Faro mine, the system's largest user, and ask the personnel to shut down some of their circuits. This could not be done abruptly and over the next few hours, there was a delicate balancing act to gradually lower the power load in Faro and increase the load in Whitehorse by adding diesel units in Whitehorse and Faro. Morgan later estimated that as many as ten people were reporting to him at his command centre in the truck. Operator Steve Blysak later relieved Morgan, taking a stint in the truck. By the end of that long day, the system operators had set up temporary quarters in the small building by WH 4.

At one point, as an exercise, Guy Morgan had prepared a paper discussing what might be done if the SCADA system was no longer operational. His conclusion was that every remote terminal unit would need a person to report to the operator. This is essentially what happened. Doug Smith assigned servicemen to every plant and substation location and everyone relied on their personal detailed knowledge of the system to keep it balanced and operating. Although none of the maintenance people or mechanics were interviewed for this project, they were equally crucial in keeping the system up that night and in the weeks and months to come. Many have made particular mention of the contribution of lead mechanic, John Greer.

Fighting the Fire

Throughout the interviews, two points were repeatedly raised. How could a building, which was made of concrete and steel and surrounded by water on three sides, catch fire? Secondly, with the Yukon River right there, why was water supply a problem?

Whitehorse fire chief, Clive Sparks, and firefighter, Dennis Blaker, answered these questions. Of course the building had many flammable elements including fuels, wood framing in the

additions, plastics, rubber, furniture, paper records and, not least, the tar roof. An important part of their job was ensuring that any other nearby fuel sources were removed or contained. Vehicles, parked nearby, were rolled away. There were two large tanks outside the building – a 1000-gallon diesel tank and a 1000-gallon propane tank – and these were shut down so that they were no longer delivering fuel to the burning structure. Clive Sparks ensured that all power lines to the building had been turned off prior to starting fire suppression activities.

Obtaining an adequate water supply was a great challenge. The 1958 building did not conform to current building codes. There was a “wall hydrant” on the outside of the hydro plant but to open it, a valve had to be turned on inside the burning building. As Bob Burrell later pointed out, the pump was also inside the building and the fuel that ran the fire pump was now feeding the fire. Trucks could not get very close to the river and the pump on the fire truck could only lift or “draft” water from a depth of about three metres. The Yukon River was much lower. A portable pump borrowed from the Golden Horn Volunteer Fire Department broke down after a few moments operation. Clive Sparks also called in the City water tankers and a number of private water supply trucks to deliver water to portable water tanks borrowed from Forestry. The fire trucks then pumped the water out of the tanks onto the fire. Chief Sparks estimated that the fire department probably pumped about 100 gallons of water per minute onto the fire for ten hours, approximately 200,000 gallons of water, until the main fire was under control.

Access was another problem. The north side of the building faced onto the river for the outflow from the generator. The opposite wall was against a steep bank. There was a parking area at the northeast corner of the building and to reach the other entrance, trucks had to drive a road that went south along the bank behind the building then fish-hooked back north. This limited the locations from which the firefighters could work. Doug Smith recalled helping to lay down planks over railings and ties that extended from the southeast corner of the building to provide extra access for firefighters. At one point, Dennis Blaker was on the bank above the building directing water down onto the burning structure.

Several full-time and volunteer firefighters were called in and a total of 27 men fought the blaze while four more remained in the fire hall to call in resources and respond to any other calls.

Across the river, professional photographer Richard Hartmier had set up his equipment to record some remarkable images of the burning building reflected in the waters of the Yukon River. One factor that favoured the firefighters was the weather. There was no snow; it was a cloudy night and fairly mild – a few degrees below zero with winds ranging from 6 to 22 km per hour. *

By five a.m., media people were converging on the site to cover the fire. Mardy Derby of CBC gave credit to John Carroll of YECL for his handling of the situation. He guided the journalists to a safe vantage spot, provided an update on the situation and reassured the public that there was no immediate danger of a blackout. As Mardy later stated: “... it really made all the difference in the world. Sometimes we go to things where we’re kept out and the public doesn’t know sometimes what the public needs to know. So, I was really impressed with how they handled that with us.”

* Environment Canada, National Climate Data and Information Archive.
http://www.climate.weatheroffice.ec.gc.ca/Welcome_e.html

The worst of the fire was under control by noon, October 30th. Then, as Clive Sparks said, “came the very hard, labour-intensive work of getting into the bits that are burning underneath everything else.”

Salvage and Clean up

Clearing up the last remnants of the fire, then cleaning the site were tricky matters. This was a dangerous building with openings in the floor, heavy steel structures, and collapsed walls and floors. There were still hot spots and there were flare-ups on both Friday, October 31st and Saturday, November 1st. In one case, a backhoe was needed to remove debris to get at the fire source. One area was cordoned off – as it was both dangerous and the probable site of the fire’s origin – until it could be inspected by the fire marshal and insurance investigators.

Nonetheless, before eight a.m. – only five hours after the fire had started, firefighters were starting to salvage paper records and computers from the building. When records manager, Brenda Mattson, and her colleague, Rick Curial, arrived on site later in the morning, a front-end loader was taking out file cabinets. Mattson recalled that, “they were falling apart, and records were falling out, and they were horribly wet and not in very good shape at all.” As the first stage in the long painstaking process of recovering the records, Brenda and Rick delivered records to Yukon Archives where they could be stored in freezers. This work went on until late evening.

For management, the first crucial need was ready communication, then a temporary workplace. Senior officials from Yukon Energy and YDC met in the downtown boardroom of Davis & Company, the lawyers for Yukon Energy, to assess the situation and determine next steps. Executive assistant, Darlene Morgan, then went out to purchase cell phones for everyone. Northwestel ensured that these were immediately activated. The Yukon Legislative Assembly was in session at the time and officials had to brief the Minister of Economic Development, Trevor Harding, sufficiently that he could answer questions in the House.

Bob Burrell put in a long day with working first with Dave Schille, then with Ron Bianowsky and Dana Miles from Northwestel to install some new telephones. Since the dedicated underground cable from the downtown office terminated at the generating plant, telecommunications personnel had already figured that it was a ‘write-off.’ Over a very long day, they improvised a temporary system setting up telephones in the diesel plant and in the S-150 substation. Cables were running everywhere. It wasn’t tidy but a rudimentary communication system was in place.

By the end of that first day, the finance department at YECL had authorized emergency repair work orders, authorizing the workers to quickly purchase whatever they needed. Within three days, Alberta Power sent up eight experienced linemen to augment the overworked regular crew. As Doug Smith later pointed out, since the separation between the two corporations had not yet happened, it was fortunate that Yukon Energy still had access to all the resources and expertise of ATCO.

YECL employees placed an oil boom around the fire area to prevent any leaking fluids from escaping. It took three days to pump water out of the depths of the building. Because the water

had been contaminated with fuels and other pollutants, it had to be hauled offsite rather than pumped right into the river. Jacobs Industries ultimately handled the demolition and clean-up of the site. Makeshift plywood shacks were erected over the hydro units to protect them from the elements.

Workers quickly determined that, despite being damaged by melting tar and gravel from the roof, the hydro turbines themselves were salvageable. These and the concrete floor were all that remained of the generating plant. Guy Morgan recovered the back-up disks from the SCADA system. These and the computers – when cleaned up – later became the basis of an improvised, temporary SCADA.

Early the following week, the site was inspected by the fire marshal and insurance company investigators. According to a report released on November 6th, the fire marshal had concluded that faulty heat tape was the cause of the fire. It was determined that the heat tape was either defective or had been improperly installed. YECL issued a release stating that both YECL and Yukon Energy concurred with the fire marshal's report. At the time of writing, insurance matters have not yet been completely resolved, and consequently, fire department members and Yukon Energy workers were unable to discuss the cause of the fire.

Rebuilding

Between 30 and 40 people had lost their workplace as a result of the fire but they regrouped almost immediately. A number of workers moved into the diesel plant squeezing in desks and chairs wherever they could. Within a few days, the system operators set up a control centre in a former washroom in the diesel plant. Mike Hannah later described the new quarters:

it was pretty tight. Actually, they took the toilets and the sinks and everything out and made it into one square room, and then, made it into a small office. ... Yes, we didn't think it was the greatest place to have an office but ...you make do, and that's what we did.

Eventually the crew moved into more comfortable quarters, a trailer that served as the System Control Centre until a new building was constructed.

Vicki Hancock, the deputy minister of the Department of Tourism, offered company officials a short-term home and within a few days they were working everywhere from the coffee room to any temporarily empty office. Two months later, they moved into the federal building on 200 Range Road. Here they set up camp while offices were literally built around them. Former Yukon Energy president, Rob McWilliam, recollected an incident from this time:

I recall having one meeting, it was a telephone conference call, we were talking about some fairly sensitive financial stuff, and there was this electrician, on a ladder over my desk, doing some wiring. We were definitely an open company, no secrets!

Behind 200 Range Road was another structure with three sections, one of which housed the morgue. The remaining two areas housed the painstaking salvage work of the Yukon Energy and YECL records. Brenda Mattson was in charge of the salvage of the Yukon Energy records; Diane Pilloud and another crew worked on the YECL papers. Yukon Archives paper conservator, Lloy Billingham, helped the staff develop a procedure for treating the damaged

records. The frozen boxes were thawed and the wet papers were carefully separated and placed on large sheets of blotting paper to dry according to their file order. They were then photocopied and compiled into new files. As Brenda later stated: “It wasn’t the paper that was important. What was important was the information on the paper.”

Copies of other crucial records were obtained from a variety of sources including Davis & Company, Intergroup Consulting Ltd. and the Yukon Utilities Board. Many company employees had worked on various projects at home and much useful material was found on their computers, leading to jokes about how it was a good thing that they were all such workaholics.

Diana Cousins, from the Yukon Government’s Public Service Commission, was on secondment to Yukon Energy, helping to set up a human resources section. She had an interesting challenge – the company was in the midst of job interviews and all résumés, reference checks and other necessary paperwork had been lost in the fire. Yukon Energy advertised, asking job seekers to resubmit their résumés. In some cases, interviews had to be repeated. Dave Wray was en route to Whitehorse for an interview the morning after the fire. When he saw the smoking ruins from the air, he figured that either there would no longer be a job or that he would be extremely busy working on rebuilding.

The Yukon Energy management and board quickly decided that they could still move to direct management on schedule – a mere two months away. Consequently, the whole team ended up putting in long hours to not only deal with the after-effects of the fire, but also the many tasks needed to ready Yukon Energy to handle its own affairs. Rob McWilliam talked about the long days during this period:

I didn’t get much sleep that year. A lot of it went by in a blur, because we were working some incredible hours, but the whole team was working like that. I had to chase people out of there at ridiculous hours. People like Duncan [Sinclair] and John Maissan and Oliver [O’Rourke] and Darlene [Morgan], you know, they put in a horrendous amount of time. Most of them were management employees, so there was no extra compensation for them. It was a very demanding time.

To a large extent, the rebuilding of the plant was dictated by the insurers. As costs associated with this interim period were financed by “Business Interruption Insurance,” the insurers had a great interest in ensuring that the facility was rebuilt and restored to normal operations as quickly as possible. Therefore, over the next several months, everyone worked under incredible pressure.

Two weeks after the fire, the management of Yukon Energy and YECL had engaged a consortium to handle the rebuilding. This consisted of three firms: GEC Alstom of Montreal, which handled electrical components; and BFC Civil from Edmonton and AGRA Monenco of Calgary which worked on rebuilding the turbines and constructing the plant. They in turn hired a number of local subcontractors to handle various aspects of the job.

This was tricky. The plant was being constructed around the turbines, which in turn were being cleaned and rebuilt within their temporary shelters. Safety was a major consideration and care was taken to cut the power during certain construction procedures.

Work proceeded full speed ahead. The managers had 24 hours or less to review and approve drawings before components were constructed. Electrical engineer Dave Wray recalls receiving faxed lists of questions every morning from Montreal that had to be answered by the end of the business day.

By December 22nd, the least damaged hydro unit – WH 3 – had been temporarily salvaged and was operating with makeshift equipment. It still was not connected to the SCADA and for a short period, the unit had to be manned full-time. The remaining two units were commissioned in late spring.* The most badly-damaged unit, WH 2, was sprayed with dry ice pellets to remove the tar.

On January 1st, 1998, Yukon Energy moved to direct management as planned. Despite the turmoil of the past two months, the move was made on schedule and the transition was smooth.

Once construction was complete, there was a dramatic shift in attitude from the insurance adjusters. After urging the company to rebuild as quickly as possible, the insurance companies subsequently demanded that every expenditure be fully justified. John Maissan recalled that dealing with the insurance adjusters was a full-time, very stressful job that ultimately took four and a half years before a successful settlement was reached.

In November 1998, the new plant was officially opened with a celebration highlighting the accomplishments of the many workers who had worked so hard to make it possible. A year later, the award-winning technical services and corporate office building went up on site.

Conclusion

The fire at the Yukon Energy Whitehorse Rapids Hydro Facility could have been a major disaster. Through the quick thinking and competency of the people involved, however, there was no loss of power to homes and businesses in the Yukon. Incredibly, the experienced crew managed to operate the system manually. The generating plant was rebuilt with state of the art technology and the new offices won a national design award for energy efficiency: truly a phoenix-like recovery. This is more than a story of a disastrous fire; it is an exciting story that spotlights a corporation in the throes of rebirth having to handle a potentially catastrophic emergency. This is also a human story where individual ingenuity and group cooperation saved the day.

Methodology

The following 18 interviews were conducted between May and December 2003. This oral history project ended up telling the stories of people representing a wide selection of professions and viewpoints, everyone from firemen to managers to a reporter to people salvaging the sodden records, and, of course, the workers who kept the lights on during the fire and in the months afterward.

To prepare for the interviews, I prepared a chronology of events that was mostly drawn from media accounts at the time. This was later expanded by information gathered in the interviews. In the Yukon Energy offices I also found a brochure with an excellent aerial photo of the Whitehorse Rapids Generating Site before the fire. This proved very helpful in pinpointing activities and movements on the night of the fire.

Interview lengths varied from as short as 15 or 20 minutes to over an hour long. Two copies were made of each cassette interview with the master copy going to Yukon Archives, one copy to the interviewee and one copy for the Yukon Development Corporation library. After each interview, I prepared a point form outline noting the counter number on the tape recorder and the topic that was being discussed at that time. This was also an opportunity to clarify spellings or ask any follow-up questions before giving the tape and outline notes to the transcriber. Joyce Bachli of Mega Reporting Inc. did a meticulous job of deciphering interviews recorded in a variety of settings, often with poor sound quality. Joyce put the counter numbers in the margins so that the outlines could be used as a finding aid to the longer interview transcripts. These numbers have been removed in the edited versions used in this report but are available with the tapes at Yukon Archives.

All interviewees had the opportunity to review and edit their transcripts. Most changes were minor, often tidying up grammar or removing some of the verbal tics that we all have (e.g. “you know” or “sort of”). In a few cases, people clarified information or removed items that didn’t seem relevant. I then did a few additional tidy-up edits to make the manuscripts a little tighter for this report such as removing interruptions or repetitions. None of these affected the content.

After the transcript review, each interviewee read and signed an interview agreement that explained where the tapes and transcripts would be stored and how they might be used. Everyone received copies of all the products of their interview including the tape, transcript, interview agreement and a copy of this report. People who were not employees of either Yukon Energy or YDC were also offered an honorarium. In some cases, they asked that this fee be donated to charity.

Thanks cannot adequately express my appreciation of these 18 people who took time from very busy lives to speak of their experiences with candour and enthusiasm. Indeed, many seemed to temporarily relive this very stressful time. These recollections bring to life an important event and period in the history of both the Yukon Energy Corporation and the Yukon Territory. Everyone I talked to contributed an essential piece to the overall story of the fire and rebuilding. But, these are only 18 pieces that have been highlighted and there are still many important stories that haven’t been told.

The Interviews

Ron Bianowsky was a service technician with Northwestel at the time of the fire. Together with a helper, Dana Miles, and YECL employee, Bob Burrell, he worked long hours to restore essential communications to the site.

Dennis Blaker has firefighting in his blood. His father, Fred Blaker, was the City's first fire chief and fought Whitehorse fires for 28 years. As well as telling of his firefighting activities at the generating plant fire, Dennis also discussed the history of the City's fire department, gear used by a firefighter, communications, and compared this experience with other large Whitehorse fires.

Bob Burrell is the SCADA electrician with the Yukon Energy Corporation. At the time of the fire, he was still with YECL handling all aspects of communication: radios, telephones, and control systems for power plants. Bob described his work on the night of the fire as follows: "I knew that what was most critical out of my bag of goods was communications. I knew that I had to try and get the phones back and radios working, and that's where I put my focus."

Diana Cousins was working for Yukon Energy on secondment from the Yukon Government, setting up the corporation's human resources department. At the time of the fire, she was in the midst of conducting job interviews. Her office was destroyed by the fire. Résumés, interview notes and reference checks were all lost and many interviews had to be repeated.

Mardy Derby has worked in radio for about 25 years, 12 of them with CBC. In November 1997, she was with the newsroom and she covered the fire for both local and national radio.

Mike Hannah was the system operator and sole employee on site when the fire broke out early in the morning of October 30, 1997. His quick actions in raising the alarm then taking the three turbines off line and transferring the electrical load to the Aishihik Plant were the first crucial steps in ensuring that that a major power outage was prevented.

Richard Hartmier has been working full-time as a freelance photographer since 1985. His work includes two bestselling books of Yukon photography. On the night of the fire, he set up his tripod across the river to capture some remarkable images of the burning building.

John Maissan was the director of technical services for the Yukon Energy Company. In October 1997, he was working on the transition to direct management. During the extended rebuilding process, he spent much of his time negotiating the insurance settlement.

Brenda Mattson is a records management specialist. As part of her business, Yukia Office Services, she hosts databases for most of the territory's public libraries on her server. In October 1997, she was organizing the library and records that were being transferred from the Yukon Electrical Company Ltd. to the Yukon Energy Corporation. After the fire, she supervised the salvage of the smoky, scorched, waterlogged records.

Rob McWilliam had been the President and Chief Executive Officer of both the Yukon Development Corporation and Yukon Energy Corporation for one year in October 1997. During that time, the board had decided not to renew the operating contract with YECL. McWilliam was involved in the negotiations to move Yukon Energy to direct management, a move that happened smoothly and on schedule, despite the fire.

Darlene Morgan has worked with the Yukon Development Corporation since 1990 in different capacities and during various organizational changes. For the last several years, she has been the executive assistant to the president and chief executive officer of YDC.

Guy Morgan is Leadhand of system operations, supervisor for the Yukon Energy system control center (SCC). SCC manages the system generation dispatching, setting up all the system switching and is the overall operating authority for the Yukon Energy power grid. During the fire, he controlled the entire generating system from a company truck using memory, a radio and a telephone.

Ken Sawyer is the coordinator of property and projects for Yukon Energy. At the time of the fire, he was the leadhand of diesel plant operations. During the rebuilding process, he became the project manager for the reconstruction of the hydro plant. Ken suffered the only injury incurred during the fire, a bad sprain to his ankle.

Duncan Sinclair had been a senior manager with the Yukon Government for over 20 years before moving to Yukon Development Corporation in February 1997 as Vice-President, Policy & Regulatory Affairs with Yukon Energy and Vice-President with YDC. While his initial mandate was to deal with environmental challenges facing Yukon Energy with the re-licensing of its hydro operations around the territory, he ended up working on the move to direct management as well as various issues arising out of the post-fire reconstruction.

Doug Smith is superintendent of operations and maintenance for the Yukon Electrical Company Limited. As supervisor of the linemen, he played a key role both during the fire and during the succeeding weeks of salvage and rebuilding.

Clive Sparks, the current chief of Whitehorse Fire Department, was acting fire chief at the time of the hydro plant fire. His interview gives an excellent picture of the procedures used and the challenges encountered when managing the battle against a large fire.

Ray Wells had been appointed Chair of the Board for the Yukon Development/Yukon Energy Corporation in August 1997. His experience working for Northwestel, another major utility, proved useful to the Board during various major decisions and crises in the months to come.

Dave Wray was en route to a job interview on October 30th, 1997, when he first saw the Whitehorse generating plant from an airplane window. After viewing the smoking ruin, he concluded that either there would be no job or else an awful lot of work ahead. He was hired as Yukon Energy's supervisor of electrical engineering and is now the director of operations.

Ron Bianowsky

At the time of the fire, Ron Bianowsky was a service technician with Northwestel. Together with a helper, Dana Miles, and YECL employee, Bob Burrell, he worked long hours to restore essential communications to the site.

. . . eight, nine o'clock in the morning, people were fairly frantic, moving around trying to get things done; but as the day progressed and telephones started ringing and power was restored to buildings, you could just see a swing in the mood. People were starting to relax, and you could feel just a down play.

Recorded 5 June 2003 at Whitehorse Public Library Meeting room. Transcript reviewed by Ron Bianowsky, 4 August 2003. [Additional information in square brackets].

Dobrowolsky: It is June the 5th, 2003, Helene Dobrowolsky here in the Whitehorse Public Library talking to Ron Bianowsky, and once again, when and where were you born, Ron?

Bianowsky: July 23, 1959 in Drumheller, Alberta.

Dobrowolsky: And you moved to the Yukon, when?

Bianowsky: In 1978, the summer of '78.

Dobrowolsky: And you're a Northwestel employee. What is your current position there?

Bianowsky: My current position is manager of operations. I look after Whitehorse and northern Yukon.

Dobrowolsky: So, how did you get into the telecommunications line? What's your career path been?

Bianowsky: A kid on more or less an adventure, I came up for summer employment and just the lifestyle of the Yukon and the company, what it offered, see the north and the different parts of it, it just turned into a career. Over the years, you know, I did lots of construction, mountaintop work, tower works and stuff like that and worked my way into a service tech here in Whitehorse; and three years ago, I took on a manager's position.

Dobrowolsky: So that first summer job, was that kind of a lineman-type position?

Bianowsky: It was construction, just basically digging ditches and stuff like that. Back then there was not much for communications in the Yukon. We were basically building the infrastructure for the Whitehorse area.

Dobrowolsky: And this was in '76?

Bianowsky: '78.

Dobrowolsky: And then, you just stayed on after that summer?

Bianowsky: Been there 25 years this August.

Dobrowolsky: Amazing!

Bianowsky: A long time, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes. So, essentially all your training has been on the job.

Bianowsky: Yes, it has, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you went from your basic construction to, I guess, hanging wire and working on, you were saying, doing various installations.

Bianowsky: Installations, microwave towers, yes, we do very diversified [work] to most telephone companies. We do a little bit of everything. We're trained in almost all departments, because we're such a vast organization compared to any of the southern telcos [telephone companies].

Dobrowolsky: And you're also covering a vast area with a lot of variation and, I guess, range of communication modes and... yes.

Bianowsky: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you mentioned you were doing a lot of work all over the Yukon and then you came back, and you were a service technician in Whitehorse and what does that involve?

Bianowsky: Basically looking after all the residential homes and all the businesses right here in Whitehorse, putting in phones, telephone systems, data circuits, just any of the technology that's out there for the day.

Dobrowolsky: And did you have a particular area that you were assigned to or just whatever came up?

Bianowsky: Mostly business is what I was doing, but you did whatever came up.

Dobrowolsky: And is this the job you had in '97?

Bianowsky: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, had you done some work for Yukon Energy or, I guess what would have been the Yukon Electrical site at that time, yes.

Bianowsky: Yes, we worked hand in hand. They have their own technician; but when they run into problems and stuff like that, we'd come in and assist them and that.

Dobrowolsky: So you were familiar with the site.

Bianowsky: With the site, the location of everything, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes. So, if you had helped them in the past, what kind of tasks would that have involved?

Bianowsky: Just basically trouble shooting bad phones, bad lines, our cable going bad between our central office downtown and their location at the dam site; just basic troubleshooting and repair.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me how that telephone cable works. Is this an underground line that goes from downtown to there or one of their overhead lines?

Bianowsky: It's underground from right downtown Whitehorse all the way out to the dam site. It was a dedicated cable right to them, and basically, we supplied dial tone from our central office switch to them. At the time, they had a red com system in there, which facilitated all of their lines throughout the whole complex there.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would have been from your downtown office on Elliot Street, is it?

Bianowsky: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: Elliot and Third?

Bianowsky: Third, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is downtown, just take me on a little route.

Bianowsky: How it would go?

Dobrowolsky: Yes, this cable.

Bianowsky: That one would leave, it comes out the back alley of Main Street and Elliot and down 2nd Avenue to approximately the boat, and then, it goes up a manhole, or I think it's direct buried all the way up along the track area there, all the way out to the dam site, which is, about cable-wise, probably about two and a half miles of cable.

Dobrowolsky: And then when it – so, it was following the tracks, and at what point does it cross the road?

Bianowsky: Right around the Robert Service Campground area there, we cross the road and go to the other side.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, and then, where does the cable run on the actual Whitehorse Rapids generating site? Like, where does it enter the property?

Bianowsky: It enters, in relation to the new building it would be...

Dobrowolsky: The new building is at the south end of this area, --

Bianowsky: It's right in this area.

Dobrowolsky: -- just behind the substation kind of.

Bianowsky: We would be ...

Dobrowolsky: Okay, we've been studying this aerial -- old aerial photo of the site that I have here, and you were saying that the cable would enter the property at a point kind of between the substation and the diesel plant, right near the highway where it's doing its big curve?

Bianowsky: Yes, between the fence line and the highway.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, and then, from there, I guess it branches off to various points on the site, or no?

Bianowsky: The main cable used to go into the diesel generating system -- or excuse me, no. The original cable used to go into the actual dam site.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would have been the generating plant, the building that subsequently burnt down?

Bianowsky: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, and then, from there that's where lines would go elsewhere?

Bianowsky: Distribute to all the buildings, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Oh okay. So, this was not only the central electrical site but also the central telecommunications site.

Bianowsky: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: Interesting! Okay, and I guess from there there would be lines to the diesel plant and to Number 4 and various other buildings on site.--

Bianowsky: To every building. Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, immediately before the fire you were a service technician working in Whitehorse. When would have been the last time you would have visited the site?

Bianowsky: Before the fire?

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Bianowsky: Oh boy ...

Dobrowolsky: There's nothing that sticks out in your mind?

Bianowsky: I couldn't really say, no. I couldn't really say. It could have been months ago or a year ago.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, and then, tell me what happened the morning of October the 30th. How did you find out about this big catastrophic fire?

Bianowsky: Like everybody else in town, it was, like, the top of the news that night, everything ... Like, especially like us, we had all kinds of phone calls within the work, because of the cables around the area and the heat. They were concerned about all our other cables. We kind of knew that the cable in that area was a write-off because of where it was located. And I got called out the next morning right at eight o'clock to go down there and assess what we could do to restore some communications to them as soon as possible. And upon entering the area, you know, after getting through all the security and stuff like that, I met up with Bob Burrell at the time, still is their communications person.

Dobrowolsky: And were you on your own at that point?

Bianowsky: Yes, I was.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, and this was about nine o'clock you went to the site?

Bianowsky: Shortly after 8:00 I was down there.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, shortly after 8:00, okay.

Bianowsky: And after I got on site we went for a walk, basically right down to the generating plant to take a look and see what was there. Like I say, it was just catastrophic, the damage and walking through there, the smell of smoke and water dripping and just burnt everywhere. It's just... it was amazing.

Dobrowolsky: There was still smoke plumes?

Bianowsky: A lot of hot spots. You know, you could smell hot spots and stuff like that and steam rolling off. It was chaotic, just people everywhere, running around trying to figure out what was going on, what to do.

Dobrowolsky: So, there was still, I guess, a substantial presence from the fire department?

Bianowsky: The fire department, there was a few left, not a whole lot, in the morning; but mostly Yukon Electric people, the upper management, a lot of security people; and like I say Northwestel was in there, and RCMP. It seemed pretty chaotic.

Dobrowolsky: So here is this mess, this devastation, lots of people trying to figure out what next, and then, as we later learned, this small group of Yukon Electrical workers desperately keeping the power up.

Bianowsky: M'hmm, up and running.

Dobrowolsky: So, you arrived, your first impressions. Then what?

Bianowsky: Basically we just kind of laid out a plan of what phones were the necessities to get up first and running. Like I say, me and Bob went through that. We kind of organized what he wanted to get up and going, and after that I went back up to our compound. I got one other guy to help me.

Dobrowolsky: This is your compound up on the Alaska Highway?

Bianowsky: Up on the Range Road, yes; and we took one of our service trucks that we use for residential service. It's a small service wire that has six or 12 conductors in it that's capable of running six phones. And we started paying that out in every direction possible to get phones back restored and basically spent the day, you know, in every direction, hooking up, testing, and getting all the phones back into service basically.

Dobrowolsky: So, to backtrack, the fellow that you collected to go with you, this would have been?

Bianowsky: I think it was Dana Miles if I remember right.

Dobrowolsky: So, you and Dana went down to the site with the service truck, and did you have to unearth that original cable, or did you have, like, a little terminal one on the site that you can –

Bianowsky: Yes, we have a terminal block there, and it was located on the lower end of the generating plant. So, we just brought everything back to that point. We cut the wire loose, salvaged what we could get on to the pairs [two wires that make a path for a phone to work] and just basically spliced straight onto them to bypass everything and get a dial tone generated.

Dobrowolsky: So, show me where that terminal was.

Bianowsky: In the basement of this building.

Dobrowolsky: [laughs] Of the building that burnt.

Bianowsky: Burnt, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, the place that you said was just before it that you were splicing things onto, or you weren't –

Bianowsky: It was right in there.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, so you were actually able to get at it.

Bianowsky: Yes, yes, that part of the building was accessible still. You know, like it was flooded and smoky and that, but we were still able to access the cable.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, I didn't realize that. So, this is on the – let's do some compass directions, saying that "This is south [upriver] and this is north [downriver]," this would have been the northwest corner of the building.

Bianowsky: The northwest, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And I understand the southwest corner was kind of where most of the where most of the fire damage was?

Bianowsky: That's where the office was and all that, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were already able to get into the building by what time about?

Bianowsky: I think we had the first phone up and working by about 10:00, 10:30.

Dobrowolsky: So, before that you were able to actually get into the building?

Bianowsky: Get into the building, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And from what I understand, it had kind of a, I don't know, subbasement where the generators were, and then, a couple of floors above that?

Bianowsky: Above it, yes.

Bianowsky: So this would have been in the basement area.

Bianowsky: We were in the lower area, yes.

Dobrowolsky: The lower area, okay; and was there – you know, I've heard a lot about, ceilings collapsing and desks falling through. Was there much of that damage in that area, or it wasn't bad?

Bianowsky: Not in that area, because it wasn't office area. It was the actual dam site we were in and there's not a whole lot of office stuff in there. It's all mechanical and heavy steel and stuff like that. So, there was – like there were some structures falling apart and sticking through. You

had to watch where you're going and stuff like that. But office material and stuff like that, no, there wasn't a whole lot of that.

Dobrowolsky: So, you didn't feel like it was a particularly dangerous site when you were working around in it or maybe yes?

Bianowsky: It made you think going in there, you know. Like, after a fire like that, just like I say, it was, you know – it was pretty, you know, not inspiring, but, just look at the amount of damage and stuff like that. I think the thing was that everybody involved, not put safety behind them but, realized it had to have been done, get it done as fast as possible. You know, there was not as a safety concern, but I think people worked well together, to, you know, do what was required to get things up and running as soon as possible.

Dobrowolsky: So, there was a certain amount of assessment of acceptable risk?

Bianowsky: M'hmm.

Dobrowolsky: So, it may not have been an entirely secure site to be working, but secure enough.

Bianowsky: Well, I'd say "secure enough"; but like I say, after a fire like that, they were in there – as soon as the fire was out, people were in and out of there. So, they must have assessed the damage if there was a safety hazard at that time. Like I say, I was in there probably like say eight o'clock. I think the first guy at Northwestel got called out something like three, four o'clock in the morning, so they had four or five hours to assess things; and if it would have been unsafe in any way, I think they would have put a stop to all that.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were saying one of your superiors got called earlier on?

Bianowsky: Dave Schille, at the time he was a construction cable splicer, and they called him out to have a look and see if there was any other – going to be any damage to cables heading into Riverdale or stuff like that.

Dobrowolsky: So, this cable to the site, you were saying that they had a dedicated cable?

Bianowsky: Yukon Energy has a cable. They have a site located on the Riverdale side here.

Dobrowolsky: This is the substation across the dam.

Bianowsky: On the Riverdale side.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Bianowsky: We have a cable going across the river to feed that, and I think that's it.

Dobrowolsky: So, the main concern was that the fire might affect that cable.

Bianowsky: Affect that cable and yeah.

Dobrowolsky: So, who would have called Dave? Would that have been someone from the fire department or someone from the company?

Bianowsky: It would have been probably Yukon Electric getting ahold of our operation centre in Yellowknife and then, they call somebody out from that area to come out and have a look.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so Dave Schille was probably on the scene.

Bianowsky: He was the first one on the scene, I think, from Northwestel.

Dobrowolsky: And then, would he have been the one to make the decision to dispatch you there later on or –

Bianowsky: No. All he would have done was went there and looked the situation over and seen if there was anything he could have done or anything that he could do to prevent any more damage to the cable.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm.

Bianowsky: And basically, after that he would report to his boss; and at that time, the managers would have got together and said, you know, “We’re sending this guy and this guy in to do what we can,” and I was delegated the one to go.

Dobrowolsky: So, you said by about 10:00, 10:30, you had your first phone up and operating?

Bianowsky: Yes, I think it was right around that area.

Dobrowolsky: And where did you set it up?

Bianowsky: If I remember right, it was in these trailers here was where the first phones were up and working, and they’re the ones –

Dobrowolsky: So, this is a trailer just east, sort of southeast of the substation.

Bianowsky: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you got some phones in there and then what did you do – or a phone.

Bianowsky: Then, like I saw, it was just cables everywhere, you know, working around people. The actual generating station –

Dobrowolsky: The diesel plant?

Bianowsky: Yes, the diesel plant; there's a few more buildings in there now. There's a bank of buildings by the substation here.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would be kind of northeast of the substation?

Bianowsky: M'hmm.

Dobrowolsky: And then, what about the building up by Number 4.

Bianowsky: Number 4, that was one of the last ones we turned up because of the distance and stuff like that, and the cable was still good in that area. So, it was just basically finding – toning that cable out, finding what pair [same as above, 2 wires] it was and restoring it. But, the main focus was the main compound of the area, to get as many phones and circuits up in there as possible.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you said you were running cable everywhere, are these kind of snaking along the ground?

Bianowsky: Exactly.

Dobrowolsky: [laughs]

Bianowsky: Any possible way to get them to the building.

Dobrowolsky: So, nothing very sophisticated, you weren't planting any poles?

Bianowsky: No, not for the telephones. They have a duct system that runs behind the plant, and we tied a bunch up into that area; along this one here, too. But, like, there was a lot of cables on the ground. After the fact, we went back in there and tried tying things up and cleaning them up; but at first dispatch, it was get phones up and working.

Dobrowolsky: So, what kind of a day was it? Was it cold? Was it cloudy?

Bianowsky: Actually it was nice. It was a very nice day. From what I remember, it was fairly warm and maybe it was just all the adrenaline and stuff going through; but, like, as far as I remember it wasn't a bad day.

Dobrowolsky: So, there was no concern with, you know, freezing fingers handling metal?

Bianowsky: No, none whatsoever.

Dobrowolsky: So, you mentioned you had about half a dozen phones working by the end of the day.

Bianowsky: Yes, oh, at least that many.

Dobrowolsky: Maybe even more?

Bianowsky: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And how long a day was that?

Bianowsky: Actually it wasn't that – I think I was out of there by about six o'clock that night or something like that. So, it was long, but ...

Dobrowolsky: Yes, yes, and this was you and your co-worker. I'm sorry, what was his name again?

Bianowsky: I'm pretty sure it was Dana Miles that helped me with it. I'd have to, you know, make sure, but, I think it was him.

Dobrowolsky: So, was there any follow-up involved in this in the subsequent days?

Bianowsky: Yes, there was digging in. What we ended up doing after we got the initial phones going is at our location outside the fence there, we ran a temporary cable. We dug across the new entrance, I guess it's on the north face there where the new gate is, we come across there, brought a new cable in, and we brought a new terminal into the diesel plant. And actually what we ended up doing then is rerouting cables to come off of that so that we could abandon what was in there while they were reconstructing.

Dobrowolsky: So, you didn't even worry about salvaging this initial cable?

Bianowsky: No.

Dobrowolsky: You just kind of hooked onto it at a point?

Bianowsky: Well, it's underground. It got cut away, and it's left in the ground.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, I see.

Bianowsky: And like I say, now I think within the next – or that summer or else the next summer we ended up putting fibre optics into the new building location where everything is located now, away from any possible fires.

Dobrowolsky: [laughs] Good move. Okay, so this has been a wonderful experience for me, because I don't know a lot about electronics or telecommunications, although I've been learning an awful lot since. So, I realize that a certain amount of it is the physical, the cables, and then, from the cables the lines; and then, you have some kind of a central switchboard that actually activates the phones, or how does that work?

Bianowsky: On our end?

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Bianowsky: The central office, we run a switch called a “DMS100”, and that generates all the dial tone for the Whitehorse area, and it basically feeds every phone in the Whitehorse area. Technically all it is, you know, is it’s a dial tone generator and it just routes the calls as you dial them.

Dobrowolsky: So, kind of a switching station in a way.

Bianowsky: Yes, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you’re talking about your day of, you know, laying the cables. I imagine you would have been working with Bob Burrell during this.

Bianowsky: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: He would have been helping you to determine priorities of where the phones out to go. So, what else – it seems like everybody just kind of came in, knew what they had to do and were very single minded about it, but what else was going on around the site? Did you have much sense of what other people were doing or what else was happening?

Bianowsky: Yes, like you say, there were a lot of people involved, but it was that way. Everybody knew what their job was and carried on. Like, I had a brother up here that was involved with it because of the contractor he worked for. They were working for Yukon Electric at the time, and basically they were in there replacing power poles and getting lines up that burnt down and stuff like that.

There were electrical contractors in there and like I say telephone and Yukon Electric themselves, and it was actually very well organized and it went over very well. You know, it was – you know, for a fire of that size and the stuff that was done, it was recovered quite well and things got back into order real quick. You know, Yukon Electric was great. There was food there all day long, you know. When you took a break, there was pop, there was food, there was, you know, places to take a rest when you got tired, and it turned out very well.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, it really does seem remarkable. I have talked to a few people and they said “Well, no, we never really had any kind of special emergency plan.” I guess Guy Morgan had, at one point, written a little paper not long before about “What do we do if the SCADA ever goes down,” their big central control system. But, yes, it just seems like everyone just knew their job so well. They knew what the priority was in terms of getting things done.

Bianowsky: M'hmm. And like I say most of the people that were involved with it, we’ve known each other for years and we’ve worked around each other for years. So, it wasn’t as if you were working with unfamiliar people and that. So that might have been a big part of it, you know.

Dobrowolsky: So, lots of long-time employees?

Bianowsky: On both parts, yes.

Dobrowolsky: On both parts. Well, it's a fascinating story. I really think that this is not only really important in the company history but a really important event in Yukon history. So, any last thoughts of looking back on that?

Bianowsky: It was interesting, it was fun, but I wouldn't want to see it happen again.

Dobrowolsky: [laughs] It certainly must have been one of your most challenging jobs?

Bianowsky: Actually it was, you know. You put it behind you. You know, it's gone by and you kind of put it behind you, but you start thinking back about it, it was, you know, actually very interesting and challenging.

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you very much for this.

Bianowsky: No problem.

Dobrowolsky: That wasn't really the end of the interview. We then had a post-interview discussion, and Ron mentioned a few other things that I think are important to record, one of which is the telecommunications link to the SCADA System, the great master control for all the electrical systems in the Yukon. Could you explain a little bit how that worked?

Bianowsky: Basically we supplied a link for them for their SCADA to give them visibility of all their other sites through the Yukon; and that was probably one of their major concerns is they lost that visibility through Whitehorse, and until that was restored, which was probably a month or at least a month after the fire, they had to physically man all the sites or visit them on a regular basis to ensure that those sites were up and working properly and there was no damage found or anything on the go that might cause some problems in those sites. So, that was probably by far one of their biggest hurdles that they had to get completed. And like I say, we supplied the major link in Whitehorse for the visibility. And once that fire was gone, they lost their SCADA System. It burnt with everything else, and they lost that visibility, which was probably very demanding on their technicians to keep the other sites up and going.

Dobrowolsky: And you mentioned, did you have anything to do with the eventual – I understand they salvaged parts of the SCADA System, and they sort of got a makeshift thing happening in their washroom office in the diesel plant.

Bianowsky: Yes. Basically, we would have just supplied the dial tone or the circuit that was running it before and got it back to there so that they could hook it up and get some sort of visibility back.

Dobrowolsky: And you were also mentioning that the SCADA System also ran Yukon Electrical, as well.

Bianowsky: They did some back feeding between Whitehorse and the falls at Million Dollar Falls, no –

Dobrowolsky: Aishihik?

Bianowsky: Aishihik Dam, they actually fed on their own electrical lines the circuitry to monitor that dam, overtop power lines. So, that was gone also; but most all the circuitry is done through us. They have the SCADA in all the areas, and it's monitored back through our system.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, I think that's really important to know. You also said something very interesting about how on the day after the fire when all these people were frantically working to restore telecommunications, like a more stable system for monitoring all the electrical generation, you talked a little bit about how the mood of the day changed.

Bianowsky: Yes, you could just see it in the people. Like I was saying, eight, nine o'clock in the morning, people were fairly frantic, moving around trying to get things done; but as the day progressed and telephones started ringing and power was restored to buildings, you could just see a swing in the mood. People were starting to relax, and you could feel just a down play. People, I don't know if it was just pure tiredness or just relaxed and happy to see things were coming up; but there was definitely a mood swing by the end of the day.

Dobrowolsky: So kind of like "we're winning"?

Bianowsky: Yes. We can see the end.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, "we aren't going to lose everything and we are managing to salvage ..."

Bianowsky: Yes, that's right.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, I think that was it.

Bianowsky: That's the end this time?

Dobrowolsky: Thanks again. I'll let you off the hook here.

Bianowsky: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Dennis Blaker

Dennis Blaker has firefighting in his blood. His father, Fred Blaker, was the City's first fire chief and fought Whitehorse fires for 28 years. As well as telling of his firefighting activities at the generating plant fire, Dennis also discussed the history of the City's fire department, gear worn by a firefighter, communications at a large fire and compared this experience with other large Whitehorse fires.

Recorded July 16, 2003 at the Takhini Firehall, Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Mr. Blaker, 13 August 2003. Additional information in [square brackets].

There is a noise, and it's just a cacophony of sounds. There is some from the fire. You're going to get crackling. There are people shouting. The pumps are running on the trucks, which are fairly loud. So, it just all comes into one big noise, and while you're doing – you tend to block a lot of it out.

Side A

Dobrowolsky: Okay, it's July the 16th at the Takhini Fire Hall, Helene Dobrowolsky talking to Dennis Blaker about the fire at the Whitehorse generating plant. Dennis, to begin, could you tell me when and where you were born?

Blaker: I was born in June 1956 in Whitehorse.

Dobrowolsky: Perhaps you could tell me about your family history with the fire department? I understand this goes back more than one generation.

Blaker: It does go back, my father, the late Fred Blaker, was the City's first fire chief. He started as a firefighter in 1947 and was promoted up to captain, and then, to fire chief in 1950 and was there as fire chief until '75, when he had a heart attack. The City actually created a new position of fire marshall to suit him, and he ended up staying with the City until 1989 when he retired. So, I've kind of filled the boots.

Dobrowolsky: So, when your father started, would it have been a largely volunteer department or were there some paid crew?

Blaker: There was paid crew, but a very small crew. They worked, I believe, 24 hours on, 24 hours off, and I believe that there were three paid men plus the chief; and then, I would imagine there must have been volunteers, some corps of volunteers, but also back then there was the military presence in town. During the building of the highway, there was the American Army, Canadian Army and Canadian Air Force. So, there was quite a military presence.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would have all been during the building of the Alaska Highway?

Blaker: And thereafter, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And thereafter, maintaining and rebuilding the highway.

Blaker: Right, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, the army would have had their own fire department, as well, here?

Blaker: Yes, the army did have a fire department here. There was one, I believe it was the American Army, had a station on Steele Street, pretty much right where Mayor Bourassa's office is sitting; and there was a Canadian Army fire hall on the site of Extra Foods right now on Fourth Avenue by the school.

Dobrowolsky: And where would the City's fire department have been at that time?

Blaker: During the building of the [Alaska Highway], it was on First Avenue just south of the White Pass train depot, and they shared quarters with the Yukon Electric Company until 1949; and that's when they moved over to the fire hall on Steele Street.

Dobrowolsky: And this would have been the former Army fire hall?

Blaker: Right.

Dobrowolsky: Right, and then about when would the fire department have moved into its present quarters on Second Avenue?

Blaker: That was a centennial project, so I'm not sure of the exact dates but it was ...

Dobrowolsky: '67 perhaps?

Blaker: Yes, '67 being the centennial year, was probably the building of it. Now, I would imagine it was near the end of the year that they actually moved into it.

Dobrowolsky: Well, when did you become a member of the fire department?

Blaker: I stayed away as long as I could, and finally in about 1985, I joined the volunteer department. I was working for the City of Whitehorse as a truck driver/heavy equipment operator and finally just decided that it would be a good idea to fill some big shoes, so to speak; and I joined the volunteer squad and finally was lucky enough to get a full-time position in September of 1989 and right until now.

Dobrowolsky: And what is your current position?

Blaker: Current position is Firefighter First Class. I work on "D" shift.

Dobrowolsky: And what is "D" shift?

Blaker: We just have four platoons to give 24/7 coverage, and each platoon is just given an arbitrary designation, “A” shift, “B” shift and so on; and it just happens right now I work on “D” shift.

Dobrowolsky: And how many members would be in a platoon?

Blaker: On a platoon are five members. There’s a platoon chief, a captain and three firefighters. Right now the platoon chief and two firefighters work out of Station 2 here at Takhini, and a captain and a firefighter work down at Station 1 on Second Avenue.

Dobrowolsky: So, going back in time to October, 1997, what kind of a shift were you working on the 29th? Would you have been on night duty or a day shift?

Blaker: I was on night shift, which runs from 6:00 at night till 8:00 in the morning, and we use the 2400 clock, which is military time. So, it’s 1800 to 0800. So, I was working at Station 1 downtown on the night shift.

Dobrowolsky: And tell me about the sequence of events, how you heard about this call.

Blaker: Well, we got the call – it was early in the morning about 3:00 – I have it on my notes here, and I will be referring to notes – it was at [2:57] we got the 911 call, telling us that there was a fire at the generating station up at Schwatka Lake, and it was in our jurisdiction for a response. So, we were prepared to head off to that call. Station 1 looks after everything downtown and below the escarpment. Station 2, where we are now, handles everything else.

Dobrowolsky: So, below the escarpment that would include all of Riverdale?

Blaker: All of Riverdale, the industrial area, and out to the dam site and along Schwatka Lake.

Dobrowolsky: Good, so, you got your call. What would you do normally to get ready to respond to a call like this?

Blaker: We would be in contact with the other station, and we would have had the call – just the way our system works is one hall minds the phones on one night, and the other hall will do it the next night so one group isn’t always stuck by the phone. So, I believe it was our night for looking after it.

So, we would have used an old magphone. That’s what we have in the hall. It’s an old army field phone for calling up between station 1 and station 2 and at one time the fire chief’s house. It’s old technology, but it works; and we crank it up like you see on the old movie *M.A.S.H.* They used the field phones as well, and we crank that up and get the guys up and say, “This is what’s happening.” We had been informed that the generating station, there was a fire. There was smoke showing, and you could tell by the voices that there was definitely some adrenaline pumping. So, you know something is happening.

Dobrowolsky: And this would have been a voice of the operator at the plant?

Blaker: At the plant yes; I don't recall who it was.

Dobrowolsky: I believe it was Mike Hannah who called that in.

Blaker: It very well could have been. I only know one name that I could put a name and a face together out there, and that was John Greer; and he was on the scene at some point during the incident, and that's the only person that I really recognized. So, we take the pertinent information from the emergency call, and we relay it to Station 2 so that everybody is playing on the same page, we know what's happening, who is going and what's happening.

Basically we told them, "Okay, we got a call. There's smoke showing from the dam site, and we're on our way", because that's our response. And the platoon chief from Station 2, he responds to all calls. So, he immediately heads off down to the incident and the other member that was in the hall at Station 2, he begins the paging process.

Dobrowolsky: So, maybe we should get some names at this point. So, the platoon chief would have been who?

Blaker: At that time it was Norm Jensen. And again, you may hear some rustling. I'm looking through papers. Norm Jensen was the platoon chief, Paul Taylor was acting captain, myself firefighter on duty at Station 1, and Gary Pettifor was in Station 2, and Gary acted as the dispatcher.

Dobrowolsky: So, he would have been the one who got that initial call, or he would have been the one who would have been in turn paging everyone who needed to know?

Blaker: Yes. I don't recall right now if it was Paul or myself that took the actual call at Station 1, but Gary Pettifor was the dispatcher. As soon as the incident happened, the person in the non-responding hall becomes the dispatcher; and he started paging, letting the chief and deputy chief know and getting the firefighters on the scene.

Dobrowolsky: Good. Okay, so, your crew, consisting of you, Norm and Paul, would have headed out to the incident. Gary would have been in turn calling the chief and whoever else needed to know.

Blaker: Right.

Dobrowolsky: I guess keeping track of things.

Blaker: Yes, we do keep a logbook of all pertinent information in chronological order. So, in case it ever does have to go to court, it's always a permanent written record.

Dobrowolsky: I understand, yes.

Blaker: So, he – Gary would have – every time he had an important radio communication, if the chief was asking for a status report he would say "Yes" – he could look back in his papers and

say, “Yes, Pumper 4 was on the scene at a certain time” or when was Yukon Water Service called for extra tankers. Things like that are all put down into the logbook.

Dobrowolsky: So, there would have been the truck with the three of you?

Blaker: Just two.

Dobrowolsky: Two of you.

Blaker: Because two of us are responding from Station 1 in the pumper. The platoon chief was responding from Station 2 in his platoon chief vehicle, which is pickup; and he just leaves the firefighter alone here while he – the firefighter will page in people into the hall to help him here in case there’s a second call or more, and he calls out people to cover Station 1 and send people to the scene. So, when we took off, it was Paul and I in Pumper 4 out of Station 1. It sounds like a lot of numbers and things but –

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Blaker: – and then Norm, the platoon chief, he took off out of Station 2 with the PC truck.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, PC?

Blaker: Platoon chief.

Dobrowolsky: Platoon chief, of course.

Blaker: We do end up using some acronyms and some just initials.

Dobrowolsky: I have learned an amazing amount of jargon during this project. The electrical people are way ahead of you!

Blaker: Oh, I wouldn’t doubt it.

Dobrowolsky: So, then you’re driving to the scene. At that point, were you seeing any evidence of the fire before you got there? Was there any smoke in the air?

Blaker: I could see some smoke, as I recall some – a bit of a glow. But it was near [three] o’clock in the morning and still quite dark. As we went around for the intersection, we had to basically go past the generating station, and we could kind of look through the buildings past the diesel plant, and we could see some smoke and a little bit of a glow happening. We came in through that intersection, which is up by the Schwatka Lake Road, came back, and we were met by a Yukon Energy employee and he was telling us that the generating station was on fire. And so, we parked approximately 200 feet on the north side of the generating station, and we could see definite flames coming out and a fair bit of smoke now.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, I'm going to get you to pause. I have a map or I have a little plan here I want you to look at.

Blaker: Well, the road as it is now comes in way up here; and we had to come in, and then, backtrack again to get onto the property.

Dobrowolsky: So, this was already after the South Access had been reconstructed, and there was the new entrance that goes to Schwatka and to the site.

Blaker: Yes, and I'm sure that it's – it's almost right across from here.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, you're right.

Blaker: So, it should be right in here. So, we would have come in about here, turned back, and then, come in; and I'm just not quite sure where – if the road comes in between the building and the fuel tanks or on this side of the fuel tanks.

Dobrowolsky: I think you can actually go either way once you – right now anyway. I don't how it would have been then.

Blaker: But I believe we did come in around here, past this set of trailers, because they were using that as an office of some sort.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is between the substation and the trailers north of the diesel plant?

Blaker: Yes, and we came in this way, headed upriver and ended up parking, I would say, in around here.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would have been, as you said, just in this kind of parking lot area.

Blaker: Yes, there is a bit of a parking lot area.

Dobrowolsky: And just north – the northwest corner, I guess, of the generating plant or in the northwest corner.

Blaker: Yes, in that general vicinity, yeah.

Dobrowolsky: So, we got you in there, we got you parked. Then what?

Blaker: One of the operators came up to give us a warning that there were some dangers. There was a diesel oil tank and a propane tank right beside the building. They would be on the west end of the generating station, and I'm not sure of my measurements, but it was I believe a 1000-gallon fuel tank and a 1000-gallon propane tank. So, we knew that there were the dangers there. We strung out the line. We strung out 250 feet, because we only carry 800 gallons of water on board, you know. We started off with one hose, get working on it. There were flames showing on the west end of the building, down low as well as up high along the roof line; and I told Paul – I

called him back to tell him about the dangers, what was happening in there, obviously to be very careful about it. We got the pump in gear and started flowing water. Paul was on the nozzle, and then, I went up to back him up.

Dobrowolsky: Now, was there still power being supplied to that building at that point? Would the power to the building have been cut off by that point?

Blaker: I really don't recall. There was just so much going on, and you feel a little overwhelmed when there's two guys on a fire truck coming into a major fire, and it's one of these kind of fires that you mentally think to yourself "I'm going to be up all night." It's just one of those kind of working fires.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm

Blaker: So, it's just like I say, there's just so much going on that I really can't recall what there was for power in the building or right beside the building. Yes, it was just fairly substantial, knowing that, yes, it's going to be an all-nighter. There's a lot to do, and then, being told about the two different fuel tanks right beside. When Norm Jensen, the platoon chief, came on scene, he would have come down into this parking lot, as well, near the pumper; and we told him about the dangers, as well, and he ordered me to go in and shut them off.

Dobrowolsky: The tanks?

Blaker: Shut the tanks off, there's emergency shutdowns on the tanks, whether being the oil tank or the propane tank.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would have been to ensure there was no fuel flowing in the lines from the tanks to the building.

Blaker: Right, to try to isolate it. I did that and went back with Paul, and we started working the hose line again.

Dobrowolsky: And where would you have been directing the hose at that point?

Blaker: At that point, we were directing it onto the west end of the building, because that's where the fire was showing. We couldn't see into the building to see if it had spread. Right at that point everything seemed to be – it was right in that end of the building, and we would have been off probably 30 to 40 feet back of the building. I'm being generous on that, it may – sometimes we ended up getting a little closer and just working towards the wall.

Dobrowolsky: So, being that close to the building, would there have already been, like, a fair bit of smoke and heat?

Blaker: There was a fair bit of smoke, but, of course, with smoke it's going to go up. But there was a fair bit of heat generated already. There was a lot of orange flame and black smoke, which generally indicates a petroleum base, and it burns very hot. So, it was burning quite hot. And our

truck carries 800 gallons, so 800 gallons coming out doesn't last very long. So, we had to be somewhat judicious on the application of the water, knowing that we were waiting for reinforcements to back us up to establish another water supply, and at one point we were basically out of water until we had more troops on the scene.

Dobrowolsky: So, as you said, you could tell right away this was going to be a major fire, you were probably going to be up at least all night. So, when you're directing the hose, is your strategy almost right away containment? Like you only have 800 gallons, it's obvious that this isn't a little fire you can just quickly extinguish.

Blaker: Right, we knew that it was a major. As I said before about being out on the scene all night, we knew it was going to be one of those kinds of fires. It was fairly substantial right at the start when we arrived and we were waiting for the troops to get on the scene.

Dobrowolsky: For reinforcements.

Blaker: For reinforcements, not only to help with the actual firefighting tactics but for establishing a water supply and for, you know, just more able bodies to get on the scene.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, and I guess, you know, very early on, you would have been fairly certain that everybody was out of the building and ...

Blaker: Yes, I believe whoever was working at the plant had said that everyone was accounted for at that point.

Dobrowolsky: So, at least that wasn't a factor.

Blaker: It wasn't a factor. We were – we could just concentrate our efforts on the fire itself.

Dobrowolsky: So, how long does it take to spray out 800 gallons of water about?

Blaker: We could have it out in, oh, six, seven minutes if you were going full-bore. It doesn't take very long at all. So we just had to tone it back a bit and try to knock down as much as we could in the first bit, you know, to put it at bay until the next truck arrived.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, and then, what happened?

Blaker: Then all hell broke loose. There was a problem with getting a water supply right off the bat because we were waiting for trucks to come in. As I recall, the only place we could get our truck was, you know, close to the river for drafting, it was going to be too high. We can only draft so high up off of a water source.

Dobrowolsky: So, actually there's only a limited distance you can physically lift the water up or pump it up.

Blaker: Right, and we were, I believe, just on it or just above the threshold of it. So, Golden Horn Fire Department brought in a 500 gallon-per-minute portable pump, and we got that set up down at the river, and it only worked for a very few minutes and calved. I'm not exactly what had happened but it calved.

Dobrowolsky: And by "calved"?

Blaker: You'll have to forgive me sometimes I use vernacular.

Dobrowolsky: No, that's fine; I'm just your translator here.

Blaker: Okay, it died. And so we started calling in the City tankers and private water supply companies, and we got the rest of our equipment down there and started pumping off of portable tanks where we could set up like an above-ground swimming pool and the tankers can just back in, open up their gate valve and just quickly dump their contents into the tank, and then we can pump off of that.

Dobrowolsky: So, just to go back, you're getting in all these reinforcements. Now, I'm assuming by this time Clive would have been on the scene.

Blaker: Clive would have been on the scene.

Dobrowolsky: And there's a special, I can't remember the name of it, his control truck.

Blaker: There's the – we call it "Rescue One". That's just the designation we give it, but it does have a command post in the truck itself, and he can set up his command post in there. It's got radios, telephones, maps, charts, his computer, all kinds of resources.

Dobrowolsky: So, would he have been, then, relaying these requests for extra vehicles and water tankers to Gary?

Blaker: Yes, between Clive, the deputy fire chief, and Norm, the platoon chief, they both would have been asking for materiel.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Blaker: Brian Monahan, the fire chief at the time, was out of town. So, Clive was acting fire chief at the time.

Dobrowolsky: So, give me a time frame. How long would it have taken to bring in your portable pool or tank and these water tankers and private water tankers? About how long do you think that all might have taken?

Blaker: Just off the top of my head without looking at the notes, the second truck probably would have been in there within about 15, 10 to 15 minutes getting a second crew to man the truck, and then to get it down there; and then, up to probably a half hour later/45 minutes later,

possibly the first water truck getting on the scene. But if you want to pause for a sec, I can check in the logbook and it would have it – it has everything in the logbook, and I believe that you have copies of the logbook from Clive.

Dobrowolsky: Clive is getting them to me.

Blaker: Okay, this is probably it here.

Dobrowolsky: So, Dennis is consulting copies of the fire log book.

Blaker: The station logbook.

Dobrowolsky: The station logbook, and you were saying – just to clarify the times – you were saying the call came in at 2:53 [a.m.].

Blaker: 2:53, and from that initial call to having trucks on the scene, as well as water tankers, establishing a water supply, was about 40 minutes.

Dobrowolsky: So, it all happened very quickly?

Blaker: Very quickly, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, now personnel; so you mentioned another truck came in shortly after you had finished draining your original 800 gallons. So, would that have been another truck with two crew, or would more people now be starting to arrive? How does that usually work?

Blaker: Generally the next truck in will have two people on it. Getting extra people on the scene being the job of Gary, who was the dispatcher, he pages in the paid on-call people, which are what we call the volunteers, and they arrive in their private vehicles and bring their gear with them, and then get changed at the scene and then get assigned with tasks. So, the next truck would have come in with another two people, and then, another truck shortly thereafter, and then the water trucks started. So, I didn't get to see a lot of it; because at that time, we were down in the hole trying to – down at the river trying to get that pump going or keep it going. And then, back up at the generating station itself, there was about I think four vehicles, private vehicles, that were parked right close to the building, and we ended up pushing vehicles out that we could, we pushed them out away from the building to obviously try and save those vehicles but also to cut down on any fuel load of making the fire get bigger. So, during that time is when they were establishing a water supply.

Dobrowolsky: So, a lot if this preliminary stuff it was – well, of course, all the stuff with the water, and I heard about that in great detail from Clive. But, what you were saying, looking at things around the fire site, so shutting down the tanks, and then, moving these vehicles which were not as you said, potentially adding to the fuel load of the fire but I guess, also perhaps hindering access.

Blaker: Yes, hindering access for the equipment for men. I believe that it was Norm Jensen, the platoon chief that had ordered to see if we could get those vehicles moved.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, then what?

Blaker: Then once we got the water supply re-established, then we were able to start attacking the fire a little more vigorously; and I stayed pretty much for the longest time on that one side.

Dobrowolsky: And this would have been on the west?

Blaker: The west side basically where it would have been knew to be the seat of the fire.

Dobrowolsky: By “the seat”, kind of the hot spot.

Blaker: The hot – the main part of the fire; the other crews then started dragging hoses out and attacking from other directions. And at that point then, as I stated in my fire statement, I was just assigned a variety of tasks until the incident ended. At one point I was – near to the end of the incident, I was up on the dike with a two-and-a-half inch hose training it down onto the building.

Dobrowolsky: Well, maybe we could just look at that map again.

Blaker: It would have been up on this road here.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is the road to the south end of the building, or it looks roughly to the south, maybe southwest, yes.

Blaker: It comes in from here and comes up behind the generating station –

Dobrowolsky: Behind the diesel plant.

Blaker: The diesel plant and the generating station, and then, around, and it comes back down. And as far as I know, that’s all still there.

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Blaker: So, we had parked a pumper up here.

Dobrowolsky: Right on the road opposite the building?

Blaker: Right on the road, and then, we were just training the hose downward to what I would now call just the east end of the building. So, quite often you end up getting a variety of tasks. You end up jumping around a far bit on the scene, and you do a lot of different tasks. At one point, we were hauling plans and papers and stuff, books, into the work trailer that was almost adjacent to the diesel shacks.

Because there was some sort of an office in there, and we were hauling a bunch of the stuff out of the offices, I would imagine that is where they came from. I just ended up more on the tail end of it of hauling all the stuff into the office, trying to save some of the plans and pictures and books and just get them away from the fire scene and the water.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is while the fire was still being fought some of these things were being taken out?

Blaker: Some of these things were being taken out; it is part of our mandate, not only just to put out the fire, but to try and mitigate the whole circumstance of the smoke damage, the water damage, whether it's in an industrial building or a private home.

And it was just one of the lessons that I still carry from my first night of training back in 1985 of the fire chief then Doug Row had stated, he said, "It doesn't matter what the house looks like, it's still somebody's home, and you try to do as much as you can to cover up all the possessions and just to try and lessen the damage because, it's not always just the damage from the fire but from the heat, smoke and the water, as well." So, this is what we were doing, trying to do, I'm sure a lot of the stuff may have been on computer on microfiche, but there was still all the hard copy maps and drawings and stuff that we tried to save.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me about communications. You were saying you were assigned a variety of tasks. Now, do you have some kind of a radio in your helmet, or would your platoon chief or captain come up and tell you things, or how did that all work? Who makes those decisions?

Blaker: Generally the on-scene commander at the start of this scene would have been the platoon chief. He was the ranking officer on scene; and at that point, I'm not sure if Clive assumed command from Norm or let Norm continue. So, that's generally – there is one on-scene commander. It's his show. He knows how he wants it done. The initial crew is going to have portable radios, and he's going to be giving orders to us by a radio; but then a lot of times batteries go dead soon, because you're using the radio so much, and it just ends up being a "Hey, you." They will grab you and tap you on the shoulder and say, "Okay, stop this chore. I want you to do another," and quite often just by virtue of where you happen to be standing at any given moment can result in a different chore for you.

Dobrowolsky: So, give me an idea of what it was like at the scene. Like you said at the beginning, you know, there was this orange and black flame. It was – I gather the fire still wasn't at its peak when you first arrived.

Blaker: No, it was still building, and it obviously – as we know it went through pretty much the whole building. Like I say, I stayed on pretty much for the entire event on the west end of the building. There were definitely different jobs that I did, but most of it was kind of based around that end of the building. I did get up onto the roadway part way up what I'm calling "the dike"; and this is where we were training the two-and-a-half-inch line down onto the building. I was there for just a short while, but most of it was at the west end.

And then, our night shift crew – we were relieved at, I believe eight or nine o'clock in the morning; and the majority of the fire had been knocked down, and the day shift people were coming in, as well as a lot of the volunteers were still there. And because we're – I guess being the first-in crew, we were the ones that were expending the greatest amount of energy in the shortest amount of time. So, it's just "Rotate us out," because we know that we still had to come back that night for our next night shift. So, it's just time to rotate the crews.

Dobrowolsky: So, as the fire was increasing to its peak, is it like – well, I'm assuming there would be heat. Is it noisy? Do the flames make a lot of crackling? Were there things crashing in the building or –

Blaker: There is a noise, and it's just a cacophony of sounds. There is some from the fire. You're going to get crackling. There are people shouting. The pumps are running on the trucks, which are fairly loud. So, it just all comes into one big noise, and while you're doing – you tend to block a lot of it out. You're just kind of concentrating on what you're doing. Yes, we get so used to hearing the pumps running and the radio traffic because it's not only on just hand-held portables, but there's loudspeakers on the trucks as well. So, you know, you hear it kind of across the whole field.

Dobrowolsky: So, you get used to just kind of putting your blinkers on and focusing on your part of it?

Blaker: Yes, in a manner of speaking, yes, you just kind of drown out the extraneous noise and just working with –

Dobrowolsky: And activity.

Blaker: And activity, yes, because there is so much going on. It may be a crude term but we call it just "bodies", not to be confused with casualties but able bodies. So, there are bodies moving all over the place, doing different tasks, that it's just a buzz. You just try to concentrate on the task at hand.

Dobrowolsky: So, about how many people do you think would have been there during the maximum peak of activity?

Blaker: It looked like – I was looking through the list here, and it looked like there were about 30 people.

Dobrowolsky: And that would have been a combination of full-time crew of both on-call and on-duty and the volunteers.

Blaker: And the volunteers, yes, and then, there were the trucks coming in and out from the – I believe it was Yukon Water Service had supplied one or two of their tankers for doing the water shuttle for filling up those portable tanks. So, I believe there was about 30 people on the scene, as well as there was Yukon Ambulance Service was there with one of their ambulances just on scene in case of any firefighter injuries.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, that makes a lot of sense.

Blaker: Right, and as a matter of fact, I did end up having to get checked out in the ambulance. I don't even recall what time it was. It may have been 6:00, 7:00 in the morning, but I was just starting to have some chest pain; and the chief just immediately said, "There's an ambulance there. Go get checked." As it ended up, it was just strain on my chest muscles from pulling two-and-a-half-inch hoses, which are very heavy; and it just kind of overdid it. It wasn't a heart thing, but they did check me out with the heart monitors and a quick once-over in the back of the ambulance, and then, I was ready to go again. But it is something that is always – it's always in kind of the forefront is firefighter safety; and one of the things that happens at a lot of scenes, especially outside, is if there's going to be a fatality on the scene, a lot of times it's a heart attack from the over-exertion. So, that's something that we just kind of always watch for, and Clive had noticed this and sent me to the ambulance.

Dobrowolsky: So, what about protective gear? I don't know a lot about fire fighting equipment. I still have that kind of kid's idea, you know, the helmet and the slickers.

Blaker: Our gear has dramatically changed since, say, the time of my father. In his time, it was the old-style fire helmet with the beaver tail, the big tail down the back to keep the water off your neck, a canvas coat and a pair of rubber hip boots; and that was pretty much it. A lot of times they didn't even have breathing apparatus. Now our gear consists of coat and pants made out of fire-resistant materials, one you may know the name of is Nomex; new helmets with good thermal liners in them, face shields, proper breathing apparatus. We call it "self-contained breathing apparatus."

Dobrowolsky: So, would that involve actually carrying a tank of air with you, or it would be more of a filter-type arrangement?

Blaker: No, it's got a backpack tank similar to what you see on a scuba diver. It has a tank and a regulator and a face piece; and again, it's made of fire-resistant materials, and they weigh about – I think they're about 35 pounds. That's what you have on your back, plus the weight of "bunker gear", as we call it. If you were going into the building, you definitely would have had to wear breathing apparatus. If you're on the upwind side of the fire so you're away from the toxins, then generally it's just your bunker gear and no self-contained breathing apparatus.

Dobrowolsky: So, I'm going to just quickly switch sides here.

Side B

Dobrowolsky: Okay, side two of an interview with Dennis Blaker, and I'm going to do something I meant to do at the beginning of the interview and I forgot. In advance of this interview I had agreed with Clive Sparks and yourself that we wouldn't discuss the cause of fire or anything that might affect any ongoing insurance investigations.

Blaker: Right, I agree with that.

Dobrowolsky: just wanted to get that on the record so that you realize that I'm not going to ask you any trick questions on that subject.

Blaker: Right, I agree with that.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were describing when we left off all the gear that you were wearing and your heavy clothing, your tank, dragging this what seems like a very heavy hose; and are they really awkward, these hoses?

Blaker: They are when they're charged.

Dobrowolsky: And they're under pressure with water.

Blaker: Under pressure with water, they're very heavy and very long, and you do have to get them from one side to another. We don't want to move them too often just because of that fact that they're very heavy. If you're going any more than just a few feet, then we would have to shut down that line, move it, and then, recharge and bring it back up to pressure.

Dobrowolsky: So, you would need a few people to do this?

Blaker: In most cases, sometimes you just end up having to do it yourself.

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Blaker: And probably I must have done it at some point in there and just pulled some muscles.

Dobrowolsky: So, I guess weight training would be a good idea if you want to be a firefighter.

Blaker: I would think so, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, at what point in the evening did you feel like, "Okay, the worst is over. This is kind of under control"?

Blaker: I would say probably 7:00, 8:00 in the morning, we knew that it was not nearly as raging as it was. It was calming down. The biggest part of the destruction had happened and now we were getting into the, it's called the "mop up" portion, and that means going through, finding hot spots, getting into other areas that we weren't able to access before. So, it's not the full, raging inferno now but now down into, you know, smoke is still definitely coming out, but it's not as severe.

Dobrowolsky: So, you could actually go into the building and start –

Blaker: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: – attacking spots, or did that happen later?

Blaker: I never did get into the building myself.

Dobrowolsky: By that time your shift would have been over.

Blaker: The shift was over; and like I say, I can't quite recall what time it was that we were relieved, 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning, and he said, "Okay, you guys go home." We all continued, but it had definitely settled down a lot; but, like I say, I never did get into the building at any point during the event.

Dobrowolsky: So, I guess kind of with the coming of daylight, was really when the fire – there was a sense that the fire was subsiding.

Blaker: Yes, it seemed to be, kind of the coinciding time that night was over and in a manner of speaking, so was the fire. Sometimes it takes longer doing the mop up than the actual containment and extinguishment, just because you're now able to get in there and start really rooting around and going for the hot spots to make sure that they are out, because we definitely don't want to be coming back again.

Dobrowolsky: So, initially there would have, I guess, been the sense of "Let's keep this – this building is not probably not going to make it or not a lot of this building and we have to just keep this from spreading," was that –

Blaker: That's always a consideration of any of the fires, you know, if we get a major incident at whether it's an industrial or a private home is to obviously to put the fire out within the fire building but also to protect "exposures" is what we call it.

Dobrowolsky: And these are the surrounding structures.

Blaker: Surrounding structures, vehicles, whatever, anything else that can keep the fire going. So, it's get rid of the fire first, the main body of the fire. Then at the same time, you want to be watching the exposures.

Dobrowolsky: So, at the time that you were going through all this I gather there was a fair bit of activity on the Yukon Energy side. You probably heard some of the stories after of all the manoeuvres to try and keep the electricity on with –

Blaker: I heard, like I was saying before about there's such a din of noise and activity that you try not to focus on any one thing, but I do recall just hearing that they were, I'm trying to think of the word, "shunting" – they were shunting power to another substation to try and keep the grid up, and I just remember; that and it seemed to be there was something across the river just downstream.

Dobrowolsky: The Riverside substation, yes.

Blaker: Yes, and I remember them talking about shunting power over there; and I guess I was probably even thinking about it myself, because we're out on the fire. If we lose power, you know, "How long is my place going to, you know, stay warm?" Little things like that kind of do

go through your mind a bit that you're always wondering, you know, "Okay, I'm out here looking after this mess. Who's looking after my stuff at home."

So, it probably did kind of cross my mind that, to hear that the Yukon Energy people were doing this shunting and moving power around, keeping everybody else in power and having lights and heat; because I can't remember how cold it was at that time, but it was the end of October.

Dobrowolsky: It turned out that this was an epic fire. I mean, this did make the national news. Would you say this is perhaps the biggest fire you've ever worked on, or how does it compare with others?

Blaker: It's up there for sure. In my day now, there's been the Yukon Energy fire, there's been two airport hangars, the SAAN store.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, the SAAN store. I forgot about that one, yes.

Blaker: So, they're all up there.

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Blaker: Now, I don't always go with, you know, looking at a fire report at dollar loss.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm.

Blaker: It's just that was a big fire, or it's going to put that many people out of work; or at the airport, because I do like airplanes, I was thinking of the different aircraft that were lost in that fire. For me it kind of comes down to a more basic, a personal thing of, you know, what has been lost.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm.

Blaker: But also, being a firefighter is how big it was, and, in some ways, we are all here for the greater good; but also, I think there is a satisfaction level for us all, as well. So, it was very exciting working on the Yukon Electric fire, as it was on any of the other big incidents that we've had here. It still gets into your core, and that kind of reminds you of, I think, why you're really there in the first place. Yes, the greater good is there, but it's also a primal thing inside as well, I think.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're saying it's a bit of a rush –

Blaker: Definitely

Dobrowolsky: – to pit yourself against something so big and ferocious.

Blaker: Yes, it is. Throughout history, there has always been euphemisms and stuff for the fire itself, called "the beast"; and I guess in some ways you're battling the beast. And people say,

“Aren’t you scared of it?” And generally no, because it’s – for a lot of it, it’s a known quantity. You know what fire behaviour is and for the most part how it’s going to act. So, you can counteract; but it’s still exciting.

Dobrowolsky: Any final words? Any other things that I haven’t thought of to ask you that you think we should maybe include in this?

Blaker: Just the odd final thoughts, just thinking that it was definitely one of the bigger fires that I’ve seen around here, and I’ve lived here all my life. I think it is going to stick in a lot of peoples’ memories, you know, for a long time and it’s probably a very good idea of what’s happening today of cataloguing and recording some of the events that have shaped Whitehorse and the history. And it’s nice to see that somebody’s taken the initiative to do that. And I personally like Whitehorse history, it’s just one of my little passions. So, I don’t mind getting in and doing this and seeing now the relevance of it, of getting it on tape and a written record, and then, it is there; because I did go to the archives on occasion looking for things, and now somewhere down the road someone else can.

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you very much for this. This was excellent.

Blaker: You’re welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Bob Burrell

Bob Burrell is the SCADA electrician with the Yukon Energy Corporation. At the time of the fire, he was still with YECL handling all aspects of communication: radios, telephones, and control systems for power plants. Bob described his work on the night of the fire as follows: “I knew that what was most critical out of my bag of goods was communications. I knew that I had to try and get the phones back and radios working, and that’s where I put my focus.”

There was no urgency in his voice ... it sounded like something was maybe smoking, smouldering. I thought maybe it was just some wires had burnt up. I really did not think it was anything serious ... So, I’m taking my time driving through town, and I drive down Fourth Avenue, and I get to the corner by the Klondike, the boat; and off in the distance, I see quite a bit of red in the sky. At that point in time, I sped up a little bit. I thought, “It really is a fire!”

Recorded May 27, 2003 at Yukon Energy offices in Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Bob Burrell, 23 December 2003. Additional comments in [square brackets].

Side A

Dobrowolsky: It is May the 27th, 2003. I am at the Yukon Energy building in Whitehorse, talking to Bob Burrell. Just to get going, could you tell me when and where you were born?

Burrell: I was born in 1957 in Bentley, Alberta, a small town in central Alberta not too far from Lacombe or Red Deer. And I moved to Whitehorse in 1965, my Grade 2 year, and I did all of my schooling in Whitehorse. I lived in Porter Creek pretty much my whole life. I’ve been on sabbaticals while I’m out at school, and I worked for a few years in Alberta, as well.

Dobrowolsky: Great. So, maybe we could start out by talking about your employment history. Did you have any special training before you started with Yukon Electrical [YECL]?

Burrell: Yes, I was in business for myself before. In the early ’80s I owned a truck with my mom and dad. We had a small trucking firm. And I went back to school in 1985 and took electronics in Vancouver at Vancouver Vocational. I took electronics and communications.

Then I worked for three years for a computer company in Calgary, a computer company that I don't think is in existence any longer, but it was a computer company called Wang Computers.

Dobrowolsky: I remember those.

Burrell: At one time they were a fairly large company, but as technology has grown, they went away. The home PC basically took over the market. And in 1990, I actually was reading the *Calgary Herald*, which is where I was living, and I saw a YECL job posting. And because this

was home for me, I actually phoned my dad – my mom and dad still live here – I phoned them and asked them to have dad come down and see a friend of ours, Bucky Koepke, who I knew was working in this building and ask to talk to the person who was in charge. I had introduced myself to him on a holiday and his name was Terry Rafferty. Dad came down and was talking to Bucky Koepke, who is a long-time friend of the family, and Bucky said, “Well, here’s Terry right here, you can talk to him.”

And Terry said, “Yes, basically get your application in. You’re qualified.”

So, they phoned me immediately. I applied; and over a course of a few interviews and time, I ended up with the job and in August of ’90 I started.

Dobrowolsky: And what were your duties?

Burrell: Well, when I first got here, our control system, our SCADA System – System Control and Data Acquisition is what that stands for – our SCADA System was an older, pretty much at the tail end of its life. I spent quite a bit of time maintaining that, trying to keep it running. Also, telephones, radio communications. At that time, YECL, we had all of the small plants, what we called the small plants, which is the communities with diesel plants: Pelly, Stewart; of course, Faro, which is still part of Yukon Energy, but Beaver Creek, Destruction Bay, all of those plants, Watson Lake. And I spent quite a bit of time working on the control systems, the programmable controllers, which is the small industrial computers that run the plant, that automate the plant.

Dobrowolsky: So did that mean you spent a fair bit of time on the road, or were you kind of in charge of communicating with the communities?

Burrell: No, we all spent quite a bit of time on the road in the YECL days. My position in the 12, 13 years I’ve been here, I’ve driven as much as about 40,000 kilometers in a year to as few as about 15,000. It usually averages somewhere around 25,000 kilometers a year in the 13 years I’ve been here. We all do quite a bit of road work.

Dobrowolsky: So, over time since you first started, you mentioned they had this older, out of date SCADA System. Was that pretty much the base system the whole time you were here, or did that change?

Burrell: That changed out in about ’92. The old system, the original system, went away in I think it was ’92, and we started replacing it with a newer system, of which we still have some components in the system. The new system, at that time, was built by a company called Landis & Gyr. Of course, the main computer part of that control system was in the hydro plant that burnt in ’97. We resurrected it out of the fire and kept it running until basically this new building was up and running, and then we transferred over to another new system that is built by, at that time it was called Quindar. Now they’re calling themselves Survalent [Technology]. But our pieces of equipment that are out in the field are mostly still the original Landis & Gyr or the Landis & Gyr equipment from that ’92 upgrade.

Dobrowolsky: I am not very well versed in matters electrical. So, you mentioned that this is kind of the overall system for controlling communications with communities, as well as the operations of the units. Just give me the “Idiot’s Guide to SCADA.”

Burrell: Okay, SCADA basically, we have a room upstairs in this building called System Control Centre. Short-term we all call it SCC. In that room, there are four computer screens, and they have the ability to look at all of our major plants in a graphical way and operate all of the units. So, using the hydro plant that burnt, we have three hydro units in there. They’re called WH1, WH2 and WH3 – Whitehorse 1, Whitehorse 2 and Whitehorse 3. They can look at their screen, see whether a unit is on line, whether it’s producing electricity, how much electricity it’s producing, whether there are any alarms in the plant; and they can also control it. If it’s not on line, they can put it on line. They can start it. They can stop it. They can do a number of things. They can tell whether somebody has walked in the building through door alarms. It’s basically a remote-control system. Along with the control, which is the system control [the SC part of SCADA], the data acquisition [the DA part of SCADA] it keeps a running record. It does it on paper at a printer so that we can look at a historical [record] when we have a fault. Let’s say for some reason the lights go out, we can go and look and see what happened first.

Dobrowolsky: So, would this be like a graph-type thing, like a cardiogram?

Burrell: It has the capability of doing graph work, but no, this is usually a printed document. It says that this breaker, the piece of equipment that allows the electricity from that unit on the line, opened before this one. Then we can piece it together and say “It was caused by this;” because sometimes you get a cascade failure. One problem will cause another one, will cause another one; and by the time it’s all said and done, it’s a very big problem, and you’re not sure where it started. This SCADA System maintains a record so that hopefully you can figure out where it started and not have to go through it again in five minutes.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, that’s remarkable! So, as you mentioned, you started working in communications, working with SCADA, working with the communities; and I assume over the years as the equipment upgraded so would your experience have. So, maybe we can lead up to the time to the fall of ’97. Do you do shift work, or do you work regular days; or where were you at in your schedule of work?

Burrell: I work regular days, typically five days a week, eight hours a day, 8:00 to 4:30. The particular day of the fire, I know exactly what I was doing the day before the fire, and of course, I know what I was doing the day of the fire. That particular day, I was working at our Takhini Switching Station, which is Mile 5 on the Mayo Road. I don’t know what Kilometre it is on the Klondike [Highway].

Dobrowolsky: I know the one.

Burrell: Like I said, I grew up here; it’s the “Mayo Road.”

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Burrell: I was out there assisting one of my fellow YECL employees looking at protection upgrade. The protection is the type of equipment that if there is a problem on the line, somewhere in the electrical system, it will automatically open a breaker or remove that problem from the system. It may mean an outage for a customer, but it's better than an outage for everybody.

So, we were at Takhini Switching Station looking at some protection. Typically I work till 4:30. Well, that day his shift was 8:00 to 5:00. We worked right through till 4:30 or five o'clock there. I was the electrician on call or the electrical person on call, and I live in Porter Creek. So, between Takhini Switching Station and here is my house. So, at five o'clock I just drove home.

Dobrowolsky: Straight home, sure.

Burrell: I kept my truck at home that night. So, my personal truck was sitting in the parking lot right beside the building that burnt, and I had my work truck at home. Then at about 2:30 in the morning, I got a phone call. The phone call came from my supervisor at the time.
[Note: The call was more likely at 3:30 a.m., see Mike Hannah interview.]

Dobrowolsky: And who was that?

Burrell: His name was Al Hebrada. He was an Alberta Power person. He wasn't here for very long. He was here for a couple of years, but he was my supervisor at the time; and he called me, and he said, "Basically," he said, "there's a fire at the plant. Could you come in?"

I mean, there was just no urgency in his voice, and I did not expect what I saw. There was no – it almost made it sound like, "Well, we have something smoking."

Dobrowolsky: This little small thing, yes, a wire –

Burrell: Well, it sounded like something was maybe smoking, smouldering. I thought maybe it was just some wires had burnt up. I really did not think it was anything serious. At that point in time, I was living on Evergreen Crescent in Porter Creek. So, I came down Mountainview Drive into town. It was 2:30 in the morning, and I'm not really fully awake. I'd only had an hour, hour-and-a-half of sleep at that time. So, I'm taking my time driving through town, and I drive down Fourth Avenue, and I get to the corner by the *Klondike*, the boat; and off in the distance, I see quite a bit of red in the sky. At that point in time, I sped up a little bit. I thought, "It really is a fire!" I mean, there was just no urgency in his voice, and I did not expect what I saw.

Then, of course, I get down here, and my personal truck was – well, at one time, I guess the flames were right underneath my personal truck. I get here, and they'd already rolled it out of the way, because they couldn't figure out how to start it even though the keys were in it. That's just one of the little – it was sitting in the middle of the yard. So, I jumped in it and got it out of the way, and then I went to work.

Of course, the work being trying to re-establish communications. We had no phones. We had no radios, because the System Control Centre, which is now in this building [the new Yukon Energy

office building], was in the building that was on fire; and, of course, so were all of the controls. So, cell phones played a pretty major role in keeping the lights on the existing customers. We moved our main operator, our system control operator, into the only other hydro plant here in town. We had to get him a radio. We had to gear him up. He had no phone or anything, so everything was being done by radio.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you say “the other hydro plant,” do you mean –

Burrell: WH 4, this building here [pointing to a plan].

Dobrowolsky: Oh, right, the fourth wheel, okay.

Burrell: The fourth wheel, because that was the only producing electricity plant that we had here in Whitehorse. So, at least he had some control.

Dobrowolsky: Let’s back up a little. You got the call from your supervisor. You came to the site. Who was already here at that time?

Burrell: The fire department obviously; Guy Morgan was already here. I don't believe Al Hebrada was here yet. Doug Smith, I think, was here, YECL lineman; and Doug is still in town. I didn’t really look around. The emergency vehicle – no, it wasn’t here. We never brought it in. They were mad at us for that. That's right. But the fire department was definitely here. They weren’t doing a whole lot, because they were having problems getting water. But there were quite a number of employees here already. I don't remember them all. Basically, the ones who lived closer were here is about what it amounts to.

Dobrowolsky: That makes sense. So, the fire department was here, but I understand that although there were hydrants on the site, the actual valves were inside the building that was burning, that turned them on?

Burrell: That's correct.

Dobrowolsky: Right, and I guess the firemen probably also had to make sure that the power was shut down in the building.

Burrell: And the fire pump that feeds them was in that building, and the fuel that ran the fire pump was feeding the fire. There was a break in that fuel line, so there were a multitude reasons why that fire pump couldn’t feed water; and even though we were right beside a river, for some reason, I don't know whether it was fish reasons or whether they couldn’t lift the water out of the river, but they couldn’t take the water out of the river. They ended up hauling water to the fire trucks. But like I said, I was busy with communications at the time, so I didn’t spend a lot of time around, watching the firemen do their work. Mind you, I don't think anyone did. We were all somewhat busy with chores.

Dobrowolsky: So, was there anybody kind of coordinating? I’m just amazed, when I read about this, at how everybody seemed to do exactly the right thing and showed this tremendous gift for

improvising stuff, all to keep the power going. Was it just everybody drawing on their experience of, “This is the most logical thing to do,” or was someone kind of directing?

Burrell: There was no one person I would say was directing the operation as a whole. Everybody kind of knew their part in it. I mean, I knew that what was most critical out of my bag of goods was communications. I knew that I had to try and get the phones back and radios working, and that’s where I put my focus.

Guy Morgan knew that he had to try and keep the lights on. He is the lead operator for the System Control Centre. So, he spent his time dealing with that. He was basically organizing people to get to our Aishihik Hydro Plant, because now it became a 24-hour-a-day plant. It had to be manned. Typically it’s manned, we have a person on site, but it’s only an eight-hour shift, and they can be called out if it’s required.

Well, at this point in time, we no longer have our SCADA System. So, we can’t see the plant for the off-hours. So, it had to be manned; and our only communications with them was via a telephone system that went through our [power line carrier] – one end of which was in the generating plant, that was burning. So we had to send a SAT (satellite) phone to Aishihik with the first relief operator. On the night of the fire, Guy communicated with Aishihik by radio. For the first weeks after the fire, Whitehorse communicated with Aishihik by both radio and SAT phone.] Note: BB later corrected the information in the section after reviewing the transcript.

Dobrowolsky: And this was essentially the person who was on regular eight-hour shift there. You called him out and –

Burrell: He was there and called out, and then, because it became a 24-hour plant they sent a second person out so that they could run two, 12-hour shifts. Then I think as the recovery was going on, four or five days later they sent out another two to relieve the guys who had been out there.

Dobrowolsky: Working these desperately long shifts.

Burrell: Working 12 hours; I mean, we all worked long shifts, everybody. It didn’t matter whether you were out there or whether you were in here, we all worked some pretty long shifts; but everybody kind of knew their part. I mean, even the supervisors, everybody knew that, “This is where we have to go. We’re going to have to run diesels to maintain power we’ve lost so much generation.”

We tracked down people to operate the diesels. In our typical scenario, the same people who work at the Aishihik Hydro Plant work in the diesel plant. Well, now that you’ve got twice as many people at the Aishihik Hydro Plant, you have that many fewer to run the diesel plant. So, there were some logistic problems, there was no doubt; and everybody got a little bit of overtime.

Dobrowolsky: A little, sure.

Burrell: I believe the first day I worked 17 hours. I started at 2:30 in the morning; and by five o'clock that night, I had phones in a couple of locations on site, Northwestel phones. [These were in the diesel plant and in S-150, the substation next door.] I certainly had some help. I had two workers from Northwestel who really busted their behinds all day.

Dobrowolsky: And who were they?

Burrell: Ron Bianowsky, who is now a supervisor with Northwestel, and the other guy, I can't remember his name. It's Dave [Schille], but I can't remember his last name; but they worked their tails off, and they really did a good job and I thanked them for it. And I made sure their supervisors knew that I thanked them for it, because they went above and beyond. They put about a 12-hour day in. They didn't start at 2:30. They started at eight o'clock. That was the difference. But by that night, we had phones back on site; and by the end of the next day, we had multiple phones on site. I mean, the first night we had three or four working so that the people who were trying to keep the power on didn't have to rely solely on cell phones. It was a bit of a long day.

Dobrowolsky: And just all that stress, yes, it must have been amazing! Just to get back to the chronology, you were saying that the first thing you did was setting up an operator and communications by the fourth wheel site.

Burrell: Yes, that was basically what I had done.

Dobrowolsky: Right away.

Burrell: Yes, I mean, we knew – and my office was actually in the building that burnt. I had – myself and J. Allen were in the – it would be the southwest corner of the building right effectively where the fire started. It started right below our offices, and obviously we couldn't get to anything that was in our offices. So, basically you kind of glanced at the corner of the building every once in a while, trying to remember what you were losing; because you knew it was all gone. That corner of the building was burning at 2:30 in the morning when I got here, and it was burning at five o'clock at night when I left here, or six o'clock at night, whatever it was. Diesel fuel had been feeding the fire, and there was our telephone entrance room, which is where Northwestel brought their wires into our building, and then, we have to have some kind of method of protection to stop from putting an electrical voltage back on the wires. So, this all came into a little closet in that corner, and there was a thick rubber mat on the floor. Well, that burnt all day that mat. Every time I drove by, and I was driving back and forth on this little stretch of road, getting pieces from wherever I could get them and driving to Number 4 and setting it up; and every time I drove by, I could look in my office, because the wall was already down, and see the flames flickering away in there. But we were busy. It didn't really have a lot of time to even, sort of grasp what was going on. We were busy with the chores at hand, and there wasn't a lot of time to sit back and take a deep breath and say, "Wow, where do we go now?"

Dobrowolsky: Yes, you were already there. So, where were you setting up all these communications? You mentioned you got it at the –

Burrell: Number 4, I wasn't able to get phones in Number 4 until later. What happened was because the existing wiring for telephone and so on that go to Number 4 go through the hydro plant that burnt, they go through the lower floor; so obviously I couldn't go down there and do any work. It was on fire. And even after the fire was out, we still couldn't go in for a few days. So, what we did, the Northwestel cable location is right near our existing gate. That's where it came into the building. Looking at it in a basic –

Dobrowolsky: Sorry, “by the existing gate”?

Burrell: By the gate –

Dobrowolsky: Oh, out to the property?

Burrell: Yes, this picture is the old way we used to come in here right direct off the South Access.

Dobrowolsky: Right, I remember that, right.

Burrell: Where our gate is now is approximately where Northwestel's cable came.

Dobrowolsky: Okay.

Burrell: It was similar to this. I don't believe our road was there yet. I don't remember when the South Access upgrade was, but I think it was after the fire.

So, we looked at it; and I might have touched based with supervisors, but basically, I was making a lot of decisions on where we were going to do this. We ran a new cable around. No, the gate was there, because we had to bring in a backhoe with a hammer to get across the road. So, the road was already there. So, the South Access upgrade was first.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, okay.

Burrell: So, we jackhammered across the road with a backhoe, sunk a cable, went around the corner of the diesel plant and ran it into this end of the diesel plant.

Dobrowolsky: So, the diesel plant is this big building in the foreground of our little site photo here, and you went around the east side and into the northeast corner, the diesel generating station?

Burrell: Yes, and then, we started running cables from this new location to – obviously we got phones working in the diesel plant. We got a couple of phones working there. Then we ran a new cable out of the diesel plant and into this switching station. Actually, this is a substation. This is what we call “S-150,” Whitehorse Rapids Substation, and I had a phone –

Dobrowolsky: So, this is going again to the northwest of the diesel plant?

Burrell: This picture calls it "Whitehorse Rapids Substation".

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Burrell: Our designation is "S-150", and we got phones working in S-150, because from an operator standpoint, a person controlling the system, which they had been doing with a computer graphical interface, they now had to rely on looking at meters, looking at what's actually happening in the field; and because we couldn't get phones to Number 4, we made a decision late in the day, "Well, maybe we'd better get phones in here. At least they can see some system information. They never actually moved in there, but we still required phones in there; but by that night, we had phones in the two locations, and then, once the fire was out, we ran some wires back into this building and to the building that burnt. All of the connections were in what you would call "the basement floor."

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Burrell: So, they didn't actually get burnt. They were smoke-covered and so on. So, we connected onto wires there that went to Number 4. So, we got phones back to 4 [this was by November 2nd], phones back across the river. This is the Riverside Switching Station [S-171]; and because those are located in the basement of this building, at that point, we started to get the phones scattered around again.

Dobrowolsky: So, about when was it that you – you were saying it was the second day, the second or third day after the fire that you actually got the phone lines into the subfloor or whatever of the burnt building?

Burrell: I'm guessing. I should have brought my book. No, my book burnt. I have a little notebook that I kept track of things in, and that's around somewhere. I've moved offices about five times since then. I don't know whether I could find that one. But I'm guessing by memory – it may be wrong, but I'm guessing about the third day. I don't think the second day we were allowed in the building.

Dobrowolsky: It was still dangerous?

Burrell: Yes, well, they were still unsure of how solid the floors were and so on.

Dobrowolsky: And probably still investigating the cause of the fire.

Burrell: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, we're continuing on talking about the first few days after the fire and various steps you were taking in re-establishing communications. I heard this anecdote about running aerials over doorways as part of your whole improvisation –

Burrell: Well, we did put an antenna over the doorway in the diesel plant. Obviously the diesel plant became a much more important asset than it had been in a few years, partly because we all

had to move into it. I mean, the whole maintenance staff basically moved back into the diesel plant.

Dobrowolsky: And there were offices there, or did you just kind of shove desks and tables here and there?

Burrell: We just kind of shoved desks and tables everywhere. Eventually we acquired a trailer that has been around town quite a bit, that painted trailer that was over by the skateboard park. That was my office and Al Hammond and Ed Chaplin's office, sitting right outside the diesel plant. We had that office for over two years. We were in that little trailer. I mean, there were a number of things that we had to do. Obviously, we had to be somewhere near the site to continue the work. Yes, I mean we did whatever it took. We had to run a new antenna for the radio in – actually, I don't believe there was a radio in Number 4 when the fire started. That was one of my first projects. I got a radio working in the Number 4 hydro plant so that at least the operators had some method of communicating. We just did what was required, what was needed; and you sort of had to prioritize and say, "Well, this one outweighs that one right now. That's Number 3."

Dobrowolsky: Because those are all urgent and –

Burrell: They're all urgent. There wasn't a lot of, for lack of a better term for them, senior managers, hovering, telling us what to do. They realized that most of us knew our jobs and let us do our jobs, and that was actually very nice. I mean ...

Dobrowolsky: Well, a great credit to the staff to be trusted.

Burrell: Well, I suppose they had other worries.

Dobrowolsky: Well, yes.

Burrell: I mean what I might deem important they might not think is very high on the list, it's all important; and I don't know how they were thinking at the time obviously, but basically most of us were allowed to run our portion of the job and just do it. Obviously we all tried to run it the best way we could. Sometimes it wasn't the cheapest, but it had to be done. That really wasn't an issue.

Our administration office at the time was still [YECL], so a lot of administration was happening through the First and Elliot office. So, our finance department was down there. I mean, by the end of the day we had what we call "J" work orders. They are an emergency repair work order, and it was just like we had a number that we could go out and buy stuff, whatever was required, buy it. Everybody had a fairly eventful day. Probably the ones who had the biggest problem and the most time to consider their losses were the new people on site, the Yukon Energy staff; because they didn't really have any maintenance items to do, and they're sitting there, watching the brand-new building burn. I mean –

Dobrowolsky: Because their offices had only been built two years before.

Burrell: One year. They were finished in '96 and the fire was '97.

Dobrowolsky: While we're on dates, before we started this interview you very kindly took me through when everything was being built. So, maybe we can just quickly review that again. You were saying the original hydro 1 and 2 plant was built in, was it '58?

Burrell: 1958 – and that “1958” sign is still on the end of the building. You can still see it when you look at it. It's right here above the door on the end of the building.

Dobrowolsky: And then, hydro 3 came in.

Burrell: I believe hydro number 3 was added in 1968, I'm not positive on that one, but I believe it was '68; and then, there was an office addition on the back end of basically where hydro 3 is on what would be the southeast corner of the building, and I believe that was added in 1986.

And some of our existing managers were in that building. Some were in the First and Elliot offices. People like Hector Campbell were in this building, Les Boisvert, who was basically the maintenance and operational people, right up to the senior manager level, were in this building; and the others, administration-type people were in the First and Elliot. So, we had a receptionist. We had water people. We had a couple of water engineers, Ron Gee, who is still with us; John Murray, who is retired; Hector Campbell, Les Boisvert was in there, Ric Seely, Guy Morgan. Ken Sawyer was in that corner of the office.

Some of them were upstairs in the SCC area, and then, of course, the SCC, the existing System Control Centre of that time. That SCC upgrade happened to the existing 1986 building. They upgraded the upstairs in it in '92 and moved the [SCC] up there, and that's how it was sitting until '97, until the fire, except for, of course, the 1996 Yukon Energy addition, which was added to the building, but it was really kind of a separate part. We, at that time, were still [YECL], even though the discussion was happening whether [YECL] was going to get management contract or whether Yukon Energy was going to go into self-management. That was during the build in '96; and then, of course, in '97 it was already known that we were going to be direct management, and it was happening as of January 1st, '98 or December 31st, '97. I believe it was December 31st, '97, actually.

So, there were a few tensions between managers more than personnel. I mean, even to this day, the workers, people down at my level get along fine with the people at my level in [YECL]. I believe there might be the odd manager that doesn't like to talk to their counterpart on the other side, but that's their problem. I mean, the workers have a very good relationship between the two companies.

Dobrowolsky: So, you knew fairly early on that you would be moving over to Yukon Energy. Was that sort of already well established?

Burrell: Yes, I had actually already signed my paper that I was moving over, because I signed, saying that “I am accepting the position with Yukon Energy.” Basically how they made their decision was if you did more than 50 percent of your work on what was known as Yukon Energy

assets, you were offered a job with Yukon Energy. If you did less than 50 percent of your work on Yukon Energy's assets, you remained with [YECL]; and my work was mostly Yukon Energy assets. And I remember signing my acceptance of the position in the new Yukon Energy building. I was one of the first ones that signed over, partly because of all the [YECL] employees of that time, I probably spent the most time with the Yukon Energy people, because I did a lot of computer work, as well. That was before we did a lot of hiring-out for our computer work, and now we have full-time computer personnel; but at that time we didn't. So, with my background, they had me do some of that work. I had known Darlene and that bunch from Yukon Energy before. I went up, and I remember sitting there at the desk in that building and signing my paper. And I don't remember how long that was before the fire but probably not very long.

Dobrowolsky: Tell me how long that first intense emergency phase was going on when everybody was working the 10-, 12-, 16-hour days? How long did that kind of immediate crisis phase happen before people could relax a little bit?

Burrell: By my memory, I worked 22 days in a row without a day off. Some of them weren't very long days, four hours, five hours on some of the weekends; but it was 22 days I think without a day off. [Around Remembrance Day}, I was thinking "Okay, I should be able to get a day off now, we're to the point," and I got called in for a problem and came in and fixed it.

It was a Sunday, I know that, and I thought I had got the day off. We had guests. It might have been Remembrance Day. That works about right. That's 10, 12 days into it; and at that point in time, it looked like we were to a point that things were somewhat back to normal and we could relax.

I would say the real intense 10-to-16-hour days were only the first four or so for the real initial hit; and then, there were a number of contractors who were brought in. I mean, we needed help obviously; and, of course, where my focus went after that was getting the SCADA System back up and running.

Side B

Dobrowolsky: So, we're on side 2 of a May 27th interview with Bob Burrell, talking about the great Yukon Energy fire of 1997. While we were talking a little bit about the immediate aftermath, the long, long days everybody was putting in, that whole emergency sense, you were starting to comment about dealing with stress and how the crew was handling that.

Burrell: Well, I think from my perspective, it wasn't really stress so much as it was just busy. My philosophy on it is that if your personality is one such that you like this type of job, the maintenance, the troubleshooting, the emergency response-type person, it's not really as stressful as something you're not enjoying doing. I mean, yes, we put in long days; and there wasn't a lot of time to sit back and relax and take a deep breath, but there was some time. I mean, obviously a person can't run steady for days and days and days. You have to take a few breaks. But I didn't find it that stressful, other than the fact that the more you can get done, the easier it is for everyone else.

It's like when the power goes off, it's fairly important that we get it back on; and that can get pretty stressful, because people want their electricity. In this case, the power never went off. So, we were just trying to maintain that no power going off. So, it wasn't as stressful as probably some of the other situations. It was just duration that began to build on people; and after a week or two of it, I think attitudes started to show it. I mean, people were starting to get a little more owly, due to lack of sleep, long days. It was much easier to bark at someone than probably it was the day before the fire, but that's just life in a busy situation. I don't think anybody became enemies because of it, but I know myself included – maybe myself worse than most, it was, like, it would be very easy to snap and bark at somebody, but –

Dobrowolsky: It's over with quick.

Burrell: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, and I think, from what I can gather, there was this incredible sense of teamwork and working toward a common goal and having to get up and operating and rebuilding sufficiently to get things going.

Burrell: Yes, there certainly was. I think, just before we turned the tape over, we were talking about the SCADA system and the rebuild of the SCADA. What happened with that was once we could get back into the existing building where the SCADA system was, and this was done basically by contractors, Dynamic Systems did it, they pulled all of the pieces out of the existing SCADA master, the computer part of it, and sent everything to an outfit in, I think Vancouver, for hydrostatic cleaning, and then, shipped it all back in. And we rebuilt the SCADA system in the diesel plant. Well, one of the things that has to happen with the SCADA system is it has to be able to communicate with its remote sites; and of course, that's done via either a telephone-type system or wires.

So, after about I would guess it was six days, somewhere in that ballpark, two or three days before we could get into the plant to get the equipment, two or three days to get it shipped to Vancouver, cleaned, sent back and start rebuilding; and I think it was about eight, nine days before we had a SCADA system up and running. We lost the monitor that the operators used, so we rented one from the company that built the SCADA system, Landis & Gyr, and started getting communication lines back to it. Some of that came in through the Northwestel link that the boys had helped me rebuild and some came via hardwire, wire directly off our sites; and most of that was brought in with Northwestel's help, because they had the wire, and they had the people.

I spent quite a bit of my time in that section just sort of organizing, saying, "I need this here. I need this to go from here to here and let me know when it's done." It's not like I had to supervise. It was more organizing, and everybody that I had to deal with did their job and did it extremely well; and I'm sure that anybody who was running any portion of their part of the field would say the same. I mean everybody seemed to work and seemed to do their job with very little prompting.

Dobrowolsky: So, at the same time that you were doing all this jury rigging and setting up temporary systems, they started building a new facility fairly soon after that, didn't they?

Burrell: You mean this building?

Dobrowolsky: Not this building [Yukon Energy offices and SCC] but the replacement for the generating facility.

Burrell: Okay, the replacement generating facility, yes, that was done with the insurance company. Basically what happened there was the insurance company, and there are other people who could talk about that probably better than I can, they basically became the control of how this went back up. Once it was settled, I would think probably within a month, they were tearing down the remains of what was above ground on the hydro plant.

What was below ground, what's at ground floor and down, is all original. I mean there might have been some repairs obviously, but the cement floor that you stand on when you walk in the hydro plant was there before the fire. It may have had some patches and so on, but it's an original floor. And the insurance company basically started that rebuild, and we had very little to do with it. In fact, they asked us to stay out of the building. It became a point that "No, you guys aren't allowed in here."

Dobrowolsky: So, they didn't want any of your expertise in designing or planning or –

Burrell: Not at all, they wanted to do it their way, and that was how it was.

Dobrowolsky: So, then it was finished the following spring, was it?

Burrell: I would guess, yes, that it was probably – I would think it was probably March or April before the hydro plant was back up and running, basically in run mode. I think they had some temporary – they got one or two of the hydros running sort of in a manual mode just to help generate power; but they'd put it on, and they'd just let it run there and operate the system with other – it was just generation, no remote control or anything; and that went on while they were rebuilding the other ones and getting the plant back up and running, and that I don't think took as long. Guy would be a better one to talk to on that. He should have history of that better than I do.

Dobrowolsky: And then, in terms of company relations, I guess there was kind of a year after the fire, they put that wonderful insert in the *Yukon News*, talking about the events of that night and how everyone kept the power going. Then I guess there was a reception or something a few days later to celebrate – well, I guess belatedly, the new facility. Did you feel like the company appreciated all the work and all the effort and all that you put in?

Burrell: Yes, I think at least on the surface they did. The reception you're talking about, there were six of us that were given plaques. I don't know why I got singled out any more than anyone else. As far as I'm concerned, there should have been 40 or 50. Everybody did their job, and why they decided that only six of us ... I don't display my plaque. I don't think it's right. There are other people who did lots of work. Obviously, they appreciated it since they gave me this plaque,

but I don't really feel right that I got one and the person sitting next to me didn't, that type of thing.

Dobrowolsky: It's not something you'd want to hang in your own house?

Burrell: No, I don't think it's fair. Yes, it's nice that they thought I deserved one.

Dobrowolsky: But everyone deserved one?

Burrell: But everyone deserved one. I mean, most of the names I've talked about here received these plaques. Guy Morgan got one, Al Hebrada got one, Doug Smith got one. There were only six of them. I can't remember the other two. Why we all got singled out, I don't know, why we got them and others didn't. Oh, and Mike Hannah got one, obviously; and probably Mike was – Mike made some moves that, for one thing, kept the lights on. Mike was very – from what I hear after – I mean, I didn't have time to talk to Mike that day obviously – he made some very cool, calm moves when you're sitting in a burning building. Obviously the fire was at the far end of the building.

It wasn't a dire emergency, but he had enough wherewithal to remove that plant from the system. Before the SCADA System went down, he walked back in and removed those hydro units, phoned the fire department and exited the building. He only had, I think, one unit on at the time; and I'm sure you'll talk to Mike and get his perspective, but I think he only had one unit on, but he took the few minutes to take it off or the minute to take it off, whatever it took, and supply the power to the system with other units, and then, he left the building and stood outside until the fire department got there, until everybody started showing up. I mean, he made phone calls obviously. He obviously must have let Guy know, because Guy came over, and then, probably Guy used his cell phone to start calling people. So, that's five of the six. I can't remember who the sixth one is. There are records.

Dobrowolsky: Well, it seems like it was a real "trial by fire" with the new company. I mean, here is the direct management thing happening –

Burrell: Oh, there's no doubt.

Dobrowolsky: One of the things that Rob McWilliam said that I found kind of funny, he said, "Well, after going through that, we felt like we could handle anything. I mean, Y2K, so what," although that also had to be all planned for while all this rebuilding and stuff was going on.

Burrell: Well, my background is electronics, and I wasn't worried at all about Y2K. With the equipment we had here, I wasn't concerned. The worst-case scenario is we go into a night or two of operating like we did during the fire. The very worst-case scenario is I mean I knew our hydro units weren't going to go down, because they don't have any electronics in them, a lot of them. Our diesel plant certainly wasn't going to go down, there's no electronics that have a date associated with them. I mean, we were going to keep power on, I wasn't concerned, but that was a world-fed fire.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Burrell: Realistically I had no concerns at all.

Yes, as far as a management thing to take over this facility with a SCADA system that you know is questionable, SCADA is not a cheap thing to change. I believe our '92 upgrade to SCADA was – I'm guessing, I don't know the actual numbers, but I'm thinking it was probably about a two million dollar project. The new system that we have now wasn't quite as bad, because we were able to keep the existing field devices. They're called "RTUs", remote terminal units; and we were able to keep the existing Landis & Gyr RTUs and run them with the new Quindar master. So, all we did after the fire was replace the master.

Dobrowolsky: So, any final words, looking back on that? How does that period of your life figure when you think back, when you look back on that whole period of the fire and the –

Burrell: Was that this lifetime?

Dobrowolsky: (laughter)

Burrell: I actually, in a lot of ways, enjoyed the challenge. There was no doubt some of it was an opportunity to improve things that were wrong. There was definitely a lot of work, and there were a lot of challenges. I think, from the level I look at it, I mean, I'm maintenance staff, I don't have to make the large two million dollar decisions. From my perspective, it was just part of the challenge. It's a part I hope I don't have to do again soon, but I mean I'm sure that if it happened again, that same thing would go on, that it would be met with pretty good people doing their jobs.

From a Yukon Energy standpoint, right in the midst of giving up their management contract that they had with YECL, I suspect that there were a few nights of lost sleep; but they're looking at it from a different perspective than I am. I mean, my perspective is we were keeping the lights on, and we did.

Dobrowolsky: You guys are all amazing. Thank you very much.

Burrell: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Diana Cousins

Diana Cousins was working for Yukon Energy on secondment from the Yukon Government, setting up the corporation's human resources department. At the time of the fire, she was in the midst of conducting job interviews. Her office was destroyed by the fire. Résumés, interview notes and reference checks were all lost and many interviews had to be repeated.

They literally built the offices around us. We just moved in there [200 Range Road] with begged and borrowed furniture from Asset Control, from the Yukon Government; and we set ourselves up where we thought we were going to be, and the guys came in and they built the walls around us, and we just carried on.

Recorded July 23, 2003 at Ms Cousin's home in Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Ms Cousins on 28 September 2003. Additional information in [square brackets].

Dobrowolsky: It's July the 23rd, 2003, Helen Dobrowolsky speaking to Diana Cousins about the fire at the Yukon Energy generating plant in 1997. So, first of all, an easy one, could you please tell me when and where you were born?

Cousins: I was born in Victoria just off the Naval Base; my dad was in the navy, in 1953.

Dobrowolsky: Esquimalt?

Cousins: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And when did you move to the Yukon?

Cousins: 1965, June 5th. My dad was in the Air Force and we got transferred here from Ontario. We'd been in Churchill for a couple of years and liked the north, so the two years in Ontario was just enough for him to sneak a transfer back north.

Dobrowolsky: Great! Could you tell me how you ended up working in Human Resources?

Cousins: I had done little bits of HR off and on for a long time, and I wound up in a job in Government Services as their personnel clerk just before the YG [Yukon Government] moved over to the pay equity job classification system; right around that time they were doing training sessions I had done some of those, and I was doing pre-classification on all the jobs in the department I worked in before we sent them to PSC. Then, when they did the transition to the new classification system they seconded me over to help with that. Later, they had a classification analyst position come up, and I got that on an under fill basis. Then I did my Certified Compensation Designation and my degree. I just evolved into it by accident.

Dobrowolsky: So, you really got to learn it literally from the bottom-up.

Cousins: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: I understand in 1997 you were helping out the folks over at Yukon Energy when they were switching to direct management. Could you tell me how that came about?

Cousins: Initially, PSC [Public Service Commission] had been asked to do some work with YDC to help them get organized on the compensation work that they needed for direct management. I was working on that and that evolved into a secondment over to them for two-and-a-half years to help get everything set up and organized: staff recruited, classification system and all their policies; because there was nothing at all when we started, which was kind of fun.

Dobrowolsky: I was about to say that must have been really starting from scratch, setting something up.

Cousins: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So you would have been working with their personnel to train them at the same time, or were you kind of a one-woman show?

Cousins: I was a one-woman show for quite a while. Then I lucked out. I had staffed a position for a personnel-cum-payroll clerk, and I hired Linda Greer, who is now their HR director over there, and she was just awesome. Between the two of us we managed to get the payroll system up and running it so that we could pay cheques every two weeks. We finished off the staffing and all the HR policies and got the classification system built. We built a pay equity classification system with a joint management employee committee. It was a gas actually. It was really fun.

Dobrowolsky: Good. So, what was the timeframe that you were with them?

Cousins: Two-and-a-half years; I think originally it was supposed to be a year-and-a-half, but that was a little optimistic given the workload demanded, so we stretched it out another year and then I went back to PSC.

It would have been the summer of '97 that I started. In the spring, I started working on the project while in PSC and it was in the summer that I actually went over to Yukon Energy and just barely got things going when the fire messed it all up, and we had to start all over again.

Dobrowolsky: So what, specifically, were you working on in October of '97?

Cousins: All the staffing. That was huge, trying to make sure that there were all the positions that they needed for everything: linemen, electrical engineers, accounting staff, secretarial staff. Staffing was the big thing.

Dobrowolsky: So, maybe just to give a little background, apparently the Yukon Electrical Company Ltd. [YECL] had been operating all the power systems in the Yukon; and by "direct

management,” you mean that Yukon Energy was taking over the operation of their own resources?

Cousins: Yes, there was a whole bunch of staff that was YECL staff, but YDC paid for them because they ran the plant, which was the YDC operation. So all those guys were coming over to Yukon Energy so there were all their letters of offer to do to bring them in and then to hire all the other people that weren't coming over from YECL. There was the systems control group that was coming over, and the diesel plant; the staff in the communities, Dawson and Mayo and Faro; and in Aishihik.

Dobrowolsky: I guess you would have had to do a lot of recruiting outside of the territory?

Cousins: Most of it, actually. We were lucky we got the mechanical engineer, Bill Haydock right here in Whitehorse. But pretty much everyone else we had to go Outside for. One of the head financial guys we recruited from YECL.

Dobrowolsky: So, for something as specialized as running a power system, are there trade publications, or would you just go the regular route and publish in national newspapers?

Cousins: Yes, the *Globe and Mail*, and we worked with an agency in Vancouver. They were just great. They did a bunch of the work for us in terms of formatting the ads and getting them into the papers for us. We basically were just giving them content and they were taking it from there. Then there was the bazillions of applications and résumés and e-mails that we were sorting through to get people.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were getting a lot of responses?

Cousins: We were, and lots of times it would be from people fresh out of school. They didn't have the kind of experience that Yukon Energy felt they needed, especially at that stage where they felt like they needed people who could hit the ground and run at the same time. It was time-consuming, trying to get an electrical engineer. In the end we always got great guys. Dave Wray is the electrical engineer there now and he shone right out of the pile. It was interesting for me, because I hadn't done a whole lot of recruitment. I'm very much on the tech-weenie side of HR, which is what compensation is all about. So, for me the recruitment side was, a learn-it and do-it and all at the same time.

Dobrowolsky: But so interesting to learn about all these different occupations.

Cousins: Yes. I had to rely a lot on the guys there. To hire electrical engineers I was relying on John Maissan; Ric Seeley and Guy Morgan for systems control jobs; and Les Boisvert, for diesel plant jobs. I needed their brains for the technical stuff, and then I just added the “soft, fuzzy stuff,” as they called it, in terms of interpersonal skills and fit for work groups. It worked well. They were a good bunch of guys to work with.

Dobrowolsky: Good. So this is what you were in the heart of in the fall of '97. The Yukon Energy library has a wonderful binder full of clippings and news items, all relating to YDC or

Yukon Energy, and I remember there seemed to be an awful lot of ads that fall in terms of people being recruited and positions that you were filling. Okay, so then the morning of October the 30th, tell me about that.

Cousins: Happy Halloween! (laughter) Well, as I said earlier, I was at the plant at shortly after 6:00 in the morning, just to see if it was true.

Dobrowolsky: Well, first of all tell me how you heard.

Cousins: A colleague of mine had called me just sometime before 6:00 in the morning to say, “Have you heard the news?” and I hadn’t. I wasn’t quite awake. So, he had told me that the plant was burning down as we were speaking. I pretty much just threw on some clothes, and he came by and picked me up, and the two of us ran over there and ran right into the middle of it. I was looking for Rob and trying to find out if anybody had been hurt and –

Dobrowolsky: This is Rob McWilliam?

Cousins: Yes, Rob McWilliam, who was our fearless leader throughout this whole process.

Dobrowolsky: And who was the colleague you went over with?

Cousins: Mike Nevile at Clarity. He does job evaluation and job analysis; he had been working with us from early in the project, before I went over to Yukon Energy, and then through the transition stages, as we were building job descriptions. So, the two of us went over there and the plant was burning down. We found out that Ken Sawyer had broken his ankle running equipment out of the control room and into the back of the truck, but otherwise that nobody was hurt and the guys there had things under control. So we immediately started working on trying to set up an office, somewhere else to run out of for a while and the lawyers that we worked with in town gave us a couple of offices and a boardroom to work out of their office.

Dobrowolsky: And that was Davis & Company.

Cousins: Davis & Company, yes. They were great. They rescued us until we could find something more permanent.

Dobrowolsky: Just something I should have clarified, I understand the year before Yukon Energy had put personnel offices off the back of the generating plant, and you would have been in the building.

Cousins: Yes, I was downstairs.

Dobrowolsky: You were in the building that burnt down?

Cousins: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, all your records and all your files and ...

Cousins: Yes, actually they didn't burn so much, because the fire seemed to be in another area of the plant; but my office got really bad smoke and water damage. I actually still have a couple of binders that I rescued out of there. The librarian, that we had hired to do the document rescue, dried them out and put them back together but they still stink when you open them. But a bunch of stuff like résumés and job descriptions and job ads were just destroyed. So, that was fun too, wading in a couple of days later, mucking through to see what was salvageable and what was just lost.

Dobrowolsky: So, if the fire hadn't happened, what would you have been doing that Thursday and Friday?

Cousins: More staffing.

Dobrowolsky: So, you actually had interviews lined up.

Cousins: Yes, I think we were in the middle of linemen interviews. It might have been Faro, or maybe it was the head lineman in Faro or Mayo or both. I can't quite remember, but it was one of those jobs. We had half the interviews done and half the references done, and we had to phone people back and say, "We need to sort start at the beginning again, because it's lost."

Dobrowolsky: "Can we have another copy of your résumé?"

Cousins: Yes, "Can we ask you those questions again?"

Dobrowolsky: So, this would have been for interviews you had already done. You would have lost all your notes and records.

Cousins: M'hmm

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so let's go back to the chronology. You had gone to the site, ascertained that no one had been hurt then established a temporary office in the Davis & Co. offices downtown, and then what?

Cousins: And then we just pretty much started rebuilding right from the get-go. The first few days was just a bit of nuts work, trying to sort things out and where things were at and what exactly had happened to Ken because at the plant we didn't know how badly he'd been hurt, just that he was hurt and in the hospital. And then, we just got right at it, trying to sort out where we were, what we needed to get back to there and how we were going to go forward. It wasn't very long before we found space up at the hill in the old federal government building to work in.

Dobrowolsky: On Range Road?

Cousins: Yes, they literally built the offices around us. We just moved in there with begged and borrowed furniture from Asset Control, from the Yukon Government; and we set ourselves up

where we thought we were going to be, and the guys came in and they built the walls around us, and we just carried on. (laughter)

Dobrowolsky: Rob McWilliam has a wonderful story about being at a fairly sensitive meeting while this electrician is hanging over him, installing something or another.

Cousins: Yes, yes, doing reference checks while the guys are installing the steel studs and it feels a bit like you're in a cage, or something like a cross between a cage and a fishbowl, because people are trucking back and forth to the Water Board and trying to discreetly do reference checks. (laughter) It was quite bizarre, but it was definitely interesting.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, I can imagine!

Cousins: Yes, it was quite fun. The difficulty about being up on Range Road, of course, was then there was this separation. There were all of us "newbies" who were up in the Range Road offices and all the old guys that had come from YECL in trailers and remnants of the plant downtown. I think that slowed down the kind of cross-fertilization that we needed to get the feeling of being there together, as opposed to being "us and them." I think that slowed down some of the cultural assimilation that needed to happen between the two groups.

Dobrowolsky: And I assume that would be very important when you're starting out, very much from scratch, as a new organization and people with old corporal loyalties and the experienced ones and the new ones and ... Yes, I can see where that would be tricky.

Cousins: Yes, and it took a while, of course, to build the new plant and the new offices. So it extended that whole transition period a little bit. We didn't get to be as close as we needed to be as fast as we needed to be. From my perspective that was one of the most serious repercussions. The paper and stuff, it's like, "Oh, well, it's paper, you build it again;" but it was the relationship that just took longer to establish.

Dobrowolsky: That's interesting; I hadn't thought of that but, of course, that would have made a huge difference in how things operated.

Cousins: Yes, because it felt different. As soon as we got into the new offices and we started working with each other, having all those casual contacts, it started to change right away and it started to be an "us and us." Whereas before it just wasn't happening. So, that's too bad because I think there probably were more growing pains than there needed to be if the fire hadn't happened. It's hard to say, it might have taken just as long anyways.

Dobrowolsky: No, that's interesting. I think you are very right. And yes, how could you not feel a little bit, "There are the people on the hill and here are us doing the real work at the real site with the real equipment."

Cousins: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, I understand that one of the interviews that you were doing around the time that the fire was happening was with Dave Wray?

Cousins: Dave was the one actually we were right in the middle of and that we had to redo a bunch of stuff. Dave and the linemen, we had those all going on at the same time.

Dobrowolsky: And was that interview actually happening the day of the fire?

Cousins: Yes. Now, how did that work? I think it was Dave that we were flying in that day so that he could come and tour the plant and have a look at Whitehorse and decide if this felt like a good fit for him. So, it was sort of a: “Well, here was the plant. Welcome to the smoking ruins.”

It was amazing that he actually accepted, in some respects, because he must have had some inkling of how scary it was going to be. Not only was there this new job but there was a whole new plant to build and all the work attached to that. So that really speaks to how adventurous he is because he was still willing to take it on.

Dobrowolsky: A famous quote I heard from John Maissan was apparently at his interview he said, “Well, it’s a lot of fun when things blow up.”

Cousins: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And I guess he had that quoted back at him several times.

Cousins: “Are you still having fun?”

Dobrowolsky: So, with all this catch-up to do, did you find yourself putting in extra hours?

Cousins: Oh, yes. Before this happened we had just months until the transition to direct management. So, there was already tons of work, and it was already long days trying to fit it all in. So, we just figured it would take a little bit longer and ...

Dobrowolsky: More intense.

Cousins: A little more intense, yes, but it was really, I know this sounds kind of weird, but it was really kind of exciting, too, because it was all new and there was this catastrophe that everyone was trying to rescue themselves from and it was just – it was a neat kind of adventure, and it had a neat feel to it –not every day – but most days.

Dobrowolsky: Well, I do get a sense of people rising to the occasion and to the challenge and to the determination to surmount this and get everything going, whether it be actually keeping the electrical systems operating to making sure direct management goes smoothly, and then of course, all those extra things that were added like dealing with the insurance.

Cousins: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: But, yes, my impression is that although nobody really enjoyed, you know, missing sleep and –

Cousins: Having a life. (laughter)

Dobrowolsky: Yes, seeing their families, to a certain extent there was that sense of enjoyment and fun and rising to meet the challenge.

Cousins: Yes, you did. You really felt like you were part of creating something new, something that would be, important to the territory and valuable to the people of the territory even though they might just take it for granted. It was a neat feeling and there were just some really neat people to work with. I'm sure we all got on each other's nerves at times, but by and large, it was a really fun experience. I was really glad I got to be there.

Dobrowolsky: So despite that physical separation you were talking about earlier, I think maybe in some respects the crisis did a bit of that team building that you were talking about.

Cousins: It certainly did at the senior management team level where we were all thrown together to rescue things, but it just wasn't trickling down as much as it needed to. But yes, I think at the senior management team, as we were all trying to feel each other out and get comfortable with each other we were trying to solve the problems and get on with life at the same time.

Dobrowolsky: And it seems like you certainly succeeded.

Cousins: Yes, I think we did.

Dobrowolsky: Well, I can't think of anything else to ask. Have you got any final thoughts, or are there any bits of the story that we haven't discussed that you think maybe we should talk about here?

Cousins: No, that covers all the good stuff. There was difficult stuff. There were people from the old world that didn't fit in the new world. So, there were a fair number of releases that happened and those were difficult. One in particular was just kind of heartbreaking in a way. It was just part of the transition too.

But by and large, I think they were all for the better. I think those people needed to move on. I think in the long run, it was probably good for them, too, as well as for the organization. That's what you always hope.

But those were difficult. For me anyway, I found them really, really difficult. That was the hard stuff. Everything else was just work.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, so it sounded like it was quite an interesting time to be associated with Yukon Energy.

Cousins: M'hmm, yes, yes it was; but I think we had good people and we managed to gather a bunch more good people, and it's got a good feeling when you go down there. It's got people whose hearts are in the right place and who have good heads on their shoulders. It all counts for something in the long run.

Dobrowolsky: Well, good! Thank you very much for this.

END OF INTERVIEW

Mardy Derby

Mardy Derby has worked in radio for about 25 years, 12 of them with CBC. In November 1997, she was with the newsroom and she covered the fire for both local and national radio.

[John Carroll] really was just so well organized and made the effort to collect us and say, "Okay, we will take you in. This is what we can show you, you know, to keep you safe, as well," but it really made all the difference in the world.

Recorded December 16, 2003 at the CBC building in Whitehorse. Only one side recorded. Transcript reviewed by Ms. Derby on January 18, 2004.

Side A

Dobrowolsky: It's December the 16th, 2003. I am talking with Mardy Derby at CBC. She is a journalist who covered the fire for her broadcasting station. To begin with, could you please tell me when and where you were born?

Derby: I was born in Ottawa December 31st, 1952.

Dobrowolsky: perhaps you could tell me just a little bit about your journalism background, how long you've been in radio, that kind of thing?

Derby: I've been in radio on and off for probably about 25 years now, just 12 with the CBC, doing various duties, a lot of current affairs, some news coverage. Right now I work as the regional producer for the three territories. Around the time of the fire, obviously I was doing some news stuff.

Dobrowolsky: And how did you hear about the fire?

Derby: Well, my phone rang in the wee hours of the morning; and for two reasons, first of all because I live in Riverdale very close to the plant and (b) because I'm by nature a morning person; but I don't think I was all that sharp that morning, because whoever was on the other line said, "Mardy, the power plant's on fire."

And I said, "Well, my lights are on." So, it took a few minutes before it really sunk in and I, of course, got dressed and running down to the station to gather all the equipment that we'd need so that we could broadcast live and let people constantly know what was going on.

Dobrowolsky: Do you have any idea about what time that was that you might have been called?

Derby: No.

Dobrowolsky: Like, close to 6:00 a.m., earlier than that?

Derby: I believe it was before we were on the air. I think it was quite a bit earlier than that.

Dobrowolsky: So, even around 5:00?

Derby: Yes, certainly no later than that, because I know I was here before we went to look.

Dobrowolsky: And how would the station have known? Is there someone who tracks the police scanner?

Derby: We do actually have a scanner upstairs, which sits right by the morning newsreader's desk. So, you know, especially when there's a great deal of activity on the scanner, then it doesn't take long before we realize, and then, we start making some calls to find out what's going on and what we can do, as well.

Dobrowolsky: So whatever engineering or tech person was on duty at that time would have been monitoring that?

Derby: It would be the morning newsreader or the morning director, whoever comes in first; and they're there at least four o'clock [a.m.].

Dobrowolsky: So you got up, you rushed down here, you got your gear. Then what?

Derby: Well, I headed back out to the plant; and in the meantime, the people here at the station were calling Yukon Electric, trying to find the PR person; and he's such a big part of my story, and I can't remember his name. It will come to me tonight probably. So, essentially it was barricaded off. They weren't letting anybody close into where the fire was, and of course, journalists were arriving from more than one outlet. And whoever it was, and I mentioned, I'll remember it again, really was just so well organized and made the effort to collect us and say, "Okay, we will take you in. This is what we can show you, you know, to keep you safe, as well," but it really made all the difference in the world. You know, sometimes we go to things where we're kept out and the public doesn't know sometimes what the public needs to know. So, I was really impressed with how they handled that with us.

Dobrowolsky: I know that someone called John Carroll did a live broadcast from the site. Could that have been the person you're thinking of?

Derby: It could be, yes.

Dobrowolsky: One of the managerial types from YECL?

Derby: John's name rings a bell, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, I think he did do a live broadcast from the site, explaining what was going on. Okay, so this person, possibly John, you said brought you in and showed you what you could see. So, any idea around what time that might have been?

Derby: I'm guessing between 7:00 and 8:00. We go off the air for our morning show at 9:00, and we are on the national news at 9:00. So, for them to turn it around here, ballpark I'd say between 7:00 and 8:00, which is our highest listening audience, as well.

Dobrowolsky: Right. So, exactly how did that work? Did he bring you to a site that was at a safe distance from the fire?

Derby: It was at a safe distance from the fire, but we still could visually see, you know, the part that was burning at that point. And I remember it was so cold. You never think of fires when it's cold and yet, I guess sometimes that's when they're worst. I also can remember looking down, and they had the fire truck with the big water trucks, and that always struck me as being so strange that we were so close to the river and yet, they had to bring water trucks in to fight the fire. And it was just a very busy place. But, yes, it was just really appreciated. because we could – with the radio, we could sort of paint this verbal picture or a description of what was happening and again, it was also a matter of getting information out to people that, "Don't worry, it's under control."

Dobrowolsky: I'm going to just pause here, because I have a map of the site with me, and I'd like you to just take a quick look.

Derby: M'hmm. So, I think there's a little bit of a walkway along the side of the building here.

Dobrowolsky: So, we're looking at the northwest side of the diesel plant?

Derby: M'hmm. So, basically, they let us in behind the diesel plant.

Dobrowolsky: On the river side?

Derby: Yes, so we could have a view of that, and the water trucks were parked down in this area.

Dobrowolsky: And this would be in the little parking lot downriver from the generating plant?

Derby: Yes. Now, because I went back a little later when they were showing me the equipment, the two trips are a little mixed up in times; but once we left there, I went around to this area [indicating the substation on the Riverdale side of the river] –

Dobrowolsky: And this is over by the fish ladder near what they call the substation.

Derby: Yes, and there was somebody over there, too, who was sort of talking about how they were managing to keep everything going, and they were pretty calm actually. I was quite surprised.

Dobrowolsky: (laughs) Or at least put on a good pretence.

Derby: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you mentioned that there were the fire trucks, the water trucks. What other kind of sights and sounds – that it was quite cold. Was it still quite smoky or noisy, or did they have the fire fairly well under control at that point? What were your impressions of the blaze?

Derby: I certainly felt it was, if not under control, almost out, but you could really see how charred and blackened the building was. But when we had that tour, I'm pretty sure there was no great leaping flames although when I had been there initially, you know, you could certainly see them from the roadway. And that was my job was, when I was there, essentially to broadcast live and say "Here's the picture. This is what they're doing." You know, I'm sure it was quite blackened, because I remember describing, particularly the one side of the building as being essentially gone.

Dobrowolsky: And were the fire crews still quite active at that point?

Derby: They were sort of – I remember the two water trucks there, a lot of – I have nothing to compare it with. I mean, if I'd been there at 5:00 when it was really going crazy and saw that level of activity, as opposed to when I was there, say around 7:30, I'm sure it was quite different; but, yes, they certainly were still active and still working in there.

Dobrowolsky: So, it was a very busy site; plus, I guess, there were all the Yukon Energy and YECL crews, who were actually keeping the lights on with their trucks and their radios and their cell phones.

Derby: Yes, and we didn't really have – it's partially because you don't have a full understanding of how all of this works, you know. You know the power comes from somewhere, and it wasn't a situation where I could do a lot of research ahead of time. You're thrown in. So, at that point, we didn't really have that much of a sense of really everything that was being juggled to keep everything on the air. We knew that the territory's largest power plant was in trouble.

Derby: And yet the lights were staying on. And I think it was a couple of weeks later, because I went in with the TV guys, that they actually took us into the diesel plant. They took us upstairs and showed us the various computers and how things were being routed out throughout the territory, which was really interesting. I wish I'd seen it beforehand, because I would have had a better understanding of it.

Dobrowolsky: So, how long were you involved during the morning? I'm assuming you were around for an hour or two. You mentioned you were doing live broadcasts. You got this little tour from one of the company personnel.

Derby: M'hmm. I think it was – I think I left this area pretty close to nine o'clock.

Dobrowolsky: And this is around by this diesel plant, yes.

Derby: And went over to the switching station around that time. And do you know why it really strikes me as being those times is because when I was driving from one to the other, I had CBC

on, and I heard my report on World Report; and it came as a surprise, because as a rule, the journalist will go back, type up their script, have them okay it, but because it was happening so fast, Mike Linder, who was the regional director at that time essentially pulled the raw tape from my blither – I guess we don't want to call it that, right? – and that's what they shot down to them with an intro. So, I was quite surprised that they had turned that around and got it on the national news that quickly. So, it really was a matter of as quick as we could probably technically get it to them. And then, I spent a few minutes there, and then, I went back to the station. And basically, over the next few days – and this is one thing I probably can check, going through our logs, I imagine we would have had more interviews with company people, just what's happening, what's the future look like and ...

Dobrowolsky: So, you were following up on this for a while after this?

Derby: Yes, and I don't think it was that long either before we were invited back, as I mentioned before, for the tour of the diesel plant. So, they took us upstairs and – well, you probably know your way around there blindfolded by now.

Dobrowolsky: Well, I think they actually set up a temporary system control centre in a former washroom.

Derby: That's right, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes. I know the guys were real pleased about that! (laughter)

Derby: It wasn't roomy, that's for sure, because I know I was in there with a cameraman and an operator and myself and one of the journalists; and there wasn't a lot of room to roam around in that area.

Dobrowolsky: No. Well, you should see the lovely facility they have now in that new building. It's quite something!

So, in terms of its importance as a story, you've got across the idea that an important part of what you were reporting on was not just "This was a big fire" but also a public service to reassure people that "Things are under control. Your lights are going to stay on." How would an event like this fit in your overall range of stories? Obviously it had some importance nationally if it ended up on the national news that quickly. Looking back, how big a story was this?

Derby: Well, it was a very big story. It might have been bigger were it not a happy ending. I mean, obviously had the power failed – it was about 30 below, wasn't it, that morning? I mean, it was quite cold; and certainly, if we had lost power in the territory because, you know, there are not that many homes that are equipped to withstand that, it would have been unfortunately a tragic story. So, the fact that they managed to do it – and yet, I'm not convinced that everybody really knows sort of the heroics behind what was involved in keeping that today; and partially again, that's because a lot of people don't have a really in depth understanding of the system, including me. And I think it was more as the days went on that we really got a better sense of "Wow, it's amazing!"

Dobrowolsky: Yes, yes. Well, as a member of the public who listens to the radio regularly and reads the newspapers, it wasn't really until I saw the Yukon Energy company insert in the *Yukon News* a year later and read all these little brief accounts of all these folks and what they did to keep the lights on that it even occurred to me, "Oh, yes"; because you think, "Oh, it's so automatic. They must have something they automatically switch to."

Derby: Well, that's exactly; and even standing in the lot that day, somebody said, "Oh, well, if that's not there, it just goes to diesel. So, we're okay. It's a little more expensive or a lot more expensive, but, you know, it's not a big deal." And I think part of it wasn't a full understanding of exactly what was housed or intrinsic in the building that burned down. So, yes, it was great.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm. Do you have any other final thoughts or observations?

Derby: Well, only from a personal thing is every once in a while, something like this comes along, and it's kind of interesting to be part of it and just see it happen.

Dobrowolsky: Well, and to learn about a completely different facet of how our territory works.

Derby: M'hmm.

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you.

Derby: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Mike Hannah

Mike Hannah was the system operator and sole employee on site when the fire broke out early in the morning of October 30, 1997. His quick actions in raising the alarm then taking the three turbines off line and transferring the electrical load to the Aishihik Plant were the first crucial steps in ensuring that that a major power outage was prevented.

Recorded on May 30, 2003 at the System Control Centre, Whitehorse Rapids Generating Site, Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Mike Hannah, June 2003. Additional information in [square brackets].

Note: Mr. Hannah also donated a copy of the handwritten statement that he had prepared for insurance representatives.

I started walking towards the door to go downstairs, just to see what was going on with these alarms; and I opened the door, and I was immediately confronted by thick black smoke that had filled the building already. It was at our end of the building.

So I slammed the door and went running back into the control room, got ahold of Guy again on his cell phone and said, "Hey, look, we do have a fire going here, and you'd better hurry."

Dobrowolsky: It is May the 30th, 2003, and I am speaking with Mike Hannah at the SCADA System Control Centre, at the Yukon Energy Corporation offices about the great fire of 1997. So, to start, could you please tell me when and where you were born?

Hannah: I was born July 27th, 1960, in Whitehorse, Yukon.

Dobrowolsky: You're a local boy.

Hannah: I'm a local boy, born and raised, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Great. So, tell me a little bit about your employment background. How did you get into the electrical business?

Hannah: Actually, I started in 1989. I got a job in the diesel plant, operating the diesel engines in the summertime. I was actually coming back to Whitehorse to be an auto body repairman from Kelowna. I'd just finished going to college for two years there. And I came back, and I ended up seeing a job, there was a job here at Yukon Energy or Yukon Electrical [YECL] at the time. So, I applied on it and got it, and I worked in the diesel plant for four years, and then, I got on as a permanent employee and made my way out to Aishihik Plant and worked there for about a year-and-a-half. And then, I came to SCC, the System Control Centre, and I've been in here for the last six years.

Dobrowolsky: So, what kind of duties would you have had at the diesel plant? What exactly is the diesel plant responsible for?

Hannah: Basically just running the diesel turbine units, yes, you were an operator, you kept maintenance in the plant, made sure when the units were running that they were – the maintenance was good, the units topped up in oil; or whatever any problems were, we would pass the problem on to the mechanic or whatever. Just basically the plant operator.

Dobrowolsky: So, were the diesels a supplement to the hydro units?

Hannah: That's correct. That's back when Faro, the mine, was running; and yes, the diesel was supplementing the hydro in the wintertime. Not in the summer, but in the winter when the mine was up and running, we'd have that diesel plant pretty much full out. We've added another diesel, but, yes, with all the diesels running, I think it's about, if my memory serves me correctly, about 25 megawatts of power; and there were six diesel units in there at the time. There are seven now, but there were six when I was operating.

Dobrowolsky: And you were going from machine to machine, making sure that all the controls were fine and –

Hannah: Yes, and you take your readings from each unit. Every hour you go and take readings from it and make sure that there's nothing overheating or whatever; and yes, that's about it.

Dobrowolsky: And then, at Aishihik, would that be similar?

Hannah: Yes, we would take turns going out there. There were four of us, and we'd go out there for a week at a time; and we'd operate the plant. Because it's so far out of town, they would always have to have someone there when the plant is running in case they had problems, of course. That's what we would do, we'd just operate the plant. At Aishihik, the generation is controlled from here via SCADA. So, basically all we are there is for an emergency. If there's something that needs to be done or whatever, we're there to take care of the problems.

Dobrowolsky: So, explain "SCADA."

Hannah: SCADA is a computer system that we use to give commands to basically they're remote terminal units (RTUs) that are in – say in Aishihik we'll have an RTU, remote terminal unit, and it's connected to SCADA here in Whitehorse; and we'll give the commands from SCADA to the [RTU], and then, the [RTU] will pass the command that we've given it on to the unit, and the unit will do the command that we've given it. Like if I'm from here, Whitehorse, I will say "Raise AH1," which is the Aishihik unit number one. I'll give it a raise, and it will go from SCADA to the [RTU], and then, from the [RTU] it will go to the control that controls the unit and makes the load raise. That's basically it.

Dobrowolsky: And the acronym "SCADA" System –

Hannah: Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition.

Dobrowolsky: So, it's a pretty key piece of equipment.

Hannah: It is.

Dobrowolsky: This is the heart of the whole operation?

Hannah: Oh, yes, without it – you bet, yes, this is where it all happens, yes. This is where everything gets – all the controls are and everything, yes, for the system.

Dobrowolsky: So, I keep running into this other acronym, I don't know if you say it this way, “WAF” or “WAF”.

Hannah: WAF. W-A-F, yes, Whitehorse-Aishihik-Faro, and that's our grid. Those are the three – I guess you'd say “the corners” of the system, the ends of the system. Yes, Whitehorse being a main generator, Aishihik another main generating station and Faro is not a generating station. They do have some diesels there, but they used to have quite a bit more when the Faro mine was up and running; but now all their power is supplied by Whitehorse or Aishihik to Faro. They used to have a bunch of diesels there. We've taken three of them out of there, and there are only three left. So, they're there for an emergency purpose, and that's about it.

Dobrowolsky: Right, pretty minimal.

Hannah: If the Faro line was to go down, they would have their generation at that end to keep the Town of Faro lit up.

Dobrowolsky: Right. So, at the time that the Faro Mine was open, it was a pretty major consumer of power.

Hannah: It sure was, yes, in the wintertime – oh, it was so long ago; but in the wintertime, it would consume as much power as the rest of the grid was using. So, yes, it was a large customer.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were at Aishihik, and then, you came back to Whitehorse to work on –
Hannah: Then a job opening came up here in SCC, in the System Control Centre, and I applied on it, and I ended up getting the job. I was successful in getting it. Mostly everything that I've done here has been on-the-job training. I've got to say I never came back to Whitehorse expecting to do this line of work, but I'm glad I'm in it now that I'm doing it for sure.

Dobrowolsky: Well, it sure sounds fascinating!

Hannah: Oh, it's great; it's a great line of work, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, up in SCC, you were managing the SCADA.

Hannah: That's correct.

Dobrowolsky: And would this be shift work? Is it a one-man job and you work shifts?

Hannah: Yes, it is 12-hour shifts, and there are five of us who rotate, Guy being the sixth. He's our supervisor, but he does work the desk when there are people on holidays or somebody sick or whatever. He does cover.

Dobrowolsky: Or nuisance interviewers.

Hannah: For sure; but, no, there are five of us who work the desk full-time, and like I said Guy being the sixth. Yes, it's 12-hour shifts. There are lots of days off, and, yes, it's good. I love the shift work.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, good.

Hannah: It's not great for family, but you sure get a lot of time off.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, my brother is an ambulance attendant, and it's the same situation.

Hannah: The same type of thing, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, on the evening and night of October 29th/October 30th, 1997, you were working, what, a graveyard shift?

Hannah: That's right. I came in the night of October 29th at seven o'clock, and I stayed until the morning of October the 30th at seven o'clock. Yes, at three o'clock in the morning on October the 30th is when the bell started ringing. Do you want to start talking about that?

Dobrowolsky: Yes, unless you can think of anything more to say about the actual operation or what was different or special about that night. I think the main thing to establish is that it was at a time when the Faro mine was operating and consuming lots of power.

Hannah: That's correct, they were, yes. They were fully up and running at the time of the fire; and like I said, it was about three o'clock in the morning, and I was just reading a book, and I got an alarm, it was actually a north door alarm, which is the other end of the hydro plant from where I'm sitting. It would have been this door right here down here, and I'm sitting up on the top floor here, right; and the door alarm was right here, the door. So, when we get those alarms, we're not really supposed to leave our post and go and check these door alarms.

We're not really supposed to, but usually we'll sit there and wait for somebody to call in. As soon as the door is open, we give them 30 seconds to a minute to call in and say "I'm in the plant;" but that didn't happen, so I waited a good two minutes. And then, I decided I was going to go and investigate. So, I was walking towards the stairs, and I got about three meters out of my office, if that, two meters out of my office, and I heard a bunch more major alarms. So, I turned around and I went back to the SCADA System, and it was showing me there was – three alarms came up. One was the water in the oil on WH 3 and two other alarms, one being a master link. CPU-AB link failed on me, and what was the other one? I'm not sure. A DC control failed. Anyway, the one that concerned me was the water in the oil on WH 3. So, I started lowering the load on that. I started lowering the load on WH 3; and as I was doing that, I got a fire alarm.

So, immediately I called my supervisor, being Guy Morgan, and I told him what's going on, "I'm getting weird alarms, and I just got a fire alarm." So, I told him to come in, hung up the phone, phoned 911, and I got them, told them there's a possibility of a fire. I still wasn't sure what was going on. I really didn't think there was a fire, but ...

Dobrowolsky: Especially with getting all the different alarms and range of information.

Hannah: Right, right, and you're in a steel-and-cement building with water all around you, so you don't really think ... But at any rate – so, I did that. I was talking to Guy, and then, I phoned the fire department; and I called for a couple of lowers on that unit, WH 3. I was going to take it offline because of the water being in the oil. And after I did that, I started walking towards the door to go downstairs, just to see what was going on with these alarms; and I opened the door, and I was immediately confronted by thick black smoke that had filled the building already. It was at our end of the building. So, I slammed the door and went running back into the control room, got ahold of Guy again on his cell phone and said, "Hey, look, we do have a fire going here, and you'd better hurry." And he was already en route, coming through the gate.

So, yes, I started taking off the other two hydro units that were in the building at the time. I had all three hydro units going at the time, an eight-megawatt unit and two, five-megawatt units. So, I got those units shut down as quickly as I possibly could and transferred the load over to the Aishihik Plant. And once I got them off line, by then the smoke was in the control room. I was actually down so that the smoke would be above me. I had to get the units off; and I didn't feel that I was in jeopardy myself, because I couldn't see the flames and I thought that it was in the plant anyway. And I didn't think there was any – I was sure that there was nothing in there that could explode.

Anyway, I finished taking the units off line, and then, I went running out the side of the building. There's a door right there, as well, right in my control room. So, I went out there, and I started crawling up the bank; and as I looked behind me, I could see the flames shooting out the side of the building there. If I can show you on the diagram here, there's a window on this side of the building and another window on this side of the building, down, and the fire was coming through both of those windows.

Dobrowolsky: So, if we use compass directions here, there's a window on the north –

Hannah: I guess we'll say this is the north side here, okay?

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so this is where the little pink arrow is.

Hannah: M'hmm. So, there was a window on the north side, and then, a window on the east – or west I mean, sorry, yes, that would be the west, m'hmm, because this is the east. So, yes, there were two windows there on the corner of the building, and the flames were coming out of both of the windows on that end of the building. And as soon as I got up to the top of the bank, which is right here, the bank, I was standing up here, watching the fire; and Guy came along around the corner here. He had just opened the gate so the fire trucks could get in, right here this gate.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Hannah: And he picked me up, and right away we went to Number 4, and I started operating the system via Number 4.

And Guy basically, in his truck, he turned it into a command centre, his truck, and he talked the Faro mine off the system. Like, slowly they came down with their load; because as they went down with all their minesite, we had to slowly tweak everything manually, all the units here in Whitehorse and at Aishihik and stuff. So, everything was a really slow process. If we would have had an outage, it would have been trouble, big trouble. So, we wanted to do everything slowly and take our time. Yes, it was incredible, just incredible!

Dobrowolsky: So, just backtracking, after the alarms, and then, you investigated, you saw the smoke. Then when you mentioned you were taking –

Hannah: The three – like inside the building that was on fire –

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Hannah: – that I was working in, P-125 is what it's called, there are three hydro units; and they were all generating power at the time. So, I had to take those three hydro units off, because if I would have left them going and left the building, then the fire would have tripped these three units off and done major damage to them; and, as well, we would have lost 18 megawatts of power, and that would have caused an outage, right? All of a sudden 18 meg trips off, you're going to have outages and nothing but trouble. So, I wanted to take these units off and transfer the load from these three units to Aishihik, and then, get out of the plant.

Dobrowolsky: And you were able to do this remotely. You didn't have to do any of the kind of thing that Guy did with the Faro operator?

Hannah: No, that's correct. No, I did it all right there inside the building, yes, via SCADA.

Dobrowolsky: So, then, you ended up at Number 4, which is the little building quite close to the dam?

Hannah: That's right.

Dobrowolsky: And that operates the fourth wheel, I guess.

Hannah: That's right, the fourth wheel. That's a 20-megawatt unit. It's our single biggest unit on the system, a 20-megawatt unit, and yes, we can control the whole system there by just raising and lowering that unit; or at Aishihik, the Aishihik operator could control the system by raising and lowering – and that's what they were doing. Like, in conjunction with me at Number 4, I would tell the Aishihik operator, "Okay, lower your unit a bit more because the mine is slowly coming down." So, as the mine comes down, they're not using power. We'll slowly lower our units so that they're not putting out so much power.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Hannah: And that's what we were doing, just, "Okay, go ahead, call for a lower," and that's what he would do. And "Okay, you can take off another pump at the mine," and they would go back and forth like that. And actually, Guy, he did a great job. He controlled everything from his truck and, yes, he did a great job making sure that there was no outage in power.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you talk about "raising and lowering," is this water levels you're talking about?

Hannah: I'm sorry, raising and lowering the load of the unit, putting out more power or –

Dobrowolsky: No, no, I'm an idiot when it comes to electricity, although I'm learning fast.

Hannah: As I was when I started here, believe me. It was quite overwhelming.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're raising and lowering the [water] levels, which in turn are controlled by the hydro power, right?

Hannah: Right, yes, yes. I mean, we call for a "lower" on the unit, and basically what we're controlling is the wicket gates. I mean, if you want to get really technical, I could. I don't know if you want to do that, but ...

Dobrowolsky: Moderately, yes.

Hannah: Yes, we're just controlling the speed of the unit. I mean, we'll just call for a "lower", a "lower" on the unit. I could show you out here on SCADA after we're done.

Dobrowolsky: Sure, that would be great.

Hannah: Sure, I could physically do it. Yes, we just call for a "lower" on the unit, and what it does is there's a bunch of wicket gates. They're gates on the unit that's in the water, right.

And as we call for a "raise," these gates will open up wider and they'll catch more water as it's coming by, and it'll spin the unit faster, and it'll put out more juice; and as we call for a "lower," we'll slowly close these gates. And then, it doesn't catch as much water, and it slows the unit down until these gates are closed totally, and then, the unit will stop.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you were here and Guy was in his truck, it was a three-way communication? You were all linked by radio or –

Hannah: Yes, we were all linked by radio, that's correct. Guy was actually parked right here, right in the middle of the parking lot; and he was just talking to Faro, and as he was talking to Faro, I was listening to what he was saying at Number 4; and he would still tell me, "Okay, Mike, call for a lower," but actually what I was doing, I wasn't controlling Number 4, because

Number 4 is a 20-megawatt unit, and it likes to run at 20 megawatts. Anything less and it doesn't run very stable.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Hannah: It starts to vibrate, and it can do some damage to the unit; so we like to run that unit at 20 megawatts. And I was basically telling the Aishihik operator, "Okay, go ahead and lower your units." There are two, 15-megawatt units at Aishihik, and they can run it anywhere from three-to-5 megawatts with no problem. So, that's what we were controlling the system with those two, 15-megawatt units at Aishihik.

Dobrowolsky: So, it was essentially a relay, with Guy communicating with the fellow at Faro, and then, you, in turn –

Hannah: Guy communicating to me and the guy at Faro, and I'm communicating with the guy at Aishihik. That's correct. I'm still the system operator.

Dobrowolsky: Right. So, the fellow at Aishihik, would he have been on duty at the time?

Hannah: Oh, yes; well, he was sleeping, but we always have an operator at the Aishihik plant through the winter, whenever the Aishihik plant is up and running; and during the summertime, we'll take it off for a couple of months like we will this summer. But during the winter, whenever that plant is running, there's somebody there, living there.

Dobrowolsky: Whether they're physically working or not, they're on standby?

Hannah: Yes, he was sleeping, exactly. We have a house there and everything at the plant. So, he was sleeping. I had to wake him up and get him over there, but they respond very quick. They're over there in a matter of a minute. So, yes, it was pretty slick.

Dobrowolsky: So, how long did all this take, the taking of Faro off the system and –

Hannah: We were still slowly staging them down I believe at six o'clock, 6:00 in the morning. I'm thinking it took a good three hours, if my memory serves me correctly, to get it so that the system, we weren't concerned that there were going to be any problems. Like, actually we were always concerned until we finally got another SCADA System up and running that there was going to be a problem. But no, once we got the mine off, I think it was about three hours, and then, we were pretty confident that everything was going to be all right.

Dobrowolsky: So, then what did you do with the rest of your day?

Hannah: Actually, I stayed there until about seven o'clock, and then, my cross-shift came in. Then I had a meeting with the fire marshal. I had to write this SOE up. I talked to a couple of the firemen.

Dobrowolsky: SOE?

Hannah: Sequence of Events, sorry; and I talked to a couple of the firemen, and I had, like, a bunch of stuff that I had inside my office that I didn't grab on the way out because I didn't think there was going to be a fire; but it was, like, I kept my jewellery and a bunch of old coins that I collected in my locker and stuff anyway. So, it was in there; and after the fire was out, they told me to go home and get some sleep. I went home. I lay in bed for probably 15 minutes. I couldn't even think of sleeping, so I came back down to the plant right away; and by that time, the fire was just about out. It was smouldering, but the roof of the building was now on the floor. And I wanted to find – like I had a ring of my dad's and just some sentimental stuff. So, I went in there, and the three firemen who helped me were incredible. The firemen were great. They helped me physically lift the roof off the floor so I could find out where my locker was approximately, and we found the gold ring, and it was just melted into a little gold –

Dobrowolsky: Blob.

Hannah: Yes, the fireman actually found it; and then, he started finding all my coins, by they were defaced. It was incredible. You couldn't tell what the year was or what the coin was. That's how hot that fire was! So, yes, it just destroyed everything. There was nothing recognizable in that office of ours.

Dobrowolsky: So, between the time that you left the building and the fire would have reached your office, about how long do you think that might have been?

Hannah: I'm thinking a good hour, a good hour, yes. Yes, it was about an hour before – it was an hour before the fire reached the inside of the office, and it was probably an hour-and-a-half before I could see the roof – maybe an hour-and-a-half, two hours, the whole roof was engulfed; and it was a tar roof, too, so it burnt. It was fuel to the fire. Once that roof caught on fire, that was it. There was not a lot of hope of saving it.

But when the fire first started, I thought for sure that the firemen would get it out; and I wasn't even really – like I was concerned that there was a fire in the building but thought they'll get it out, but it never happened.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, everyone keeps mentioning it was a concrete and steel building.

Hannah: Well, they didn't have a pump that was strong enough to go into the water so that it would pump the water into the truck. So, they were just standing there. They didn't have any water to fight the fire with. They had to wait for tankers to come and feed their fire trucks. So, yes, I think since then we've had fire hydrants installed, and it's much better.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, [fire chief] Clive Sparks had some things to say about the lack of following the Building Code –

Hannah: I'm sure he did.

Dobrowolsky: – and the water outlet on the side of the building with the valve inside the building.

Hannah: Yes, yes, that was an issue.

Dobrowolsky: So, you came back. You found your melted souvenirs.

Hannah: Yes, we dug around in there for a while.

Dobrowolsky: And then, what happened?

Hannah: Then actually I was wide-awake. I went back to Number 4 and hung around with the operator there for probably three, four hours; and I think that was my last shift. It was, and I was off for four or five days.

Yes, then we had to start thinking where we're going to set up another SCADA System. I mean, that wasn't one of the things we did right away, but we started building it within the next couple of days, and we ended up building a SCADA control room in the bathroom in the top of the diesel plant; because right below the bathroom was the best place, because that's where all the wires – all our connections and terminals and everything were running through. So, it was the easiest place. So, we had a control room in the bathroom for the next, I don't know how long we were in there, three months, four months.

Dobrowolsky: And didn't the bathroom also have a window onto the units, or was that an issue? It was mainly the wires as best you ...

Hannah: Yes, because all the wiring and everything was up in the diesel plant. It just would have been a lot quicker and cost-efficient to build the control room in that plant because of everything that was there. We had an RTU there, which is a remote terminal unit that we could use to relay our information from. No, I guess it was, according to all the techs, that was the best place to build the control room.

Dobrowolsky: So, were you involved in helping to set that up at all, or was that when you took your days off?

Hannah: No, we all helped in setting that up, the control room there. I mean you have techs that put all the – we don't do the computer stuff. We're just basically the operators. So, they built the control room, and we added our two cents' worth what we wanted and where we wanted it type of thing. Yes, it was quite interesting all right.

And they ended up putting a trailer right here. That's where our next office was, in this little turnaround.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is on, I guess it's kind of a little peninsula going out between the river and the reservoir, this little parking area here.

Hannah: M'hmm, yes, it's called "the turnaround".

Dobrowolsky: The turnaround, okay.

Hannah: M'hmm, yes, yes. I'm sure you know this is all man-made, all this, right.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, yes.

Hannah: And that's our intakes right here, the intakes. The water goes down the pipes and into these three units in here, these pipes under the road.

Dobrowolsky: Right. So, tell me what your washroom set-up looked like. There couldn't have been a lot of room.

Hannah: No, it was pretty tight. Actually, they took the toilets and the sinks and everything out and made it into one square room, and then, made it into a small office. It was quite the feat that they did that. Yes, we didn't think it was the greatest place to have an office, but, whatever. You make do, and that's what we did.

Dobrowolsky: So, three months in here, and then –

Hannah: I can't say for sure if it was three months. I'm not sure exactly how long it was. Yes, it was probably even closer to probably five or six months to be honest with you before we –

Dobrowolsky: In the washroom?

Hannah: Yes, well, they fixed it up so it didn't seem like we were in a washroom after a while, but for the first bit there were still the toilet stalls behind us and stuff like that. Like I say, you make do.

Dobrowolsky: Pretty basic. So, then you moved into the trailer, and that was kind of your home until this building opened?

Hannah: Exactly, that's right.

Dobrowolsky: And that would have been in '98 sometime.

Hannah: When this building opened?

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Hannah: Yes, when was it? In the fall of '98, yes, it was in the fall of '98 if memory serves me correctly; and yes, this has been home ever since, the perfect place.

Dobrowolsky: Well, it's a lovely area, and you have fabulous views of the river and the dam. So, in the aftermath of the fire. I mean, it was done quickly but still the process of rebuilding, how was that time?

Hannah: So, the rebuilding process was long, let's put it that way. We lost that P-125, which was 18 megawatts of power, and we had to supplement that with diesel. So, there was a lot of

overtime incurred for sure. The diesel plant was now running 24 hours a day because of the loss of power in the hydro plant.

Dobrowolsky: So, it was all three of those turbines, then?

Hannah: That's right, the three turbines were gone now. So, we had to make up that 18 megawatts in diesel. As well, we made sure that the Faro mine stayed down so we didn't have to generate so much power.

Dobrowolsky: So, the mill stayed closed?

Hannah: Well, it didn't stay completely closed. They came up, they had two mills that were running. One was larger and one was smaller. Oh, it's so long ago, I've just got a terrible memory of that stuff.

Dobrowolsky: It is a long time to be trying to remember. So, they weren't entirely in full operation?

Hannah: They weren't in full operation, no, not at all. They stayed down for a couple of months until we started getting our hydro units back or until – you see, this was in October. So, we're just starting the winter. Therefore, we're using a lot more power in Whitehorse, because everybody's got their heat on and stuff. So, yes, we had to keep the Faro mine so that they weren't running at capacity.

I don't know what to say.

Dobrowolsky: Well, tell me about getting the turbines back on.

Hannah: Well, I'm not even sure how long that took. That was like over a year period that it took before we had that plant back up and running. I'm not even sure how long it was. I'm terrible with times and dates.

Dobrowolsky: Well, especially over this kind of a distance. So, during this, I gather lots of people were putting in lots of long hours keeping everything going and working on the new building.

Hannah: That's correct. Yes, everybody was putting in long hours for sure and just doing their thing. It's hard to explain exactly everything that was going on, because I'm only in one part of the – I mean, I'm in operations, and I don't go from place-to-place seeing what everybody's doing and how things are going.

Dobrowolsky: No.

Hannah: I mean, basically we're stuck in our little cubbyholes, either there or wherever.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're pointing at where the [Fourth Wheel] plant is?

Hannah: Number 4, yes, we were there for it must have been a good three weeks-to-a-month before they had something up and running in the diesel plant here.

Dobrowolsky: So, were you grilled afterwards by all the people when they were doing the fire investigation –

Hannah: Oh, yes.

Dobrowolsky: – and the insurance people and ...

Hannah: Time and time again, m'hmm, yes. I was interviewed by two of the fire – well, by Clive Sparks, the fire chief, and one other fireman, I can't remember his name; and then, the insurance adjuster. Yes, that's why I just wrote that up. Instead of explaining it every time, I said, "Just read this."

Dobrowolsky: Good plan.

Hannah: Especially with my memory, I guess.

Dobrowolsky: So, I'm gathering at this time you were still a YECL employee?

Hannah: That's correct, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes. And had you already made the decision to come over with the transition to direct management? Had that already been organized at the time of the fire, or was that still in negotiation?

Hannah: I had no choice, either to go to Yukon Energy or be without a job; because we were system control operators, and Yukon Energy was taking over the system control centre. So, we naturally had to take the transfer, sure, yes; but everybody – pretty much it just went from YECL to Yukon Energy. Yes, there were one or two layoffs, but there wasn't a turnover in people. It was basically all the same faces. We just went from YECL to Yukon Energy.

Dobrowolsky: I know that went fairly smooth.

Hannah: It was really smooth, yes. I didn't notice much at all.

Dobrowolsky: Well, good. You still kept getting that pay cheque regularly.

Hannah: Yes, that was the main thing.

Dobrowolsky: And did you feel that the company was appreciative? How should I put this?

Hannah: Of going the little above and beyond of what we did?

Dobrowolsky: Yes, yes.

Hannah: Yes, for sure. I mean, they recognized everybody that went above and beyond. I don't know if it's above and beyond; did their job, let's put it that way, everybody that did their job. No, the company recognized everybody and gave out awards and stuff like that. So, it was fair. For sure they treat us well here and always have.

Dobrowolsky: One of the things that I found interesting in the accounts of that night was that everybody seemed to know right away what it was they needed to do. Did you ever have any drills, like in case of emergency or in case for any reason they have to shut down this system, this is what; you know, we go to Plan A or we go to Plan B or we go to Plan C, or did it just make sense at the time, because there didn't seem to be a whole lot of the master coordinator.

Hannah: Preplanning.

Dobrowolsky: Everybody seemed to know right away what it was they had to do.

Hannah: No, there were no drills, not that I ever participated in. No, there was incredible organization right off the bat. I mean, like I said, basically Guy deserves a lot of credit for what he did. I mean, he kept everything organized basically. And all the workers who were there, everybody, like you said, seemed to know exactly what to do and just went about doing what came natural. Yes, it was incredible to watch the workers do what they do best. It was commendable, for sure. I was quite proud of my co-workers, for sure.

Dobrowolsky: You should be proud of yourself! Thank you very much for this.

Hannah: No problem, Helene, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Richard Hartmier

Richard Hartmier has been working full-time as a freelance photographer since 1985. His work includes two bestselling books of Yukon photographs. On the night of the fire, he set up his tripod across the river to capture some remarkable images of the burning building.

Well, you could sit there and photograph flames all you want. I did a little bit of that, but I knew that there would be reflections in the river, and I knew that the front of the building had this large glass entrance. So, it was going to look really interesting when it got that far, and it did; and that was the stuff that I got that I remember that I liked, and it sort of summed up the fire for me.

Recorded November 24, 2003 in Whitehorse. Reviewed by RH on 8 December 2003. Additional information is in [square brackets.] Tape cassette was recorded on one side only.

Dobrowolsky: This is Monday, November the 24th, Helene Dobrowolsky interviewing Richard Hartmier about the Yukon Energy Corporation fire of 1997. Just to start out, would you please tell me when and where you were born?

Hartmier: I was born in Ontario, Toronto Western Hospital, in 1951, June 18th.

Dobrowolsky: And how long have you lived in the Yukon?

Hartmier: My first foray to the Yukon was in 1974, and then permanent from '79 on.

Dobrowolsky: So, you are a very well known photographer. Could you tell me a little bit about how you got into photography, what attracted you and just how long you've been doing this?

Hartmier: Well, I've always been interested in it from childhood. Friends of mine were really into it as a child, and I grew up with it, and it was always of interest to me, of interest to me at university; and when I came up here in '74, I made sure that I brought a camera with me. You can't come to the Yukon without wanting to see more and it hooked me. The other side of the coin for me was photography was a way I could live in the Yukon, keep my independence and not have to work for the Government.

Dobrowolsky: When did you move to the Yukon full-time?

Hartmier: Full-time would have been in the late '70's, I think it was '78/79 in that area.

Dobrowolsky: And you've been a freelance ever since?

Hartmier: At that point, I did a number of different things. In terms of freelance photography full-time, I made that commitment in I believe '85 and got into it then. So, essentially that's been my sole source of income since 1985, which is probably why I'm as well off as I am.

Dobrowolsky: So, do you have a particular area that you're interested in? I love your landscapes, but do you do portraits? Are there certain things you prefer to do or just would rather not do when you're taking pictures?

Hartmier: Well, I like to do a lot of everything. I like the landscape stuff. I love the historical stuff. I do a lot of that on my own, and people don't see that. If it's old, I'll photograph it because I know it won't be here [for long]. I learned that in the very late '80s when we did a survey of one of the old gold creeks, and it was one that hadn't been plundered. I did it with somebody from Parks Canada [curator Michael Gates]. We photographed it from one end to the other, and some kind soul followed us and ripped off the whole creek behind us. To this day, I don't know who it is. I have my ideas, though. So, preserving what's left of the historical record here is an important thing, and I've always enjoyed that. To me, that's part of the whole landscape of the Yukon. By "landscape" here, I think people are involved in that, buildings are involved in that, landforms. It's an overall thing. So, I never really categorize myself as a landscape photographer or a building photographer or an architectural photographer. The reality of the thing is if you're going to do the sort of stuff up here, you have to sort of do everything

Dobrowolsky: So you see yourself as portraying a dynamic landscape, one that has people and animals and structures.

Hartmier: Well, the Yukon is a dynamic landscape. It's dishonest to photograph it only one way from either extreme. I mean, if you just look at, you know, the built stuff or the landscape, well both of those don't tell you what the Yukon is; and you're right, dynamic is exactly what it is about as far as I'm concerned.

Dobrowolsky: And when you talk about documenting history, are you talking about historic buildings, rundown structures, some of the old mining remains, dredges, that kind of thing?

Hartmier: Oh, absolutely, yes, because that stuff is going. It's going very quickly, and there is less and less interest in it for a whole bunch of reasons, many of which are political.

Dobrowolsky: And what about historic events, do you ever have a sense of – I know you wouldn't have been here when the sternwheelers burned down, but –

Hartmier: I was here for that. I watched that. I was working for the Highway Division for White Pass as a summer student, and we all got down there during and after the fire. That was my introduction.

Dobrowolsky: Do you ever have a sense at the time that when you're photographing an event or a catastrophe, I guess that's pretty straightforward but something that "I am filming something that is a historic event or that is an important part of the historic documentation?" I'm talking more about events, rather than structures.

Hartmier: Oh, absolutely, yes, yes, you do that; but then, you know, if you look at the big picture, you have to start recognizing that today there is not much of any historical consequence that occurs here. We're way back in the backwash of history in the Yukon today. It's nice to talk

about it and dream about it, use it for a significant attractive thing in terms of tourism, but we're far removed from significant historical events here. You know, we have our own little discreet historical things within our own context, that certainly; but historical with a big "H", no.

Dobrowolsky: Do you think that the fire at the Whitehorse Generating Plant was historical with a big "H"?

Hartmier: In terms of the local context, it was pretty historical. I would think it was an almost historical. It was a huge piece of our infrastructure that could have gone with a lot of significant consequences. But for the old hands that were there to keep the thing running and but for God and good luck, we would have been in serious trouble.

Dobrowolsky: Let's go back to the events of late November, 1997, how did you hear about the fire?

Hartmier: I heard about the fire when my phone rang at, I don't know if it was three o'clock in the morning or 2:30. I'm not sure when it was, and Pam Buckway was on the other end, telling me to get my tail down to the dam because there was a big fire.

Dobrowolsky: And Pam Buckway, at the time, was a CBC announcer?

Hartmier: I don't know if she'd just retired or was still doing CBC. It would have been right at that point, but she lived in the "Pink Palace" [condominiums], across from the *S.S. Klondike*. So, she was looking directly out her window and could see the fire in the sky, and then she phoned me and off I went.

Dobrowolsky: And she just happened to be up and looking out her window?

Hartmier: Apparently, yes, yes. You'll have to ask Pam about that. I don't know. I have no idea. Who knows!

Dobrowolsky: So, it's the middle of the night. It's dark. What kind of gear would you take to go and photograph something like a fire?

Hartmier: Well, what I did take was basically 35 millimetre, tripod, cameras and off I went.

Dobrowolsky: Slide film?

Hartmier: Yes, I used slide film. I wasn't interested in newspaper stuff at all, and I did photograph it the next day afterwards, and I had earlier photographed the interior of the building for, I don't know, would it have been Yukon Energy? It would have been Yukon Energy I would think.

Dobrowolsky: So, you packed up your film, your tripod, your camera.

Hartmier: I just threw it in the truck and off I went. Yes, that's always sitting.

Dobrowolsky: Right; and I understand you tried taking pictures from a few vantage points. Could you talk about that?

Hartmier: Well, I drove down the South Access. Actually, I'll preface that. The first thing I did was go and fill up my gas tank; because from what I gathered from Pam this was a significant fire, and I knew that if that building went, there was a significant chance that the power grid would go, and that means that nobody would be able to get gas. So, the first thing I did was get gas.

Dobrowolsky: How interesting. You're the only person I've heard of who did that.

Hartmier: Well, I don't know. So, down the hill I went. I went down the South Access and pulled up and took a look and walked over; and at that point, it was still on the western side, but it was moving towards the main entrance on the other end.

Dobrowolsky: So, the western side, this would be the side away from the river towards the escarpment?

Hartmier: Yes, because it's a long building.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Hartmier: So, it started at one end and worked towards the other.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Hartmier: And by the time I got there, people were beginning to arrive. Photographically it wasn't that interesting. I mean, there's a fire and there's a building, but there you are, and everybody is scurrying about. So, I took a quick look, ran around, hopped back in my truck and went across the river to Riverdale, and then, walked down the trail to where I was directly across from the river; and I was basically alone.

Dobrowolsky: Now, would this have been near the Fish Ladder site?

Hartmier: Well, we did walk down from the Fish Ladder. In fact, I parked there. We walked down the trail to directly across from the building, which is a couple of hundred feet, maybe 400.

Dobrowolsky: So, from the Fish Ladder, you would have gone downriver?

Hartmier: Yes. Today you just drive straight in, but you didn't have to do that then. You had to park at the top, and then, come down. It was quick. I was accompanied by Tim Kinvig. I'd bumped into him. He wasn't photographing. He was just watching. So, we just sat there and watched the fire move across until it got to be really interesting, and then, I started to take pictures.

Dobrowolsky: So, you didn't feel you had to document the whole course of the fire. You were more interested in getting that one spectacular –

Hartmier: Well, you could sit there and photograph flames all you want. I did a little bit of that, but I knew that there would be reflections in the river, and I knew that the front of the building had this large glass entrance. So, it was going to look really interesting when it got that far, and it did; and that was the stuff that I got that I remember that I liked, and it sort of summed up the fire for me. Documenting it is what the news people do. This would go in a book if you wanted to do historical events in the Yukon and Whitehorse. "Okay, here's a shot of the fire at ..." and that would be it, rather than this and that and some other things.

Dobrowolsky: So, it was more of an art, you were going for art images, more than documenting the shoot?

Hartmier: Well, there was an aesthetic to it, yes. Absolutely, yes, yes. I documented it the next day. I took my big camera back and documented the aftermath. I have that in panoramic format, as well.

Dobrowolsky: So, you said you were waiting until the fire took over the whole building. About how long did that take?

Hartmier: Oh, we would have been there three-quarters of an hour. It moved towards us. Well, we knew that. I knew that when I got there at the beginning.

Dobrowolsky: That it was going to be travelling that way.

Hartmier: That it was going to be going that way, and that was the bureaucratic end where all the command control stuff was and the heavy paper and the offices, and that was the good stuff. That would burn well. The rest of it was just essentially a large, aluminum-type building overtop of the generator.

Dobrowolsky: So, what was the fire like? From where you were standing, was it smoky? Could you hear noises?

Hartmier: I could hear it. It was smoky, not super smoky, lots of crackling and popping, but it wasn't that magnificent a fire. Both of the airport fires were a lot more interesting than this fire because there was so much more to burn there.

Dobrowolsky: A lot more wood.

Hartmier: Oh, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you didn't really feel heat or excessive smoke or smells?

Hartmier: No, we were out of it. If you look at the pictures, you can see that we were well out of it. They were smoky, but we were well out of it there.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is a page of slides that you took.

Hartmier: M'hmm.

Dobrowolsky: Well, we'll talk about those in a moment. So, in terms of while you're watching the fire, waiting for it to take over the whole building, from your vantage point could you see much in the way of activity, what was happening with the fire trucks, the crews?

Hartmier: Yes, you could spot – the fire trucks were off on the bottom on the right side of it down below, and you could see them scurrying around, trying to get water from the river and that sort of stuff; but it was well involved, and I don't really think they made much of a contribution to stopping the fire. And it was cold, too, relatively cold.

Dobrowolsky: About what temperature do you think?

Hartmier: I don't know. I don't know. It was cold. I remember my hands were cold using the camera, and I know it was difficult for any of the fire guys to fight this stuff in cold weather; but it wasn't 40 below or anything. But if it had been as bad as it could have been, it would have been bad, because we would have been froze now, the town. I mean, as you watch the fire progress, you begin to look at the consequences of this very large rock in the pond. You know, you could have got to the point where you'd have to remove people from the hospital, take them out of here completely, out of the territory, because there would be no way to support the infrastructure that we have. I mean, this was an extremely key part of territorial infrastructure.

Dobrowolsky: Well, I understand the hospital does have an emergency generator. So, there were a few places but even so –

Hartmier: Yes, but once you're on your generator, you're vulnerable, too; because how many of the generators that people had didn't work.

Dobrowolsky: Or hadn't been tested in some time.

Hartmier: Or hadn't been maintained or tested.

Dobrowolsky: Good point!

Hartmier: I mean, you can't justify putting all of your marbles in that particular barrel.

Dobrowolsky: So, about how long were you there, waiting for the fire to become fully involved?

Hartmier: Well, the building was fully involved when I arrived, but it was moving from one end to the other; and we just had to wait at the other side for it to progress.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm.

Hartmier: I guess it was, oh, 40 minutes or so.

Dobrowolsky: And then, you would have left the site about what time?

Hartmier: I honestly can't remember.

Dobrowolsky: After a couple of hours maybe?

Hartmier: Yes, it would have been no more than that, no more than that. I mean, they were still fighting it and cleaning up afterwards, but the interesting stuff was gone. It had started to die down by the time we ...

Dobrowolsky: And then, when you came back the next day, about what time was that?

Hartmier: Morning, around eleven o'clock, 10:30.

Dobrowolsky: And how did the scene look to you at that time?

Hartmier: It was really interesting. I photographed it from the berm up above. So, I used my panoramic camera, and the whole building was gutted in front of me, and that was basically the foreground of the picture. It was a very hot fire, and you know, I'm glad nobody was hurt.

Dobrowolsky: Indeed. So, tell me about what we're looking at in these slides.

Hartmier: Well, these are the ones that I took from across the river essentially; and as you can see, there are basically only two or three that I really like anyway. One of them is a close-up of the old entrance with all of the glass squares in it, and it looks almost surreal, and the other one is a shot of this end as it's burning down, reflected in the Yukon River as it goes by the building.

Dobrowolsky: So, by "this end," you mean the river end?

Hartmier: Yes, the river end.

Dobrowolsky: And what kind of ASA would you have used for that?

Hartmier: I think that was 100 ASA. There was a lot of light from the fire, and that's why you carry a tripod, of course.

Dobrowolsky: Well, they're wonderful pictures. So, are you pleased with the results? Is there anything you would have done different in that experience?

Hartmier: No, no, I was grateful for Pam's phone call. I probably would have brought a bigger camera. In fact, I believe that I had it in the truck, but the events were just so quick that it was easier to use 35 millimetre, and I remember I ended up using a long lens for the shot into the opening of where the glass was. So, I didn't have that range of magnification with the large camera. So, I think I just left it in the truck and shot it with 35 millimetre, and that's fine.

Dobrowolsky: So, how have these images been used since? I've seen a few of them, and –

Hartmier: Well, they've been around a little bit but not much. People wanted copies of them. I think Yukon Energy has one somewhere. That's pretty much it.

Dobrowolsky: I think they have a copy in their boardroom actually.

Hartmier: Yes, I think they have one. That's about all. There's going to be – if I do another Yukon book, this isn't the only fire that I've photographed. I've got some interesting stuff from one of the Dawson fires, the Monte Carlo; I've got a door that's interesting. From the airports nothing really interesting. There's an aesthetic to this stuff. Sometimes it's interesting, sometimes it isn't.

Dobrowolsky: Well, it's interesting when you get to the point you've documented enough that you can actually compare and make that kind of judgment.

Hartmier: Well, yes, yes. This isn't very common. It doesn't often happen that you get this.

Dobrowolsky: No, no. Well, they're beautiful images, and thank you very much for talking about this.

Hartmier: Well, you're most welcome. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Note: After the interview, Richard talked about the particular significance of fire in the north, e.g. forest fires in summer, both Whitehorse and Dawson have had large fires in the downtown areas and been rebuilt. According to Richard, fire leaves a large footprint in the historical record of both the frontier and contemporary north.

John Maissan

John Maissan was the director of technical services for the Yukon Energy Company. In October 1997, he was working on the transition to direct management. During the extended rebuilding process, he spent much of his time negotiating the insurance settlement.

At the time of the loss, ... the insurers ... were very much focused on minimizing the losses, getting facilities back and operating as quickly as possible regardless of cost ... "Whatever the cost, get it done right now" was very much the attitude. And so we worked under tremendous pressure from the insurers to get facilities back in operation and things rebuilt just as quickly as possible ... near the end of July of 1998, we got a certificate of commissioning or I guess of recommissioning of the third of the three turbines that were damaged by the fire. And ... suddenly we seemed to get a change in attitude from the insurer that said, "All right, now you're back in operation. Now we want you to go back and justify every single dollar you spent."

Recorded July 1, 2003 at Yukon Energy Offices, Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by John Maissan, 16 September 2003. Additional information in [square brackets].

Side A

Dobrowolsky: So, we'll start with the simple stuff. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

Maissan: Yes, I was born in the late 1940s in Europe, and I came to Canada in 1951 with my parents at the age of three; and I've lived in various places throughout Canada and spent the last 19 years in the Yukon.

Dobrowolsky: Could you tell me how you got into the electrical business, is that something that you trained for?

Maissan: No, it's a long story. I guess it's as nomadic as my life is. My background is in chemical engineering; and, in particular, my career as I started out, was in extractive metallurgy, mineral processing, and it was this mining industry that brought me to the Yukon in early 1984. I worked in the mining industry here for a few years, and due to family circumstances it was necessary to get a job closer to home to allow me to spend more time near home I found a job with the Yukon Government in the Energy and Mines Branch in 1986, and that was a bridge between mining and energy. I always have had an interest in energy, energy efficiency, those sorts of issues. And at the time I was with the Energy and Mines Branch of the Yukon Government, the negotiations for the transfer of NCPC assets to the Yukon Government were underway. So, I was with the Department of Economic Development in the Energy and Mines Branch when –

Dobrowolsky: And when exactly was this?

Maissan: This was in 1986, and the transfer was completed, of course, on April 1st, 1987, and the Yukon Energy Corporation was born. I think it started out with a different name but eventually it became Yukon Energy. So, I worked for Yukon Energy indirectly on various projects, because it was initially run out of the Department of Economic Development and I got more involved with time. In 1989 I had an opportunity to join the corporation full time, and so, I did that. So, I've been with Yukon Energy since 1989; and in those early years the utility was being run on a contract basis by the Yukon Electrical Company Ltd. [YECL] and its parent, Alberta Power, and my job was to oversee the technical aspects of this management contract. So, that's how I got involved in the power business from mining.

Dobrowolsky: So, by "overseeing," would this be looking after the diesel operations, the hydro operations?

Maissan: It wasn't getting involved into the day-to-day detail, so much as ensuring that [YECL] and Alberta Power were meeting the requirements under the management agreement to maintain and operate our facilities in an appropriate way. I suppose that most of my detail involvement was in capital projects, assessing the state of our facilities and ensuring that appropriate capital work was done to maintain our facilities or upgrade them to a reasonable standard.

Dobrowolsky: So, would you have been around when the fourth wheel was built?

Maissan: No, that pre-dated the transfer to the government.

Dobrowolsky: That was still NCPC then.

Maissan: That was still NCPC then. That was commissioned I believe in 1985. Construction began in '82, and I believe it was operating since '84 but didn't officially get commissioned until 1985, which, was a time when I was in the Yukon, but I was not with Yukon Government [YG] or Yukon Energy.

Dobrowolsky: So, of course, before the events of the fall of '97 when the great fire happened, Yukon Development Corporation [YDC] or Yukon Energy were very much involved in the transfer of direct management from YECL. Would you have played a role in that?

Maissan: Very much, yes. As one of the small team of Yukon Energy people, I was very much involved in preparing for the transfer of day-to-day operations from [YECL]-Alberta Power to Yukon Energy itself and forming the corporation with all its staff, and we were very much in the midst of this transition work and in the process of hiring technical staff to run the new utility when the fire took place. One of the amusing stories out of this is that we were interviewing electrical engineers the day after the fire, and one of our candidates flew in over the smouldering remains and wondered whether there was a job to come to; and this fellow in the interview, besides coming across as strong, of course, had the guts to say, "It's fun when things blow up." That fellow is now our director of operations, Dave Wray, and he's learned a lot through this process, it's an amusing story we still like to tell.

Dobrowolsky: Well, yes, the feeling of coming over the facility and seeing this smoking ruin!

Maissan: Saying, “This where I’m supposed to be working”, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Could you tell me just how things had been proceeding with direct management. Would you say it was a smooth process?

Maissan: The transition? The transition was certainly a challenging one, because we had this reconstruction to do at the time when we were still trying to hire staff and run day-to-day operations, it was –

Dobrowolsky: Well, even before the fire, did you feel that things were going fairly [well], this is a leading question, I guess...

Maissan: Yes, well were they going fairly well at the time of the fire. I would say so. One of the things that, I guess, was a concern at the time of the NCPC transfer to [YG] was the fact that there were few qualified utility people available to be hired. So, it would be challenging for the [YG] to staff up its own utility and run its own utility, and that was one of the reasons why a management contract with [YECL]-Alberta Power was entered into. But, in 1987 – sorry ‘97, things were quite different. There was a lot of deregulation happening in the electricity business, and there were more technical people available to be hired. And so, we felt that it wouldn’t be all that difficult to attract a reasonable staff to Whitehorse, to run the operation; and in fact, that did prove to be the case. We found some very well qualified people, who are still here and still pillars of the corporation.

Dobrowolsky: Good. So, tell me what you were doing in late October, 1997.

Maissan: Well, we were working very hard to take over on January the 1st, and on that morning of, I’ve forgot now whether if it was the 30th or the 31st. It was the 30th, wasn’t it?

Dobrowolsky: It was the 30th, yes.

Maissan: Yes. I woke up early in the morning to hear the CBC radio talk about this major fire, and then, it mentioned at the Whitehorse Hydro Plant. Well, it was a shock for me to hear this on the radio, when I was getting up and just having breakfast, I stood by the radio a bit more and heard what was going on, and then, took a drive out to the fish ladder area to see for myself. I did not come on to the site with all the firefighting crews, etc. around the place. My involvement was not really necessary at that point. People who needed to be there were there, and so I watched the office building, we so proudly built the year before, come burning down – and the key hydro plant. Given that this was our office building and one of our key hydro plants, it was certainly an ominous way to start direct management. So, yes, it was quite a shocking event.

Dobrowolsky: So, then what?

Maissan: Well, then we got together. I did go back home and did some calling around and we were told that we would be assembling at Davis and Co. in town where we were able to borrow a boardroom and set up I guess a – I don’t know whether you call it a council of war but a council

of disaster, I guess, to take stock of where we were and what needed to be done in the circumstances. We were there by nine o'clock in the morning, starting to make our plans for how we move from where we were to where we needed to go; and one of the things that was happening that very day, of course, was interviewing of candidates for the electrical engineer's position. We had our human resource people, who had lost basically everything in the fire, try to reconstruct the interview questions etc. and put that all together. We had to wing it a bit, but I think we did all right.

Also on the afternoon of the 30th when the fire was pretty much under control, it was deemed safe by the firefighters for the Yukon Energy staff to go into the bottom floor of the office building and recover such things as were recoverable. My office was on the bottom floor, so I had the pleasure of wading in deep rubber boots to pull out all my waterlogged files and records, etc. and help with whatever other files were there. Some areas were not accessible, because the floor between second and first had collapsed and was physically not accessible. Pretty much everything on the top floor was lost other than the file room, from which surprisingly, I think, about 90 percent was recovered, largely because it was a two-hour, fire-proof room; and so, we were quite fortunate in that regard.

The day-to-day operations at that point, with two months to go, were still being handled by [YECL] and Alberta Power and, they, of course, were very much involved in the fire and running the operation immediately afterwards. So, from there in the coming days, we planned how we were going to move forward, how we were going to recover facilities to the point where we could keep the power on for Yukoners during the coming winter, and with the Faro mine running at the time, that was no small challenge. So, that was quite a time.

Dobrowolsky: So just moving back a little, did you feel any sense of surprise that you were able to turn on your radio and have this broadcast?

Maissan: Well, I was shocked by it. I suppose what struck me was that I had not been called and knew nothing of it, and the first I heard of it was on the radio in the morning. Given that I had a fairly senior position in Yukon Energy, I guess I would have expected for something that major, to have received a phone call. But people were busy doing the things they absolutely had to do, I guess, and since day-to-day operations were still being handled by [YECL], then my involvement was not critical. But it was a bit of a surprise, I guess, to hear it on the radio as opposed to through a phone call.

Dobrowolsky: And did you wonder, "So, how is – with this facility, this major facility, obviously shut down, how is the power operating," or did you just assume, oh somehow –

Maissan: Well, my power was on in the morning, so obviously it was being kept on, and through the course of the day and the following days, I learned more of how this was done by people like Guy Morgan and others to keep the plants running. I learned about how Mike Hanna had been able to off-load the electrical load from Whitehorse to other plants and turn operations into manual mode and vacate the building, which was soon demolished.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, quite remarkable.

Maissan: Yes, yes.

Dobrowolsky: I find that, talking to some of the operators and people on the ground, what I find quite amazing is that this did not seem to be a contingency anyone really had ever planned for or there were any kind of established emergency procedures, but everyone seemed to know exactly what they needed to do to keep the power on and to keep things operating, and, yes, I found that quite remarkable.

Maissan: Yes, that is. I guess it shows that the people involved were all competent people and were not the kind to go into panic mode. They kept their heads and their cool, and figured out quickly what needed to be done and got about doing it without further ado, and yes, a credit to them.

Dobrowolsky: The other thing I found quite interesting is that a number of these employees had been with the corporation or YECL for years and years, literally from the shovel-up, and a number of them had experience when all the systems were on manual mode and before the sophisticated computer operations had been set up, and I think that really served the corporation well. They had that kind of background and had these maps in their heads of how everything interconnected and what needed to be done manually.

Maissan: Yes, indeed. Many of the people, although they were with [YECL] at the time, had come from NCPG before that. So, they knew the plants. They weren't people who came from outside the Yukon to run Yukon plants, but they were people who grew up here, to a large degree – grew up here and cut their teeth on the very plants they now had to run manual mode.

Dobrowolsky: So, you had your challenge dealing with the day-to-day operations, preparations for moving into taking over direct management. Did you find you had to call on other resources as well, almost immediately, for the rebuilding and also just to keep things going? Were you involved in that part of it?

Maissan: Yes. It was essentially a committee approach, if you want to call it that, between [YECL] and Yukon Energy, because the transition was very much in progress; and while [YECL] was still managing our facilities, of course, the handoff was going to happen two months later, and so, Yukon Energy needed to be very much involved in moving forward to repairs, etc.

Representatives from the insurance company were here very quickly, in a day or two, and with [YECL] and some of their Alberta Power people, who backed them up, we started to put together a plan for how to select a contractor to start repairs immediately. The start was an assessment first of what was there, what was the damage and the state of affairs and to start to plan for rebuilding; and you can well imagine that there was a lot of pressure to do it very quickly, both for internal need but also because of business interruption insurance. It meant that the insurer had a lot of interest in seeing this facility put back together in running order very, very quickly. And so, there was a lot of pressure to get on with it.

We went through a very short process to find a general contractor with the appropriate qualifications to oversee the complete reconstruction. So, they needed electrical background, they needed civil background and they had to put a whole team effort together to essentially design and build at the same time, very much in a rush mode, and you know –

Dobrowolsky: Well, under certain constraints. I mean, you did have your footprint. As I understand it, the only things that were salvaged were literally the concrete floor and the turbines themselves.

Maissan: Yes, the turbines and generators were all salvaged. That was all good. Everything from the ground-up essentially had to be replaced, all the electrical switch gear, the building itself, the crane, everything. Now, the cabling and wiring was pretty much burnt. Even bellow ground level, the fire followed the cables, burnt the insulation from the cables etc. and so, there was a fair bit of damage below the concrete floor in cabling etc. The generators were very dirty. Of course, the turbines themselves were flooded with water, and they all had to be pumped out.

We had to assess what the damage to the bearings, etc. was, and to the generators, and try to determine whether any of this was salvageable. In order to protect the generators sort of boxes, steel boxes, were built over top of each of the three generators so that building demolition could happen without destroying or risk of further damage to the generators and the associated equipment – and also to start to assess and dry out this equipment. The generators were protected by these three or four temporary buildings for the wintertime; and in fact, we were able to get one of the three generators running by, I think it was December the 22nd.

So, less than two months from the time of the fire we had one of the generators running on a temporary basis, which was Number 3 furthest away from where the fire started. Everyone accepted that there was some risk, because the generator was rather dirty from smoke and deposits and so on; but once it was properly dried out, we found that electrically it was still in reasonable shape. Bearings and so on were all cleaned out and re-lubricated, and so this generator ran with temporary, salvaged electrical equipment, as well. We were able to scrounge enough together from what was salvaged to run it, at least on a temporary basis. Everyone accepted that there was a high risk of failure; but better to have it running than not have it running. And so, we had the first of the three units running before Christmas.

Dobrowolsky: So, was that also the same time that you had the partially salvaged SCADA system operating as well?

Maissan: Yes, it was pulled together around the same time, recovering electronic data. Stuff was sent down to, electronic discs or whatever, Vancouver to have electronic data recovered, and SCADA was temporarily recovered, and we were able to piece together enough to run it on a temporary basis. A washroom in the diesel plant was converted to a control room on a temporary basis, and things that needed to get done got done; and as unconventional as it may have been, in those kinds of times, you do what you have to do and there was no standing on ceremony about “Well, this used to be a washroom.” It doesn’t matter. This is now your control room. (laughter)

Dobrowolsky: So, I understand the location was picked, that particular location was picked because it was accessible to a number of the cables and such that they needed to hook up the temporary SCADA, is that correct?

Maissan: Yes. It was in the diesel plant, it was close to other sources of power and electronic information and close to the substation and all of that. In the fullness of time, in the fullness of limited time, we set up a single-wide trailer a little further away, and then, that became the SCADA centre until the new office building and the new SCADA centre were built and up and running. I've forgotten just when that happened, but it was a number of months after the fire.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so just to fill in a few blanks, when you were talking about the adjusters, I assume these were insurance adjusters that came up.

Maissan: Yes, the insurance adjusters, correct.

Dobrowolsky: Were these people who had some kind of expertise in dealing with utilities, or like were they knowledgeable about this kind of situation, or they were just applying their general, I don't know, insurance considerations?

Maissan: Well, general insurance considerations, but they were certainly familiar with electrical plants, and they brought in some technical assistance, as well, to assist them. So, you know, while they were not intimately familiar with utility operations, then they certainly knew industrial operations, these adjusters. I guess that was their business, and so they knew something about large industrial plants.

Dobrowolsky: What was the name of the Yukon Energy insurance company?

Maissan: Well, there were three different insurance companies and, in fact, through this whole process the firm of adjusters changed, as well. We kept the same adjuster. His name was John Bicknell and, I think, when he started out – at the time of the fire, he was with a company called Lindsey Morden, and then, he set up with other partners. He set up another firm. I'm trying to remember, I think it's Kendal Adjusters. My memory is starting to go already, after only five years.

Dobrowolsky: And so, he was an adjuster ...

Maissan: Representing all three insurance companies, yes, three insurers or three consortiums.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, and do you recall their names offhand?

Maissan: Oh, there were several. Lloyd's of London was one. There was Confederation Life, I think, I'm not sure. Anyway there were three different –

Dobrowolsky: Cast of dozens.

Maissan: – cast of dozens, and there are re-insurers involved and our, I guess “face” for the insurance companies that we had to deal with was the adjuster; and the lead adjuster was John Bicknell.

Dobrowolsky: So, did this cause some complications, the fact that there were a number of insurers? I assume they would have handled different aspects of the operation?

Maissan: It was all handled through John Bicknell. So, there was that one-window approach in that respect, and I’m sure they were all asserting their influence on John Bicknell as to what they would like to see in terms of how the insured dealt with the loss and reconstruction. And what I recall most, though, particularly in the early months, was the focus on getting operations back and minimizing losses because of the business interruption insurance, and that certainly resulted in additional cost; but from the insurer’s perspective they would want to minimize their overall claim, and that would be a combination of not just repairing the loss but also minimizing the business losses which they would otherwise have to pay for. So, from their perspective, it’s minimizing the overall loss.

Dobrowolsky: So, perhaps just explain in a little more detail what they mean by “business interruption insurance.”

Maissan: Business interruption insurance provides for lost profits, lost revenues etc., you know, with various strings attached, because the business is incapacitated due to an insurable event, such as a fire. In our case, we had to run more diesel generators, so our cost went up substantially. We had to use the Aishihik Hydro Plant a lot more than had been planned for, and this resulted in us hitting a low supply level and running out of power in the coming years because of inadequate inflows. So, all of this added substantially to the diesel cost, and business interruption would cover that increased cost, I guess, to keep business going, to keep revenues going.

Dobrowolsky: So, would this also include people working extra shifts and overtime and additional temporary staff, that kind of thing?

Maissan: That all worked into insurance claims, yes. You know, there was a property claim. There was a boiler machinery claim. There was a business interruption claim. So, it’s a fairly complicated affair; and with the assistance of not just the adjusters and the insurance broker but also other specialists we eventually completed the claims and settled without having to go to the courts or anything like that.

Dobrowolsky: Right. So, you were talking earlier about having to fairly quickly find someone qualified to be a general contractor to deal with the rebuilding. Could you tell me a little bit about the players in that and perhaps the selection process? I imagine there wouldn’t be all that many firms in the country with that kind of expertise.

Maissan: There weren’t, no; in fact, when we started phoning around, and I say “we” liberally here, that includes the committee and [YECL] people. Several big firms were contacted, Monenco, Acres – I’m trying to remember – West Kootenay Power I think was also approached

to see if they could put a team together, and SNC-Lavalin. And we got, I believe, three consortiums putting in their brief proposals, and it had to be brief because it had to be quick, and we were talking a selection within a two-week timeframe from the fire, and we had three bids to evaluate. Again the insurer – the adjuster and his technical assistants – were present during the review and selection process, defining scope of work, etc.; and we selected a group led by Monenco AGRA. Included were a company called “BFC Civil” and GE (General Electric) Alstom, I think was – sorry Alstom, which was later, I believe, bought up by GE. Alstom, out of Montreal, was part of that consortium, too, and they represented the electrical side of the business. They were selected, and I think within three weeks they were on the job as it were.

Dobrowolsky: So, these would have been firms from eastern Canada?

Maissan: Mostly out of western Canada, other than Alstom, which was centred in Montreal; but they were part of a consortium centred in Calgary, Monenco AGRA out of Calgary. BFC Civil was out of Edmonton, I believe, and Acres has a Calgary office, as well as I believe they have a Vancouver office, as well. So, we were dealing mainly with firms in western Canada.

Dobrowolsky: So, then I gather representatives from this consortium would have come up here, done an evaluation, meetings; and as you were saying, while the rebuilding was happening, it wasn't necessarily this nice orderly process where you had your drawings and ... (laughter)

Maissan: Exactly, it was quite a challenging process. It was well underway by the end of the year at the time the reins were formally handed over to Yukon Energy, and of course, the transition happened on January 1st, 1998 with the work still in progress. So, effectively, I guess I was the overall project manager, even before the hand-over.

Dobrowolsky: The transition, yes.

Maissan: I was part of this committee, and we had people like Sid Mathur, who was an electrical engineer with YECL, played a major role in that time leading up to the transfer. And then, the ball was entirely in our court as of January the 1st, and we had some new staff onboard already then. The electrical engineer I mentioned earlier, Dave Wray, he joined us in early December on a permanent basis, and he was put to work, helping out there; and we had some other staff starting around the same time. So, we all rolled up our sleeves and got to work. And essentially what we had to do was – or what the contractor had to do was design and build on the fly. There was very little time for review and approval of drawings. It was not the conventional way of reconstruction.

Dobrowolsky: Kind of draw two lines and “This is what you're doing today.” (laughter)

Maissan: This is conceptual designs very quickly and, yes, proceed; and then, do some more detail work, and sometimes it was having to do field adaptation, field measurements, to get final designs in place.

I just thought of something interesting, and I lost it again. But yes, on drawings and approvals, I can recall an incident getting flack from our adjusters about requesting 24 hours to review and approve sets of drawings for the reconstruction. So, you can imagine, –

Dobrowolsky: 24 hours!

Maissan: – 24 hours you get a set of drawings, and you have to approve or comment within that period of time just to keep things going. That's incredible time pressure.

Dobrowolsky: So, what kind of hours were you putting in during that time?

Maissan: I think I averaged about 60 hours a week and maybe a little bit more. My life was being totally consumed by this transition, plus the fire reconstruction and as were others. I wasn't alone in that boat by any means; and yes, it's a lot of work, a lot of time, but when things have to get done, you just have to roll up your sleeves and do them.

And you know, looking back on it now, I think the end result was very satisfactory. We have a hydro plant that works well again. We have an office building that met not just our needs in terms of replacing what was lost, but also in a sense the fire was an opportunity to build a building that would house all the employees we would have post-transition. So, we took a traditional approach with the office building; and while we were in temporary quarters on Range Road, we designed this office building in a traditional fashion, incorporating energy efficiency features that we won awards for later, which was really rewarding, because we wanted this to be a model building. It was set up in the right way, and it's become a very good building. It's a big success from all of this, to have such a good building.

And the hydro plant in the end became a very good hydro plant, too; and we also took the opportunity to incorporate a number of the features we wanted to incorporate – that we only have one chance to – because we were reconstructing. The old building was very energy inefficient, very thin walls, etc. It had only electric heating throughout. So, we took the opportunity to upgrade the building from what it had been; not just to meet code, which the insurance company covered, but also to meet modern standards as far as energy efficiency goes. We put in an oil heating system so that when we are out of hydro, when we don't have hydro surplus, we can run on oil, and then, we can sell the electricity to the customers that need it. Electric heating is not an efficient use of electricity as you probably know, and it can be expensive, as well. So, we have, in fact, a dual system in the hydro plant, which is both electric heat for when we have surplus hydro, and we have oil for when we don't have surplus, as with this office building as well.

Dobrowolsky: Enhanced fire protection features, I assume?

Maissan: And some enhanced fire protection features, an office building that is not attached to a hydro plant and those kinds of things. So, yes, I think we've ended up with some facilities we can be quite proud of; and despite the pressures of time, I think we did some things which were relatively far-sighted in those respects, and I guess we look on those features with pride now.

Dobrowolsky: So, going back to your builders, you would have had these people working on the plant, working on cleaning out your generators and your turbines; I understand a lot of tar and stuff from the roof, well just debris from the fire got on everything.

Maissan: Got into the generators, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And then, in terms of how these people – I understand there were also a number of local contractors involved, as well.

Maissan: And subcontractors, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Maissan: Yes, they would have worked for the general contractor, that's correct.

Dobrowolsky: So, that would have been part of their job would be making use of any local tradesmen or –

Maissan: We didn't have – we didn't have requirements in the contract for them to use local tradesmen. In the pressures of time, I guess you focus on getting the job completed; but certainly these contractors would find it very cost-effective to use local people, because they're not having to fly people up to put them up in hotels and those sorts of things. Local people are – you know, they live here, they have their accommodation here and they are available.

Dobrowolsky: And their own supply lines?

Maissan: Their own supply lines, and so, quite a lot of local talent was used.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm. And then, in terms of additional people who might have had to be brought on board while you were kind of in those first weeks and months while you were still in this state of semi-emergency, were you involved in that at all when I understand a number of expert people from Alberta Power came up to kind of help spell off some of the local crews that were putting in very long hours, or would that have been not quite your province?

Maissan: I was not directly involved in that, no. That would have happened in the first weeks, and that was all handled through [YECL]; but as things started to settle down, routines were re-established, and these people then went back. And certainly by Christmas time, I don't believe there was anybody still here from Alberta or Alberta Power working with us. Even people who were project managing before had essentially handed over the reins to me before Christmas, and it was our show from thereon.

And this whole transition between [YECL] and Yukon Energy was challenging from another perspective, and that's the accounting perspective. Of course, all financial records were initially being handled by [YECL] / Alberta Power as part of the normal operations of the day, but starting January the 1st, '98, then of course, Yukon Energy had its own books. So, in all of this insurance costs reconciliation was the issue of two sets of books; under [YECL], and then, under Yukon

Energy; and being a fledgling company, our system was relatively simple to start with. That created some accounting challenges, but we had some good people to help us through that. One in particular I remember is Patsy Birmingham [PB], who knew the financial systems very well and was extremely helpful in keeping financial records and in sorting them out for the project.

Dobrowolsky: And was she a Yukon Energy employee or a consultant?

Maissan: She had been a [YECL] employee, and she came over to Yukon Energy, and she became a Yukon Energy employee; and so, we had the benefit of her knowledge of the [YECL] systems and people.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm.

Maissan: And she worked with our system, as well.

Dobrowolsky: Excellent. I'm going to take another little break here.

Side B

Dobrowolsky: Okay, this is the second side of an interview with John Maissan on July the 1st, 2003. We were talking briefly before we restarted the interview, about the continuing negotiations with the insurers; and you mentioned how there was a certain flip in attitude. Could you talk a bit about that?

Maissan: Sure. At the time of the loss, as I mentioned earlier I think, the insurers were represented by the adjuster, were very much focused on minimizing the losses, getting facilities back and operating as quickly as possible regardless of cost. You know, time was a constraint; money was not, get it done. "Whatever the cost, get it done right now" was very much the attitude. And so, we worked under tremendous pressure from the insurers to get facilities back in operation and things rebuilt just as quickly as possible; and only about nine months or so after the fire, I think it was near the end of July of 1998, we got a certificate of commissioning or I guess of recommissioning of the third of the three turbines that were damaged by the fire. And so, we were now back in full operation again from the generator perspective; and suddenly we seemed to get a change in attitude from the insurer that said, "All right, now you're back in operation. Now we want you to go back and justify every single dollar you spent."

So, rather than, "Do it now no matter what the cost;" suddenly we had people looking back and saying, "Now go back and justify every single dollar," when at the time of reconstruction the attitude was very much "Get it done now no matter what the cost!" So, there was quite a bit of additional pressure on staff at that point to make sure that our records and documentation supported what we did and why; and even while the last of the building was finished, which pretty much occurred by the end of 1998, it took us until 2001 to sort out all the details with the insurers and come to an agreement. So, there was a lot of work in between.

Part of it was that the office building took a while to complete because we did it the conventional way. We started construction of the office building in the fall of '98, and we started moving in I

believe it was in March of '99. And so, once that was completed, then of course, that had to form part of the final insurance claim and records, as well. And because there were significant upgrades, that too added to the complexity of the discussions with the insurers, as to what is upgrade and what was replacement for what we had before. And it took essentially two years of work with the assistance of some lawyers and some other professional accounting staff to sort out all of the documentation (and working with the adjusters and their consultants too) and we finally reached at least a “handshake settlement” in March of 2001.

Dobrowolsky: A mere four-and-a-half years after the fire.

Maissan: A mere four-and-a-half years, and that was an extremely stressful time in my life, I can assure you, those last six months leading up to getting a settlement was very stressful, a lot of work and just a lot of pressure; and it was a big load off my back when that settlement was reached. The paperwork took a little while after that before that was all sorted out, but essentially the deal was reached in March of 2001. I hope I don't have to do it again, (laughter) but if I had to do it again, then certainly this experience would stand me in good stead; because you would – I guess I would – know more what to expect and be better prepared.

Dobrowolsky: Just when you were talking about all the consultants and all the lawyers and all the accountants, I'm just thinking of the vast amount of human resources that went into justifying, you know, something that was probably entirely justifiable but greatly increased everybody's costs.

Maissan: It did, but there was a lot of money at stake; and, of course, people spend money because they feel it's cost-effective to do so. They either, if they're an insurance company, want to make sure they don't pay out any more than they absolutely have to; and if you're the insured, you want to make sure you get everything you're entitled to and are not short-changed by the insurance company. So, it's everybody trying to protect their interests, making sure that they get a fair and just settlement for all parties. The overall claim here was – and I can't remember the details, but over 13 million dollars. So, there was a fair bit of money at stake, and if you spend a few hundred thousand dollars on consultants in order not to be short changed by a million or two from both sides, then everybody would probably consider it money well spent. Certainly our consultants were very helpful to us in this process, and I'm not sure we could have achieved the settlement we did without their assistance.

Dobrowolsky: And would this have been, again, your lawyers, Davis & Co.? Were they involved in it?

Maissan: Davis & Co. was involved in this, and we also had consultants from Pricewaterhouse Coopers. They were consultants that were, in fact, recommended to us by – or one of the firms recommended to us - the adjusters at some point saying, “These people are experienced with dealing with insurance companies and fire claims. They're a third party. They've got their independent credibility, and they may be able to help you,” and they were very helpful.

Dobrowolsky: Excellent.

Maissan: Well, where do you want to go from here?

Dobrowolsky: So, do you think that took a few years off your life? (laughter)

Maissan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: Certainly lots of nights of sleep I would imagine.

Maissan: Lots of stress and, yes, it certainly affected my sleep for sure. Yes, that kind of stress always has its toll on human health; and because of that and other overlapping work pressures, 2001 was a stressful year; and my health started to suffer because of it. You know, at the same time we were reaching this insurance settlement, we were in the throes of getting the Mayo-Dawson City transmission system project underway. So, we had those two overlap by about a year; and so there was some pressure from both of those situations. And yes, but, you know, people just have to do what they have to do and –

Dobrowolsky: And how about during all these weeks and months after the fire? My impression is you were one of many who were putting in long days and working extra shifts and cancelling holidays. How do you feel working under this continual stress generally affected people? Do you feel people rose to the occasion or it made things more difficult? Probably a combination of both?

Maissan: Well, you are correct, people really rise to the occasion; and in this case, with no exceptions that I know of, people really put up, and this is where professional attitude really comes through. And it's like most people in personal life, when they're faced with extreme difficulties, you'd be surprised at how deep down people can dig for amazing strength, you know, to do things or carry things that they would otherwise have difficulty dealing with. And it was the same here. People really put their shoulder to the wheel and got it going, and that's not to say that we didn't have some signs of cracks because of stress along the way; but by and large, people felt real pride in getting things done and doing them properly and doing them quickly, and there was no belly-aching that I know of, of the extra time that was put in.

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Maissan: That's an angle I wouldn't have thought about discussing, not too much anyway.

Dobrowolsky: Well, I talked to one or two people who actually said that in some ways it was fun. It was fun to have this incredible challenge –

Maissan: This challenge.

Dobrowolsky: – and this sense of being able to do something very different and new and, again, rising to the occasion; and although it was long days, lots of hours, yes, it was so interesting.

Maissan: It was fun, yes. Well, certainly people learn a lot in this situation, and as Dave Wray's comment, "Things are fun when they blow up," indicates you learn more when you're having

difficult times than when everything is going smoothly, and so, people rise to those kinds of occasions, and we held Dave to his comments, too.

Dobrowolsky: (laughter) I'm sure it was quoted back at him!

Maissan: He was busy! Oh, very, very often. And he was a very busy man over the following year-and-a-half for sure.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm. So, any final thoughts here?

Maissan: I guess just looking back overall again I would say that I, like many other people, am quite proud of what we achieved during those difficult circumstances; and in my own case, I include in that the ultimate settlement with the insurers. You know, I feel that we did a good job in reaching a final settlement, and I feel pride in that, and I hope I don't have to do it again; but if I do, I'd do it better the second time. (laughter)

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you very much for this.

END OF INTERVIEW

Brenda Mattson

Brenda Mattson is a records management specialist. As part of her business, Yukia Office Services, she hosts databases for most of the territory's public libraries on her server. In October 1997, she was organizing the library and records that were being transferred from the Yukon Electrical Company Ltd. to the Yukon Energy Corporation. After the fire, her job was to supervise the salvage of the smoky, scorched, waterlogged records.

Recorded May 28, 2003 in Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Ms. Mattson on 19 September 2003. Additional comments in [square brackets].

We went to the site with our grubby clothes on, which became more grubby, and started as they were bringing out materials with a large shovel, a front-end loader. They were bringing out the file cabinets, and of course, as they brought them out, they were falling apart, and records were falling out, and they were horribly wet and not in very good shape at all; but we recovered safely what we could recover.

Dobrowolsky: It is May the 28th, 2003. This is Helene Dobrowolsky talking to Brenda Mattson in Whitehorse about the aftermath of the great fire at the Yukon Energy Corporation (YEC) generating plant back in 1997. So, quick reprise here, could you please tell me when and where you were born.

Mattson: I was born on December 3rd, 1951, in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Dobrowolsky: And how long have you been in the Yukon?

Mattson: I have been here since 1981, July 13th, 1981 actually; but I visited here several times before that.

Dobrowolsky: Great. So, I understand you'd been working with Yukon Energy on their records and their library. Could you tell me a little bit about your occupational background, how you came to do that kind of work?

Mattson: Library and records management? Well, I didn't take it in school, but I have strong organizational skills, and that was a way to apply them. I started my business in 1991, doing secretarial work for some of the community groups where I lived in the Hamlet of Mount Lorne, such as the school council and the hamlet council and the fire hall and helped out with a number of different things there, including chairing some of those [councils and committees].

I worked part time for Whitehorse Public Library for about six years; and of course, that's good training for anything organizational. It was listening to people complain about how they couldn't find information, not only library materials, but also records materials; and making decisions, the government was actually making decisions without the proper information, because they

couldn't find it or didn't know they existed. Just listening to those complaints or needs that they had identified, and I started to fill in the niches with database work for libraries and database work also for records management.

Dobrowolsky: And your business is called?

Mattson: Yukia Office Services.

Dobrowolsky: So, you handle databases for all kinds of libraries, don't you?

Mattson: Yes, I have a website of Yukon libraries, both public, special and technical, government libraries; and some of the boards and smaller organizations in the community.

Dobrowolsky: As a frequent user of your website, I must say it's a real boon to the researcher to be able to look up things from my own desk and then, to phone ahead to the Archives and say, "I'd like to look at this, and here is the call number" or to even find out if they have a particular item and to see which library might. I think that's wonderful!

Mattson: Yes, having worked for Renewable Resources' library, which is now Department of Environment for the Government of Yukon, that was where I heard contractors coming and saying they had to visit five or six or seven libraries and do research in each one of those libraries to find the materials they need to write the papers that they were being requested to write or the reports. That's how it came about to be able to take the data and make it searchable; and, of course, the Internet starting in 1994 here in the Yukon also opened up a whole new world for people being able to find information. So, that niche in the technical capabilities was there for it all to happen.

Dobrowolsky: Excellent, very enterprising! So, before the fire, you had been doing some work, now, was it for Yukon Electrical (YECL) or Yukon Development Corporation (YDC)?

Mattson: It was for Yukon Energy Corporation. Rick Curial was doing a project, and one of the aspects of the project was organizing the library and the records that were to come over as YECL devolved its responsibilities back to Yukon Energy; and Yukon Energy actually blossomed into a place where there were many people working instead of just a few and YECL managing the resources. [Note: Rick Curial was hired as a contractor and/or coordinator for the transfer of management from YECL to Yukon Energy.]

So Rick called me in, knowing that I did library and records management, and I started [doing inventories] and also looking at the different records [inherited from NCPC and YECL]. Everything was to be brought over. Of course, in the middle of that, a few months before the January 1st, 1998, date for the devolvment, there was the fire in October.

Dobrowolsky: Were you still in the process of transferring and organizing those records from YECL at the time of the fire in October 1997?

Mattson: At the time I had identified all the resources while I was still working on some of the drawings and what was to be brought over; but as far as the library and the records, I had identified what they were, where they were and the quantity and the equipment that they would be needing to store them and the places that they would be needing to store them or making suggestions about where they could keep the information.

Yukon Energy and YDC had one file room with a door with about four to six filing cabinets in it that were full; and they would be both YDC corporate records and Yukon Energy corporate records.

There was a library in that building that was completely destroyed. It was in the boardroom, and all the books were behind closed cupboard doors. So, you had to open the door to find out – to get to the shelves.

Dobrowolsky: What kind of cupboards, were they wooden?

Mattson: They were wooden with a kind of a vinyl cover on the outside, and they were floor-to-ceiling on the length of one wall and the width of the other.

Dobrowolsky: So, about what extent would the library have been, about how many volumes?

Mattson: I think there were about 4,000 titles and perhaps slightly more volumes, plus periodicals and magazines that they subscribed to; a substantial library for the Yukon. It was half their collection. The other half of the collection was at YECL, but that was more the technical information, such as manuals; and we do have a list of all that was lost, and over the years, they have replaced what they've needed to replace and what they could replace since then.

Dobrowolsky: Tell me how you found out about the fire?

Mattson: Rick Curial phoned me in the morning and let me know. I think I might have heard about it slightly before that on the radio. He said, "Stand by, and we'll see what's going to happen with this." The fire was out by then, but the recovery was about to take place.

And I phoned ARMA [Association of Records Managers and Administrators], that's the records management association in Kansas, and asked them for information on recovery of materials that had been in a fire, smoke and water damage; and they kindly faxed me several articles and information on what to do and how best to treat the materials so that the information could be recovered from them.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were already making preparations?

Mattson: Yes, I was preparing, and then, Rick phoned again later in the morning, and I drove in; and we went to the site with our grubby clothes on, which became more grubby and started as they were bringing out materials with a large shovel, a front-end loader.

They were bringing out the file cabinets, and of course, as they brought them out, they were falling apart, and records were falling out, and they were horribly wet and not in very good shape at all; but we recovered safely what we could recover, which was almost everything except I think there was one drawer missing of YDC corporate records. We did miss that.

Dobrowolsky: So, what did the site look like at the time you got there? You said that was about 2:00 in the afternoon?

Mattson: In the afternoon, and we worked until well into the night. I think I was able to take everything up to Yukon Archives by about nine or ten o'clock at night. [Yukon Archives staff Diane Chisholm and Clara Rutherford had kindly donated space] I had my truck with me and hauled it up.

Dobrowolsky: What were your impressions when you went on the site? What did you see?

Mattson: Oh, a lot of black and charred remains; I particularly remember books that had been on people's desks that were charred around the edges, not able to be used. Some we did keep, and you can see in the library now that some books have blackened edges. Some we weren't able to, but we did make note of those ones and reordered the ones that we've needed. There was one on Environmental Science that I think was on Duncan [Sinclair]'s desk that was a particularly good book and we did order another copy.

Interestingly enough, the wooden desks that came out of the fire, things in the drawers were fine; but what came out of metal desks, there was a lot more damage to the papers inside. I thought that was unusual. Yes, that the wood would ...

And I think a lot of the damage came from above with water damage going from the top down. So, you could see where people's papers had been on their desks, the top ones would be wet; but the ones underneath would be actually intact or fairly intact. There were charred edges. So, you can see, not the original records, but the copies of records that were made, that they had charred edges and photocopies of the charring.

Dobrowolsky: So, you saw these blackened ruins. Was there still any smoking, or had that all stopped?

Mattson: A little bit of smoke coming up but nothing that produced flame or fire in the area where I was; I think it was just smoke that had been trapped inside, and as they were moving things around and recovering what they could, little bits of smoke [or perhaps steam] would come up.

Dobrowolsky: By this time, I guess it would be the Yukon Energy or YECL crews and fire department were starting to salvage what they could?

Mattson: Yes, I don't remember seeing too many fire department people there, and I'm not sure who was operating the equipment for the recovery; but there were YECL and Yukon Energy people there, yes.

Dobrowolsky: You mentioned that you were trucking things up to Yukon Archives, so I guess as part of your preparations before you went to the site, you had called the Archives and made arrangements?

Mattson: Yes, I phoned and talked to Clara Rutherford, I talked with her, and she stayed and waited for me to bring the records up, and she told me where the loading bay was. A lot of it had to be kept in freezers, because it was water-damaged; and we could not just let it dry without taking the pages apart. They would have been stuck, and they wouldn't have been able to recover the information on the pages. It wasn't the paper that was important. What was important was the information on the paper. So, we froze everything, put them in freezers as best we could, and kept them frozen until we set up the site for the recovery.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you were bringing things up to Archives, how many boxes are we talking?

Mattson: Oh, many boxes, I should have counted them. My mind goes to 44, but I think there were actually more than that.

Dobrowolsky: So, we're talking dozens?

Mattson: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And this is again mainly the records, not so much the books; most of those –

Mattson: The books were gone other than the odd few books that were in people's bookcases or on their desks; but there wasn't much left of them. Very few of them were useable.

There is quite a large picture that hangs at Yukon Energy and probably hangs at YDC, too, showing the flames leaping out of the boardroom where the library was. So, there was no hope for recovery of that library.

We did have the database of it. When I was doing my research on libraries and records information for Yukon Energy, I had the databases of everything that was lost. So, they were well aware of what they had lost.

It helped a lot. I think it helped a lot with the insurance part of it, and it helped a lot with relocating that information so that they could put it back into their existing library; and their existing library came from YECL.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is the first day. You're in your jeans, getting really grubby, hauling boxes into – it was just your truck, back and forth to the Archives?

Mattson: No, Rick had his truck there, too, as well. I think he brought up some things, I don't remember exactly, but ...

Dobrowolsky: Then everything went up to the Archives. Put it in the freezers, and that was probably enough for one day.

Mattson: Yes, it was very exhausting, and it was emotionally exhausting, too, you know, watching the people who had worked there help, as well. It wasn't just me and Rick. There were many people there, including Darlene Morgan, having to look through the remains of their desk. And there was another woman, and again I can't remember her name. She retired after over 30 years with YECL.

Dobrowolsky: It wouldn't be Pamela Griffiths, would it?

Mattson: No, it wasn't Pam, although Pam was there, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And there was [Diane] Pilloud.

Mattson: Yes, that's it. After all those years, and she was in charge of many of the records, so it was quite hard on her, I think, too, to look at that.

Dobrowolsky: Pretty emotional!

Mattson: Yes, there were not only Yukon Energy records. Then there were sets of YECL records, as well, that needed to be recovered. So, we actually set up two stations, and she was in charge of the YECL records, and we did the Yukon Energy records.

Dobrowolsky: So, phase one was just physically salvaging what you could from the devastation and then, when did the next phase start? Everything is in freezers, so at least it's stable.

Mattson: Yes, really the next day, you know, I started calling and having Lloy Billingham come on hand, because she's a paper expert and we were lucky enough to have her in the Territory at the time. So, she could review that, setting up the space. I like to think that the recovery project went from Hallowe'en to Valentine's Day, because it really did, from October 31st, and we were finished and wrapped up by February 14th of 1998.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, that brackets it nicely.

Mattson: Yes, I think I put that in my last report to them.

Dobrowolsky: So, what were the mechanics of setting it up? I guess first of all, you needed some space just to work.

Mattson: Space, yes, space was found at the Federal Building, the same place – on Range Road.

Dobrowolsky: 200 Range Road, the big building?

Mattson: Yes, and behind that is another building, a large warehouse kind of building. They also used part of it for the morgue, I believe, or all of it for the morgue, I'm not sure. And we were

able to get tables; we needed a lot of tables, because we had to take each piece of paper and separately set it out but keep in order how the papers were in the files so that there could be new folders and the paper back into the files in chronological order, subject and chronological order, of course.

And photocopy machines, at least two of those, and lots and lots of paper, boxes of paper and, of course, people to do the work. That's the most important part. The names that come to mind are, well, Lloy Billingham and Christine Griffiths also helped. She has lots of energy and did a really good job. Lloy stayed for about two or three weeks, and then Fay Tangermann came. She's also a records management person here in the Territory.

There are two large open areas, and one area was – there are actually three. One area was for YECL records recovery. The middle area was for YEC/YDC corporate records recovery; and then, the far end, where I never went to, was the morgue.

Dobrowolsky: I can understand that.

Mattson: You'd see the hearse drive up every once in a while.

Dobrowolsky: And look the other way.

Mattson: Yes, kind of feel a bit sad.

Dobrowolsky: And then, in terms of finding tables and that kind of thing, how was that arranged?

Mattson: Well, the Federal Government was very good at it, and I believe the coordinator there was Atkinson.

Dobrowolsky: Bill Atkinson?

Mattson: I'm not sure if that's the right name.

Dobrowolsky: Well, I did see Bill's name mentioned in one of the references to the project, so possibly.

Mattson: Possibly, yes; and he was very good at, you know, finding the tables necessary, and you need a lot of tables. I think you have a picture there that shows how the tables were set up and all the papers –

Dobrowolsky: Long, long rows of tables.

Mattson: Yes, and also, Yukon Archives supplied blotting paper because you can't just set the paper onto the tables. You have to have something to absorb the moisture as things were thawing.

One of the things we did do, Yukon Archives wasn't able to store the material for any length of time because, of course, they had their own needs for the space that we were using; and on the Federal site again, on 200 Range Road behind the building that we were in, there were small buildings in a compound, garages, they perhaps came from Hillcrest at some point. Of course no heat, but we were able to stack the boxes in there and keep them cold, because the temperature that winter was cold enough to do a good job of keeping them frozen.

And it wasn't just papers and things. There were a number of other articles. There were lamps that were intact. There were things that people were able to rescue, maps, pictures, photos, although they were damaged. Some have gone on to be repaired and recovered, and some were beyond repair. There were also photos, too.

Luckily the photo library had [not] been moved at that time. It was still at YECL. The plan was to move the photo library to Yukon Energy, and it hadn't yet been done, luckily. If it had gone and all the photos, and they had thousands of photos – I think it's almost 15,000 now, and it was probably at least 11,000 or 10,000 at that time – would have been lost. So, the plan for the move of the photos was I think January 1st. That was one of the good points, I guess.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm. Okay, so just take me through your typical salvage day. You come in, in the morning. You pick up one of these frozen, soggy boxes from the garage.

Mattson: You come in in the morning, and –

Dobrowolsky: Or you put on old clothes?

Mattson: Yes, you don't wear anything too good. You turn on all the lights. Make sure that the alarm is set, because that was a lot of fun. Often someone else would come in another part of the building and set the alarm, and then, when you came in, the alarm would go off. Yes, just one box after another really, and then, the soggy parts of it. Christine and Fay and I think there might have been one other person working there, and I'm sorry, I don't remember a name, they really did the grunt work, the hard work of day-to-day, nine to five working on these pieces of paper.

Dobrowolsky: So, the boxes there, you have your long table and the blotting paper. Would that come in a roll?

Mattson: No, it comes in sheets, quite large sheets about maybe three feet-by-four feet.

Dobrowolsky: So, almost like art paper or something?

Mattson: M'hmm, yes, but it's a white blotting paper.

Dobrowolsky: So, you set out your blotting paper to fill up the table, and then, you take a file folder out of a box.

Mattson: Right.

Dobrowolsky: And then, dismantle the file folder, and then ...

Mattson: In chronological order, yes, and leave the file folder there so you know what papers belong to which file, and then, just follow the process on the table so that you did them in order and they all got back into the file in order, as well. Some papers were loose papers, which was challenging to find a place for those. So, there was some filing at the end that had to be done and things slipped in, but what was there was able to be recovered.

Dobrowolsky: So, when these papers were set on the blotting paper, then it was waiting for them to dry before you could do anything else?

Mattson: Waiting for them to dry but not only just waiting for them to dry; maybe having to turn them over, depending upon how wet they were. Once they were gathered up in order, then they had to be photocopied. The original paper wasn't stable. It was too crinkled. It was charred. It was too damaged to actually put back in the file; and again, I stress that it was the information that was important on the pieces of paper and not the pieces of paper themselves that were important. Then they were photocopied one after the other and put into new file folders, and the original file number was marked on the file folders and/or the title of the file.

Dobrowolsky: Very painstaking work!

Mattson: Painstaking work, yes. I don't have the exact numbers of the files there, but I'm thinking around 1400 files, which would range from a few pieces of paper to an inch-thick file. So, 1400 volumes.

Dobrowolsky: So, thousands of pieces of paper?

Mattson: Yes, with, in some cases, critical information for the operation of Yukon Energy and YDC, as well.

Dobrowolsky: You mentioned that Fay and Christine and Lloy initially were doing the actual compilation work. Were you kind of overseeing the project?

Mattson: Yes, that was my job, to oversee the project, plus continue working on the devolvement of the information from YECL to Yukon Energy.

Dobrowolsky: So, your regular job still couldn't stop?

Mattson: Yes, it was still the same. That contract was still going on. And then, of course, where were they going to put the information that they were receiving? Where was the library going to go? It had to be stored before another building was built, which is exactly what happened, and boxed and numbered. That was an interesting project, because it was one library with the same classification system. So, YECL information was interfiled among Yukon Energy books. So, myself and a fellow from YECL actually went through the library book by book and separated what was Yukon Energy and what was YECL.

Dobrowolsky: And this had to be done to –

Mattson: Not part of the recovery project, but part of the –

Dobrowolsky: Part of the devolution project to determine what YECL was keeping and what was appropriate to go over to the direct management group?

Mattson: Yes. And then, I adjusted the database for Yukon Energy and strongly suggested that YECL do the same, but I'm not sure if they actually did that or not.

Dobrowolsky: So, through this process of reviewing the records as part of the takeover of direct management, you were essentially the representative for Yukon Energy?

Mattson: Yes, [for the records and library materials. I reported to Rick Curial and YDC/Yukon Energy staff.]

Dobrowolsky: So, sometime in there, Yukon Energy got temporary quarters at 200 Range Road?

Mattson: Yes, the bottom floor and a few offices on the top floor as well, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And so, was some of your work done in that building or some of the salvaged records, did they then go in that building? Did that become a temporary library?

Mattson: Yes, in the basement there was a vault, and they were stored down in the vault initially in boxes, and then, put on file shelves in order. They didn't have a database of the records at the time. What they did have was an Excel spreadsheet, which had the numbers and the titles of the files but not the volumes or dates. So, there was a lot of missing information, information that would be necessary for proper records management. So, they began filling in that information. Darlene hired a number of different students or temporary people to help with those projects.

Dobrowolsky: Just to get things better organized and getting a better handle on being able to find things?

Mattson: Right, and once they were in the new building, then I had a contract to redo the classification system and convert the records to the new classification system, plus all the records that had transferred from YECL. I'm just trying to think of the numbers of files, over 14,000 files now, and they add about 500 a year. So, at that time, it was maybe 12,500. So, there was another person – [Enny Durani] – worked on that project. She actually did the data entry, and I did the database work and quality control. Then they bought a doublewide trailer and installed that on site where the Yukon Energy building is now, and that contains the holdings of all their inactive records.

Dobrowolsky: So this would have also included a lot of the material that you salvaged?

Mattson: [No, this was mainly what was stored at YECL and include NCPC records from 1942 to 1987.]

Dobrowolsky: We were just talking about some of the other people who may have been working on the salvage of the records, and you were starting to say that some of the YECL staff were volunteering for this?

Mattson: Diane Pilloud, and then, there were a number of people who she hired part time to come in and help with the recovery of those records. They were a little bit more difficult, because YECL used coloured folders. So, with the water damage, all the dyes would seep into the white paper, which is a difficult recovery process. So, one of the recommendations certainly was never to use coloured folders.

Dobrowolsky: Maybe coloured tabs without –

Mattson: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: That's something you just wouldn't think of.

Mattson: M'hmm. And also, you shouldn't use clips, paper clips, or other ones; but it's pretty hard to keep a file intact if you don't have some way of clipping them, just in a file.

Dobrowolsky: Just because the metal rusts?

Mattson: Yes, and it's difficult to get the papers away from the metal under those circumstances. But it's very important, I think, and certainly corporations understand this, to have a good records management system and a database of information and, also, electronic records, too, to use that same classification system so that you have your retention and disposition schedules intact, no matter what the media. You know what to keep and what not to keep and when it's going to be destroyed or where and for how long it's going to be retained.

Dobrowolsky: It really is an art, isn't it? It's not just warehousing but to track and to create systems, to organize things that are useful and useable by staff and to set priorities as you go along. It's not a simple task.

Mattson: Yes, I think there are people who are well suited and who have those organizational skills in order to be able to see the big picture and see how information and management of knowledge works within corporations or within companies or within government.

Dobrowolsky: And of course, as a historian, I am profoundly grateful to the people who saved their records and have them well organized. Well, thank you very much for this. This was really helpful and I think a really key part of the story of the salvage and rebuilding after the great fire. I'm going to make you tell me one more anecdote. When we spoke a few weeks ago, you were telling me about the power to your computer.

Mattson: Oh, yes, well, I run a server. I have an Internet base server for the databases for the Yukon libraries, all the different special and technical and corporate and public libraries within the Yukon; and after the fire, Yukon Energy lost their electronic equipment that actually manages the flow of power throughout the Yukon. So, the engineers were “flying it by hand” is what they called it, and they were just there monitoring it all and working really hard and spending 24 hours a day, making sure that everybody received their electricity. On my server, there is a power gauge, I guess, for lack of a better word. I can't think of the exact word right now, but it monitors fluctuations of power that come into the server. Prior to the fire, there would be a lot of spiking and changes. Nothing that would make any difference to the server, but you could just see the fluctuations in power; and during the time that they were flying it by hand, the power ran smoothly. There were very few ups or downs to it. So, I think we have to think about those engineers and electricians who really did a great job of keeping us electrified.

Dobrowolsky: You're right. Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Rob McWilliam

By October 1997, Rob McWilliam had been the President and Chief Executive Officer of both the Yukon Development Corporation and Yukon Energy Corporation for one year. During that time, the board had decided not renew the operating contract with YECL. McWilliam was involved in the negotiations to move Yukon Energy to direct management, a move that proceeded relatively smoothly and on schedule despite the fire.

The NDP came in under Piers McDonald, and when he was appointing senior officials to various places, he told me he wanted me to go to the Yukon Development Corporation, which came as quite a shock to me. [My response was to say] basically, "I don't know anything about the utility industry." His response to that was, "Well, don't worry, we're not really expecting a lot of change there." Four years later, I had reason to doubt him, because we went through a very tumultuous period.

Recorded May 21, 2003 in Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Mr. McWilliam on 9 June 2003. Additional comments in [square brackets].

Side A

Dobrowolsky: It is May the 21st, 2003, and I am speaking with Rob McWilliam. Could you please tell me when and where you were born?

McWilliam: I was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1949.

Dobrowolsky: You mentioned earlier you first came to the Yukon in 1976?

McWilliam: Well, actually, I came to the Yukon in '73. Then I went to the NWT for two years and came back to the Yukon Government in '76.

Dobrowolsky: So, you've had a long career as a civil servant?

McWilliam: Yes. Things have changed a lot in terms of the Yukon Government in that period.

Dobrowolsky: So, I know that you have worked for a long time in various senior positions in Government. Could you maybe just briefly outline some of the things you were doing before you started with Yukon Energy Corporation?

McWilliam: Oh, gosh! I worked, as you say, in quite a few departments; but I was Deputy Minister of Renewable Resources in the mid '90s. I had an opportunity to take a leave of absence to go on a CIDA [Canadian International Development Agency] contract for two years to Jamaica. It was too good to pass up, so my family and I packed up and left for two years. When I left, the understanding was I would come back to a deputy level position, but there was nothing held open for me. I got back in September [1996]. There was an election in October. There was a change of Government. The NDP came in under Piers McDonald, and when he was appointing

senior officials to various places, he told me he wanted me to go to the Yukon Development Corporation [YDC], which came as quite a shock to me, [My response was to say] basically, “I don't know anything about the utility industry.”

His response to that was, “Well, don't worry, we're not really expecting a lot of change there.” Four years later, I had reason to doubt him, because we went through a very tumultuous period.

Dobrowolsky: So, what year was it that you started with YEC?

McWilliam: I'm terrible with dates, it would be '98 –

Dobrowolsky: Well, '97 was the year of the fire.

McWilliam: Okay, '96 then.

Dobrowolsky: So, you had been doing your job for nearly a year or about a year by the time –

McWilliam: Yes, yes. Well, I went in in October, so it was basically a year.

Dobrowolsky: And one of the things that was happening before the fire was Yukon Energy was taking over its – I guess we should get it straight, Yukon Energy and YDC – first of all, maybe I can just ask you to briefly outline the relationship between the two, and then, tell me about the utility takeover.

McWilliam: Well, YDC is a Crown corporation of the Yukon Government, and its gone through various iterations in the time it's been around; but when I went in virtually all of its attention was focused on its subsidiary corporation, Yukon Energy. The two companies were really interlocked. So, I was appointed as President and Chief Executive Officer of both, and all of the staff had cross-appointments at that time, the same Board of Directors for both corporations. Really Yukon Energy was the only asset that we were really focused on.

At that time, we also had what was called a “management agreement” with Alberta Power that had a similar arrangement with Yukon Electrical Corporation [YECL]. YECL is a wholly owned subsidiary of Alberta Power's. That management agreement had existed since the devolution of the Northern Canada Power Commission [NCPC] assets basically because the Government wanted to ensure they had experienced management of the power corporation. So, it had gone through two different renewals of the management agreement. There had been a very acrimonious set of negotiations before I got there, and things just about broke apart then.

Because it was looking like there was not going to be an agreement, John Ostashek agreed to extend the management agreement for an additional two years and hopefully find time to work out the differences. In that time, there was an election. There was a change in government. There was a change in management. I was appointed. There was a new Minister, Trevor Harding. The incoming NDP Party had set up an Energy Commission under Gary McRobb, and nobody was quite sure what they were doing in relation to the Power Corporation. So, there was a lot of confusion.

One of the things that I had to deal with very quickly on coming in was initiating negotiations on the new management agreement, because we were running out of time. So, we went to Cabinet, got a mandate; and the government had no interest in direct management, but they did want to see the cost of the agreement we had with YECL changed, and they also wanted to deal with some irritants that were there. So, we started into negotiating. It became increasingly difficult and acrimonious, and by the – this was in October – by the spring, negotiations had essentially broken down. We thought we had an agreement. It was a package that had met the government's mandate; but when I took it to the Board of Directors for YDC, they choked on how much it was going to take to “buy peace in our time” as we referred to it. It didn't work for Chamberlain, and it wasn't about to work for us. Basically YECL was being very aggressive in terms of wanting more assets. They were after our community distribution in Mayo, Dawson and Faro. They wanted that all, and that was really the straw that broke the camel's back. In terms of the Board's perspective, they were not prepared to sell those assets to Alberta Power. So, the Board said, “No.”

In the normal course of events under the management agreement, there was provision for orderly transfer; and we would have had a year minimum to prepare. Because negotiations had been extended for a period of time into that grace period, we were left with six months to create a power corporation out of what essentially was a shell company. At that time, we had six employees, and all of the frontline staff worked for YECL, and YECL was quite confident they wouldn't want to work for the government. So, it was quite a daunting experience.

In the midst of this, the Faro Mine had gone off, and we'd had to jack up rates. Then it came back on under new management. Then they went bankrupt, and we had to go back to the ratepayers again. So, we went through two GRAs in a period of a year. People who are not involved in the industry may not understand what an extremely difficult period of time a rate application is.

Dobrowolsky: A GRA?

McWilliam: A General Rate Application; when you go before the Utility Board, you're examined not only by the members of the Utility Board but by their advisors from the B.C. Utility Commission and anybody who's got intervener status like the Utility Consumers Group, the Association of Yukon Communities. It wasn't hard to get intervener status and come in and ask as many questions as they thought they could to basically attack what we were doing with rates. So, all of this was happening, and we were having to prepare to go to, as we described it, “direct management.”

We had just got to the point in terms of letters of offer to employees, putting in place some essential contracts. Things looked like they were on the rails, that we were going to be able to do it, and I got a call at home about three o'clock in the morning, I think it was, from John Carroll, the General Manager for YECL, who were still the operator at that time, saying, “The plant is burning down.”

Dobrowolsky: So, here you are in your fairly recent job and with fairly intense training on the job; but as you said, things were getting on course as far as getting into direct management. What was your reaction when you heard about the plant?

Actually, I want to back up a little bit. The name of this building, it was “the generating facility” or “the generating –

McWilliam: Well, what we lost was the turbine building, but the building consisted of three hydro turbines, Hydro Turbines One, Two and Three; and then, on top of that, there were some offices for the workforce. Less than two years before it burned down, there had been an extension put on the building to provide some corporate offices. So, Yukon Energy had just moved out to that site. Previously it had been in an office building downtown, and that was seen as being too remote from the operation. So, the new corporate offices had been there. In fact, the previous President, Bill Byers, hadn’t even gotten an opportunity to sit in his office before the government changed and there was a shuffle. So, they were brand-new. They were lovely offices right there on the waterfront.

Dobrowolsky: I heard there was a great view of watching the otters play.

McWilliam: Watching the otters play, and my office was right on the water’s edge there, so I could look down into the water, and that’s where the salmon would pool when they were resting up before they would push up through the fish ladder. It was just a spectacular spot, wonderful, wonderful views and it was all gone.

We had pulled together a management team to work on getting to the direct management, and we’d had a meeting not long before the event, the fire, that I was feeling quite good about, you know, “We can do this.”

Just sort of a little personal anecdote, just that same week that the fire happened, my wife had had a car accident, not a major accident, but she was shook up. She’d never had an accident. It was quite traumatic for her. That same week my youngest boy at school lost a tooth. He was playing on some ice and broke off a tooth. So, we’d gone to the parent-teacher interviews at FH Collins the night of the fire and were just joking on “What’s next, trouble comes in three’s.” And it was that same night that the plant burned down. So, I now believe in threes.

Dobrowolsky: So, what was your reaction when you heard about the fire?

McWilliam: Well, my initial reaction was disbelief and anger, because our relationship at that time with John was quite acrimonious. He’s a strong competitor, and he didn’t like to lose, as he saw it, us going to direct management. We thought he was frustrating us in many ways. So, when he called me at three o’clock in the morning, I suspected his motives to start with; but then, when I woke up and realized that he was really serious, I immediately said, “Well, should I get down there right away?”

He said, “No, there’s nothing you can do.” So, I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling for about an hour-and-a-half until I couldn’t stand it any more, and then, went down; and sure enough the

whole place was engulfed in flames. Fire trucks seemed to be everywhere. Anybody who wasn't actively working the fire, we were trying to keep outside the property gates.

Dobrowolsky: So, that was a role you helped out with?

McWilliam: Yes, and basically I was there. So, like, the Yukon Energy people, like my Vice-President of Finance came over as soon as he heard the news, and people started showing up.

Dobrowolsky: This is Oliver O'Rourke?

McWilliam: Yes, Oliver almost compounded the problem. It was snowy and icy; and he stopped up on the highway, and there is a very steep ditch down to the gate there. He started to come down through the ditch and slipped and started to fall, and I just caught him and said, you know, "We don't need any more accidents, thank you very much!"

It was also the day of our regular board meeting, so we had a number of Board members from out of town who were in for the board meeting.

Dobrowolsky: So, just to backtrack. All this happened early in the morning of October the 30th? The 3:00 a.m. always throws me.

McWilliam: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, did it happen on the night of the 30th or the morning of the 31st?

McWilliam: The call was I think you'd say "morning of," because as I say as best I can recall, the call I got was about three o'clock. So, I got there. The staff from both YECL and the people who were now Yukon Energy staff, or we saw as our staff, were working on the fire. The reason I differentiate was because under the management agreement, there were some positions which we were obligated to make job offers to, and those people had already accepted offers from us, but they weren't technically working for us. But we considered them "our staff". There were other staff who were YECL's that were going to continue to work on YECL's assets. So, it was quite a confused time at that point from a staffing point of view, but everybody was pitching in together, along with the fire department and media people running around, confusing things, on top of everything.

So, what I was trying to do was deal with the Yukon Energy staff as they were coming, and deal with the panic. The first thing we did was we got our lawyers, Davis & Company, Rod Snow, offered us to use their boardroom at their downtown office. So, we went there to try and regroup and figure out what we do first.

Dobrowolsky: So, this was later in the morning?

McWilliam: This would be, like, eight o'clock in the morning as best I can recall. So, when we left the fire site because we weren't able to really do anything there except get in the way, we wanted a place where everybody could come and deal with the grieving process we were

obviously going through, as well as coping with the shock and trying to figure out what the next steps were.

So, we got there. We had a couple of out-of-town board members who were in town and excited about what was going on and asking questions; and nobody was in any shape to deal with these questions, but from that point on, things started to sort themselves out. We got Darlene to go out and buy a whole bunch of cell phones, and that was “our first office”. A bunch of cell phones. Davis & Company were very good about letting us use their office for that entire day. So, we were basically trying to take stock of what was going on. Once the fire department said it was okay to go in and check out the site – we still had firemen there on sort of “spark watch,” but it was just basically a skeleton crew that were maintaining an oversight – we were able to go in see how bad the damage was. It looked pretty devastating. There was not much of anything left.

Dobrowolsky: So, the meeting would have lasted an hour or two? I’m just trying to get the chronology before you went to the site.

McWilliam: I couldn’t really tell you at this point how long it lasted. I think it was probably a couple of hours we were there. Partly it was that we had staff that were coming in when they heard and had to be redirected over to Davis & Company. We were trying to get our act together in terms of figuring out “Well, is Aishihik going to be able to hold? How are we going to control it without the control room?”

I’m sure you’ve already got the names of the people who did some absolutely heroic stuff over I’d say a 48-hour period like Guy Morgan sort of conning the electrical system out of his pickup truck with a radio and a cell phone. It was just amazing when you see the equipment those guys have up in the control room to run that system, and he just had such a sound knowledge of the system that he could operate it from his pickup truck. It was quite incredible.

So, as we were trying to sort out this type of stuff, we were getting calls from other utility companies, offering assistance. Alberta Power we certainly heard right from off the mark, saying, “Anything they could do.” As part of our going to direct management, we were doing some work with West Kootenay Power Corporation; and as soon as they heard about it, they contacted us, as well, and offered whatever resources we needed.

A lot of the stuff we were doing for the first little while was just trying to deal with all the questions that were coming in. There’s a period just a few months after the fire, and it was getting fairly overwhelming, and part of the way I was coping with it was by drawing cartoons. I was drawing all these cartoons, myself overwhelmed by all these people who were sort of hovering around. Some of it was very well-intentioned, and some of them were very self-serving. We had people that, the day of the fire, were offering to sell us real cheap used ATCO trailers for offices, almost like the war speculators.

Dobrowolsky: Oh dear, carpetbaggers!

McWilliam: Yes, exactly. So, there was certainly some of that going on, too. You know, we had guys from EMO, –

Dobrowolsky: Emergency Measures Organization.

McWilliam: Yes, Emergency Measures Organization, Eric Magnuson and Ron Janusaitus from the Public Affairs Bureau with YTG came over and lectured us in terms of how we weren't doing a very good job of communicating with the public via the media. We didn't even know what the hell to communicate at this point, and they were already dumping on us. So, it was a lot of trying to deal with that kind of stuff. So, that got us through the first few hours until we could get over and have a look at the "devastation" I guess is the best word. It was a pretty daunting sight.

Dobrowolsky: So, in the meantime, I understand there was all this jury-rigging going on, the famous control room out of the washroom in the diesel plant.

McWilliam: Yes, yes, and we had ordered up Alberta Power's portable diesel unit as a standby system. We were fortunate we had the diesels there so power capacity wasn't a problem at that time of the year. You know, if it had been 30 below, we would have been in big trouble; but between Aishihik and the diesel units we had on what's called "the Whitehorse-Aishihik-Faro, the WAF System," we had enough capacity, but we were dealing with those kind of questions, too. The Legislature was in session, and that same day, there were questions from the opposition about "Is there enough capacity?" and "Are we going to have power?" So, we were trying to reassure the public, and we were trying to reassure the Legislature and basically trying to make sure we did have enough power, because it was nip and tuck for a while.

Dobrowolsky: Well, yes, and how could you be sure?

McWilliam: If we had one more thing go wrong, it would have all gone down.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, the more I hear and read about this, the more amazed I am at how well everybody rose to the occasion and managed to do exactly the right thing with so few resources to keep things going. So, you're dealing with, again, the overwhelming forces from the outside. There is the small group, working overtime, desperately trying to keep the power going; and you'd done this initial inspection of the devastation. What were you able to save, salvage or recover; and how long did it take to find out all that?

McWilliam: Well, I guess there were discrete parts to it. The first thing that was of concern to us was the control room. The second thing was how much damage had there actually been to the turbines, and we had to get some experts in to assess that; and fortunately, we didn't have a lot of structural damage to the turbines themselves. The generators all had to be completely rewound and everything that was aboveground had to be redone, but the turbines themselves were basically sound. So, that was a huge weight off our shoulders when we discovered that.

Dobrowolsky: And how long did it take to ascertain that?

McWilliam: Well, we thought that was the case fairly early on, but until you crank them up, there was always a bit of concern. So, actually when we had the generator building more or less finished, we had a bit of a ribbon-cutting ceremony. That was in the spring, and that was the

point where we could basically take a deep sigh of relief, “Okay, I guess it really did work.” But as I say, you know, we thought fairly early on that the turbines would probably be okay.

So, there was dealing with the control room; and as you say, the system was jury-rigged, and it was not a really comfortable environment they were working out of for some time. Basically we wound up with them working out of a truck trailer, very cramped, dark conditions. There was the power generation side of things, and then, there was the corporate office, which was something I was much more involved in. Our supposedly impenetrable fireproof records vault was quite badly damaged. We had a lot of smoke and water damage in there. More so than the actual loss of records, the records were destroyed by the smoke and water damage. So, that was a huge challenge putting all that back together again. I’m sure they’re still finding there are information gaps. I know in the next year, there were lots of times when they’d say, “Well, I know that something happened here, but prove it.”

Dobrowolsky: Darlene said she has 25 boxes of what she calls “loose papers” that weren’t easily sorted or filed that she just hasn’t had a chance to go through, and they seem to be haunting her.

McWilliam: Yes. So, we basically took all of that stuff, this wet, sopping, smelly paper out and froze it; and that was how we thought we’d be able to recover it eventually.

Dobrowolsky: Where did you find the freezers for that?

McWilliam: Well, it was again the end of October or early November. It didn’t take a whole lot.

Dobrowolsky: That's true.

McWilliam: It was keeping it cold.

Dobrowolsky: It wasn’t 30 below, but it was still plenty cold.

McWilliam: Yes, it was chilly enough for the stuff to be frozen, but we kept it that way. On top of that, then we immediately started contacting all of our suppliers. We did a lot of work with consultants. Davis & Company were our lawyers, and we had InterGroup [Consulting Ltd.] out of Winnipeg that did a lot of analysis for us. They had a lot of copies of correspondence that we’d had back and forth with them, so we started arranging with them to ship us copies of everything they had related to our business, and that helped us to rebuild a lot. So, all our information wasn’t contained in that one vault.

Dobrowolsky: The frozen sort of mess.

McWilliam: Yes, and then, you know, we contacted the Yukon Utilities Board and Department of Economic Development and all these people we dealt with and said, “Can you give us your records or copies of them anyway?” So, that was a big challenge.

The insurance aspect, trying to deal with that, was a big challenge; because the insurance adjustors were in right away. I should probably let John Maissan talk more about that, but they were very much looking at minimizing their costs. So, that means they want you back up and

running right away, because they were paying us for lack of production. For every day we were off-line, it was costing the insurance company big money. So, they were very aggressive about, you know, “You’ve got to get going, get going, get going.”

At the same time, we were having to document everything so that we could file a proper claim. So, those things sort of worked against each other, and there were times when I had to get involved with John, telling either the insurance company “Back off” or telling YECL that “We really have to move faster on this stuff.”

We also had to get in place contractors. It was basically all done by contractors. We didn’t have the staff to do the rebuild. So, we had to identify them, enter into contracts and identify project managers, all of that stuff.

Dobrowolsky: And that happened quickly, though, didn’t it?

McWilliam: It had to happen quickly; not only through the reliability of the system but also with the insurance company calling the shots and terms.

Dobrowolsky: So, was that something that was readily available? Through your various connections in the utility world, were there people who had experience in quickly putting systems together?

McWilliam: Yes, there were people that had experience, knew contractors; and as I say, you know, once this happened, people wanting to profit from it came out of the woodwork. We had lots of expressions of interest. So, it was a rushed job. Probably John would have said it, and I’d certainly say it in my own case. In hindsight, there were things we could have done better, but given the fact this was a very new experience for us and we were flying by the seat of our pants, I think we did a pretty good job of getting it together fast, particularly given the fact we had nowhere to call ‘home’ at that point.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were using the Davis & Company boardroom to camp out.

McWilliam: That was just the one day, and then, Vicki Hancock, [Deputy Minister of the] Department of Tourism, and again this is one of the nice stories of people who came forward and were offering help, offered us office space at Tourism. So, we were camping out at people’s desks there. If somebody was on holidays, we’d occupy a desk. We occupied the coffee room, and they were very accommodating to us. So, we were there I want to say “several weeks,” but I’d have to check that. We were there while we were getting our feet back on the ground.

Tom Sparrow from Public Works Canada came forward and indicated that they had space up at 200 Range Road that they could renovate for us. So, we moved into that space while they were still busy building it around us. I recall having one meeting, it was a telephone conference call, we were talking about some fairly sensitive financial stuff, and there was this electrician [on a ladder over my desk], doing some wiring. We were definitely an open company, no secrets!

So, we were in what became the space that we occupied for the better part of a year, before Christmas, early December.

Dobrowolsky: Was when you moved up to Range Road to the Federal Building there?

McWilliam: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, we're recording again here; and while all this was going on with the insurance and with finding office space, with getting the plant up and operating, what's happening with the direct management story?

McWilliam: We were moving right along. There was an indication from YECL that if we wanted to re-enter a management contract again, they'd be quite happy to discuss it with us in a short-term agreement. So, I took that to the board. We had some discussion; and basically, they looked at management and said, "Can you do this?"

And we said, "Yes, we think we can." So, we carried on, and we took over direct management on January 1st, 1998. The lights didn't flicker, and from that point on, Yukon Energy has been running its own assets.

Dobrowolsky: So, what were some of the challenges of continuing on with the turn over to direct management while you were dealing with all these other stresses?

McWilliam: Oh, there were some huge challenges. We had some staffing holes to fill, like our electrical engineer was recruited in the midst of this. We had a number of areas where YECL had provided us service in the past and it wouldn't be cost-effective for us to do it ourselves. It's things like billing systems, warehousing, purchasing, a lot of this stuff where economies of scale are so important; and we wanted to find out a cost-effective way to do it. We were very conscious, having gone through the two rate applications, that Yukoners couldn't afford to pay more. So, that was really the reason for us going to direct management was to get the cost down.

The board and management agreed with them that if we were sort of controlling the operation, we could keep the costs more in line; and I think the proof of that has been that there has not been a GRA since '96, whereas historically there was a GRA and rates were raised every two years. So, we thought there were savings to be made in the system; but to do that, we wanted to make sure that we were operating in a cost-effective manner, which meant not developing a large, internal bureaucracy.

So, we were negotiating with YECL and Alberta Power [AP] for some services. We were negotiating with West Kootenay Power [WKP] for some other services. Like, we went with WKP for a billing system. AP's negotiating strategy was if they thought they had us over the barrel, they would push hard. They would be very inflexible and demand a high price. That's what broke down the negotiations on the management agreement. We kept saying, "We have another option. If you guys are not prepared to meet us part way, we have another option," and they never believed us. Then we get into direct management, and we're trying to negotiate some

services for them, and they continue to think they have us sort of in a position where we have to buy from them.

We said, “You know, we’ve got another option. We told you that last time,” and in the end we went with WKP for billing. We went with Arctic Power for warehousing and some purchasing. So, we were setting those kind of contracts up at the same time. So, all of that stuff was going on while we were rebuilding, and the priority in terms of building was get the generation back up. So, that was done first, and then, you know, we built the new corporate offices, which also accommodated the staff expansion. We would have had to have built something on the plant site anyhow for the extra bodies that were coming in with direct management, but this way, it was all under one roof.

Dobrowolsky: So, to pull all this off, what kind of hours were you putting in at the office; or let me put it the other way: How often did you get home?

McWilliam: I didn’t get much sleep that year. A lot of it went by in a blur, because we were working some incredible hours, but the whole team was working like that. I had to chase people out of there at ridiculous hours. People like Duncan and John Maissan and Oliver and Darlene, you know, they put in a horrendous amount of time. Most of them were management employees, so there was no extra compensation for them. It was a very demanding time.

Dobrowolsky: I really got the feeling, talking to Darlene about the experience of going through this and the bonds with your fellow employees that had been through all this that it was almost like going through a trauma in the order of a war experience, just this incredible devastation and stress and this incredible amount of work to pull everything back together.

McWilliam: Well, not having gone through a war experience, I can't really compare it; but I think you're right. I think it was incredibly traumatic. I'd gone through some other experiences. Like I was in Dawson the last time it flooded and spent the night on top of the hotel wondering if it was going to hold up, but the next day, they rescued us. We got on the road and we came back, and our lives went on as normal. I certainly had more empathy for the poor people of Dawson after this experience, where you're left with the mess, and you're left trying to put your life back together; and everybody lost personal stuff in there. Yes, a wartime experience is probably a fairly good way of describing it.

There was also a lot of stress on people, and that meant there were some people who just didn’t last. There were also some times when I had to get involved in terms of playing referee and deal with interpersonal conflict that was really, I think, related to stress as opposed to people just couldn’t get along. It’s just they had so much on their plates and lashed out.

So, we tried to be conscious of that. We tried to be as supportive of staff as we could. The odd party to thank staff for all the work, a recognition of the people who were the real heroes during the fire itself, those type of things; but the public and the Board expected that things were going to go on, and we had to keep driving. We couldn’t stop and draw a breath and say, “Okay, now let’s just take some time off before the next crisis.” It was right on us.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, it's quite amazing how you all pulled it off so well, but obviously it had some personal cost.

Side B

Dobrowolsky: So, we've been talking about the aftermath of the fire, the incredible stress on the staff, the long hours, some of the things management was trying to do to support the staff. So, tell me about some of the highlights. Tell me about when the new generating plant opened.

McWilliam: Yes, I guess it's such a trite, old cliché, I'm embarrassed to say it, but it really is true that "Every cloud has a silver lining." There were things that the fire, as devastating as it was, did for us. First of all, there was a sense of confidence that, "Hey, we can't be beaten here. We've dealt with this. Y2K, hey, that's no problem, we've dealt with a fire."

Of course, we had to start planning for Y2K while the fire was going on. We basically had the generators rebuilt, and the generator facility is now far more efficient than it was. We've got brand new offices, excellent space for all of the staff and all under one roof. We've got a new control room, and that did incorporate a lot of the stuff that would have otherwise probably been a problem with Y2K. So, there were those kinds of things that are on the plus side; but I think the basic thing was just the sense of confidence that staff had that they can handle anything.

Dobrowolsky: So, just to finish off the direct management story, that was, what, January the 1st, 1998, you took over and there were no delays.

McWilliam: There were no delays. The lights didn't even flicker. People were getting their bills. They probably would have been happy if that part of it had failed. You know, it went off without a hitch. There was a lot of pain and agony that went into getting it there; and as I say, some people didn't survive the transition, because they were just not suited for the type of company that we needed to have when we were in direct management, as opposed to a holding company. I feel badly about that; but by and large, the Yukon has its own utility.

Dobrowolsky: It sounds like quite an achievement for you to oversee, for someone who knew nothing about utilities a year-and-a-half before. That's pretty impressive!

McWilliam: Well, when I said, "I know nothing about utilities and there will be a really steep learning curve," Piers McDonald said, "But we're not really expecting any changes. You have time to climb the learning curve." Huh!

Dobrowolsky: You showed him!

McWilliam: And I never want to again!

Dobrowolsky: So, then, was it a year later that you had the official opening of the generating plant, or was it the following spring? I'm kind of lost.

McWilliam: Well, I'm losing track, too. I think we had the opening of the generator plant the spring after the fire; and basically, that provided staff recognition, but also to reassure the public that, "Yes, we were up and running. We could handle this." But then the new control room went into the corporate office building, and that was the following year.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, actually, from what I have here in my little chronology, not long after you put that wonderful insert into the *Yukon News*, recalling all the events of the fire and the "Thank yous", you had your ceremony and reception to celebrate the generators back in service in early November, two days later; and then, I guess the new office building the following spring.

McWilliam: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: The award-winning building.

McWilliam: That sounds like Duncan. It was an award-winning building, but Duncan would never let an opportunity go by to say, the "award-winning building."

Dobrowolsky: No, I picked up on that all on my own very quickly, although it helps that Yukon Energy has this nice pamphlet, telling you that it is an award-winning building.

McWilliam: There's even a plaque on the wall.

Dobrowolsky: And then, in the meantime Faro had gone off again. So, there was coping with that.

McWilliam: Yes, and that's when we started looking at what our alternatives were and out of that, generated the idea behind the Mayo-Dawson transmission line as one of the ways to use surplus energy; because we were conscious of the fact that we had to either generate more revenues or lower costs, and we were looking at both of those, knowing that we couldn't plan for Faro being back on.

So, we did a lot of work, and we were working on it over that same period of time when we were dealing on direct management, with the first year or so after we were in direct management, that was a real focus of the management team, what are our options here: An Atlin inter-tie, that would be a great project, but B.C. Hydro doesn't want to do it. We looked at things we could do that would be more efficient out at Aishihik, but they cost capital money, and that drives the rates. So, we said, "Nice idea, but we can't do it." We then settled in on the Mayo-Dawson line as a way to not only generate more revenue but lower our cost by getting off diesel, which was just going through the roof.

Dobrowolsky: So, it sounds like those four years were definitely a pretty intense, memorable time with your –

McWilliam: They were certainly intense, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Any final words, any thoughts looking back on all this?

McWilliam: Well, I've said it before, but I think the thing that really stands out through this whole experience is the people; just first of all working together as a team, but heroic efforts of staff to first of all, respond to the emergency, and then, to meet all the demands that the board and the government were putting on them, people like Guy and John Maissan. It's not fair to name names, because everybody was really pitching in and doing what they were asked to, but there were some real heroes there.

Dobrowolsky: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Darlene Morgan

Darlene Morgan has worked with the Yukon Development Corporation since 1990 in different capacities and during various organizational changes. For the last several years, she has been the executive assistant to the president and chief executive officer of YDC.

I believe I was probably working days from eight o'clock in the morning, which I think was the earliest I could put my daughter in the daycare, and then head off to work, until probably 11:00 or 12:00 at night; and I did that for probably almost two years, and I wasn't the only one. Rob was in the office so many hours that I'm sure his family thought they had lost him, because we all were just trying to get everything back together and working.

Recorded 15 May 2003 in the YDC boardroom, Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Ms. Morgan on 27 December 2003. Additional comments in [square brackets].

Side A

Dobrowolsky: It is May the 15th, 2003, and I am speaking with Darlene Morgan. If you could say something, Darlene, maybe when and where you were born?

D. Morgan: I was born February 23rd, 1961, in Fort St. John, B.C.

Dobrowolsky: Could you talk to me a little bit about your employment history. Did you start with Yukon Electrical [YECL], or was it Yukon Energy?

D. Morgan: No, actually I have always been employed by Yukon Development Corporation [YDC]. I have been employed now almost 13 years. I started July 30th of 1990. So, a pretty long history with YDC. When I started, we were located in Financial Plaza, and there were actually about nine or ten employees in there, and it was both YDC and YEC; and at that time, YECL was managing all of the actual assets. So, the staff for Yukon Energy were the same as YDC more or less, with a couple of electrical engineers or utility engineers.

Dobrowolsky: So, what exactly is the relationship between YDC or the Yukon Development Corporation and the Yukon Energy Corporation? How does that split work?

D. Morgan: Okay, Yukon Development Corporation is a Crown corporation of the [Yukon] government, and it was formed in 1986 when the government was wanting to purchase the assets of the Northern Canada Power Commission [NCPC]. Governments are not allowed to directly own electrical utilities, at least our Government isn't. So, the Development Corporation was formed at that time, and then, it formed a subsidiary corporation, which at that time I believe was called "Yukon Power;" and they purchased the assets of NCPC. So, there was some money came down from the territorial government. Most of it, though, was a loan from the federal government, which is being paid back by the Development Corporation for the purchase of all

those assets. When we purchased the NCPC assets, it was for what is now Yukon Energy. So, I'm pretty sure it started as Yukon Power, and then, they changed the name to Yukon Energy. So, that's how it came about, and the Energy Corporation is a subsidiary of YDC, and then, YDC, of course, is under government. So, it is kind of a big, arm's length relationship. So, that's how it came about. I believe Energy Corporation was in 1987 that it was formed and started to own most of the generating facilities and a few distribution, not very many.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were saying earlier that "Yukon Electrical Company Limited" – is that their full name, YECL?

D. Morgan: Yes, the YECL is actually owned by ATCO. That's out of Alberta. They had some assets up here but mainly on the distribution side. They had very few generating. They actually were managing our assets for us so that we didn't have to hire a big staff of people. They had the people who had the knowledge to run the places. Most of them came over from NCPC, but they were hired by YECL. I'm not sure how that all came about, because that was before my time; but I just know that that was done through a management agreement, that they would manage all of those assets on our behalf once the government purchased them, and then, turned them over to YDC.

Dobrowolsky: Now, your actual job with YDC, I assume that's changed over time.

D. Morgan: Oh, yes, yes, I started as a receptionist back in 1990, and I worked in that position for I believe it was two or three years, mainly working with the files, meeting the customers, answering phones and that kind of thing. Then we kind of devolved as there were more people, and they decided they needed ... So, I started there, and there was another girl started as the President's Secretary at exactly the same time. So, it was kind of neat. We both started within a few days of each other. So, she was working under the President, and there was an office manager at that time, Valerie Williamson, I believe her name was. Anyway, she moved with her husband, and so that kind of left a vacancy in a position; but they wanted to restructure it. So, what they did was they left the reception position. They had the President's Secretary position, and then, they created what was an Administrative Assistant position. The girl, Izabelle Zimmer, who was the President's Secretary, took the Administrative Assistant job. So, then, I moved up to the President's Secretary, and then, we hired someone else to work in the reception. So, that was how I moved up to that position. So, at that point, we had three clerical-type positions in the Corporation, and I moved up to President's Secretary. That lasted until, I'm trying to think of when Izabelle left ... She moved away – I'm not sure. Anyhow, it's evolved around a number of times that we've had these three positions, but it wound up evolving into two.

And then, when the fire happened was when there were a lot of other changes, because YECL, of course, had their own clerical staff, et cetera, down at the dam. So, when we were taking over managing our own assets, which was scheduled to happen in 1998, so, of course, we were working into it in 1997, we started re-evaluating all of the YDC positions, knowing now that Yukon Energy was going to be bigger and taking over a bunch of the staff from YECL, there would be people coming from there, as well, which included one clerical person. So, we started looking at what was going to be needed and how those would evolve. It's been interesting and challenging, and it wound up being that YDC now has one person. That's me, and I'm doing

everything that three people used to do, and it's not easy; and it was very challenging during the fire, because what they did was take the staff and most of them went to Yukon Energy, and they didn't fill the positions under me more or less. So, I'm now called an "Administrative Assistant," "Executive Assistant," I don't know, one or the other. Who am I? I don't know these days, but I'm doing all three jobs. I was doing reception. I'm still the President's Secretary and providing support to the Board, and I'm also doing the administrative assistant stuff, which is all of their corporate stuff and everything. So, it's very challenging and very busy.

Dobrowolsky: You were mentioning that the Yukon Energy was taking over direct management of the power facilities. Could you tell me why this decision was being made or what was behind the decision to take over from YECL?

D. Morgan: Okay, there had been – and I wouldn't call them "disagreements" or "fights" or anything, but there was some question raised as to whether or not we were getting full value for the money that we were paying to YECL for them managing our assets. So, the Board made a decision that it would prefer to take over and manage the assets itself, figuring that it would be less expensive to the ratepayers. They thought we were paying a premium for some of the stuff that Alberta Power was providing to us and that we would be able to do it less expensively on our own. So, that was kind of how that came about.

Dobrowolsky: You've talked about YECL, which is an operation of ATCO?

D. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And how does Alberta Power fit in there?

D. Morgan: YECL is actually under Alberta Power, which is then under ATCO. So, there is like a three-layer thing; and I guess I missed Alberta Power when I was originally explaining it. A lot of the stuff that YECL does, such as billing systems, et cetera, they use Alberta Power's systems out of Edmonton, Calgary, et cetera, which is why they kind of had a big range of people they could pull from; because if they needed a particular person to come up and work on something, they could just pull them out of the Alberta Power ATCO pool. So, that was why it was kind of a good fit at the start before we knew much about electrical utilities, because it was a new thing for YECL and for the Yukon.

Dobrowolsky: Now, for the timing, was this at the end of a contract period or a leasing period or a new agreement was about to be made? Is that why the decision was made that particular time?

D. Morgan: Yes. There had been, I believe, two previous contracts that had been negotiated for YECL to manage the assets. When I moved up in 1990, there was one in place; and then, I know it was negotiated in about '94; and I think it had come up for negotiation again. I believe there were three or four-year contracts that they were operating under. It may have been two. I can't remember exactly; but the contract was coming up for renewal, and I believe it was being discussed in the end of '96, beginning of '97. Like I said, that was where there was a lot of discussion of whether we were getting value for our money and whether or not they were actually working in the best interests of us versus the best interests of ATCO. So, there was a lot

of discussion, and it was decided that maybe we should look at taking it on ourself. So, that's how that came about, and that would have been in early '97 that that was starting to take place, that we were starting to put in place our own people and hired a person to do the personnel area and check with the employees of YECL who might want to come over and start doing all of that stuff.

Dobrowolsky: Was that Diana Cousins?

D. Morgan: Yes, Diana Cousins was actually seconded from the Public Service Commission to come over and work in that role for us, and she came in I believe it was early 1997. And you were asking when we had moved down to the dam. So, that would have been prior to that. Actually what happened was the Board was looking at what we were paying for office space in the Financial Plaza, because we had gone from a smaller office to a bigger one, and now we were going to be taking on all these extra staff, and they were all down at the hydro dam. So, they started looking at would it be more feasible to build an office building down there on our own land and actually be getting something for the money that – you know, like it would pay for itself in no time. So, we started looking at that, and it was decided it would be a good idea.

So, I believe it was in the fall of 1995 that they decided to start this new construction; and it was decided just to add onto the generation facility, because it was already there, and it was already a two-story structure. So, we were just going to add on the extra office space and that that we would need for the administrative side of things down there. So, that construction started in '95/'96. 1995 was when the decision was made. 1996 was when they did the construction. We moved in the end of September, I think it was September 30th of 1996 that we moved into the new facility, that they were finished, and we actually moved our offices down there. We were all nicely settled in for about a year before the fire happened. And of course, that was when all the changes were going on, because Diana Cousins was down there with us and doing all the hiring, and we were bringing in all the new staff; and she had all the paperwork and stuff of people who would have been starting in 1998 when we were going to direct management; because if there were staff that didn't want to come from YECL, then we had to, of course, go Outside and hire.

Dobrowolsky: Recruit?

D. Morgan: Recruit; so, she was working in consultation with a company in Vancouver, I believe, doing a lot of the recruiting for us. That was where Diana came in. So, she would have come to us in I'm sure it was late '96, early '97, the same time that we were making all the decisions. I'm pretty sure it was early '97, because I believe she moved straight into the new offices and hadn't been in the old Financial Plaza space.

Dobrowolsky: One of the things I can't quite get clear is what exactly was that building called? I've heard it referred to as "the Generating Plant". Commonly, what did you call it?

D. Morgan: Originally it was "the Generating Station," I guess, because that's what it was.

Dobrowolsky: And this was built at the same time as the dam, around the late '50's as far as you know?

D. Morgan: As far as I know; there may have been some upgrades to it from when it was originally built, but it was mainly just a steel structure that was there. It was, yes, two stories high, had a flat roof. Yes, as far as I know, it was there from the time the dam was built, and it was the original generating station that had the turbines and stuff kind of in the basement. There was almost like three floors. There were two floors that people actually inhabited, and then, there was the lower floor which was where the turbines, et cetera, actually were. The first floor had all of the operating systems they need to run the turbines.

Dobrowolsky: This is the SCADA I keep reading?

D. Morgan: The SCADA System – I think it’s pronounced “scay dah” – was actually upstairs; because that’s where all the computers and stuff are; but it may have been that the main part of it, energy sector, was on the bottom floor. That’s where all the big boxes and everything were that sat there. I have no idea what all that stuff was. The guys will be able to tell you more than I can, but, yes, it was all in that same structure. The upstairs mainly was office space and the SCADA room was facing the dam. So, they had quite a nice big open window/wall that looked out towards the dam so they could see what they were doing when they were operating the SCADA System and opening different gates and stuff to keep the water flowing through. So, when we added on the corporate offices, which is what we called them, they were added on kind of beside the SCADA and at the front of where they already had offices. So, there was kind of two stories added on at the front or back of the building depending on how you look at it. We called it “the front,” because it’s where you enter. It was out towards the dam side. So, you actually drove out towards the dam –

Dobrowolsky: So, the south side of the building?

D. Morgan: – and then, drove back down into the parking lot and where we entered the building; and that was where the new offices were added on, almost totally opposite to where they are now, because now that they’ve built the new building, it’s out at what I call “the back end” of the generating station. So, it depends on how you look at it. I called the front end the side where SCADA was, and that was there they entered for the office building. So, that’s why I always referred to it as “the front”. I don’t know if it was actually the front or the back. I guess it depends on your perspective. Anyhow that was where they added the corporate offices on; and like I said, we moved in in 1996. So, that was when it was all completed, and we had a nice, great big boardroom that over- looked the dam facilities. The President’s office actually sat out over the water. You could go watch the little otters play in the ponds and stuff down below his office. So, if you were really stressed, you kind of walked in there for a couple of minutes and looked at the otters playing and the fish swimming around.

Dobrowolsky: Very nice!

D. Morgan: Yes, it was a beautiful location.

Dobrowolsky: So, about how many people worked in that building between the operations people and the office staff?

D. Morgan: A good question; I would guess it housed between 30 and 40 staff would be my guess.

Dobrowolsky: So, there was a lot going on in that building!

D. Morgan: Yes, yes, there was. It was pretty busy most of the time, because all of the office staff, all of the senior management, was in the corporate building side, the corporate side that we had built on. And then, there were also some offices in the bottom for the people who came over from YECL. As well, they actually maintained their offices in kind of the old section of the office building, which also kind of got revamped. It was all kind of given a face lift at the same time that we did the corporate offices. So, there was also a bunch of offices in there where John Murray was and Hector Campbell and the people who had been there before. They just maintained their offices.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, these were former YECL?

D. Morgan: Former YECL employees that came over. I don't even remember ... So, in '97, they would have still been YECL employees, working out of those offices; and some of those people did not come across to Yukon Energy but they still performed their function, of course, under the Management Agreement up until December 31st, [1997]. So, even though we had moved down there, there were still YECL employees, of course, because they didn't switch until January 1st of '98, which was after the fire that they actually did the switch over and became Yukon Energy employees. So, at the time that we moved our offices down there, we still probably had a fairly small staff that you would call Yukon Energy employees. It would have been a few more than previous; because, of course, some of the people did switch over earlier once we made the decision, like John Maissan switched over as a Yukon Energy staff instead of being YDC staff.

YDC staff were all government employees, because we are a Crown corporation. So, that's a big distinction. I guess it's a good time to distinguish between that. The YDC are government employees, we are under the YTG and PSC. So, we are under the PSAC Agreement completely, and we follow that side. Yukon Energy created its own distinct – because they are different. They're under the *Business Corporations Act*. They're not under government. So, they had to create their own total union and everything when they formed. So, they have I think it's called the "YEA," Yukon ... I'm not even sure who they are for sure. You'll have to get that distinction from somebody else, "Yukon Electrical Employees Association" or something, yes, YEEA or YEA. Anyhow they formed their own union. So, they're totally on their own. They aren't under YTG contract or anything. They have their own complete separate contract, which is negotiated, as well, probably by Diana Cousins. I'm sure it's fairly similar, because, of course, a lot of the stuff would have been pulled from there; but they would have also had to use the Electrical Company for the wage scales, et cetera, because, of course, people aren't going to take a cut in wages. That would never happen.*

Dobrowolsky: Nor should they!

* Note: Employees of Yukon Energy are currently members of local Y024, of the Yukon Employees Union/Public Service Alliance of Canada according to a collective agreement dated January 1, 2002.

D. Morgan: Nor should they, exactly, I would never take that either. Yes, so there were definitely two distinct entities – actually three for a while, depending on how you look at it.

Dobrowolsky: So, while we're discussing all this corporate stuff, I know we're kind of jumping ahead in the chronology; but did the fire end up holding up the turnover at all? I noticed in one of the newspapers that part of the agreement with ATCO was there was a provision that YECL could continue to run the facility for an extra 12 months if necessary.

D. Morgan: They provided backup. I would not say there was a delay. Everything moved ahead. It was quite surprising. Some of the personnel records, of course, got lost. So, the people who had applied on jobs and had actually been interviewed, we had lost their information in the fire. So, we had to actually contact them again. So, there may have been a slight delay; but no, everything pretty much came across as scheduled January 1st of 1998.

Dobrowolsky: That's remarkable!

D. Morgan: It was remarkable in a lot of ways that it didn't affect more than it did. So, there may have been like a month delay of some things that we had planned on or where people were supposed to be hired but it took a while to put notices in all the newspapers, saying, "Due to the fire, we have lost your application and information. Please contact us." Luckily with lots of people, you have pretty good memories in there that could tell you who you'd interviewed. Even though there were a number of names, you could keep that pretty much in line. So, there was very little delay actually, and things came across fairly fast. Yes, it was actually very amazing that things didn't fall apart more.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, we're back in business here, the fire!

D. Morgan: The fire.

Dobrowolsky: Tell me how you heard about it.

D. Morgan: I was at home. I had worked at the office. We'd had a board meeting the day of the Fire. That's why I remember it so vividly. I had worked at the office until probably about 12:30 or one o'clock, pulling together all of the new board briefing binders and information that was required for the Board meeting the next morning. So, I was at home, and it was like seven o'clock in the morning; and I got a call from I'm trying to remember who actually called me. I think it may have been Rob.

Dobrowolsky: Rob McWilliam?

D. Morgan: Yes, I think that was who actually called me; and he was calling to try to find out if I knew where board members were staying, and that was kind of how the conversation started was "Do you know where the board members are staying, Darlene?" Yes, and I started telling him. "Do you have Fred's phone number?" So, I told him that. Then I think there was a change, and the phone was handed to somebody else, and I think Oliver came on, and he went "Darlene."

And I went “What?”

And he says, “We’re going to be having a meeting at Davis & Company’s offices at nine o’clock.”

And I said, “But we have a board meeting.”

And they said, “Oh, you haven’t been listening to the radio?”

And I said, “No.”

And they said, “Well, the office is on fire.”

And I said, “What!”

And they said, “The office is on fire. It’s burning and probably won’t be there much more, and we have to get ahold of all the Board members and tell them that the meeting is cancelled; and we’re having a staff meeting at Davis & Company at nine o’clock.”

And I’m sitting there going, “You’re kidding,” right. I’m just not taking this in, because I just left the building like six hours ago. So, I’m kind of in shock, and I’m getting my kid ready for school. I’m still standing there going “Whatever.” And I had actually made a couple of calls to board members that I remembered the ones that were staying in hotels that had come in from out of town; and I had given some of the numbers just out of my head to the people. Then I hopped in my car and drove down, because I was in Riverdale, I drove down to the fish ladder.

Dobrowolsky: Across the river.

D. Morgan: Across the river from the office building and looked across and could not believe all the big balls of fire and everything going towards the sky, and the office was gone.

Dobrowolsky: So, this was about what time you got there?

D. Morgan: By the time I got there, it was probably 8:00, 8:30, because I would have been on my way to the Davis & Company’s offices, and I didn’t believe it. Until I actually saw it going up in flames, I didn’t believe it even though they’d told me that. You know, you get there and you kind of look at it, and you go, “Oh, my God!” There were lots of people down there, looking at it, standing there, of course, watching the building burn; and it just was unbelievable to me, just unreal.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would have been, you were saying, 8:00, 8:30 in the morning, and there were still lots of flames. So, the fire really wasn’t under control at that point?

D. Morgan: Well, I think they had it more or less under control, but there was a lot of –

Dobrowolsky: Contained?

D. Morgan: It was contained, but there were still a lot of flames happening; not as many as had been happening early; but it was like they would think they had it out, and it would probably catch another pile of books or something and just take off a bit again. Yes, it was just totally unreal to me; and I'm standing there, and people were making comments about, "Wow, that building has been there a long time. I can't believe it's gone."

And I'm standing there, going, "I can't believe it's gone, and I worked there." And they'd look at me, and I'm just going, "Wow," almost like no expression yet, it was like it hadn't sunk it; but it started to about then. So, I kind of turned away and went to my car and sat there, shaking and just not believing that it was happening. Then I drove down to Davis & Company's offices and walked in and saw everybody else and burst into tears. That was where it kind of went, "Oh, my God, the office is gone!"

And it sunk in. All the people were in there, and it was really tough.

Dobrowolsky: So, who all was at this emergency meeting? Now, Davis & Company, this is a local company that volunteered their boardroom?

D. Morgan: Yes, Davis & Company had been our lawyers and still are actually. We still use them. And Rod Snow, who is the local Davis & Company rep, when he found out about the Fire, immediately offered the use of their boardroom for us to use as long as required; and they set it up kind of as an emergency operation building. So, the meeting actually – as I burst into tears here I knew this would happen – there was Rob McWilliam, the President; all of the senior staff, myself, Diane Pilloud, who was the Secretary to the President at YECL at the time — she was working in the building as well — Pamela Griffiths, who was another clerical person. I'm trying to think of who all else was in there. Anyhow, all of the key people, management staff and that were there; and a few Board members who hadn't got the message had wound up showing up, because they wound up down at the dam, and then, people told them that we were meeting at Davis & Company. So, there were a couple of Board members who actually were there for the first meeting, which was more or less, "Okay, we've got to get ourselves back up and operating now. So, where are we going to be?"

So, at that point they kind of delegated jobs to people. I was taking minutes, which was probably a good thing; because then I managed to pull myself together. So, amidst the tears and everything else, I was taking a lot of minutes of this meeting of all the key stuff. So, I was able to just keep going whereas some people just sat there and cried, which didn't help me much. So, it was a pretty emotional day. Different tasks were handed out. Of course, the guys were tasked with trying to figure out how we were going to keep things running without the SCADA System and where they were going to locate a temporary place to do the SCADA out of, all of that had to be decided; and luckily the diesel plant is totally separate. So, they more or less said, "Okay, this is going to be a feasible place, because you can still see all of the stuff that you need to be able to see," and they wound up setting it up in a bathroom in the diesel plant, because it was the only room that could actually look out where they needed to see. So, they started that. Of course, all the clean up was going on. So, as soon as we were able to get in, Oliver O'Rourke, who was the Chief Financial Officer, Pamela Griffiths and Diane Pilloud were all tasked with the job of going

down to the fire and actually going through with the fire people to see what could be salvaged once it was safe.

Dobrowolsky: So, mainly the records?

D. Morgan: Records, things out of desks, computers, if we could get the hard drives, all of that kind of stuff. Terry Tessier was also our accounting person at that time. She went down and went through it with them. There were actually a lot of people went down to the site. I didn't. I didn't go back to the site at all. I couldn't. I would go near it, and it would be a fall-apart time, so I stayed away. I worked on getting office space, purchasing cell phones so that we had immediate communication for people to reach us, organizing new phones and new office space, new furnishings, purchasing office supplies that we had to have immediately, paper, different things like that. So, that was what I was tasked with.

Department of Tourism offered us space for our main core of the admin section in their Tourism Building downtown. So, we were housed in there within I think three days of the fire. It may have even been a couple of days. So, we weren't working out of Davis & Company's offices very long, although we kept that for kind of meetings that needed to happen for a little while. Then we moved into the Tourism Building, and the people like Rob and myself and John Maissan and a number of other people, Diana Cousins, were given offices in there; and that was where we started operating out of so that we had some temporary locations.

We worked out of there for, I don't really know, a couple of months, and then, we found space; because we needed permanent space while we rebuilt and decided what we were doing. So, we wound up moving up into the Federal Government Building up on Range Road. We moved up there and took over a large section of the bottom floor and the second floor and out in behind in the archives for our purchasing and everything so that we had a big space and recovering the records was all done out of the, I guess you'd call it "the morgue building" I don't know what it is, but there was a morgue actually in the building, which our staff found a little weird, but that is where they did all the recovery of the file records; and there was actually –

Dobrowolsky: So, like a refrigerated space?

D. Morgan: Yes, what it was, it was parking garage space. So, it was huge. There were big doors that they could back up the trucks to and bring it in, and it was all open. So, they could lay out a lot of tables, because they had to dry stuff out. Even though it wasn't all burnt, it was all wet because, of course, when you have a fire they put it out with water. So, there was a lot of water-damaged material that they had to dry out, so just a big, humongous space.

Dobrowolsky: So, items that weren't necessarily affected by the fire or the smoke but had been damaged by water?

D. Morgan: Yes, by water. And they took the stuff that had been damaged by fire and stuff and did as much recovery as they could. We had Brenda Mattson and a whole crew. We had people from Archives there, showing us the proper way to blot and recover and all that. I wasn't really involved in that side of it. Like I said, there were other people. There were a lot of people who

volunteered their time to come and help with that side – with recovering the records and, in the meantime, just keeping everything going.

The power never ever went out, which is totally amazing. I still don't know how they did that. Yes, everything just kept going. The problem was my brain anyhow more after the fire, I didn't remember anything. It was like, I don't know, I guess you're in shock or something. I lost so much information that I used to just have that was at my fingertips that I couldn't even remember any more. The phone numbers that I'd remembered the morning of the fire I couldn't even remember a few days later if you would have asked me, no idea.

Dobrowolsky: It must have been incredibly stressful, I mean, to even get your head around it let alone knowing where to begin to, as you say, keep the operations going and all that.

D. Morgan: Yes, at the time it wasn't very stressful; because you just have to do what you have to do. So, you're busy proceeding. But as there's a little time and you have the time to think and whatever, it's more stressful because for myself, I had three computers and none of them survived. So, I lost everything, all of my Board records, everything, just like literally everything. The funny thing was when they went in to salvage, Oliver was very close, him and I, because we always wound up working in the office late. So, we were always there a long time after everybody else was gone. He knew how upset I was about everything. So, he went looking for my desk to try to find out where it was and try to save something for me. It was really funny, because the only things he could save were the petty cash box, which he brought to me with all the receipts in, that had been a little scorched, but they were there and my work-to-do drawer believe it or not. There was one drawer out of the six that was in my desk that survived, and it was the one I had locked up all my work to do. So, the only thing that survived was what I still had to do, not the stuff that I had done or anything else. It was my work-to-do drawer. But, yes, the petty cash box was a little metal box; and it had survived the fire. And he brought me a half-melted hairbrush that had been in my desk. He was just trying to find anything. It was kind of funny.

So, for me there was a real major change, because I had looked after the library, which was upstairs. I had all of the board records and stuff, all of the general rate application binders. Everything was by my desk. So, I had a lot of paper, plus I had all those binders that I had just created for the board meeting sitting on the corner of my desk; and I had about four boxes of old file records, because I was digging through for some information that people had asked for. So, my desk did not survive needless to say.

I had three computers, because I had had one really old one that I had set aside in the boardroom because I was wanting to take some information off it still. So, it was still sitting there. Then I had kind of the in-between one that I was given to work on until my new one came, and it was sitting in the boardroom, as well. Then I had my new computer with all of my stuff, which included an inventory that Diane and I had just painstakingly went out and done. It had the hard copy, plus the only digital, yes, electronic copy was on my computer. We had just finished doing it I'll bet you three days before the fire, because we had to decide which assets belonged to YECL, which assets out at YECL's facilities actually belonged to Yukon Energy so we knew

what we had to swap around during direct management. So, Diane and I had just literally gone everywhere. We climbed stairs in the diesel plant. This was all just done, and that was gone.

Dobrowolsky: And completely lost.

D. Morgan: Yes, completely lost; there was nothing any more, other than the numbers that we had put on all of the pieces of equipment. So, the identifiers were still there in the places that weren't affected by the fire, but the listing was gone. Actually, it's quite funny, because I was just asked about that inventory probably two weeks ago by Yukon Energy, asking if I knew where it was. I said, "Yes, I know where it is. It's gone." So, it's funny how even though the fire was now almost six years ago, it's still affecting us; because there's still stuff today that we're looking for. Yes, it was not a good time for anybody. There was a lot of stuff, though, that made it through the fire, which again was amazing. I'll bet you 80 percent of our records were actually recovered.

Dobrowolsky: 80 percent?

D. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: That's remarkable!

D. Morgan: It is. The fortunate part and the unfortunate part, depending on how you look at it, when we were building the new office building on, I insisted on a file room with a door, and that door is closed every night. For the most part, I also closed the doors on the file cabinets. People always laughed at me, because I was insistent on those things happening. They said, "Oh, you're so anal, Darlene. What's the difference?" One of the reasons I made sure the door locked was because it did have the confidential Board binders and stuff in that room, which was located on the second floor and was right beside my desk. So, one of the last things I did at night would be to close the doors on the cabinets and close the big, main door.

The unfortunate part was when they were building the building, they realized they had not put in any air intake and outtake ducts, and they stuck them in there, which then compromised the room. Before we even moved in, I said, "Is this going to be okay? If there was ever a fire or anything, isn't it going to come shooting through these pipes and into my file system," which is exactly what you don't want.

And they were, "Oh, no, no, no, that will be fine, you know. They're just air intake ducts up to the roof."

Dobrowolsky: Who told you that?

D. Morgan: Oh, probably the contractors or my bosses or somebody that, you know, doesn't worry about file records, but I was worried about them; and sure enough, the damage that happened was due to those – the places where the papers were burnt were those two spots where the ducting pipes ran up through the room. Unfortunately, I was right. You know, there are times

when you're glad to be right, and there's times when you're not. This was one of those "not" times.

Again, though, the fortunate part was that because it was an outside wall and because I did close most of the doors on the cabinets and I closed that door, the fire didn't actually get through it; and it was a fire door. It was a fire safety door. So, when they were breaking down the walls to go in and recover all the files and stuff, the cabinets and everything had just fallen through the floor and were sitting on the next level down; and they pretty much were able to just remove everything out of the cabinets drawer-by-drawer, and the water damage was the worst part to the files. There was one whole shelf of I think my board binders that didn't make it, I still haven't found them to this day, that probably burnt; and it would have been directly in the line of the fire is my assumption. And because they were binders, they were on shelves versus in cabinets. So, there were no doors on them. So, of course, there's new things that you learn. They go into cabinets with doors now, but too late now.

Yes, so, for the vast majority of it, probably like I said about 80 percent they recovered. The unfortunate part was because I'm the one that worked with most of the file systems and I'm the only one who has been with both companies all this time, I still have about 25 boxes of what's titled "loose papers" from the fire sitting in a back room here, waiting for me to go through them; because what they were is items that had a file number that didn't match our new file system or items that they couldn't identify which file they belonged in or just files that fell apart, and there was no way to identify where they belonged. So, they just stuck them in what they called "loose papers". So, they were dried out and they were recovered, but they're still in boxes.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, that's a job!

D. Morgan: And they're still in boxes, because I have no time –

Dobrowolsky: And you're really the only one who has the –

D. Morgan: Yes, and there was no one else I could pass them off to. Two reasons, because probably most of them might be YDC information. Nobody else is still around who's been with the company, other than me; and the part that might be Yukon Energy is the older information; and again, the staff has changed so much. Like, from the time of the fire, there is probably myself, John Maissan, Duncan Sinclair for the Yukon Energy side of things that are still around. So, as far as the files go, the other two clerical people that were there are gone. So, there's no one else. They're sitting here waiting for when I have time, which doesn't seem to ever happen.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, my!

D. Morgan: Yes, it was definitely an interesting time, and there were a lot of people who I consider heroes, the guys who kept the power on. That's to me amazing. When I found out he was sitting in a truck, calling out orders.

Dobrowolsky: Now, who was that?

D. Morgan: As far as I know it was Guy Morgan. He had come in, one of the first people after the fire was found out. Of course, the main guy who saved everything was the guy who was in SCADA that night, and I believe it was Steve Blysak. I may be wrong. One of the guys in SCADA, Steve Blysak or Gary – I can't remember which guy was on that night;* but he ran down and switched all the power over to the manual operations before it went out. So, if he hadn't done that, if he hadn't had the foresight to run down to where the fire was actually happening. You know, I can't believe that he went down there and did that. He probably really almost put his life in danger doing that, and I don't know how many people are aware of that, himself and whoever the other guy was who first responded. It may have been Ken Sawyer. I know somebody else sprained their ankle or something. I'm pretty sure that was Ken Sawyer that came in –

Dobrowolsky: I think he broke it actually.

D. Morgan: Yes, broke it, yes. I couldn't remember exactly what, but it's just amazing to me what they did. Probably a lot of people didn't realize it, because the power never even blinked. You know, I mean I was getting ready for work. I had no idea. My power was on, and I was doing all my usual stuff, making my coffee and everything else. I had no idea. Those people are the ones, ... and the firefighters, of course, who were there, doing their best to do their job and probably pretty perilously; because from what I understand they weren't able to access the river to get water. Like, it was a really bad situation. I think they had to bring most of the water in, in the trucks.

Dobrowolsky: Well, apparently there were water outlets, but all the valves were inside the building.

D. Morgan: Yes, yes, see I wasn't sure how it all was; but I knew it was not an easy task, but of course, you don't realize that until after the fact. I don't think anybody ever thought about, "Well, gee, where are the fire hydrants," because the river was right there. Of course, you figured you'd be able to access it; but with the way the fire was, they couldn't get access to it.

Dobrowolsky: Nobody could get past the fire to get to the river.

D. Morgan: They couldn't get past the fire to get to the river. So, yes, I mean again all stuff that without this situation you would probably never know. But, yes, it was very amazing, very traumatizing. I kept telling everybody, "I think I would rather have had my house burn down, because I spend so much time at work," that it was really hard. It was really, really hard.

Dobrowolsky: Well, for you, it was like a decade of professional work up in flames.

D. Morgan: Yes, yes, it was a lot of stuff, seven years and a lot of hours. And of course, like everyone, you tend to take stuff to work. So, I mean, there were personal baby pictures and stuff of my daughter that were sitting on my desk, gone, you know, that kind of thing. And everybody had that, everybody had that. Everybody had stuff at work that probably they shouldn't have had at work. The Corporation was really good about trying to replace anything that they could that

*Note: It was systems operator Mike Hannah.

was lost by the staff that wasn't covered by insurance. Again, they didn't have to, but they were really good about doing that. Yes, it was a tough time, still tough to remember it!

Dobrowolsky: Oh, I can imagine!

Side B

Dobrowolsky: This is Side 2 of an interview with Darlene Morgan at the YDC office in Whitehorse on May 15th. We've been talking about the fire and all the damage that was done, quite a bit about the damage to the records and the salvage. One thing I read about I wanted to ask you about, apparently a lot of the records or correspondence that were lost you were able to get from other offices or other places that had copies. I think I read something about that somewhere.

D. Morgan: Yes, a number of the things that had been lost in the fire, such as I was talking about the General Rate Application binders that were on my desk, we were able to recover from other places. The Yukon Utilities Board had copies of all that, and they were nice enough to let me go in and photocopy the complete binders on their copier. All I did was bring some paper. They provided the space and somebody to help me with all of that; and that was a big job because, of course, we were right in the middle of a rate application. The 1996/97 rate application was still ongoing. So, there was information that was really required, quite important. So, that was great to get those back. That was one weight off my mind.

A lot of the other things, important corporate records that we hadn't recovered yet, all of our incorporation data, all of that type of thing we were able to get from Davis & Company. A lot of other information we were able to access through InterGroup Consulting, who was also working with us on different issues like the rate application; but a lot of other areas, as well.

Dobrowolsky: InterGroup Consulting?

D. Morgan: Yes, InterGroup Consulting [Ltd.], Cam Osler and I'm trying to think of who all else was involved from InterGroup, mainly Cam. He works as a consultant for the corporations in the area of rates and that type of thing. There are certain things that you only need people for occasionally; and rather than staff up your own people, you work with consultants. They worked with us on all of the rate applications that had been done in the prior years, and, of course, were working with us on the one that was ongoing.

So, they had all of the background of all of our rate schedules, too numerous to mention. I mean, including from the YDC side of things, we had probably lost all of our information to do with the still ongoing issue of rate stabilization, all of those type of folders where you have all the background and all that that was needed, because I think that was part of the General Rate Application, but it was the YDC side; because Government, of course, has the rate stabilization ongoing. You need all that background. So, those type of files, which are pretty much irreplaceable, we were able to replace.

As well, the fortunate part, me being me, I had a laptop computer at home which happened to have file listings. I don't even know the set-up of some of the Board stuff, copies of letterhead, which would have had to have been redone. I don't even know, there was a lot of stuff. The business directory that we use on an almost daily basis to access companies we work with was on there, lots of things that surprised everybody. Like, I was so glad I had it at home and I hadn't taken it back to the office; because I did a lot of work, being a single mom, I would take work home if there was a lot of stuff that needed to be done after hours, which there always seemed to be. I don't know, I could never seem to keep up. It went home with me.

As well, we were also undertaking a project on all of the board minutes to put numbers to them. So, Pamela Griffiths had a whole bunch of the board binders and minutes and stuff at her house, because she was putting numbers on them, like years plus motion numbers so that we could do a resolution binder so we could track the board stuff easier. So, there were a number of things that were saved and recovered because people had them at home. We all joke what workaholics we are. Rob, as well, had a lot of material at his house because he was working on it, the board meeting or whatever it might have been. You know, we all laugh. We go, "You know, if we weren't such workaholics and we didn't take all this stuff home, it would have been worse."

Dobrowolsky: Much worse.

D. Morgan: Much worse. We could have probably not continued as easily, because a file listing, whether people think files aren't important or not, it was very important; because it was what helped recover. Again it was just amazing the amount of stuff that we found that people actually had at their homes that helped pull everything back together. Of course, it's a never-ending thing, people don't realize. I'm still pulling stuff together, and this is almost six years later. I still have 25 boxes of paper sitting in my files here, waiting to be done, which periodically bug me, –

Dobrowolsky: The loose papers.

D. Morgan: – the loose papers, because they're sitting there. People will admit it here and I will, too. I'm very anal about my files. It's something that I can't handle being behind in. Because of the fire, my YDC side of things went on the shelf until we moved out in 2000. When we moved our offices away from Yukon Energy was the first opportunity I had to work on any YDC stuff. So, I am still putting stuff in files that's almost six years old. It's sitting on shelves, because I didn't have time to work on the YDC side of things. I was having to get everything back and operating for Yukon Energy, because it was the more active company. So, all of my time was spent recovering the Yukon Energy files and keeping the Yukon Energy files up-to-date, because we had to access them more often, getting all of that side of things up and operating.

So, until we actually split the two corporation offices, which happened in 2000, we moved the YDC offices out of the Yukon Energy facility and back downtown, to put the more arm's length relationship back in the public eye because there were a lot of people confused who kept thinking "Yukon Energy is government," which it isn't. So, we tried to make it clearer. All of Yukon Energy staff now are totally Yukon Energy staff. There is no longer a joint President, which there was before. I don't work for both companies. I strictly work for YDC now. So, there

shouldn't even be a perceived government side of things to the Yukon Energy side. But like I said, until we did that in 2000 – and then, of course, I'm still setting up another new office.

So, your day-to-day stuff is still going on. So, again there I was buying new furniture and new computers and new office stuff for the new YDC offices. So in 2000, I'm almost back where I was in 1998 when I was refurbishing the other office, but it's just that now I was doing it for YDC; and it wasn't really related to the fire, but it's still another big task. So, I still have probably about three – I don't even know – two full piles of paper that haven't made it to the files yet since 1997, which is kind of scary; because for me, it's always in the back of my mind that it's there, and my files aren't up-to-date, and I can't get back to it. Of course, it just adds to your stress level, which is great.

For me, I have never really come down off the fire. The fire created a time where everybody was working lots of overtime, and I still am; because like I said, there were a lot of staff changes, and Yukon Energy still to some degree relies on me to try to help them with a lot of the things, because they have had staff turnovers. So, any time there's a staff turnover –

Dobrowolsky: So, you're a big corporate memory.

D. Morgan: I am the corporate memory. Even now if they look towards another General Rate Application, there is not a clerical person in Yukon Energy who has been through a General Rate Application. They have no idea the hours that are required to sit in those hearings and to work after the hearings. So, that they're still looking to me for. I'm actually meeting with some people next Friday for lunch to talk about what's involved in the Rate Application process. So, my days are very long still. They're not as long as after the fire. When I go back and look at the hours –

Dobrowolsky: How long after the fire? What kind of days were you putting in?

D. Morgan: Oh, I don't even know. It's hard to say. I would start – and again it was difficult, because being a single mom, you still have to get home, but you're taking the stuff with you. So, I believe I was probably working days from eight o'clock in the morning, which I think was the earliest I could put my daughter in the day care, and then, head off to work, until probably 11:00 or 12:00 at night; and I did that for probably almost two years, and I wasn't the only one. Rob was in the office so many hours that I'm sure his family thought they had lost him, because we all were just trying to get everything back together and working. I don't even know, that continued, I can't even remember where it stopped. I don't know that it did. Like I said, it was just so busy, you don't ever really catch up with something like that. You're constantly looking for that file that somebody is looking for that may be in that box of 25 files sitting out there. Yes, I don't know. It's not something you recover from easily, and it's not something that's done fast. I still keep telling myself, "In about two years, I should have everything caught up." That's my long-term goal, and it's something to reach for; and I guess it's the only way to keep yourself sane in some ways as far as the work goes, because it doesn't go away.

Dobrowolsky: But it is remarkable what the team accomplished. I mean the restructuring went on schedule.

D. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: It seems like record time that the new generating plant went up, very soon after the new offices. I mean, there is really this immediate sense of a phoenix rising out of the ashes of the fire.

D. Morgan: Oh, yes, everything came back, but it's the residual stuff that people don't see that is like a never-ending thing that doesn't go away.

Dobrowolsky: And because a lot of people really stressed themselves out to accomplish this.

D. Morgan: Oh, definitely; I would say the first two years after the fire were so stressful for most people. For myself I know it took a toll on my health. I get sick more now than I ever, ever did before the fire, and I'm sure it's stress. That's what people have told me. They kept telling me I should go to a counsellor, but I still haven't done that. It's not something I could do very easily. But they did warn everybody, and they did send us to people to try to help us with the stress. They were so exceptional, actually, management really were.

Dobrowolsky: These are Yukon Government people?

D. Morgan: No, this is our management team. Rob McWilliam made sure staff knew how appreciative he was of them. There were at least a couple of different events that they put on to try to relieve the pressure of the "after the fire" issue and gave people stuff, just to show their appreciation. It is just amazing, actually, how much that helped to know that they know that you've been working these mega-long hours and appreciated it. Yeah so it was great people.

Dobrowolsky: Well, it sounds like you've all done a wonderful job of supporting each other through this, with pulling together resources. It's like going through a war together. I mean, you're all veterans. It is life-changing.

D. Morgan: It is life bonding. It's amazing the people that I didn't know, the SCADA people. Before we moved down to the corporate offices prior to the fire, I hadn't even met half of them. I might have talked to them on the phone. I wouldn't have met them. I'm kind of a people person. So, I made it my job to go into the SCADA room, which is not really encouraged; but I would go in with doughnuts once or twice a week and pull other people in with me so that we could meet the people who were in there, working at keeping the power going, Steve Blysak, Gary – names fail me sometimes. There were a couple of Steve's and a couple of Gary's, so I kind of lose track of who was who; but to go in and meet them and to meet the people who work out of the diesel plant.

You don't normally, as an administrative person, associate with all those people who are working in those areas; but I think it was kind of something I wanted to do, because I'd heard all the names, and I'd talked to the people probably on the phone; because like I say, I've been here a long time. So, by '97, I had been working there for seven years, and I had talked to a lot of people but hadn't met them. So, I kind of wandered around at coffee breaks to the diesel plant and sat and talked with the guys or played crib or whatever.

So, it was a unique bonding experience kind of just prior, and then, after that was even more important, because you were keeping in touch with everybody to see how everything was going. It was very ... and funny, as people might call it, it was almost like a family pulling together and getting through it. That's what it was; it was a family.

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you very much. This has been amazing.

D. Morgan: You're welcome.

Dobrowolsky: I really appreciate it!

END OF INTERVIEW

Guy Morgan

Guy Morgan is Leadhand of system operations, supervisor for the Yukon Energy System Control Centre (SCC). SCC manages the system generation dispatching, setting up all the system switching and is the overall operating authority for the Yukon Energy power grid. During the fire, he controlled the entire generating system from a company truck using memory, a radio and a telephone.

You know, maybe in the back of my head, I thought, "Okay, once the smoke clears, we'll just go back upstairs, and we'll be good," because, I mean, if you take a look at that building it's all metal. How does that burn?

Recorded June 3, 2003 at System Control Centre, Whitehorse Rapids Generating offices in Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Mr. Morgan, 1 October 2003. Additional information in [square brackets].

Side A

Dobrowolsky: It is June the 3rd, 2003. This is Helene Dobrowolsky talking to Guy Morgan at the SCC at the Whitehorse Rapids Generating facilities and we're talking about the great fire. To start out, would you please tell me when and where you were born?

G. Morgan: I was born in Calgary, Alberta on April 23rd, 1966, and I came up to the Yukon when I was about three years old and I've been here ever since.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me how you got into the electrical business, or I don't know if that's what you call your profession.

G. Morgan: It was a summer job in '85. I just got out of high school, looking for a summer job like everybody does; and I applied at Yukon Electrical. At the time Porter Creek "C" was getting built, and they were doing all the underground. So, I walked in the door with a set of brand new work boots; and the lead lineman said, "You're with me, Genius," and off we went up there. And he gave me my shovel, and that's really what I did for the whole summer was just shovelling back in the trenches and laying cable.

Then at the end of that job, if you were able to stick around long enough, you got on this powerline that went from Marsh Lake to Teslin, which was quite an experience. It was six tens all summer long.

Dobrowolsky: Six days, ten hours a day?

G. Morgan: Six days – yes, six days a week, ten hours a day; and what we did was, there was me and three other guys, and we put the poles in the ground. A Nodwell would go along, punch the holes in the ground, put the poles in –

Dobrowolsky: So, a Nodwell is kind of a digger?

G. Morgan: It's a tracked vehicle that just can go over all-terrain. It digs a hole, puts a pole in and then, we come along with these what are called "pike poles." They're about a 14-foot long pole with a spike on the end. There's four of us. We'd all plug into the pole, and then, we'd just with the plumb bob set it, and then, shovel dirt in and hand tampers.

Dobrowolsky: Real sophisticated stuff!

G. Morgan: Oh, yes, I thought they had hydraulics all figured out by that time. So, I did that for the majority of the summer, and then, I was back on the line crew for a couple of years.

Dobrowolsky: So, what did the line crew do?

G. Morgan: The line crew, you're going out and you're doing extensions, full extensions, the hot spots of the Yukon, Stewart, Pelly, you know, you'd go there for a week at a time.

And then, I went out to school to be an electrician for my first year. And then, I came back looking for another summer job in the interim. I applied again, and then, I got a call from a guy named "Vern Parkin," and he's saying, "I'm the superintendent of the hydro plant."

And I'm saying, "You know, I applied for Yukon Electric." I didn't know at the time that Yukon Electrical was managing the facility now. So, then I got on as a labourer at these facilities, and my jobs included cutting brush, mowing lawns, all the dirty work, the general labour work.

Then a position came up. Then I was actually being trained to be a diesel operator; because at that time, we had the Faro Mine up and running still. So, they needed –

Dobrowolsky: So, this would have been around '86?

G. Morgan: '87. So, we were running diesel all winter. What I ended up doing was getting trained up at the diesel plant, and then, a job came up at the Control Centre. So, I applied for it. My whole intention was to get my journeyman's ticket and be an electrician; but this came up, and I figured, you know, I might as well give it a shot anyways.

So, it was a little overwhelming at the time, because we didn't run anything – part of the system was run on an old computer system, and the other part was all pistol-grip handles and stuff like that. So, if you took a look at it, it was probably about a 30-foot row of switches that you had to know what each and everyone of them did; a bunch of gauges and stuff like that. So, I got on there, and I did about four years of shift work, the 12-hour shifts. And then, I guess they thought I was doing well enough that they put me into a day job, basically setting up all the switching and stuff like that that takes place, the generation dispatch; and I've been in the position ever since then.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were at the diesel plant for how long exactly?

G. Morgan: Just trained, like, basically for about a month.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, okay, so a fairly short time?

G. Morgan: A fairly short time, and then, the funny thing is they were going to be paying me probably about \$12 or \$13 an hour to run the diesel; but when you got on to the system-operated position, they wanted to start me at something like 9.48 an hour, but you're running the whole power grid. So, I talked to the guy, and I said, "Hey, you know, –

Dobrowolsky: What's wrong with this picture?

G. Morgan: Yes, and I was making \$10 an hour being a labourer, and they were going to pay me less with a whole bunch more responsibility; but I think I got it up to \$10.48 or something like that an hour and just stuck with it. In this scenario, you think that it's all standard, everything's the same; but there's always stuff that comes up out of the blue that you learn from it. You know, since electricity is invisible, but all the physical aspects of the place, there are always things cropping up that you can't remember ever seeing before.

Dobrowolsky: What are some examples?

G. Morgan: Icing, icing up on the intakes, we call it "frazil ice," it plugs up the intakes. Even the stuff that comes downstream that gets up against our trash racks; like we've had water skis, beavers, deer all trapped in there, different types of outages, different areas going out that you've never seen before. Not saying that they never happened but how you route the power a different way. A lot of it in the first couple of years for me, it was a very steep learning curve and even still to this day, we're still doing the odd different thing. Like I've got something planned for Thursday that's picking my brain quite a bit.

Dobrowolsky: And I guess the technology keeps on changing.

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: I mean, Mike Hannah very kindly gave me a tour of the SCADA System after I was here the other day, and this is a far cry from the 30-foot row of switches and dials.

G. Morgan: Yes, it all started out, they put a computer in front of us. We used to have a two-foot by three-foot board, and you'd write all your numbers down with a pencil, and you'd have to figure it all out, which is a really good way to learn; because you're forced to know exactly the power flows and where it's generated from and how much water you're using to do that.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're doing your own calculations and what load is on any part of the system?

G. Morgan: The different feeders, how much generation is being put out of the different hydro units. Like, I was lucky enough to start out I guess in the old way. Then we got the computer, and then, we put our log sheet on the computer. And then, the next thing you know, we're going to be buying a new SCADA System.

Dobrowolsky: And about when did that happen?

G. Morgan: The first one was probably in I'm thinking about '89, '89/90. You're probably going to be able to find out a little bit more about that than me. And then, as it turns out, the guy who was doing all the programming, we had some layoffs, and I had the opportunity to get involved in the SCADA, the programming part of it, the drawing of the screens and how it looks to the operator. So, I got involved in that, and then ...

Dobrowolsky: So, you were working with the program designer on this?

G. Morgan: Yes, at the end; like, after he was getting laid off. So, it wasn't a happy, happy thing. I didn't get a great deal of training. I got about a week, and "Here you go," and off and running. That's the problem with living up in the Yukon, you don't get a lot of ... Like, this company that we bought it off of is based out of San Jose, California; and it's tough to get support from them. So, a lot of hit and miss, but it was great that way.

Then we were, at the time, looking at upgrading or buying a new SCADA System, and the fire basically forced our hand. So, we got out and what we've got today is a pretty deluxe system. I mean, it can do not only utilities. It can do water, water utilities, gas, the whole works. We're set up and ready to go.

Dobrowolsky: And I noticed you even had a little section that dealt with the windmills on Haeckel Hill, to monitor the wind generation.

G. Morgan: Yes, when we tie it into the SCADA System; right now it's an independent computer, but we are planning on putting it on real time. SCADA is real time. We're seeing it as it happens. The wind turbines are a dial-up modem scenario where we're just checking it from time to time. Again, it's not as crucial to us. It's not a great deal of generation that we're going to lose if it does go down; and if it does go down, we'd probably have more problems than worrying about the generation of the wind turbines.

We see as far north as Faro and Mayo, and we're going to be seeing Dawson within the next year, controlling that. See, the SCC Control Centre, we're the operating authority of the grid. So, nobody can do anything without talking to us.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so just to quickly review, "SCC" is the System Control Centre?

G. Morgan: The System Control Centre, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you are, as you say, the master authority for all the generating areas, Mayo and Aishihik and –

G. Morgan: Yes, we're the operating authority. So, if you want to take a diesel out of service in Faro, you talk to us; and then, we'll take a look at the system loading, and if we can get away without having it available to us, we'll give it up to you.

Dobrowolsky: And then, the SCADA, what does that acronym stand for again?

G. Morgan: SCADA stands for System Control and Data Acquisition. It basically allows us to receive inputs from the field, various substations and plants, and output from here to same, commands, open/close, raise or lower, open and close the spill gates, and on and on it goes.

Dobrowolsky: And then, another term that came up when I was discussing this with Mike Hannah, RTUs?

G. Morgan: RTUs are Remote Terminal Units. It's what the SCADA master talks to in the field. It's like the computer that it's talking to.

Dobrowolsky: So, at Aishihik – here you have your lovely little graphical display of all these dials and exactly how much input, raising/lowering –

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: – of the load, et cetera. So, the terminal that is in Aishihik, the operator would see the duplicate of that for their own part of the system, is that –

G. Morgan: No, no, in any of the locations where we have these RTUs that we control, there's no graphical display or anything. There's no interface for somebody locally.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, I see.

G. Morgan: If you're going to do it local control, you're going to be doing it like the old days, like that 30-foot bank of pistol-grip handles and stuff like that. So, no, you can't plug in a monitor and you're seeing the same thing that we're seeing here. It just doesn't work. We're working off the master computer, and those are just little slave computers. They actually don't even look like a computer. They look like a closet door. You open it up. There's a whole bunch of flashing lights, and that's about it, and a communication line that goes there and just talks back and forth.

Dobrowolsky: So, in October of 1997, at that time the [SCC] was on top of the old generating plant that was over the original three hydro turbines.

G. Morgan: Yes, not so much on top but offset on the rear, the back end of it, yes, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And at that time, you were an operator, or –

G. Morgan: I was – at the time, I was the leadhand of system operations.

Dobrowolsky: And what does that mean exactly.

G. Morgan: What that means is the position, I have five operators that work with me. We, as a team – the guys are doing nights and days. So, I provide the continuity, I guess, of what's going

on from night shifts to day shifts, the planning of the work, the writing up of the Safe Work Permits, the generation dispatches, making sure that we have enough generation available, that we're not – somebody just doesn't let five diesels go out of the picture, and then, we can't meet our peak the next day. You're always looking at temperature, because our load is based on temperature.

Dobrowolsky: And how does temperature affect things?

G. Morgan: Every one-degree temperature change works out to about four to 500 kilowatts. So, if we see it at zero today and we know it's going to be minus 10 tomorrow, we know that we're going to have enough generation to pick up another four-to-five meg on top of what we peaked at today.

Dobrowolsky: So, keeping track of the weather is an important part of your job?

G. Morgan: Yes, yes, it's just a daily thing for me, I go and I check and see what the weather – not so much in the summertime; the wintertime more so, and it was compounded a lot more with the Faro Mine. That system was quite a bit tighter system. By saying that I mean that we had already exhausted all our hydro units, and we know that we're going to be running diesel every day. So, we want to make sure that, like again, we have enough generation available. You've got guys who are coming off shift, and then, their next day is say a Monday, and I've got a whole bunch of things planned on Monday; and rather than him walking in the door blind, I'm there in the morning for him. I'm saying, "You've got this, this, this and this. This is what's going on; and oh, by the way, this diesel is out of the picture for you."

Dobrowolsky: So, the continuity part is very important?

G. Morgan: The continuity, yes, I guess I'm just the go-between to make sure everything is consistent.

Dobrowolsky: And the paperwork.

G. Morgan: And the paperwork and the nice supervisory skills that a guy's got to have and stuff like that. Back then when the Faro Mine was up and running, it was all consuming. I mean, it was just you were on call a lot, making sure everything was good.

Dobrowolsky: So, it wasn't unusual to get a phone call in the middle of the night about a problem or something going on that was perhaps not easy to figure out at first glance?

G. Morgan: That's right. I mean, with the SCADA System, you've got a whole series of alarms, multiple alarms, that would come in; and if they get an alarm that comes up that doesn't go away immediately or if they can't – for instance, if it's on a hydro unit, they get an alarm; if we don't need that hydro unit at the time we'll shut it down and get the guys to look at it the next day. If we know we're going to need it the next morning, myself, the mechanics, our electricians, will come in and take a look, and then we make new plans for the next day if we can't get it back.

Dobrowolsky: So, you do a fair bit of work in conjunction with the people who do the maintenance?

G. Morgan: Oh, the maintenance, absolutely; I mean, it's like we drive the car and they fix it; and if it doesn't work, then we've got to replace some parts in a hurry or else we're not going to make it the next day.

Again, like I say, it was more of an issue when the mine was up and running. Not so much now; we've been given quite a bit more flexibility of what we can and can't take out of service. Diesels very rarely run. If we have an icing condition, then yes. But as it stands now ...

Dobrowolsky: So, we have a wealth of power at the moment or potential power?

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, let's go back to the evening of October 29th/October 30th. You'd had a fairly normal day October 29th?

G. Morgan: Fairly normal, yes, yes; nothing out of the ordinary, the Faro Mine was still up and running. I believe at that time there were some issues about them not continuing on. You know, we didn't really know what they were doing at the time; but that day they were up, and they were probably running around 25 megawatts in power. A typical day, the next day we were probably going to be running some diesel.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would be the mill primarily.

G. Morgan: The mill, yes; what we dealt with there at the Faro Mine was an "A" circuit, what they called 'an "A" circuit' and 'a "B" circuit'. An "A" circuit was about five-to-six megawatts; a "B" circuit is seven-to-eight; and then, you've got some other station service loading, and then, you had the pit itself, which was the electric shovels, and when the electric shovels came on, they just swung our system all over the place. So, we had a bunch of little tricks that we would do. We would have diesels that would come on what we call "frequency control," but really what they'd do is they'd run about 60 percent; and as the frequency went down, they'd pick up generation. As the frequency went high, they'd actually swing with the system and try to swing in the opposite direction and steady the frequency up.

Dobrowolsky: So, it was pretty crucial for you to know what was operating at Faro?

G. Morgan: Yes, we needed to know what was on at the time, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you'd had a fairly, I'm sure, busy day on the 29th. What, you finished about 4:30, 5:00?

G. Morgan: 4:30; yes, I come in at 7:00, because that's when the operators' shift change, and if the guys got anything to tell me, he can tell me then, and then, pass it on, and we can get the maintenance boys on it; but, yes, I don't recall anything out of the ordinary that day.

Dobrowolsky: So, you had your normal day. You went home, presumably had a pleasant evening with your family, and then, what?

G. Morgan: I had a call. I was getting – of course I was sleeping. I got a call from the operator, Mike Hannah. He said, “Hey, I smell smoke.”

And I was going, “Okay,” like, I mean, you’ve just been woken up.

“All right,” I said, “I’m coming down.” So, I got ready to go. I’m in the company truck, and I’m driving towards the plant; and then, he calls me back, and he’s a little bit more excited because he said he walked down the stairs, and he actually saw smoke coming out of the plant. We were on the second floor, and the turbines, of course, were on the first floor, and then, there was another floor beneath that.

Dobrowolsky: Kind of a sub-basement almost?

G. Morgan: Yes, there is a turbine floor and a generator floor. The generator floor was where the old control centre was; and that’s where he was saying that he had walked down a set of stairs, and he said he was smelling smoke. I’m going, okay, I’m getting a little pumped now, too. So, I asked him, I said, “Well,” I knew that we could get away without running that plant, because we had our Aishihik Plant on. And I said, “Well, you know, take the plant down. Shut it down and put Aishihik on.” He’s doing it all within this room.

He goes, “Yes, yes, okay.”

Then at that time, I called Ken Sawyer who was the leadhand of the diesel turbine operators. These are the guys who plant check and the hydro plants and they run the diesel units, and we shared an office. And I called him, and I said, “Heh, I’ve got a call out here, and it sounds like it’s the real thing.” I said, “Can you come down.” Now, we’re still YECL. So, I called again another equal. I hate to use that word, but we’re on par.

Dobrowolsky: Co-worker, yes.

G. Morgan: Yes, co-worker; he’s another leadhand of the line crew of the service department.

Dobrowolsky: And who’s that?

G. Morgan: That’s Doug Smith. He’s still here. So, I called him, and I said, “Heh, you know, look, I don’t know what we have here, but it sounds real to me.” It’s not the usual that we’re smoking wires or anything.

Dobrowolsky: False alarm.

G. Morgan: We’ve had smells come out of there before, but nothing to this extent. Again, I don’t know this yet. But I live in Riverdale, so I can be here within about five minutes, especially

at that time of night. So, I come; and by the time I'm driving by Robert Service Way, I can see smoke, and I'm going, "Oh, great."

So, I drive in. Mike, he called the fire department. He told me he'd called the fire department. I said, "Great, okay, I'm going to wait for them at the front gate." I said, "Once you get the hydro units off and you get that plant shut down, bail out, get out of there."

And he said, "Yes, yes, yes."

It's easy to come in as a second set of eyes on any emergency, any power outage that we have. This poor guy's sitting there, and he's got bells and whistles going off, and he's a little shell-shocked; but when you come in fresh, I guess you're taking a look at the big picture. It's a big help. Having been on the receiving end of that, I can appreciate it.

So, anyways, I asked Mike to get out of the plant after he shut it down. I met the fire department. I was there before they were. I opened up the gate, and I basically pointed them to where the fire was. Now, what I did was then I went and picked up Mike. Now, he had crawled up this bank here.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is the high bank up from the building?

G. Morgan: That's right. So, he had crawled up this bank.

Dobrowolsky: To the upper access road?

G. Morgan: Yes, and he was waiting; by the time I got there, he was waiting and basically he jumps in the truck, and I go, "What did you do?"

"I shut down the hydro units."

I went, "Right on. Good job!"

Then what we did is we went right up to the dam, because the most important thing for us in any power outage that shuts down hydro units is we're not using the water that we were through the turbines. So, we have to spill water. It's just driven into your head as an operator, that if you don't, well, then we have more problems than a fire. We're going to overtop the dam. So, what we did is we hustled up here. We took local control via the gates, and we just started spilling some water.

Dobrowolsky: So, essentially manually raising the gates or opening them?

G. Morgan: Manually raising the gates, exactly; at the time, I believe John Carroll, who was the manager of YECL, was walking across the dam.

Dobrowolsky: The road on top of the dam?

G. Morgan: The road on top; so he jumped into the truck, and we started driving down, and, you know, everybody is a little bit pumped at this time.

Dobrowolsky: No kidding!

G. Morgan: And then, we drive back, and we parked basically right about here is where we parked.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're indicating a spot on this little aerial photograph that's –

G. Morgan: Yes, so we could see the fire.

Dobrowolsky: It's an access road right by the river in between the substation and the diesel plant?

G. Morgan: That's right.

Dobrowolsky: Okay.

G. Morgan: Really, I guess we wanted to take a look at the fire; but then, we're not done by any means. So, I got out of the truck, and I was talking to fire – I think it was Clive Sparks at the time, and I think I emphasized it quite a bit, I said, "If you can save anything, save this end of the building where our control centre is." I said, "If you're going to save anything, save that, because that's our brains." We don't have any brains right now, so what we're doing is I'm on the phone, and I'm getting the Aishihik operator. There's a local Aishihik operator out there, whatever, running the plant. I get ahold of him, and I tell him that he's basically in control of the power system until we can get some sort of set up.

Dobrowolsky: For the Yukon Territory?

G. Morgan: Yes, like he's adjusting, raising and lowering the load and trying to average 60 cycles a second. So, we've got him on the radio. I've got a company radio in my truck, and we're going back and forth.

Then what I did was I came into the substation, because all the generation, the three hydro units and the seven diesels all feed into the substation. Now, we have to take this out of the picture; because, I mean, if it's a fire, we don't want it connected to our main – this is the main feed for Whitehorse in general. There's another substation, McIntyre, but it doesn't work north of Whitehorse. So, we ran in here and started tripping breakers from the hydro plant.

Dobrowolsky: And you just had a map in your head of which breakers –

G. Morgan: Yes, and we do a lot of switching. This is our map, and over the years, you get to know where everything goes.

Dobrowolsky: Good grief! It looks like there are scores of tiny –

G. Morgan: Yes, there's a whole bunch of stuff on there, but really –

Dobrowolsky: So, we're looking at a big diagram with –

G. Morgan: Yes, it's a single-line diagram of the Whitehorse-Aishihik-Faro Grid. So, I ran in and just started tripping breakers to clear the lines away from that building.

Dobrowolsky: And also turning off the power to that building, or did that have to be a separate operation?

G. Morgan: That was a separate thing later on.

Dobrowolsky: Okay.

G. Morgan: And you want to do that for the fire department, too, because they want to know that they're not spraying water on energized lines; and at the time, the lines were energized into that building. But the station services, what we call, like, our just general lights and stuff like that, we dealt with that later on.

Then what we did was I was sitting there, and then, you start getting the people showing up. What we did is I asked a guy, one of the DTOs, I forget who it actually was, and I –

Dobrowolsky: A "DTO"?

G. Morgan: A diesel turbine operator; these are the guys that are going out and checking the plants and the subs and stuff like that, and [can operate them manually if required at the direction of SCC]. So, I asked one of those guys to go up here, because now we can't see the level of Schwatka Lake. We have no idea what it's doing. We don't know if it's going down or if it's rising. And he's going, "Well, what do you want me to do?"

I said, "Just take a pencil or whatever." I said, "Mark a line on the concrete and [maintain that water level]. Don't let it rise or don't let it lower. Just keep it steady; and if you have to keep raising and lowering, fine."

Dobrowolsky: Raising and lowering the gates that control the water?

G. Morgan: Yes. And as all this stuff starts happening, you realize that everybody's going to start waking up in the Yukon, and our load profile starts going up. Now, we've basically taken a plant right out of the picture and either we're going to run diesel – you know, all these things are going through your mind, we'll run on diesel or we'll get the Faro Mine to shut down some circuits and stuff like that.

Dobrowolsky: So, let's just back up a little bit. So, first of all when you were shutting down the plant, it contained what I've learned to call WH 1, 2 and 3, you were essentially trying to switch most of that load over to Aishihik?

G. Morgan: Over to Aishihik, yes.

Dobrowolsky: But you still had WH 4, which is the north wheel?

G. Morgan: Yes, which is way up here.

Dobrowolsky: Which is way up by the dam?

G. Morgan: Yes, it's not affected by the fire at all.

Dobrowolsky: And you have the diesel plant?

G. Morgan: We have the diesel plant. We're good to go with that, but see, the thing is that all this stuff that SCADA does, it's looking at about 15 different locations and feeding you information back all the time realtime. Now you totally lose that. You don't know how much is coming out of Aishihik. You don't know how much water you're spilling. You don't know the level of the lake. You don't know what's going on in Mayo. Like, Mayo could be in an outage. You just don't know, because you don't have that, you know ... Computers are great, but if you rely on them you're lost without them.

But see, the thing is what I had done in the past is I had written up a document that says, "Hey, what if SCADA died or something like that, what would we do?" Well, we would man every location that there was one of these RTUs, and that would be the eyes. You know, the guy would be talking back and forth to you. So, essentially that's what we did.

Dobrowolsky: So, they became your RTUs.

G. Morgan: Yes, and we just talked back and forth, "What are you seeing?" because a lot of the stuff that your eyes are looking at, you're just looking at analog values, the voltages, the outputs of different plants and stuff like that; and you take it for granted, because you can see it in two seconds. You know where you're at. But if you don't have that ...

So, what we did is Doug Smith did a great job. He put servicemen – we had guys on every different plant location, and they would just talk to me. I guess I was the operator in a truck, and I'd just go to Aishihik, "Well, what have you got on now?" And they'd give me a value.

Dobrowolsky: So, by "a value"?

G. Morgan: They would [give me the values for [voltage, load flows and unit outputs]. And I'm going, "Okay." And then, I'd talk to a guy in the substation, "What's your voltage?" And then, I'd talk to a guy at Takhini, "What's the load going to Faro?" Just because this is what you do. You knew what the load flow – how the load was going to increase and what you needed to meet the peak. So, Faro Mine was secondary. You know, we're going to keep the lights on in town, and, you know, all the communities, we wanted to keep them on.

So, then we got ahold of the Faro Mine, and some really good people who were working there at the time, explained our situation.

Now, in the interim, at the same time, my boss plant manager –

Dobrowolsky: Your boss was?

G. Morgan: Ric Seely at the time, Hector Campbell, I think Les Boisvert, these were all like our management, the plant guys, the head of the plants and stuff like that, they were all in Faro. I don't know what they were there for. They were doing some training or an info session or something like that.

Dobrowolsky: A retreat.

G. Morgan: So, I don't have anybody – Yes. I don't have anybody to talk to. I can't sound off – I mean, I've got good people around me; but I don't have anybody to go – so, we just off-the-cuff.

Dobrowolsky: The big decisions, yes.

G. Morgan: Yes. So, you know, right away we called them; and I'm going, "Heh, the plant's burning down!" And they couldn't believe that. And I said, "No, no, no." And so, they got in their vehicle, and they headed back right away.

So, what we did was we talked to the mine and got the mine on the phone.

Dobrowolsky: So, by "the mine," this would be the mine personnel or –

G. Morgan: The mine personnel, yes. And I'd just say, "Heh, you guys have got to drop a couple of circuits," reducing the demand on the power system. They were great to work with. I mean, I said, "You've got to do it slow, because we can't – we're not reacting the way we used to." So, they would drop, and then, I'd be "What's the frequency? What's the line load now," and we shut the Faro Mine down. It took a while. And then ...

Dobrowolsky: "A while," a guesstimate?

G. Morgan: Oh god, that was just a blur, that whole ... I would say it probably took about half an hour-to-an hour to shut them down, which gives us a lot of breathing room now, what we need.

Dobrowolsky: And this is essentially you saying, "Okay, now shut off this circuit and check this and shut off that.

G. Morgan: Yes, "And, you know, basically you guys are going to be down indefinitely. We have no idea how long you're going to be down for." Because at the time, we didn't know, we really didn't know what we were ... You know, maybe in the back of my head, I thought, "Okay,

once the smoke clears, we'll just go back upstairs, and we'll be good," because, I mean, if you take a look at that building it's all metal. How does that burn?

Dobrowolsky: I've heard that a lot, metal and concrete.

G. Morgan: Yes, but this section where the control centre was was all wood-frame construction.

Dobrowolsky: So, what you were taking offline at Faro, would that have been basically the mill and the shovels?

G. Morgan: The mill and the shovels; to be specific about if the shovels were on at the time, it would be a guess, but they were a 24-hour-a-day operation just like we are. So, they would tell you when the shovels were shut down, if there was going to be any delay in them starting back up. Because, during the day, if you were set up to run with a full load, you'd have a bunch of diesels on.

If they said, "Okay, look, we're going to take down "B" circuit against seven-to-eight megawatts," you didn't want to sit and run with a bunch of excess generation on line; because, I mean, it's costing you money. It's not efficient. So, what we would do is if they say, "We're going to be down for five or six hours."

"Okay, we're going to shut our diesels down and match what the load is now"; and whenever they came up, they would give us a half-hour notification. We'd fire the diesel back up and get going again.

Dobrowolsky: So, you really had to keep track?

G. Morgan: Yes, the operator had to be on the ball. I mean, you really did. You couldn't – again, part of my job at the time was to critique how they were doing. Like, I mean, if a guy just left the diesels on for five or six hours and, say, spilt water; well, that's not a good thing. I mean, you're spilling water and burning diesel. You didn't want to do that.

Dobrowolsky: It's not efficient.

G. Morgan: It's not efficient. So, use the hydro and shut down the diesel. A lot of that stuff, that was just an ongoing thing. I mean all the operators were quite skilled at doing it. Anvil Range at the time, their two hours could mean four hours. I mean, you've got to feel for it and especially who you were dealing with back and forth at the mine. Dana Hager, he was the mine manager, a real good guy to deal with. He was very helpful throughout the fire.

Dobrowolsky: And did YECL have any personnel in Faro, did you have operators in your diesel plant up there?

G. Morgan: Yes, we had a diesel operator there; and I think at the time we probably had two servicemen. So, yes, once this thing got snowballing, you're letting all these people know and the various different scenarios. We probably put Faro diesel on. You see, I guess it's like this:

You have what you call “static loads” out there, which is the Faro Mine. Say it’s 20 megawatts or 25 megawatts. You know that’s what it is. And then, the town load, like the Whitehorse area – everybody that we’re connected to, like Haines Junction, Carcross, Carmacks, there’s a cycle to how the load goes down at night, and then, comes up in the morning. It’s different on Sundays versus Mondays, and it’s different in the summertime versus the wintertime. So, what we’re doing is we have a load profile. If you put the static load on top of it, all it does is raises the profile, but the profile is the same. It’s got the same shape on a 24-hour period.

Dobrowolsky: So, you’re describing a curve with your hand.

G. Morgan: A curve, yes, like, the load’s lowest between midnight and say 6:00; and then it rises sharply, and then, it peaks at say nine o’clock, and then, it comes down a little bit and again peaks at lunchtime. It’s like “Good morning, Yukon.” You know the profile.

So, by taking the Faro Mine off, you’re just cutting a chunk off the base of that load profile and dropping it, which gives you a little bit more room to still meet that load profile, the peaks that you need to meet. It was a really good time for this to happen if it’s going to happen. I think it was something like three o’clock in the morning. That’s probably as low as the system’s going to get, and we still had three hours to figure out how to reduce our customer load. There was no real – you know, it wasn’t a big call to call the mine up and go, “Heh, we’re in bad shape here. You’re going to have to get rid of some of that load.”

It’s just how they drop that load; because as a system operator, if you’ve got your fancy computer in front of you, you’re just going, “Lower, lower,” you’re looking at the frequency. It’s a fairly simple thing. But when you can’t use that computer any more, then you’re forced to talk a lot. You know, you’re talking to the guy, going, “What’s the frequency? Lower it, lower it, lower it.” And as it works out, you’re dealing with the guy at the Faro end, and then, you’re talking on the company radio, and you’re doing it back and forth. Everything that SCADA does, you’re doing. You become, I guess, the master computer, and you’re just getting input from all these different sources and deciding what you’re going to do.

But once the Faro Mine was off, it was okay. We still needed to run some diesel. Guys like John Greer, great job. I mean, “What do you need?” there weren’t enough phone lines or company radios, and somehow we got it together, you know, people running up to the truck, “What do you need?”

“I’ll need this diesel”; because when we ran the diesels – not that it was a big issue during the fire, we had a stacking order, the most fuel-efficient first down to the big, bad boys that gobbled fuel.

Dobrowolsky: The old guys.

G. Morgan: The old guys, exactly. So, you had a stacking order. John would run up to me and go, “What do you need?”

And I'd go, "Okay, WD7," Whitehorse Diesel No. 7, let's put that on first. That's the most fuel-efficient. It's just driven into your head, you know, what you're going to run next.

"Yes, no problem". He'd put that on. Then he'd scream at me that, "Yes, he's got it on". Then I'd be talking to Aishihik and going, "Okay, you've got three meg. You're going to have to back off slowly and just match your frequency," back and forth.

And then, we had a guy in this substation – like I say, in a lot of various substations. We manned a lot of sites that SCADA controlled. And then, we just –

Dobrowolsky: So, about how many people were out there in the field, do you figure, reporting into your truck?

G. Morgan: Reporting into the truck, probably at least ten I'm thinking. That may be high, but about ten people.

Dobrowolsky: Both on site and –

G. Morgan: On site, yes –

Dobrowolsky: – from Faro and Mayo and others?

G. Morgan: Yes, yes, and then, we knew what the – in your head, I guess you knew what you needed to do to get to peak. I don't think we were running super efficient, but we got by.

Dobrowolsky: So, let's go back to the time sequence. You got to the site not long after you got the call from Mike Hannah. So, about 3:15 or so, around 3:20, you were here?

G. Morgan: Yes, yes, before the fire department. I remember waiting at the gate for a bit and pointing them in the right general direction. Not that he needed it because somebody had lit a fire.

Dobrowolsky: A "signal fire".

G. Morgan: Yes. But what they did is they drove down; and again I'm pointing at the picture, they drove down, right down to the river.

Dobrowolsky: So, to the north end of the site to the river, right?

G. Morgan: Yes. Now, they got there, and there was one of the employee's trucks, Bob Burrell probably told you, the story with his truck being parked right beside the fire. And then, they really couldn't do a lot, because they didn't have – I remember talking to a fireman, going, "How come you're not putting water on the fire?"

And he goes, "Well, we don't have enough water. There's no water."

And I go, “The Yukon River is right there;” but out of my ignorance, I didn’t know that they didn’t have a pump to pump it high enough out. But I mean –

Dobrowolsky: A lift, they talk about “lift”.

G. Morgan: Yeah, the lift. I’m going, “The Yukon River is right there.” So, yes, ultimately what we ended up doing is we were parked here, but we were getting smoked quite bad. So, we reverted up into the diesel plant parking lot and just continued on; and at the same time, I had the system operators working for me, and [KS] had the diesel turbine operators working for him.

And we’re trying to figure out how we’re going to man this. I mean, this isn’t just today. This is like tomorrow, “Where do we put our people,” because we’re going to be doing this for a while. So, I think ultimately what we did is we sent one system operator – because the system operator, he knows the whole power grid. The diesel operator is more intimate to a specific plant. He knows the guts of the plant, and these guys are looking globally, looking down. So, I think we decided that we were going to farm a system operator out to Aishihik, because that was really what was reacting to the load. You know, we’d left Number 4 running at 100 percent, and then, Aishihik would go up and down with the load, and then, a combination of the diesel and Aishihik, we were –

Dobrowolsky: Would be what you’d stabilize the system with?

G. Morgan: Yes, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so just to get back to the time, you and the fire trucks were here probably no later than quarter after 3:00 or so; and then, you talked about it switching over to Aishihik. So, that was an almost immediate thing, once you made sure Mike was okay and –

G. Morgan: Yes, and we were spilling water. Again, as I say, the spilling water was fairly important at the time.

Dobrowolsky: And that was a crucial thing?

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And then, it was getting things over to Aishihik, and then, it was taking down Faro.

G. Morgan: Taking down Faro.

Dobrowolsky: So, just a rough timeframe. So, what, by about 3:30 –

G. Morgan: By 3:30 we were spilling water. We were set up down here.

Dobrowolsky: This is down near the substation?

G. Morgan: Down near the substation, looking at the place burn. I'd also gone into the substation.

Dobrowolsky: And done your thing with the breakers?

G. Morgan: Yes, [de-energized] the cables that lead from the plant to the [Whitehorse Rapids] substation, isolated those. And then, we'd got hold of the Aishihik operator, put him in place. So, now we're talking back and forth to Aishihik; but again, the load hasn't done anything yet, eh. The customer load hasn't been challenged yet; but to prepare for it, now that we've taken a plant right out of the picture, that's when we decided that we were going to request the mine to reduce their load. So, dealing with that probably took about another half hour to an hour.

Dobrowolsky: So, by about 4:30, Faro would have been down?

G. Morgan: Yes, you see, it's tough because you don't have ...

Dobrowolsky: You don't have your controls monitoring ...

G. Morgan: Yes. We had a company radio, and I think we had one M-Sat phone or something like that. So, you're working them both at the same time. We got the mine shut down, and you still know the load's going to come up. And then, we started adding diesels via Faro and Whitehorse. Then ultimately we did kill the station service to this building, to the hydro plant that was burning.

Dobrowolsky: This is the live lines?

G. Morgan: Yes. it's set up behind the diesel plant. It's fairly easy. Another guy who was key in it was Allan Hebrada. He was the lead of the electricians, and I just asked him to open up a couple of breakers.

Side B

Dobrowolsky: So, here we are back the night of the fire; and it sounds like the grid is under control.

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: Everything has been switched over to manual operation. You've done all the compensations you need for having those three turbines off the grid.

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: What else happened that night?

G. Morgan: That night, actually, if I can just go back in time, is when I called Doug Smith—

Dobrowolsky: And Doug is?

G. Morgan: Doug was the lead lineman at the time.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

G. Morgan: I told him, you know, potential problems, the plant burning. So, what he did is we were already set up over here, down by the water, looking at the fire and doing our thing; he actually drove right along here and –

Dobrowolsky: So, this is the upper road in behind –

G. Morgan: This is the upper bench that goes down to the control centre.

Dobrowolsky: – the generating plant, yes.

G. Morgan: Now, the fire has expanded quite a bit by this time, and he thought that we were actually still inside, right? He thought we were “going down with the ship” or whatever. But he did tell me a story later on in the week that there was a fireman there, and he was basically dragging this guy up and saying – because he didn’t know at the time where we were set up. So, that’s a little anecdote.

Dobrowolsky: So, he was all set to go charging into the fire?

G. Morgan: Yes, you might want to talk to him. I mean, it was a good story, because we were set up and safe by this time.

What else happened, Ken Sawyer, who was probably about the second or third person down, I think I asked him to go up and check the spillway or something like that. Everybody’s pumped up and –

Dobrowolsky: And it’s dark.

G. Morgan: – and I think he – he sprained or almost broke his ankle. So, I remember him being out of the picture after that.

A lot of it was, like once we felt like we were under control, a lot of it became a little bit of a routine, check, check, check, did various substations, frequencies, voltage; and we were basing our loading off of Aishihik. Like, if Aishihik is a 30-megawatt plant, if it was down to – if it was only running at 20 megawatts, we knew we had lots of room. As soon as it got up to, say, 24, we’d put another diesel on and back it off down to 20. Whenever we run diesel to this day, we run it with enough spinning reserve to lose our largest diesel. So, you’re keeping that in the back of your mind, which what’s my biggest one? It’s not hard math, but there are a lot of things you’re thinking about.

And then, once we moved out of the smoke, because we were really getting smoked bad, we got up to near the diesel plant, the diesels were running at this time. Then we started calling additional people in, more operators, more system operators, dispatching them out. And then, you know, like, once we got ultimately past the nine o'clock peak or whatever it was, it was, like, "Okay, we made it through this."

Dobrowolsky: "We can't coast, but we can breathe."

G. Morgan: Yes, and then what we ended up doing is dispatching our people out to the various locations. Steve Blysak, one of the more experienced operators, he came in and gave me a break. I mean, he sat there for about an hour and watched what we had –

Dobrowolsky: Set up and what you were doing?

G. Morgan: Yes, and he walked right into it and did a great job. And then, we started looking at where are we going to be, you know, where are we going to go. We can't sit in the truck all day. So, we ended up going up to Number 4 hydro and setting ourselves up. By this time, Bob Burrell got a radio set up there. So, we sat down there. At least we had a phone, a real phone, and a radio; and we could judge – we have some meters to look at, because this plant actually has a frequency metre and a voltage metre, and you knew a little bit more about what was going on in your world.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're not relying so much on the map in your head?

G. Morgan: That's right, exactly; and ultimately by this time, we do have a map available.

Dobrowolsky: And when you say "a map available," –

G. Morgan: It's similar to this, yes, something like this, to make sure that you did the right thing.

Dobrowolsky: This is the plan that you showed me earlier?

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And would this particular plan be very similar to how the system was back then?

G. Morgan: Yes, very similar, yes, very few changes. It's our infrastructure, so it doesn't change by great leaps and bounds.

So, then we get set up at Number 4, and –

Dobrowolsky: So, were you very aware of what else was going on, like, with the fire and the tanker trucks coming, or you were just –

G. Morgan: No, that didn't matter to me at the time.

Dobrowolsky: It was just in your head and paying attention to the –

G. Morgan: Yes, it was a secondary thing to me, because really, it got to the stage where you knew it was going to go, so why worry about it. It's not even an issue at the time; and by, I'm guessing here, probably about six o'clock, we're up here, and so I can't see it anyways.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're in the parking lot behind the diesel plant?

G. Morgan: Yes. We've got all the doors open, and guys are coming and going. And actually, I think Doug Smith – what the boys have in their company trucks, they can turn the radio on loudspeaker. Then you've got the crowds and everything like that, but I was pretty isolated in my own little world.

Dobrowolsky: Universe, yes.

G. Morgan: Yes. So, I guess I didn't – I blocked a lot of it out, you know. It was just people coming and asking questions or me asking a question of them, "Is it available? Can we use it?" You got into a routine, and then that routine just happened to last for quite a while, you know; and all the guys were doing it, I'm no superstar here. They all grasped the concept right away. They knew where we were at with it. Like I'm saying, every one of the system operators, all the guys, I mean, it was really –

Dobrowolsky: Well, what I found very amazing was that everybody seemed to know exactly what their job should be.

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And it didn't seem like there was necessarily some master intelligence directing everybody.

G. Morgan: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: I mean, people were obviously cuing off one another; and when I talked to Mike, he was saying, "Well, I don't think we had any emergency plan, that this was sort of Plan "D" that we'd rehearsed and that went into operation."

G. Morgan: Yes, because I think, like I said before, I had been requested to and I had written up a scenario that maybe SCADA wasn't there; and it was probably only within a year prior to the fire so –

Dobrowolsky: So, you'd actually had to think about it?

G. Morgan: So, you had a little bit of, you know, "What would we do? Where would we go? What do we need to look at?" But it wasn't an official thing. It was just like an exercise.

Dobrowolsky: And who had asked you to do that?

G. Morgan: Ric Seely. Because, I'm not saying SCADA was [inconsistent] back then, but there were times when you couldn't see a plant. So, the guy would man the plant. I mean, these DTOs, they knew that from time to time, they're going to have to take local control of the plant and run it.

Dobrowolsky: Diesel Technical Operators?

G. Morgan: Diesel Turbine.

Dobrowolsky: Diesel Turbine Operators, yes.

G. Morgan: Yes. So, they would have to do this from time to time; and the same applied to substations. So, it wasn't really out of the ordinary. I don't want to make it sound –

Dobrowolsky: It wasn't.

G. Morgan: But, I mean, we had had these little scenarios. It may just have been one thing at a time and not everything, but we were able to pull it together. And, yes, you're right, I mean, everybody – the guy who was responsible for the diesels, he was on his diesels; and, you know, we were responsible for the power system, so we did the power system. Bob was responsible for the communication and we needed it, and he set us up, and the electricians. It was amazing actually if people take a step back and look at it and see how it went.

Dobrowolsky: Well, and the dark and the smoke and all this adrenalin and –

G. Morgan: Oh, yes, yes.

Dobrowolsky: What kind of a night was it?

G. Morgan: I remember it really wasn't that cold. It was – you know, I would say maybe five degrees or something like that. It really wasn't that cold.

Dobrowolsky: Was it a cloudy night, a clear night?

G. Morgan: I'm thinking it was cloudy, but I mean, it was smoky, too.

Dobrowolsky: And did we have any snow then? I can't recall now.

G. Morgan: No, no, I remember that clearly.

Dobrowolsky: So, that wasn't a complicating factor?

G. Morgan: No, it wasn't an issue, no. You know, it was good, because, I mean, all our management team was whistling down the highway, trying to get back to us; and we would get the odd phone call from them, whenever they –

Dobrowolsky: On the long drive from Faro that was probably considerably shortened.

G. Morgan: Yes, and you'd get a phone call from them – I mean, they're brainstorming as they're driving up; but a lot of things – so much stuff had already happened that you would get a call from them, and they're going, "Well, did you do this?"

"Yes, don't worry about that, yes. We've got that – "

Dobrowolsky: Old news.

G. Morgan: You know, it's finally good when they called one more time that you're going, "Well, we're good," you know.

"Everything's out of the woods." And I don't think they knew the extent of the damage until they actually drove in; but we had a guy right at the front gate, and he would call if you want to let this guy in. And we're going, "Well, who is it?"

"It's so-and-so."

And "no", you know. But the press got around there.

It was quite an interesting thing. I mean, I've often sat back and "Would we have done anything different," and I really can't see that I would have. I, myself, personally, I don't think I would have done anything different. You know, Mike did a great job. I mean, he did what he had to do before he left the building. Yes, I can't see anything that we would have done any different or any better. Maybe if we would have known the loads, you know ...

But it was quite an interesting night, for sure, and it went on for weeks.

Dobrowolsky: So, how long were you on the site that day?

G. Morgan: Don't ask me. I was probably – well, I don't think I left – I was probably on for I'm thinking about 10 or 12 hours in the truck, doing that; and then, Steve Blysak took over from me, and then, it was just like a little – just relax, come down and take a look at the world. Then we had to start dealing with the administration of people, manpower. Who's going where? Who's doing what?

And then, I think it was the following day, the fire actually started back up again the next day.

Dobrowolsky: Like a flare-up?

G. Morgan: Yes, a little bit of a flare-up, and I do ... Because the computer itself, the master of the SCADA System was downstairs, and we were actually allowed to sneak in there; and I went to where the computer was, because I was always doing backups and stuff like that, because I was intimately involved in this little box. And I popped the tapes out, and, you know, they

weren't that soaked or wet or anything like that. And then, I don't know who did it, but we got the tapes out; and this is our database, and this is what we need to get this thing working.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would be the equivalent of a disk?

G. Morgan: This is the main – yes, the disk. It's got all the information on it. So, I don't know where it went from there. I said, "Hey, look, I've got this." I was pretty happy about it myself.

Dobrowolsky: And about what time was this that you were able to get into the building?

G. Morgan: This was the following day, don't ask me, probably ten o'clock, something like that.

Dobrowolsky: So, the day after the fire?

G. Morgan: The day after, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, the 31st, the Friday?

G. Morgan: Yes. And then, I don't know who ran with that, if it was Bob who took the tape, and we got ahold of some people that that's all they do is fire recovery and stuff like that. And then, we cleaned out the master station and connected us back up, and we went from Number 4 Hydro, I don't really know how long we were there. I know it was – like, we were all doing a lot of shifts at Number 4, because we had people all over the place, and we had to figure out a schedule for everybody; and then, we ultimately went to the bathroom in the diesel plant.

And then, we leased a trailer and we moved again. And this SCADA System was all smoke-damaged. So, it was pretty flaky up and down, you know.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were using it but not relying on it?

G. Morgan: Well, no, you couldn't really rely on it. And we managed to get by until this fancy-dancy place was built and moved in here.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were improvising for quite a while, about a year?

G. Morgan: Yes, yes. I mean, we were set up – I mean, some of the guys missed being in the trailer that we leased, because it was very quiet. You know, we were the only people in the building; but then, I think once they got the view –

Dobrowolsky: The view is pretty nice.

G. Morgan: Yes, yes.

Dobrowolsky: I heard some resentment about when the offices went in and you lost your view.

G. Morgan: Yes, no comment. Yes, they definitely picked their spot when they put that in!

Dobrowolsky: So, you gave me a pretty good thumbnail of what happened over the ... How long do you figure that you were on full-on emergency mode with lots of people working lots of shifts, having to improvise who goes where and having to have lots of extra manpower out in the field? How long did that phase continue?

G. Morgan: That phase, once we got a handle on things; I would say we were in a real emergency –probably up to about three o'clock the next day, so say 12 hours where it was still touch and go what's going on. I mean, we're still in the truck. We used to have three computer, four computer screens in front of us. Yes, I would say about 12 hours, and then, we started – but that's not true either; because every operator that came on next was forced to get into the groove again. So, it was –

Dobrowolsky: Well, and training in a whole new way, –

G. Morgan: A whole new way.

Dobrowolsky: – and interfacing with the system.

G. Morgan: Exactly. So, I would say probably about three days, we were still adjusting to the load going up and down and not being able to visibly see our various plants and stuff like that. So, yes, I would say about three days; not the emergency that it initially was, but it did follow through for a couple of days until we got a handle on what we were doing and who was going where. You know, we probably sent six people to Aishihik and only needed three, but everybody was sending people everywhere. But it was quite an experience for sure.

Dobrowolsky: So, in the larger context, all this was going on while YECL was converting over to – a lot of the assets and personnel were going over to Yukon Energy as part of that move to direct management?

G. Morgan: That's right.

Dobrowolsky: And was that something you noticed much down at your level or that didn't really have much impact on you?

G. Morgan: It was more of a political thing. We were partial to some information, but we'd been together for ten years. So, it didn't even play a role in this fire at all, like not at all. It was, you know, we were dealing with the same people we dealt with – I mean, we were still under their coattails; but, no, it didn't affect the fire at all or the response to it.

Dobrowolsky: And do you feel that the people were properly, I don't know, appreciated for all the extra that they put in?

G. Morgan: Yes, I mean – what did they do? They gave us a – they had a little, mini YEC/YECL do after the fact; and I think the majority of us got little letters from the Board of

Directors and the management of YECL at the time, and we got a little plaque at Christmastime. It was good. I mean, some people like that; some people are ...

So, I have no complaints at all. I mean, it was good. There were just so many people who were involved, you know. Like, I don't know if somebody was missed or not; but it's the initial people who were there when it first went down, it's all the people who dealt with it thereafter, you know.

Dobrowolsky: The rebuilding.

G. Morgan: The rebuilding and keeping things going, I mean, there were guys – I mean myself personally, I had to bale out of some holidays I had planned. I'm sure other people had to do the same thing. And then, you've got to get back to the manpower. I mean, you can't –

Dobrowolsky: You can't expect people to work double shifts forever.

G. Morgan: Yes, and I mean when it comes right down to it, it's costing us money. When your shift workers – it costs money to make a guy work an extra day. I mean, these guys, they weren't hesitant about it at all. If you asked them, they would do it; but at some point, we had to sit down and go, "Where are we at? We've got to get a schedule out, because these guys need to know where their life is."

So, we ended up pounding that out. Personal items like the system operators in the Control Centre had lockers. A lot of them had personal items in there, making the insurance lists and stuff like that; just going through in general "What was in that building? What's an insurable loss?" I mean, that went on for months; and then, we actually went into the insurance loss of the lost generation using Aishihik, instead of storing water there – I mean, we've got a spreadsheet that's probably got 18,000 lines on it, trying to figure out what we would have done versus what we did and what is the cost. [Guy worked on this with Ron Gee.]

Dobrowolsky: It must have been terribly time-consuming!

G. Morgan: Oh, yes, I mean, we sat down and formulas and stuff like that; and then, you have to present it to an insurance adjuster and make him understand what you're talking about. I mean, it's still going on. I mean, we're still getting interviewed by people, like insurance adjusters or lawyers and stuff like that. I believe that we've been paid our money, but now the insurance company wants their piece of the pie off of whoever, the cause of the fire itself. So, we're still getting questioned about something that happened six years ago.

And we lost a lot of stuff there, because when I started there, we used to have little daybooks that you would write in the peak load and the minimum load and the time it happened and the temperature that it happened at; and this went back to the '50s. And I mean, I remember going in and taking a look and seeing on the day I was born what the system load was in the Yukon at the time, you know. Like, that sort of stuff –

Dobrowolsky: So, kind of the company archives?

G. Morgan: Yes, we had a lot of stuff there, a lot of archives and stuff like that, a lot of historical stuff that just went out the door. You know, it's not something you'll ever get back.

Dobrowolsky: No. Truly a life-changing experience!

G. Morgan: Yes, yes, and then, it was funny because you'd be – I think a lot of other utilities got interested in what happened and how we managed to stay alive; because I remember seeing some guys, you know, "suits," (we call them "suits" because they're management), coming from various different utilities, coming in and talking to us and just getting a general outline of what happened, like B.C. Hydro, West Kootenay Power. I don't know who else was there, but it was just a train that went through from time to time.

Dobrowolsky: Well, yes, because it could happen to anyone.

G. Morgan: It could happen to them, and utilities learn from other utilities' mistakes or events that take place, I mean.

Dobrowolsky: It's not like there's that many of you out there.

G. Morgan: No, no, that's exactly it, and if you can see what worked at the time or what didn't work. I don't know if there were a lot of things that didn't work.

Dobrowolsky: So, any final thoughts?

G. Morgan: No, it was a heck of a night!

Dobrowolsky: Do you ever dream about it, ever dream you're back at that truck?

G. Morgan: No, no, no. I do remember the Chairman of the Board saying, "We're going to get you a truck with a radio and a telephone and a T.V.," and I'm still waiting for that. Where is it?

Dobrowolsky: Jacuzzi.

G. Morgan: Yes. If we're going to do this, let's do it right!

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you very much for this.

G. Morgan: You bet.

END OF INTERVIEW

Ken Sawyer

Ken Sawyer is the coordinator of property and projects for Yukon Energy. At the time of the fire, he was the leadhand of diesel plant operations. During the rebuilding process, he became the project manager for the reconstruction of the hydro plant. Ken suffered the only injury incurred during the fire, a bad sprain to his ankle.

Recorded June 10, 2003 at Whitehorse Public Library, Whitehorse.
Transcript reviewed by Mr. Sawyer, September 3, 2003. Additional information in [square brackets].

You put a lot of work into something that you felt really proud of. I mean, people who did work on that and helped during the reconstruction, I think they have a sense of pride on what they accomplished; because it will be there forever.

Side A

Dobrowolsky: Please tell me when and where you were born.

Sawyer: I was born in Sudbury, Ontario, February 3rd, 1954.

Dobrowolsky: And just to reprise, this is Ken Sawyer talking at the Whitehorse Public Library on June 10th, 2003, with Helene Dobrowolsky. Could you tell me, please, Ken, the circumstances of your moving to the Yukon?

Sawyer: Okay, I originally met my wife in Vancouver, B.C. She was born and raised in the Yukon. When we had gotten engaged, we came up here so that she could introduce me to her family. It was the wintertime; and I had such a good time in the Yukon that I decided to ask her if she wouldn't mind moving back to the Yukon, and she had no objections. That was in 1975, and I've been here ever since.

Dobrowolsky: Terrific! And tell me how you got into the electrical business. How did you come to be working for Yukon Electric [YECL]?

Sawyer: Oh, at the time it was Northern Canada Power Commission. When I moved up here in '75, they were looking for people to work at the hydro plant. I put my application in; I was hired. I started off as a labourer and moved my way up to working in the diesel plant as an operator and also going to Aishihik, because Aishihik had just been constructed, and they needed employees to go out there and operate the system out there.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're another one who started literally from the shovel-up?

Sawyer: Basically, yes, after five-and-a-half years, I thought that maybe I could better myself by going to work in Faro at the Cyprus Anvil Mine; and unfortunately, at that time, there was only a two-year sabbatical or stint there when they decided to close down. And I moved back into Whitehorse; and in 1986, they were looking for people to work back at the dam. I put my

application in, and they hired me back. So, this time around, I've been employed at the dam or in the electrical field since 1986.

Dobrowolsky: So, during your time in Faro, were you also doing electrical-related work?

Sawyer: No, at that time, well, I was working at the mine basically, just waiting for an apprenticeship to come up; but NCPC approached me to operate their diesel plant in Faro after hours working at the mine, and I informed them that I would if they would pay me the same amount of money as the mine was paying me, working overtime every day. They came back to me and said, "No." So, in their infinite wisdom, they sent people up from Whitehorse, housed them and fed them, and that was it.

Dobrowolsky: And ended up paying much more.

Sawyer: And paid much more, yes, in the long run, exactly.

Dobrowolsky: So, you mentioned you were working in the diesel plant, and you were working at Aishihik. So, tell me exactly what kind of – well, not exactly; but give me a general idea of what your duties were.

Sawyer: Oh, our duties in the diesel plant were making sure the engines were running right, making sure – at that time, we had to manually put the units on and off line. Aishihik was basically the same. At that time, they were a lot more automated. When I had first started and gone to Aishihik, we had to actually stay in the powerhouse above where the control room was. We didn't have all the amenities of a T.V. or a house. We had to actually stay there; and when we were first there, we had to actually use Porta Pots and take our waste back to town, but that was a long time ago.

I went through a stint as systems operator on the desk; and after that, I basically moved into leadhand of plant operations where I was up until the time of the fire.

Dobrowolsky: And this is the diesel plant?

Sawyer: This was the diesel plant, it was the Faro Plant, it was the Mayo Plant, anything to do with plant operations.

Dobrowolsky: So, you would have been the supervisor of a number of operators?

Sawyer: Yes, at that time when we were running full out, supplying power to the mine when it was running, there would have been – I believe there were 11 people under me at that time.

Dobrowolsky: And they were not only in Whitehorse but also in –

Sawyer: Also in Faro and also the fellow in Mayo.

Dobrowolsky: And as supervisor, your job was assigning shifts and scheduling and troubleshooting, filling in when there are problems?

Sawyer: Exactly, when people went on holidays, do shift scheduling; anything to do with plant maintenance, like, say, going up to the spill gates and making sure they were operational when it was 40 below and steaming out the gates. It was myself and the leadhand of the system control centre [SCC], Guy Morgan. Him and I spent many a night on the dam, steaming out gates to make sure they were operational.

Dobrowolsky: Somehow this doesn't make the supervisor job sound very glamorous, out there chipping on ice.

Sawyer: No, no, it doesn't. No, we spent a lot of time up there; but, like, we just didn't have a lot of manpower to pull from, because everybody had schedules. They all had to work at certain times. So, it was up to Guy and I to make sure, especially in the wintertime, that the gates were operational at all times.

Dobrowolsky: And all your various jobs and the occasional special situation or emergency, you were handling internally. You didn't usually contract out for this or that?

Sawyer: Oh, no, no, a lot of the stuff that we usually contracted out was, like, the diving, because we have no divers on staff. Mainly, it was all handled by Whitehorse personnel.

Dobrowolsky: So, at the time of the fire in late October of 1997, this would have been your job. You were the leadhand of plant maintenance?

Sawyer: Plant operations.

Dobrowolsky: Yes. So, tell me do you remember anything about the day before the fire? Was there anything out of the ordinary or unusual?

Sawyer: No, we just went home for the evening and just went to sleep. And it was about [3:30] when Guy Morgan phoned me, and he had said "We've got a fire. I'm on my way over. Come down."

So, I headed down. I live in Porter Creek. So, I really – I could hear in his voice that there was something definitely wrong, but we don't know what it all entailed; but when I got on the top, overlooking the City at Takhini up there, you could see the glow in the sky. And I rushed down there; and at that time, Guy was there, the fire department was there and also Mike Hannah, who was on shift at that time were all huddling around, basically watching the building burn.

At that time, we had other people calling in. I called people in. They couldn't believe when I told them that it was the hydro plant, because the hydro plant was all cinderblock wall construction, metal siding. Because of the fuel and that that's in the diesel plant and the oils, they just took it for granted that it was the diesel plant and not the hydro plant. So, at the time, I called a few different people in. They were on their way down.

Dobrowolsky: So, could you tell me who they were? These would have been your staff or your co-workers?

Sawyer: It was a fellow by the name of John Greer. He was a mechanic, lead mechanic and everything. We called him down. Basically I called John down, because I know he would get other people mobile and on their way down there, because there was other stuff at that time that we had to deal with, and we couldn't be wasting our time on the phone to try to phone the other personnel into the plant.

Dobrowolsky: So, John would have called other staff, other operators?

Sawyer: Exactly, yes, he would have called other people in that he felt to bring in to help in this situation. At that point in time, there wasn't really much that other people could do, because the fire was so intense that you just had to basically wait until the fire was out and we could move in to do something with the plant.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you first arrived, the fire department was there, Mike and Guy. Mike had switched off the turbines, and I guess shifted the control of the system to the Aishihik Plant, or had that happened yet?

Sawyer: That had happened, yes, correct. Guy basically took control. At that time, Doug Smith from YECL came down, and we conferred inside the substation room; and at that time, the gates were open and spilling water, but the water was rising, because there was just no water going through the units any more. So, I was dispatched to go up and open the gates some more to let some more water through. Unfortunately, going from where I was given the order to go, I stepped in a hole and sprained my ankle and hobbled around for the next hour after I'd gone up and opened the gate.

Dobrowolsky: So, you mentioned about conferring in a room at the substation. So, this is all the transformers and stuff here?

Sawyer: Yes, correct. It's just a little shack, the control room shack, basically for the transformers in S-150 in the transformer yard there. That's all we had at the time. We also had the doublewide trailer where we would call personnel in. That's where I called John Greer in from.

Dobrowolsky: And where was this double-wide trailer?

Sawyer: The double-wide trailer was just outside of the transformer shack.

Dobrowolsky: So, between the substation and the river?

Sawyer: Yes, correct.

Dobrowolsky: And it was from there that you were walking up to the dam to –

Sawyer: No, I was going to a vehicle, coming out of a shack. I mean, at that time, it was dark.

Dobrowolsky: And smoky, I guess.

Sawyer: Well, smoky, and the fire was going, and your adrenalin is really pumping; and when we hear that, “Oh, well, we’ve got to let some water out,” I kind of rushed out, not looking where I was going; and you couldn’t see the ground anyways and stepped in a hole and twisted my ankle and went up to the dam and opened the gates some more and just stood by.

At that time, an electrician came in by the name of Al Hammond [AH]. He came up there to the dam and said, “Everything looks okay in regards to the four bay level. You can come back down.”

I hobbled over to – I took my vehicle and parked it in –

Dobrowolsky: Sorry, the what level?

Sawyer: The four bay level, the four bay level of Schwatka Lake. That's what we call our water storage in Whitehorse, the four bay level.

Dobrowolsky: And the “bays” refer to the four gates?

Sawyer: The two gates.

Dobrowolsky: And the four bays is just –

Sawyer: Is what they refer as Schwatka Lake, “the four bay level”.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, okay.

Sawyer: And I took my own vehicle and parked it down at the turnaround at Number 4, and Al and I, we proceeded down to the meeting place where now head office staff from YECL were and converged there, waiting for other instructions while the fire department fought the fire.

Dobrowolsky: And who were the head office staff from YECL who were there?

Sawyer: There was – John Carroll was there. Right now, I can't remember all of them. There were other people from YECL. It's – I mean, you can appreciate how hectic this was when the flames were going into the air and there's fire department around; and we just converged there, and they had the command centre for the Whitehorse Fire Department. Their command centre truck or whatever it is was sitting there. Basically after that, John Carroll seen me hobbling around, and I told him the circumstances of why I was hobbling around; and he told me that I should go in and get checked. And I went in there, and consequently, they sent an ambulance, and I was taken back to the Whitehorse Hospital in the ambulance and given x-rays. Unfortunately I wasn't there to see the fire being put out, because I was off for 10 days, unable to walk on crutches. That was basically my time that I spent during the fire.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were there during the most exciting part.

Sawyer: Yes, the initial fire was going; and unless you've experienced something like that, everything else seems, like, kind of mundane; because you couldn't believe it, but when I got on top of the hill and seen that glow in the sky, I knew that there was something going on.

Dobrowolsky: Amazing. So, I understand when the fire department showed up, there was an initial problem with water supply. Had they actually been able to start actively fighting the fire? I guess they also had to make sure that power lines were disconnected to the plant.

Sawyer: They had pumper trucks down there, but their biggest threat to them was making sure that all the power – that the building was isolated from power prior to them starting to fight the fire. After that, I heard rumours that they couldn't get water up into their pumper trucks and that; but I wasn't there at the time, so I'd prefer not to confirm that.

Dobrowolsky: Sure. So, all these people were converging. Al Hammond?

Sawyer: Al Hammond yes; there was Al Hammond, I believe Al Hebrada, John Greer, Doug Smith, Guy Morgan; those were the main people that I seen prior to me being carted off in the ambulance.

Dobrowolsky: And at that time, the main thing was to look after the water levels in the lake; and had Guy set up his famous command centre in the truck yet?

Sawyer: At that time? Not at that time. He was in contact with Aishihik, but with the adrenalin running and everything else. He probably was, I couldn't really tell you; I imagine he was running the system from the truck.

Dobrowolsky: Any other awareness of what the other people were doing during the time you were there?

Sawyer: They were basically doing different switching and everything, just to make sure that the hydro plant itself was isolated and safe for the fire department to put the fire out. Like I say, I wasn't at the plant very long after they carted me off.

Dobrowolsky: So, then, you went to the hospital and got your ankle checked. How was it? It wasn't broken, was it?

Sawyer: No, it was badly sprained. I spent a good seven days on crutches before I could come back to work; and when I got back, everything was a shell. They had already started demolishing parts of the building to get it up. They'd already got a consortium together to rebuild the building; and at that time, I was given a new assignment as project manager for the rebuilding of the plant.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me about the consortium that was put together to work on the rebuilding that you know about –

Sawyer: I really don't know how they were put together. All I know is that the person that you should really talk to would be John Maissan. He was the one who I directly answered to. How it was formed, how they decided to get all these different companies together to form this consortium I really don't know. They were in place when I came back.

Dobrowolsky: And who was part of this consortium?

Sawyer: There was – I can't remember.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were saying that two of the companies involved in this consortium were –

Sawyer: I believe AGRA Monenco and BFC and a firm out of Quebec [GEC Alstom], which I just can't remember right now.

Dobrowolsky: And you were project manager through the rebuilding?

Sawyer: At first I was just assisting Lawrence DeBlois. He was the original project manager assigned by YECL, APL; and I would help Lawrence DeBlois. After Lawrence DeBlois took a different post or position elsewhere, I think it was prior to the summer or a little bit after, I was assigned as project manager for the rebuilding of the hydro plant.

Dobrowolsky: So, just to clarify, as I've heard from other people, all this was going on while Yukon Energy was moving to direct management of the facilities, taking over a lot of this from YECL. So, you would have been a YECL employee who then moved to Yukon Energy?

Sawyer: Correct, yes. At that time we were just on the verge, the decision had been made that Yukon Energy would manager their own assets; and I believe it was January 1st that the transaction was supposed to be taking place. The fire happened October 30th, so there weren't too many months until the transaction was finalized.

Dobrowolsky: And did that have much impact on you and your work, or this was more of an upper-level shuffle?

Sawyer: No, it was an upper-level shuffle, but there was at times a little vagueness on who was going to go and work for Yukon Energy. A decision was made if 60 percent of your time was working on Yukon Energy assets, you would become an employee of Yukon Energy, and we would get offer letters to work with Yukon Energy.

Dobrowolsky: And then, I guess the rest were free to apply on any other jobs that came up?

Sawyer: Correct, if there were other – jobs had been offered to certain individuals; and if they decided that they didn't want it, then it was offered to other people to join Yukon Energy as it is today.

Dobrowolsky: So, while you were assisting Lawrence DeBlois, what kind of – take me through the process. When you got back, they were already salvaging the site. They were taking away debris, you were saying that.

Sawyer: They were demolishing the site. The switch gear room was basically gone. The whole structure of the roof was gone. They cleared it all away. The units themselves, the only original items that are left in the plant now is basically the floors and the units. Everything else is new. All the switch gear is new. The consortium at that time – it happened in October – they built makeshift plywood shacks overtop of the units, because they were exposed to the elements.

December 22nd was when the makeshift – or put Unit Number 3 back online with a makeshift of equipment that they could salvage; and at that time Unit Number 3 was put online, December 22nd. And then, they started working on teardown and rebuilding Unit Number 1 and Number 2 and Number 3 would have been the last unit that they tore down, cleaned up and put back into service.

There was new switchgear bought, brought in, assembled, connected; and while all this was going on, Unit Number 3 was still running, and it ran right up until that they took it off, until they could put one of the other units on that they had just finished rebuilding.

Dobrowolsky: So, the immediate priority was to try and get those hydro units back into operation?

Sawyer: Correct, yes, they'd – well, at that time we had no building. So, there was just a little plywood shack overtop of the generators, and they ran some cables along the floor and tried to keep it out of the elements. Fortunately, it was a very mild fall. Winter wasn't that cold. I think the coldest might have been 28 below for maybe three days. Other than that, the weather really cooperated with the rebuilding of the plant.

Dobrowolsky: Excellent. So, at this time, were you still involved with your work at the diesel plant, or that had been handed over to someone else?

Sawyer: No, that had been handed over to someone else now. Unfortunately at that time, too, Curragh Resources, I think, was there at that time.

Dobrowolsky: This is up in the Faro Mine.

Sawyer: Up in the mine; they decided that the mine wasn't viable any more. So, they decided to shut down. So, the load wasn't as great as it had been prior to the fire. So, yes, my basic duty was to help rebuild the hydro plant.

And then, there was a restructuring in Yukon Energy, and I ...

Dobrowolsky: And this happened around –

Sawyer: Around the same time; I was destined to go to another position in Yukon Energy. My position now is coordinator of property and projects, and I had already been offered that job. So, all it was was moved ahead by a few months, and my other duties were being transferred over to other people; and Guy Morgan was supposed to take over the duties that I had prior – during the fire or at the time of the fire.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me a little bit about what was required to get those hydro units functioning again.

First of all, I want to go back. You were saying all that was left were the hydro units and the floors. Like, I understand there was kind of a sub-basement cement floor and then, a couple of stories?

Sawyer: Yes. Well, you've got two floors. You've got the generator floor, and you've got the main parts of the building, the generator floor and the turbine floor. Other than that, there's really not anything above that. Below it they have access areas that you can get into the turbines, but we had no more offices. The offices were gone. Yukon Energy's offices were gone. There was no way to control the units. So, we had to hire a person temporarily who would man the units on a temporary basis so that SCC could actually see and control the units. It wasn't for – I think it was about –

Dobrowolsky: By “the units”, you mean WH 3?

Sawyer: Unit Number 3, yes, WH 3; it was the only one running at the time, or after the 22nd it was running. But for the initial run-up for about a week or two weeks, they had to have somebody actually there 24 hours a day, seven days a week before they could actually hook it up to SCC, which –

Dobrowolsky: The System Control Centre?

Sawyer: The System Control Centre, which at that time moved into the diesel plant washroom, because that was the only available place we had; and then, eventually, we'd get a trailer to put them in so that they could see the running of the units. So, that was after about two weeks, they were manned manually.

Dobrowolsky: So, the unit was actually put into some kind of makeshift operation by December 22nd, and it was from that point that you had this temporary staff doing the 24/seven?

Sawyer: Yes, for two weeks after that, yes, until SCC was comfortable that they could see what the unit was doing and they can start and stop the unit.

Dobrowolsky: And by “seeing the unit,” you mean they had some kind of a control centre with monitors and that type of thing?

Sawyer: Right.

Dobrowolsky: So, I don't know too much about hydro turbines. What kind of things can go wrong in a fire, and what are the sort of things you have to do to ensure it's operational again?

Sawyer: Well, what they were basically doing, they had to take the unit – they didn't have to take it out of the ground, but they had to take all the structure above it off, and everything had to be cleaned. All the poles had to be cleaned; because when the fire – the roof was totally on fire, it had tar. It had gravel. That would have got all into the generator, into the rotor. The governor was exposed to extreme heat. So, those all had to be rebuilt. Everything just had to be really cleaned out prior to operations going back. All the switch gear was gone. That had succumbed to the fire. It was just basically building the thing up from the ground-up again.

Dobrowolsky: And how large are these things? Like, I don't know, –

Sawyer: Physically?

Dobrowolsky: – I think of it as kind of a sophisticated giant waterwheel of some kind.

Sawyer: Well, there are different types of units that you can get, they're turbine – these ones – Unit Number 1 and 2 are Kaplan type turbines. Actually, for the amount of water that you put through them, the governor controls how much water to put through them to keep them at the constant RPM. Once you introduce load onto the unit, they have variable-pitch blades that actually turn and get the most energy out of the water to keep them at the constant RPM.

Number 3 is a little bit different. It's fixed blades, but once you've seen one hydro unit, they're basically all the same except for the size. Everything is dependent on the head. If you have – the higher –

Dobrowolsky: And by “the head”, you mean?

Sawyer: The higher the – well, where the water comes in; if you have a higher head, like Aishihik, Aishihik's units are a lot smaller than say our Number 3 Unit or even our Number 4 Unit, because they have such a high head. Their head is – I believe it's somewhere around 565 feet above –

Dobrowolsky: Of water?

Sawyer: Of water – well, of where the water comes in before it goes through the turbine. So, you have all that head pressure that's behind it. Number 4 is capable of 22 megawatts; but it is a much larger unit than Units 1, 2 and 3, because it has a slightly smaller head than the units that were in the hydro plant and that are still in the hydro plant.

Dobrowolsky: So, continuing with my perpetual course in the “Idiot's Guide to Electricity”, I just want to clarify it; by “head” are you referring to volume of water, height of water, pressure of water?

Sawyer: Well, it's where the water goes into the head gates and travels down through the penstock. So, it's the height of the water and the pressure that's behind it. So, if you have a smaller head, you don't have the greatest pressure as you would with a higher head.

Dobrowolsky: And when you were talking about a "governor", is this something controlling the rate of flow or the rate of operation?

Sawyer: What the governor does is all the units are rated at a constant speed. So, once you put on a unit at speed, no load, the RPM of the unit is at 200. When you induce load on it where you want it to produce electricity, it wants to tend to slow the unit down. So, the governor senses this. So, what it does is it opens up – on the speed ring, it'll open up the wicket gates to let more water through to keep it at that constant 200 RPM. So, the more load that you put on it, the governor senses this, and it will open up the wicket gates a lot more, and the wicket gates are what the water flows through before it spins the turbine; and it just continuously keeps opening the wicket gates and letting more water through on the more load that you put on the unit. And all the governor is doing is trying to keep the unit at the constant 200 RPM. It doesn't go up; it doesn't go down. The governor, all it does is keep it at the 200 RPM and opens the wicket gates according to the load that you put on the units.

Dobrowolsky: So, it is actually on the dam and controlling the rate of flow?

Sawyer: It's not on the dam. It's on the –

Dobrowolsky: Or on the gates rather.

Sawyer: – on the gates, on the wicket gates, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Which are immediately before the turbines?

Sawyer: Yes, yes, because your penstock comes up to your wicket gates; and then, the governor controls the speed ring, turns the speed ring, which are connected to the wicket gates, and opens up the wicket gates to let more water through to keep it at the constant RPM, whatever the unit is rated at.

Dobrowolsky: Thank you very much.

So, we've got Number 3 kind of operating. As you were saying, it was kind of dicey for a few weeks until the operators could actually see it though. I assume by that time they had the partly-salvaged SCADA System back in operation?

Sawyer: Yes, they had part of it salvaged. I can't remember exactly when they moved up to the single-wide trailer; but I believe at that time they were still in the diesel plant washroom, the converted SCC operations. When they moved up to the SCC trailer, I can't really give you a definite idea. I wasn't involved in that. My duties were to try and keep the running – or not the running but the rebuilding of the hydro plant on-stream, online.

At that time, we had a – because Yukon Energy was – didn't have the expertise, we had to hire all these people. So, we hired an electrical engineer, for example; and while he was flying in for the interview for the job, he looked over, and he saw the smouldering remains of the hydro plant and wondered if he still had a job. He was hired right away. They brought him in, and he took over the project managing of the electrical part of the rebuilding.

Dobrowolsky: And what was his name?

Sawyer: His name was Dave Wray. At that time – he had only been here a week. Because we had ordered some switch gear that we were going to be replacing in Mayo, he had been here a week. He was sent out to I believe southern California to do some modifications for the switch gear that we could use in the hydro plant at the time. So, we had already ordered – these aren't shelf items. They have to be ordered ahead of time. So, it just happened that we had some switch gear that we had already bought and we were configuring to the Mayo operation. So, he went down there and overseen or let them know what changes they had to do in the switch gear in order to make it compatible to the Whitehorse hydro facility.

Dobrowolsky: Okay. So, you were talking about the various experts you brought in to work on the rebuilding. So, you have Dave Wray, the new electrical engineer, overseeing –

Sawyer: He was going to be the new electrical engineer for Yukon Energy. All the other people were brought in, electrical types, people to get – plus our own people to get the communication up and running. These people were drawn out of Alberta Power Limited; because as you stated before, we hadn't really – Yukon Energy hadn't really taken over its assets yet. So, we were still under the YECL umbrella, which, in fact, is the APL. So, they sent their engineers up, there technicians and everything else up, and helped the plant get runable again up until the time of January 1st when it was Yukon Energy's baby after that.

Dobrowolsky: I see; so, they were only helping with the rebuilding up until the time that direct management officially kicked in and Yukon Energy took over those resources?

Sawyer: Correct, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, how did that transition go when the YECL/Alberta Power people pulled out, did you have other people lined up to take those jobs, or were some of them contracted to continue on?

Sawyer: Some of them stayed on and contracted. Other people – like, this was in the workings for months prior to this. So, a lot of interviews had already been established. People had already been hired. It was just a matter of time before the people would be on site. Unfortunately, at this time, we had nowhere to put these people. So, we had some makeshift offices up on Range Road. We had the bottom floor and the top floor of half that room. We also – there were people in the, well, the morgue in the back. We had other people there. There were four of us in that. It was just because –

Dobrowolsky: The morgue?

Sawyer: The morgue, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, that's where they were doing the rehabilitation of the files?

Sawyer: Yes, exactly. They were dealing with the papers that were all soaked, photocopying, just reconditioning everything that they salvaged out of the fire.

Dobrowolsky: But there were offices in there, as well?

Sawyer: There were offices there. After the plant was probably three-quarters of the way done, Lawrence and I – they brought in a little trailer. We called it “the lonely guy” trailer, and we were stuck in there until such a time as the project was maybe 80/85 percent complete, other than the fine-tuning; and him and I were in there, and we shared an office for a while. And then, he left and I was there by myself. So, finally they moved me out.

Dobrowolsky: Hence the “lonely guy” trailer?

Sawyer: The “lonely guy” trailer, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, about what timeframe would this have been that you were in the trailer? Do you remember roughly?

Sawyer: Oh, I think I was there probably for seven to eight months. The consortium also put up offices. They had a trailer office that they put in. So, the fellow who was in charge of – my liaison with the consortium, him and I would always meet in the morning to see what was going on, what was done. So, actually, you know, to me it was a good time. Unfortunately, it was a bad situation; but I really enjoyed that part of my career so far with Yukon Energy was the rebuild of the hydro plant.

Dobrowolsky: I've talked to a lot of people who say, you know, “Yes,” this was a catastrophe; but at the same time, they really enjoyed the challenge and the feeling of meeting the challenge and having to do all these new things.

Sawyer: There were a lot of people who put, you know, a lot of time. I mean, this was – I think they put their family on the back burner and all banded together, all got together to put this back together, this hydro plant back together. There were a lot of people – like, I heard stories about people working four days in a row, and they actually had to send the person home, because he was so dedicated to get this up and running and get something in place. It was a challenge. It was fun, actually, just to see something grow from the ground-up and what we've got now is a first-class facility. Fortunately the original one was built in 1958 with Unit 1 and 2; but we have a first-class facility now. There are lots of people who work there, and they can relate back to, “Well, yes, you can be like that; but you weren't here when the fire was here and that.” So, it was a good time, and it was a bad time; but for a lot of us who put a lot of time into rebuilding it, we figure that we've accomplished something.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me, you were talking about you liaised with someone from the consortium. Who would that have been?

Sawyer: That was Kevin Steels. He was the BFC rep. All the other two consortiums answered to him. He was the project manager for BFC. I believe he's working out of Toronto now. But he is originally from Whitehorse. He went and worked for BFC a while ago, but his home base was in Whitehorse; and now he's elected to live in Toronto and work out of there.

There were other people from AGRA Monenco who were there. There were lots of nice people to get along with.

Dobrowolsky: So, they were doing all the things to clean up and get the turbines operating, and then, I guess at the same time building –

Sawyer: The building was being built around these people who were trying to get the governors back in. I mean, there was a beehive of activity all over the place, as you can imagine.

Dobrowolsky: So, would the building have been done by some kind of regular construction firm; or because of the nature of the facility, did this have to be handled by the consortium, too?

Sawyer: I think in realistic terms, if you were to build this building by itself, you would go to a major outfit to say, "Heh, we want you to build a hydro plant", and then, they would hire all the subcontractors. They'd basically be the general, and the subcontractors would come in and do whatever they were hired to do.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would probably include a number of local firms?

Sawyer: Yes, there were a few – there was a local firm during demolition. Al Jacobs, he helped to demolish the building. Mobile Maintenance erected the steel. There were a lot of local people that were hired. Dynamic Electric was hired to do some of the terminations. It brought a little bit of an economy to the local businesses in Whitehorse, rebuilding the hydro plant, for sure.

Dobrowolsky: So, you got your improvised repairs done to Number 3 on December 22nd, and 1 and 2, they were operating within a few months, was it?

Sawyer: It's hard to remember. I'd have to go – we always had a diary, myself and Kevin Steels, we'd confer in the morning and make sure we had a diary, what we did the previous day, what was happening there. There were some timeframes, and then, all of this stuff had to be compiled and put together. They're all in the files, when units were up and running, whether they were running good, everything is there or in the files at YEC; but I can't remember.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, and approximately when was this entire new facility and the new generating plant pretty much complete?

Sawyer: Well, it's not complete until you have the opening ceremonies, and I forget – I can't remember when they were.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, that was early November, '98.

Sawyer: Yes. So, that's when it was complete. I mean, to give you an example, I think Aishihik had been on line for a year before they had the actual opening ceremonies there. You know, you don't want to flick a switch, and then, the thing doesn't work. So, you have to make sure.

Dobrowolsky: You want to make sure!

Sawyer: Yes, you want to make sure everything is working when you have all the dignitaries and that there.

Side B

Dobrowolsky: This is Side 2 of an interview with Ken Sawyer on June 10, 2003. So, you were talking about the completion of the plant. It had been operational for some time. There was the grand opening ceremony. Tell me about that, tell me about the opening.

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Sawyer: Oh, they hired a caterer and somebody to – I was involved, and we had people who would give tours and we had it so that – we have some big, overhead doors there. So, what we did was we had a guy situated I guess in the man door there and watched; and I forget who cut the ribbon, because I was inside. And when – this was my idea, when the ribbon was cut and it would flutter to the ground, the overhead doors would open up at the same time, and it opened it up to the brand new plant and everything. So, it worked quite well.

Dobrowolsky: That's pretty dramatic!

Sawyer: Yes, well, hey ...

Dobrowolsky: I'm impressed.

Sawyer: You put a lot of work into something that you felt really proud of. I mean, people who did work on that and helped during the reconstruction, I think they have a sense of pride on what they accomplished; because it will be there forever, and I guess our kids and our grandkids can say, "Heh, my grandfather" or whatever "helped rebuild that during the fire of '97/'98," whenever it was.

Dobrowolsky: So, what ended up being done in terms of fire control measures in the plant?

Sawyer: Oh, now we have – in the control room, we have a CO² system that if there is a fire in the control room, the CO² system will go out and bring the room down to 40 below in a matter of seconds. There are fire systems. There is a Preact System inside the boiler room.

Dobrowolsky: A which system?

Sawyer: A Preact System, where if it senses smoke, what it does is it fills the piping up to the sprinklerhead full of water. So, that's the Preact System; and then, when the sprinkler system actually – or the head actually melts, the water is right there and will sprinkle onto the fire. There is one of those. The Preact System is hooked into the boiler room and also the blackstart room.

Dobrowolsky: What is the blackstart room?

Sawyer: The blackstart room is – all our plants have standby diesel units so that in a blackout situation when there is no outside power source, the blackstart unit will fire up and supply electricity to the building itself, just so that the –

Dobrowolsky: So, you can have lights to see what you're doing?

Sawyer: Yes, lights, the pumps start going. It's critical at Aishihik because where we have a sump out there, because it's 357 feet underground, it continuously has water draining off it. So, if you lost all your power into the plant itself, that there was no power, the pumps wouldn't kick in, and the place would virtually fill up; but we have a fail-safe out there where we have a little standby diesel unit that all it does is run a pump to keep the water level down.

Dobrowolsky: And what about hydrants?

Sawyer: Hydrants, we've got hydrants now outside the building. We've got an actual hook-up for the fire department that if in the event that the building does – or a building around that facility does start on fire, we have a hook-up outside the building that's fed right off the penstocks, and it could feed their pumper trucks. So, a lot of safety issues did come out of this fire. Unfortunately, it was a little late, and the technology wasn't there in 1958; but we learn from other past mistakes I guess.

Dobrowolsky: And now you have this beautiful new office building and SCC.

Sawyer: Yes, we've come a long way. When I first started and was a systems operator, all we got to look at was the switch gear and a cinderblock wall. Now we've moved up. We've moved up into the 21st Century, I guess.

Dobrowolsky: So, one of the things that was – I don't know if you had much to do with this, but one of the things I heard was that people from other utilities were really fascinated by what had happened here and how you people managed to cope and make do, I guess because the utility community is relatively small, there aren't that many of them. They were very interested in learning how you managed to improvise and make do and to –

Sawyer: I don't know, this is the first – I mean, you're telling me something that I didn't know. I didn't know that. (laughter) I didn't know we were unique. I guess it's not every day that a hydro plant burns down, but, no, I didn't know that.

Dobrowolsky: And how about all the subsequent, I don't know, insurance investigation? Did you have anything to do with that part of it at all, or that was not really –

Sawyer: Yes, I did, but because it's still in litigation, I don't want to comment on it.

Dobrowolsky: No, no, no, I can certainly understand that. Well, any final thoughts, anything else you'd like to add or you think we should cover?

Sawyer: No, not really. All I can say is that I think anybody who was involved in the reconstruction and the dramatic or the fire catastrophe, I think they'll always remember something like that. I know I will. So, I guess that's all I've got to say.

Dobrowolsky: So, a real highlight of your career!

Sawyer: Yes, it is, yes. I'll never forget it. I mean, seeing the glow from the sky, every time I drive to work in the mornings, I always remember, you know, the glow in the sky.

Dobrowolsky: I can't even imagine how that must have felt, just feeling your stomach drop!

Sawyer: Oh, yes, you knew something was happening, but you didn't know that something was happening; but when you see, I'll keep saying, "the glow in the sky," you knew something was bad.

Dobrowolsky: Thank you very much for this.

Sawyer: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Duncan Sinclair

Duncan Sinclair had been a senior manager with the Yukon Government for over 20 years before moving to Yukon Development Corporation in February 1997 as Vice-President, Policy & Regulatory Affairs with Yukon Energy and Vice-President with YDC. While his initial mandate was to deal with environmental challenges facing Yukon Energy with the re-licensing of its hydro operations around the territory, he ended up working on the move to direct management as well as various issues arising out the post-fire reconstruction.

The direct management aspect was certainly the largest pressing matter. When the negotiations did not conclude ultimately in an agreement, and this is roughly June, and the Board made the decision ... we were faced with six months between moving from a holding company with roughly four people and some vacancies to an operating company in the order of 60 with all the systems in place and keeping the lights on from January 1st, a very serious time.

Recorded 25th & 30th September 2003 at the Yukon Development Corporation office in Whitehorse. Reviewed by Mr. Sinclair on 14 October 2003. Additional information in [square brackets.]

Side A

Dobrowolsky: It is Thursday, September the 25th. This is Helene Dobrowolsky at the Yukon Development Corporation [YDC] office in Whitehorse, and I am talking to Duncan Sinclair about the great fire of 1997 and the events around it. Could I get you to tell me when and where you were born?

Sinclair: I was born in Whitehorse, Yukon, March 13th, 1954.

Dobrowolsky: I know that prior to signing on with the Yukon Energy Corporation Yukon Energy, you'd worked in a variety of senior posts with the Yukon Government. Could you maybe talk a little bit about some of the things you'd done before you came here?

Sinclair: Well, working backwards, I was assistant deputy minister [ADM] of land claims and self-government implementation and First Nation relations. The handle was a little shorter than that, but that was the range of responsibilities in the Executive Council Office, Land Claims Secretariat. I did that for several years, involved in setting up the original territorial implementation structure, along with a group of colleagues, of course. You don't do those things by yourself; and also, during that period, I took on responsibilities for some specific self-government negotiations and was the Yukon Government [YG] negotiator for Little Salmon Carmacks self-government agreement, as well as the Selkirk First Nation agreements. So, that was immediately before going to Yukon Energy and YDC.

Before that I was an ADM in the Executive Council Office, with responsibilities as deputy cabinet secretary and all of the program and policy structures, with the exception of the Land

Claims Secretariat. That included the Public Affairs Bureau, the Bureau of Statistics, French Language Services, Aboriginal Language Services, Policy and Intergovernmental Affairs, the Decentralization Office, Finance and Administration, and general support to the Deputy Minister. I was there about four years; before that I was Assistant Deputy Minister of Policy and Administration, Department of Health and Social Services, responsible for a range of initiatives, as well as supporting general corporate functions, childcare strategies, family violence strategies, a variety of things that were important in the day were particular focuses.

Before that I was the Director of Finance and Administration in a corporate function, and before that I was in management with Advanced Education [and Manpower, Department of Education]. Before that I set up the Manpower and Labour Branch, as it was known, the director. It included Human Rights and Employment Standards, Women's Bureau issues and labour market stuff. Before that I was in the Department of Education, again in a variety of capacities relating to occupational training, advanced education. And before that in the Directorate of Intergovernmental Affairs with responsibilities for certain northern research matters and northern pipeline issues. That takes us back to the mid-'70s basically. So, that's a rough, quick snapshot from a work point of view of where I was before I got to Yukon Energy.

Dobrowolsky: So, you are very familiar with many aspects of how the YG works?

Sinclair: Yes, I was fortunate, basically, to work in every kind of portfolio from social to economic to central agency functions in Government and in line departments, as well as corporations. So, I've been quite lucky and spanned policy functions and management functions and finance and admin, tracking the dollars and figuring out how to finance the initiatives that the governments of the day were looking to spawn. I was pretty lucky actually, pretty lucky.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me about coming to work for Yukon Energy. When did that happen?

Sinclair: That was in February of 1997. I came over to – basically Yukon Energy and [YDC] were joined at the hip. The Development Corporation is the shareholder, is the Crown corporation; and Yukon Energy was a wholly-owned subsidiary. So, I actually came over to a job to work for both corporations, two hats in other words, in February of '97. The main mission I came over to work on at the time were some of the environmental challenges that were facing Yukon Energy with the re-licensing of its hydro operations around the territory. That struck me like it could be an interesting challenge.

The other dimension was with the settlement of land claims, there was to be a new future and involvement by First Nations and their corporations in the energy business; and part of my job was to look at how we could support implementation from the corporations. It all changed after that, but that's what I went there to do initially.

Dobrowolsky: That was your initial mission. So, you began in February 1997. Was that around the same time that Rob McWilliam came on board, as well?

Sinclair: Yes, Rob McWilliam had gone over in the previous fall. I always forget the exact dates. The territorial election had happened in September/October, somewhere in there, and there

had been a shuffle of senior officials, and he was appointed as the president and CEO of [YDC], which held the associated title, as well, and function as being president and CEO of the Yukon Energy. So, he had been there about six months before I got there.

Dobrowolsky: So, you began with Yukon Energy. So, you and Rob were in quite senior positions, relatively new at the job. What were the big challenges in terms of getting up to speed? We'll talk about the other challenges that came up along the way a little later.

Sinclair: Sure. I mean, part of it, you've got to get oriented to the area, having been around the Yukon and around the establishment of Yukon Energy actually going back to its transfer from NCPC, I had a lot of general knowledge; but it's another thing to actually be inside the tent and grapple with the issues. Big challenges came on quite quickly and the whole series of big waves that started, one was to do with [YG] initiating an energy policy process, a development process, to consult Yukon people to do original research and once and for all to actually establish policy. There had been many efforts to do so before that had never quite made it over the top.

There were huge implications for the utility, Yukon Energy, because regulatory matters and infrastructure issues and rate stabilization were central concerns in that process; but also, the [YDC], as a Crown, its primary mandate focused in the area of energy, and it is one of the key implementing bodies for Government direction. So, we had a huge stake in that process; and when I first went over there, it didn't exist, but it was soon up and running and a very important and very collaborative and open process. So, we had to attend a lot of meetings, and we had to get ourselves organized and offer our input. That means you have to get clear on what is important and what interests you need to bring forward quite early on.

We had a whole lot of groundwork to get our heads around the work that was going on with the Aishihik relicensing that had been going on for some time. Yukon Energy was working through the Yukon Electrical Company Ltd. [YECL], an ATCO Company, to actually manage the operations; but because of the significant stake Yukon Energy had in relicensing, they played more of a role in that area. So, there were a lot of difficulties all around with environmental assessment in the Yukon, let alone the Aishihik file and issues of relationships with Champagne and Aishihik First Nations and grappling with some really complex issues, including stuff that had originated from the past. So, we had to get our heads around a strategy to bring closure to this process that had been going on for over five years and looked like it would never end the way it was going; and we were, of course, now in a post-land claims environment where Champagne and Aishihik First Nation now was recognized on paper for who it is as a First Nation with significant rights and responsibilities and interests, which fundamentally transformed the environment in which that was being done.

There were negotiations, that had been ongoing when I arrived, with the ATCO Group of companies with regard to the possibility of extending the management contract for their work with Yukon Energy. Essentially Yukon Energy was a shell of a holding company, and in turn contracted with the other utility to manage and operate the company; and those negotiations were ongoing, and I gradually got more involved in preparing background material for that. In the course of negotiations, the Board of Directors had identified several options, which management was to be pursuing in the course of those negotiations; and it became clear at various points that

the option of going with direct management, in other words, doing it ourselves, it became more important to know that we actually had a plan to do it if we had to do it. The differences of view that were in the negotiations were significant, and there was a lot of money at stake in terms of the future costs for the electrical system. So, that issue suddenly became a really big deal, because the probability of concluding an agreement that would meet the interests of Yukon Energy and [YDC] and its ultimate shareholder was unclear. The effort was still focused on trying to negotiate an acceptable arrangement, but it was unclear whether that could be achieved.

So, Option 2 and Option 3 had to get a lot of attention and, I must admit, I learned a lot about the utility business in a very short period of time because those plans had to be scoped out and costed out and shaped in terms of whether we could deliver within timeframes because that management contract was going to be coming due December 31st of that particular year. So, we were down to the wire.

And if that wasn't enough, we had the Faro Mine, which was the largest single customer of Yukon Energy, go off the system, and when you lose roughly 40 percent of your electrical sales, you're not allowed to have the company go bust. So, that means you have to apply for rate increases. The previous history with the Faro Mine going off the system had involved 60-to-70 percent rate increases being sought, and the management of Yukon Energy wasn't interested in that kind of approach; but it's complicated, because you basically have to meet your mortgage payments. So, you've got to spread the costs over everybody.

So, there was a very intense period of work on electrical regulation. The corporation has a fine team of advisors and people in-house who knew a lot about it, and ATCO was very experienced; but there are some very significant issues there of apprising the public and shareholders. There was a new Government in place, and rate increases are not popular with your ratepayers, and you have to do things. So, there was a lot of work around that issue to respond and to develop new energy conservation measures, which had died since the early '90's; that is, creating new programs for residential and commercial energy management. There were a whole lot of things done in the rate application, which were quite unusual, and we were able to keep to 20 percent at the time, which was still a mind-blower, because that's a huge change overnight.

So, the Faro Mine went off the system and threw out a whole bunch of crazy rate application processes, public communications and consultation; and you're talking bad news, so nobody really wants to talk to you.

Dobrowolsky: So, just to sort out the chronology, I made a few rough notes when I was reviewing a lot of the material before doing these interviews, and my understanding is Faro had gone on-line sometime in wasn't it around June of '97 or so?

Sinclair: That's when it went off, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And then, it came back on again?

Sinclair: In October/November; I would have to pull the documents. It was late, in the fall anyway, Octoberish.

Dobrowolsky: Well, it would have been sometime before the fire because I remember the Faro plant was a big consideration when they were juggling energy.

Sinclair: That's right.

Dobrowolsky: And then, I think it went off again, was it the following January?

Sinclair: Yes. If I recall correctly, it went down in June, and then, came back on in October, and then, went down again right at the end of January of 1997, which was a whole new fiscal year, which created its own unique issues.

Dobrowolsky: So, someone like Faro, and I don't know if you're the best one to ask, but obviously a very major customer, what percentage of the power in the Territory would a big operation like that use? Do you have any kind of sense?

Sinclair: Yes, the rough rule-of-thumb was around 40 percent of sales. So, they were huge, absolutely huge. Just to go sideways for you, and not that you're supposed to do these this way; but if you look at our national filings to the voluntary climate change registry, we have greenhouse gas emission plans, and we've tracked emissions right back to the early days. So, you can see in the delivery system a mix of hydro of diesel generation and some wind; but the main system being hydro and diesel. If you follow the greenhouse gas emissions, because we ran diesel plants in Whitehorse and to some degree in Faro because of the Faro Mine because their demands for power were so large and you follow the greenhouse gas emissions, and you see this huge rise, and then, you see this great plummet, and then, it begins to veer off as we implemented more energy-efficiency measures to reduce it. But it was a massive operation. It was the largest lead-zinc mine in the world, and it used relatively, I'll say "outdated" now, looking back, I would say "outdated" methods; and the infrastructure there had aged without being reinvested in. So, it was an energy hog. There's absolutely no question about it.

Dobrowolsky: Wasn't the Aishihik power plant built in large part to service Faro?

Sinclair: That's the general view, that there was a growing mineral economy; and obviously, Faro was number one on the list in terms of major markets, that's right. That's the general view and history; and there may well have been other factors, but certainly it was the mineral economy and the Faro Mine was one of many that were expected to develop over the time, because the prospects along the corridor between Whitehorse and Carmacks are significant, and the prospects up and down the Alaska Highway with access to transmission lines and so on. So, I think everybody believed, in the '60s and '70s, that a whole lot of good things, from that point of view, were expected to occur. So, when you're in the power business, you've got to plan ahead. You're either there with resources when you're needed or you've got another problem, which is lack of supply, which hinders your economic development.

Dobrowolsky: So, you have Faro, which was a big thing, with the "Is it happening/is it not?" You're very quickly getting up to speed with a whole host of complicated issues, including the option of direct management, which became a plan. I understand the negotiations with ATCO

did not work out, and it was determined this was the best way to go. So, I'm assuming all this would have been happening through the time you started up until early fall. So, what would you have been working on let's say the last couple of weeks of October? What was on the platter then? Was it mainly work on the direct management negotiations, or were there other things, as well?

Sinclair: Well, I'll start there. I don't think my kids saw very much of me during that period, let alone my partner. The direct management aspect was certainly the largest pressing matter. When the negotiations did not conclude ultimately in an agreement, and this is roughly June, and the Board made the decision, which was ratified up the line ultimately that we were to go with the direct management option, we were faced with six months between moving from a holding company with roughly four people and some vacancies to an operating company in the order of 60 with all the systems in place and keeping the lights on from January 1st, a very serious time.

Dobrowolsky: So, why that particular deadline? Was that when the contract expired?

Sinclair: Yes, the management contract had been extended. We'd gone through a couple of cycles. If I recall correctly, there had been the initial five years, and then, it had been renewed for five years. Then it had been extended for one year while these negotiations had been ongoing, and there was an election in the middle. So people were just being realistic of the potential for clear decisions to be made. So, as of December 31st, that agreement would have expired; and in the absence of renewal, obviously the providers were not interested in carrying on particularly. So, that was a drop-dead date, and January 1, that system was ours to operate and manage.

There was some provision in the management contract for continuity of certain services, which didn't all work out from our perspective; but in theory were provided for. This is no fooling around here; we had to initiate a whole number of steps. So, there was a plan that covered the whole spectrum of things. We had to deal with all the decision-making and direction matters from the Board and to some extent our ultimate shareholder. We had to design the organization, and we had different interests in mind, and we wanted to reduce things where we could. We had to initiate all the staffing procedures. We had to design our compensation and deal with all the difficulties with communicating with employees who weren't then our employees and relations with [YECL] were not entirely smooth. So, customer billing systems, where is that coming from? Financial systems, where are those coming from? What are the mission critical items that had to be attended to? So, we put together an advisory team to help us keep our eye on the ball involving some utility expertise from Western Canada, and we proceeded to –

Dobrowolsky: Would this have been West Kootenay?

Sinclair: West Kootenay Power lent us some help from their senior people. They run a system kind of like ours in terms of hydro base and challenging country. As well, we had a former executive, a very senior executive, in the Alberta energy industry who came on board to help us with that.

Dobrowolsky: What was his name?

Sinclair: Walter Niebor, and he's involved as an advisor to the Board to this day. So, then we had a core team, which we supplemented with some local consulting resources that knew their way around. So we had a game plan. The transition plan probably ran 40 pages, excruciating detail on a whole range of matters, because we had to essentially be going live on January 1st. The way the management contract was set up, anybody whose wage was essentially paid or about 50 percent or more of their time was charged to Yukon Energy was in theory "one of ours," someone who would be part of us. But the reality was we had to go through the process of designing our organization, defining pay scales and classification, a value for those positions; and then, we had to make letters of offer to people who may or may not accept them. They were part of a larger -

Dobrowolsky: So, this was going through the whole Human Resources protocol?

Sinclair: Yes, and that's where back to my background as Director of Finance and Administration, one of my jobs there was the Human Resources management in one of the largest operating departments in the Government, Health & Social Services was a benefit. We did, however, second a really excellent person to work with us, but we were -

Dobrowolsky: This was Diana Cousins?

Sinclair: Diana Cousins, yes, came over to work with us on benefit structures, and we were creating everything from ground zero, which was good. I mean, we created a lot of neat things that gave employees options, and we actually saved ourselves a whole bunch of money, and we were able to create a lot of different work-place relationships. So, there are in those kind of situations, a great feel situation; but it's just the timeframes we were operating in were a little scary. It was important that we attract the right people to work for us and deal with the vacancies.

At the time of the transfer, there were significant vacancies on the technical side of [YECL]. They were in a transition period, and a lot of their key engineering positions were vacant up here, and we were competing in an international marketplace where there are shortages for electrical engineers, and we were of the view that we couldn't run the system without one, although the system had been running without one and just calling in consultants and stuff. So, we were into targeted staffing actions and, at the same time, we're trying to begin to build a relationship with a whole lot of employees who weren't quite sure about who we were and whether it would be a good place to work.

Customer billing systems, I didn't know anything about those, but I can tell you a lot now right down to people need to know what numbers to call and where to go and who to pay their bills to. Telephone books need new entries. You've got to get all these cutoffs. You've got to communicate with your customers. You've got to have a natural flow. We were converting from one billing system to another. So, there were a lot of details that are part of having a smooth-running system, which, having worked inside an electrical utility and appreciating ATCO has some incredible strengths; and the ones that I've come to know across the country, there are some things that these companies do extremely well that they've built up over time, but we didn't have the luxury of time. We had to do it in six months and in the year following.

Dobrowolsky: So, YECL is obviously still a presence in the territory. When you did the break-out in terms of taking over direct management, what did they get left with? How is it that I get my bill from [YECL]?

Sinclair: There are three general functions in the electrical supply and distribution, generating it and selling it to you in your house. There are generation functions. There are transmission functions, which has to be high-voltage to move the power around to where it needs to be, and then, local distribution. So, Yukon Electrical is the primary distributor. They are the largest retailer of electricity. However, they buy most of that electricity, not exclusively, but they buy most of their electricity from Yukon Energy, and they own and operate diesel plants in a whole range of rural and isolated communities as part of their utility distribution function. So, in the reverse, Yukon Energy is the primary generator of power with hydro plants and wind plants and actually very large diesel assets still sitting here in Whitehorse, for example, as backup. So, in rough terms Yukon Energy produces 95 percent of the power that's sold in the Yukon, including power that's retailed to customers in Whitehorse and Teslin and Carmacks and Ross River by [YECL], but Yukon Energy generates it and transmits it, and Yukon Energy has a small amount of distribution relatively speaking, Dawson, Mayo, Faro and a whole bunch of rural areas, Champagne, places like that; whereas [YECL], their generation assets are more historical accidents. It's not their main business. Their main business is actual distribution to businesses and households and communities, which is its own area of expertise.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me how you heard about the fire at the generating plant.

Sinclair: I got a call - well, actually, Laura, my partner, got it first. The phone rang in the morning somewhere between 6:00 and 7:00 in the morning, I'm a little foggy, from the vice-president of Yukon Energy, Oliver O'Rourke, and I would say this to Oliver's face, and I think I did at the time, but I thought he was drunk. Like, I had no reason to think that, but there was this very stressed, very stressed emotional voice saying, "You won't believe it, but the plant's burning down! You will not believe it, but the plant's burning down!" I'm trying to wake up, right.

"Who is this?"

"It's Oliver, I'm down there. I'm telling you. The flames are everywhere. Like, the trucks are everywhere." So, he went on like that, right.

I'm thinking, "Get real, the plant burning down, there's nothing there to burn," which, of course, even looking at it later, there was so little there to burn. They build these things with safety in mind. So, that was my first "Thanks, Oliver."

He said, "I'll call you later once we know what's going on. I'm down at the gate." It turned out later that apparently he truly was down there; he was an early bird. He loved to go into the office early and get a cup of coffee going and be there when everybody arrived. It was nice; you had the welcome mat out in the morning.

Anyway, it turns out, true enough, he was down there. Well, I wasn't quite sure I believed that; but anyway, I happened to turn the radio on – a bit out of sequence, because I may have thought, “Well, I'm going to go back to sleep and get up when I'm supposed to” or whatever. Anyway, I turned the radio on, and that's where this surreal “This must be real, because it's now on the radio,” and it's John Carroll who was the general manager, I think that's what his title was at the time, of the Yukon Electrical Company, and John was in charge of running [YECL] and all these assets were his responsibility, and he was talking extremely openly and very, very eloquently about the situation that was literally unfolding. He was on the radio station, explaining to the public what was going on while the fire was happening down at the river.

I don't know if I ever said to John, but you can't ask for a better approach when you're in some of these situations than to get information to people, because thousands of people travel down our highways and people notice things and so on; and Riverdale would be waking up and the South Access would be alive with people going to and from work. Anyway, a very informative interview was going on on the radio, and he was just saying what he knows. Of course part of it is, “The power is still on, and we expect that to continue, because things seem to be fine.” I have no particular knowledge of his level of real information, because there was organized pandemonium behind the scenes, which turned out to be, in a lot of ways, very well organized because it all came off with the staff taking the system to a manual operation and all the rest of it, just unbelievable really in the history of Canada to have a situation like that where the power never blips.

Anyway, that was my next, the radio is on, and there's John Carroll telling the story. I just went “Wow!” This was in the days before everybody has cell phones, so I can't reach anybody, because they're all in motion, and nobody had cell phones, I don't believe at that time. They just seemed like a luxury in those days, right.

Dobrowolsky: And they were big, clunky things.

Sinclair: And they were big, clunky things, yes. So, Rob McWilliam was gone. Oliver O'Rourke was clearly on the front lines. So, I thought, “Well, I'll start off,” since I live in Riverdale and, in fact, two crescents over, I drove over to see it for myself [at the fish ladder site]. So, I watched the fire and all the stuff that was going on over there from my side of the river, along with probably 100 or 200 people who were now gathered and photographers and stuff, and everybody is watching the building burn down.

Anyway, ultimately I don't remember exactly how this came together. Maybe it was a phone call I placed somewhere and tracked somebody down or they tracked me down. So, that's when a decision was made where we were going to gather and everybody could be brought up-to-speed at the same time and know what was going on and everything and make our plans from there. Obviously, the system was fundamentally being operated and managed by [YECL] as part of their management contract with Yukon Energy. They have critical incident teams and plans, as we do today, for dealing with all kinds of exigencies. I don't think this one was on their list, but they are a professional organization with excellent employees, and they did what they had to do. Many of those employees work for Yukon Energy today. So, they sprung into action and had obviously been going from some point in the early hours already, and they were doing their bit to

get organized and obviously ultimately we had needs, too, to get organized around; because the Legislature was sitting, and people were wondering what's going on.

"Is our system down?" and they were going to have no power for somebody this winter and all these scenarios are floating, and the Minister has to be equipped with answers. And of course, the House was sitting that very day, so now you gather information for the course of that week for I don't know how many we wrote, maybe it wasn't that many, and a lot of them ended up being briefing notes; but statements had to be made, and this was a major issue of public interest when the power system looks like it's threatened, because we depend on it for everything.

So, that was a sequence of people gathering and this will be in your notes from somebody else I'm sure because one of the first things was we all need communication; and we were located at our corporate law offices, –

Dobrowolsky: Davis & Company?

Sinclair: - Davis & Company, and Darlene Morgan went downtown. I think that was a really big purchase, again in the days when cell phones were considered exotic, and she went in and bought five or eight or some number, one for everybody so we could be found, even amongst ourselves; and they were all set up to go, and NorthwesTel was unbelievably helpful at the time because normally to get your number up and running, it took a few days, blah, blah, blah. This was instant service, no fooling around, which was very helpful.

Dobrowolsky: So, just to backtrack, this meeting at Davis & Company got organized, I understand, around 9:00 in the morning?

Sinclair: Yes, somewhere between 8:30 and 9:00.

Dobrowolsky: And who all would have come to that meeting?

Sinclair: That would have been the entire management team of Yukon Energy and people who were involved in the transition arrangements. So, there would be Rob McWilliam, as the president and CEO; John Maissan, as the director of technical services (maybe he was called that, maybe he wasn't); Darlene Morgan as the executive secretary; Oliver O'Rourke, as the vice president of finance and administration. There might have been one or two others. Our local corporate counsel sat in for some of that discussion. Rob McWilliam, as sort of the ultimate owner – ultimate representative of the owner – had been in constant touch with John Carroll, so he was very well aware of how things seemed to be unfolding; and through the course of that day and the coming days, there was a lot of interaction and communication between them and the key players and as things were stabilizing, figuring out where to go from there. Yes, it was essentially the small team that ultimately became part of the company operating system a few months later.

Dobrowolsky: So, you had your meeting. Darlene is working on communications, and then, I guess, there was a scramble to find other office space. Something we should mention at this

point, you had moved into a new addition on the southwest corner of the generating plant and that had happened that same year, as well; or that had happened the year before?

Sinclair: Yes, that addition had been completed August/September of 1996. So, when Rob McWilliam joined the company, he moved there; and when I joined Yukon Energy in February of 1997, my office was there, as well, a wonderful place to work. That's right, that's where we were located. So, we were now figuring out where to go from there. Our computers, of course, were nonexistent and all our records and files.

Yes, obviously at the point we're meeting there, the point is to take stock and establish a game plan and allocate responsibility. First and foremost, our job was to let [YECL] do their job. They were accountable and responsible for managing the assets and dealing with the situation first and foremost on the front lines, and it was our job to let them do their job. It was very important, so "Let's not sweat that unduly at this point. Let them be professional and do a job."

We had to look at some short-term issues. As you say, we needed a place to operate from. Again, the difference in five years of what you can do now with Internet technology and so on; but of course, we didn't have any of our records except what we might have taken home on disk to work on, a whole bunch of situations that became quite ironic in a way; because Darlene Morgan had been working on Board packages the night before the fire because we had a Board meeting that was happening, and it was being distributed, and so, she had happened to take a whole bunch of stuff home because she was very attentive to work responsibilities and going the extra mile and all that. So it turned out she had a bunch of stuff at home. I was working on a bunch of things, too, so I had a bunch of critical documents, including things like the transition master plan, because I was the main - we had another coordinator working with us, but I was the main keeper of the process and driving priorities, because we had the Faro Mine on and off, and we had Yukon Energy policy stuff going on, and we had work to do with the Board. We all had to play a role. So, we had to look ahead and do triage on what was important and what wasn't important.

Also, the reality is it's a pretty emotional time. It's kind of, like the town burning down in a way. There's a community of people that were affected inside, and that's an emotional time. So, sometimes people need something to do just to occupy their mind so they don't deal with emotional ...

So, looking ahead, part of it was we needed a home, and the Department of Tourism, Vicki Hancock, was on board. She was able to free up some space, fully-equipped offices, walk in and do business, a blessing, because you can't do that so easily anywhere either generally. So, ultimately we made that move fairly quickly so everybody knew where to find us. We were close to the Minister's office if we needed to deal with that, and we were close to [YECL]'s offices. I mean, it was a perfect fit, and we were equipped and ready to go. They just had to program us in so we could use the systems and carry on.

Dobrowolsky: So, how soon did that happen?

Sinclair: My memory is foggy; within days, I think, within days. We started moving over in stages in a way, I guess; because, I mean, we were sort camping out in somebody else's territory. It was almost awkward in that sense, right. So, you start using it as a place to use the phone; and while you're waiting for the computer to become operational, while you're looking, "Well, I could work at home, because the computer at home works, but it's not portable," and you're thinking through.

Meanwhile, we were full flight on transition planning and the whole range of critical things. So, it became the base for me to use on any number of subjects that were happening; and as these things go, when you have to revisit whether your existing plans can and should be sustained. Because we were there, November, December, we were two months from going live. You know, there was some consideration in, "Do we think this is going to fundamentally change the plan?" and "Is there a reason, an important reason, to say, 'Whoa, this is just going to be too much.'" Various factors in that, the bottom line from the transition team's point of view was that we could carry on, and we could get the job done, that hill needed to be climbed. So, we carried on, and the Board was supportive of that decision; but that was one we had to look ourselves in the eyeball and say, "Is this –

Dobrowolsky: Is it still doable?

Sinclair: Yes, the straw that broke the camel's back kind of situation, because we had a lot of big waves going over. So, we carried on and started to look ahead and shake down and start rebuilding files or create stuff anew from your brain and memory situation or in some cases documentation that was critical had been shared with somebody in another agency. You knew or usually remembered you'd distributed stuff. So, you would call up and say, "Listen, can you fax me that document?" I think we came close to wearing out several fax machines in Tourism. It was amazing how much documentation we had to recover that way in order to keep the ball rolling.

Dobrowolsky: So, these would be the kinds of things you would be getting from, say, your lawyers, who would have copies of correspondence or other agencies that you were dealing with?

Sinclair: Yes, I guess that's right; and most things were being handled on a team basis, so you could usually think about recovering it somewhere and we all were working from home in the evenings and weekends as much as we were at the office, so there was a lot of stuff we would take back and forth, and you'd probably left your second-last draft still sitting on a hard drive somewhere, because you hadn't cleaned it off yet. That was certainly the case for me. I had lots of documents, so I could just go and find them on my own system and print them off and carry on; but, yes, that became you just keep your head down and keep moving forward.

But there was a need, and certainly Rob McWilliam was very much on top of this with our Minister and with the Government in terms of trying to encourage building very much in the same spirit that [YECL] had on the public's information about what was going on and what the assessment of the situation was. And of course, as the days went by and the power never went

off, the spectra of the pictures of that fire were certainly indelibly inked there in people's minds, and people associated still thought it was amazing this thing was still happening and all that.

Dobrowolsky: Well, it was!

Sinclair: We were focusing on - we had a few other bigger fish in the net that we had to land, I guess in a way. So, that kept us on the straight and narrow. We did have to deal with office space and even those things – Yukon Energy is very much committed to local development and local purchasing. It has to be cost-effective and so on. So, even dealing with office space, in its own way, you can't do those things overnight. You've got to case the joint, what's available? Can it be renovated for our use? What's the nature of the deal? Do we want a short-term lease, a long-term lease? We had to structure this for the notion of the company we were to become, never mind taking care of the few of us who were temporarily homeless right now, because this was January 1 going live, right?

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Sinclair: We weren't the only ones in the building that burnt down. There was Water Management staff, and the management people for energy supply were all based there; and we had all kinds of new employees coming on. So, where were they supposed to work and the computer systems? So, that went quite expeditiously. We had help from the private sector. We had people from Government real estate, like Public Works Canada, bent over backwards to look for options. We had various property management agencies digging around to see what they could do.

Anyway, at the end of the day, we ended up at a building on Range Road, co-located with an agency we were doing a lot of business with ironically, the Water Board. They were down the hall, and Fisheries & Oceans were on the other side of the building. So, that's the old story. Moving house is moving house, and that was a big deal and new furniture, everything from scratch while we were operating (inaudible).

Dobrowolsky: Rob McWilliam had an interesting anecdote about, it was either a telephone conversation or a meeting with some real confidential stuff happening, while over his head an electrician is still wiring up the space, getting it functional.

Sinclair: Yes, yes, there is an element of what is almost – we had a number of circumstances like that where there would be conversations going in the hall, and then, you suddenly say, “Just a second now, our water regulator is just right there, and our fisheries regulator.” Maybe it's just stereotypes. Like people grow to believe the utility and the regulators, and maybe we all get caught up in some of this silliness; but it isn't normal, I guess. I don't know how comfortable they were with us being there. I don't know, because it was a nice workspace for them, and suddenly there were all these people with all this gear landing in the midst of their workplace, too. Yes, some of it, you just learn basically the more people you had to share amongst your staff and you had to share with other people who worked with you, and we couldn't sweat the small stuff, because it was just being too nice and too careful; but, yes, there were some strange circumstances.

At Christmas that year, I still kind of remember this, because we were all just working so hard, and Ray Wells was the Chair of the Board, and he was deciding we really needed to get with the spirit. He had come up to meet us at Range Road. We had boxes everywhere and were jammed in everywhere and all that kind of stuff. It was pretty cramped quarters for what we were doing. And he went down and bought Christmas lights and decorations, because he thought we needed a few in the office, because it was Christmas.

Side B

Dobrowolsky: It's September the 30th, Tuesday, in the [YDC] office, resuming an interview with Duncan Sinclair. When we left off, we were talking about the move into the temporary quarters up on Range Road, working in this kind of eccentric situation where they're literally building the offices around you; and you finished off with a mention of Ray Wells and that first Christmas. We had discussed earlier the role of the Board, which I haven't talked about very much with anyone else, and I think that's very important. Perhaps we can talk again about Ray Wells. He was also a fairly new person on the Board?

Sinclair: Yes, as we were reflecting on the director list, Ray had been appointed as the Chair of the Board of Directors for [YDC] and also Yukon Energy in late September of 1997. So, just a little over a month before the fire. He also came in basically at the point where we were in the run up to direct management, as we called it. I think we referred to that earlier.

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Sinclair: And we were also obviously in the middle of a lot of Yukon Government energy policy work that would have implications for both corporations and dealing with some large, big-picture financial issues with the shareholder, as it related to a range of energy actions and rate stabilization proposals and so on that the Government had. So, a very dynamic period for a new chair, but he brought a lot of enthusiasm to the job.

Dobrowolsky: And some diverse experiences that were useful, I guess.

Sinclair: Yes, Mr. Wells is a very skilled senior executive, but he has also been very involved in the utility world generally. That's his main career path. So, he understands the nature of the beast and the kinds of issues you deal with with capital programs and board governance and so on; but he also had experience with chairing the Yukon Council on the Economy and the Environment as a business representative. So, he had a background, I think, that was uniquely positioned to deal with a sustainable development company, because our job ultimately is to promote and develop sustainable energy resources and services for Yukon people and Yukon businesses. So, he, nonetheless, was diving into, I think, a fairly big adventure with very little time to get his feet on the ground.

Dobrowolsky: We were talking just before the mike came on again that apparently at this time, the rest of your board was undergoing some changes. It was a transitional time when there were some new members and also, of course, a time of great change for the role of the board themselves.

Sinclair: I think that's right. Just rolling back the clock briefly, there had been a solid board of eight or nine people in the run-up to the negotiations of a possible new arrangement with ATCO to manage or operate Yukon Energy's assets, as well as to make the decision around transition ultimately; and then, basically in the second quarter and third quarter, we started to have some of the evolutionary changes where terms are coming up and new people are being appointed, concluding in September with the new chair.

So, going into 1998 and dealing with the aftermath of the fire and the company up and running as of January 1st and at the same time [YDC] becoming active in energy initiatives, we had a lot of new directors who, while they bring a lot of skills and experience to the table, were learning a lot about the companies at the same time on the fly to some extent. But that worked really well, because the kind of leadership that the chair, Ray Wells, provided brought out the best in everyone, and they recognized that this was a pretty dramatic time for management, too, and important issues to be dealt with that would affect the Yukon's future.

So, we were, at the same time, in effect redeveloping policy governance in the corporations, both of them, and redefining the role of the board; because in Yukon Energy it was now an operating company, and there were important functions that needed more attention than they'd been given before, and I'll come back to some examples of that. And at the same time, the board of the [YDC] also had major issues in the sense of matters to work through with the Yukon Government relating to energy policy. So, that corporation was going to move from a passive holding company role to a much more active program delivery, infrastructure development, research and development and renewable energy initiatives and so on that were being supported by the Yukon Government, as well. So there was major transition for the board itself over '97 into '98 and, well, it carries on forever. You never stop working at getting better. So, the board was working with management, rolling up their sleeves to develop new strategic plans, and those were very interactive processes; facilitated board planning sessions, research documents and so on, to set the direction and set the priorities for Yukon Energy as a corporation. There were steps taken to put key policy in place.

When you're in the electrical business, you recognize there's some very serious stuff relating to health and safety, relating to the environment, relating to risk management and the financial integrity of the systems that operate, the customer billing so you can get your revenues and your payables so your contractors and suppliers are happy with you. As well, we were also finalizing some aspects of our human resources policies over the course of that year. So, there was major, major work for the board in creating an occupational health and safety policy, which was considered from our perspective, state of the art. We were able to take advantage of a lot of the work that's been going on across the country. In simple terms, you do not want to risk or have an environment that promotes any kind of risk around safety. Safety is job one and how you go about that and the philosophy of doing that and the importance that's placed on it. So, there was a major policy put in place, along with an action plan, the delegation of responsibility, the creation of a joint employer/employee arrangement and a whole action plan to deal with a host of issues on the safety side. It was a major, major initiative. At the same time, the board provided for annual accounting and review as their function. So, as an example where they dealt with the

whole life cycle of setting policy, delegating authority and responsibility, and then, closing the accountability loop –

Dobrowsky: Just to interrupt you for a moment, so the mechanics of doing this, I was on a territorial board and we met four times a year, and then, if extra issues came up, there were more meetings. Would this essentially be how this worked, they would have a number – because I realize your members came from all over the Territory. So, would there be a number of weekend meetings or two-day meetings or extra meetings; and were there committees handling some of this, maybe just some of the mechanics. And of course, I realize the support staff is doing an incredible amount to prepare materials for the board to review.

Sinclair: Yes, I think just to stay –I mean, while the board and there was a lot of collaboration on this, was defining the agenda that need attention, they expected management to produce discussion papers, with options, with analysis, with recommendations; and in many instances, outside advisors, external to management, were brought in to workshop some of those issues. Like, in the area of the environment, we had a whole series of educational workshops to explore what that could mean to the energy companies as part of the equation. So, the practicality of it was that coming out of the decision to go with direct management, we had a very detailed work plan that was tracked. All the big stuff was moved on early. So, there was a whole sequence of stuff going through. Basically, we were meeting with the board almost monthly, if memory serves, for a long period there, through '97 and '98 to deal with the big chunks. So, these were generally daylong meetings with agenda packages that are sent out in the order of eight to ten days beforehand so directors have a chance to come ready to discuss matters. And then, people rolled up their sleeves, and it was the chair's job to get us from the beginning to the end of each agenda, and if matters needed to be held over or a direction given, then that was done. But it was very much, I think, kind of a collaborative thing.

But the board was very clear in their minds about those things that they had to attend to, and at the same time, they recognized that an operating company was being developed under their feet so to speak. So, management needed time, and the new players that were on the management team needed time to get working relationships and reporting through all those teething issues. So, in terms of the Yukon Energy Board of Directors, a lot of big-ticket stuff was put in place round health and safety, around a very progressive environment policy and an action plan, around capital planning and infrastructure directions, around customer choice and services that the board had a broader vision for what the utility needed to pay attention to; and that was codified in a strategic plan, a five-year plan which obviously is a living document which is reviewed every year. The board revisited it, and then, pursuant to that, in the jargon of an annual business plan, which includes a specific financial plan for the year and your five-year forecast, but also included objectives and priorities for management; and it wasn't just on financial performance, but on our environmental track record, our safety track record, our customer service track record, as well as new initiatives in a variety of areas.

So, the board basically made sure management knew what the expectations were, and then, over the course of '98, as some of the major issues, and they can range from setting up pension plans and making sure all the pieces come together and that's very important. The architecture of doing those things is very important, and the board has a role in doing that, because there was a major

issue of risk downstream and so on. Anyways, we worked through all those kinds of things. Then the frequency of meetings started to relax, and the board evolved to a more traditional quarterly meeting process where they could deal with the major issues of the day in the annual life cycle, setting a business plan in the fall and early winter and stuff like that. Then you move to quarterly management reporting. So, Yukon Energy was basically getting up and running and dealt with a lot of those start-up issues.

The board with its other hat on, a different corporation, [YDC], was also beginning to emerge, largely because the Yukon Government had asked the corporation to implement four major new initiatives out of their new energy policy. One was a rate stabilization fund, along with some related initiatives, a wind research and development initiative, a green power initiative and an energy efficiency initiative. So, we were in the research and planning process there, and it gradually led to more initiatives for the board to address and provide direction on behalf of Government.

The other aspect that got a lot of attention at the same time was, I used the word “governance” earlier, but it had to do with relationships with the shareholder, to use the corporate language, but with the Yukon Government and the minister and the legislature in clarifying how the subsidiaries and the main owner company, [YDC], would work together on different matters. Yukon Energy is regulated. [YDC] is a Crown, but it’s a business corporation, self-financing; and there’s a long history of debate and confusion in the public’s mind and ratepayer’s mind and government’s minds over time about that. So, there was quite a lot of effort put into clarifying who does what on what basis and writing that down.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, a few nuts and bolts things. We had a New Democratic Party Government at that time and your minister would have been?

Sinclair: The Honourable Trevor Harding. He was the Minister responsible for the [YDC] at the point the direct management decision was proceeding, and he was the Minister with the responsibility for energy policy, as well, as it happened, broadly speaking in the Government.

Dobrowolsky: So, it sounds like a lot of the things that you are just discussing are coming out of the move to direct management, as well as some fairly big, long-term planning issues that would have happened regardless, and I get the impression a lot of your work was involved in supporting the board in putting together discussion papers, helping to deal with all these big, new issues; but at the same time, there was all this rebuilding going on. You couldn’t stay at Range Road forever. So, maybe you could talk a little more personally about just how you were splitting yourself between all these things that were happening with the company or to what extent you were involved in, I guess, the rebuilding process.

Sinclair: My main job was on the, I guess, the corporate-wide, go-forward stuff, and I’ll talk a bit about some of those other big waves that we were dealing with at the time. So, I wasn’t—in the sense of Yukon Energy, I wasn’t an operational manager. The structure had been revisited by the then President and CEO, Rob McWilliam, and we’d gone through these whole career strength skill assessments individually amongst the management team, and there had been discussions with the board about the kind of organization they wanted to see; and we, in fact, had

gone through some, in the jargon, delayering and simplifying, as well as putting some senior talent to work on issues that had not been attended to before like business planning and infrastructure development.

So, the focus was really, for me, trying to see beyond those initial things. So, you have work plans and to-do lists, and you maintain them rigorously, and you keep your eye on the big balls and moving those. We were - right on top of all this, we were dealing with the Faro Mine going off line, closing twice, which creates a whole wave of regulatory work and rate increases and things like that. We were trying to become a more open company at the time and not act like the traditional utility, which just walks into the regulator, drops the applications down and then fights the fight. We were trying to be more communicative about the objectives we were achieving and the challenges we were facing in trying to deal with the loss of a customer like the Faro Mine; and beyond that, we were just struck by the simple reality, which is, this has happened before and which, of course, is on again-off again.

Everybody out there had this in their memory banks, but no one had successfully looked beyond what happens when you lose major customers like that, and so, we just have this yoyo effect. So, we were trying to take a long-term view about how we were going to “get out of the box” was our phrase for it; because when the Faro Mine was on, everybody went back to sleep and they helpfully paid the mortgage, and then, when the Faro Mine wasn’t there, everybody was screaming and yelling because electrical rates would go up, because there were fewer sales to cover the bills, and nobody liked that. So, there were a lot of debates around where this power infrastructure came from, and of course, a lot of it was there because of the mining sector and plans for economic diversification.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, our ambient noise seems to have calmed down for the moment, so let’s continue on.

Sinclair: Yes, I was just going to pick up on the rebuilding aspect that you spoke to, and I guess it’s all how you think of rebuilding. Obviously you need a home for the new company and when we were – before the fire, we were looking at a range of scenarios about how we would accommodate all our technical services and the corporate offices and so on because there clearly was a need there, and we were going to have a lot of staff that needed places to work from, properly equipped and so on. Post-fire, of course, then we were situated where to some extent it’s a green field, you can think fresh; but of course you’re sitting there in a temporary situation with people spread all over Whitehorse, which is operationally kind of awkward to deal with. You lose a lot of efficiencies in that.

So, we needed to look at where we were going to go with that. Ultimately, in doing the cost benefit analysis and thinking about the necessity of time, the decision was to build a purpose-built facility. The location ultimately was on land the corporation held at Whitehorse Rapids, which would provide for all the synergies of the operating groups, and everybody would be together; and in the process of that it became another area where we said “We’ve got to push this envelope, too. We need to set the example and build an energy-efficient building;” and we now speak in terms of, in fact, we have a green building design support service operated through Yukon Energy - oh, sorry - another subsidiary company called “Energy Solutions Centre Inc.”

now. But in those days, a lot of people talked about energy efficiency, including utilities, but not a lot of people did very much about it. So, here was a unique opportunity with the new building. So, the specs were drawn up.

We had some excellent people working for us: John Maissan, Bill Haydock and their group in technical services. There was clear policy direction to make this an efficient, low-cost building, spend the least; but from a lifecycle point of view, have a low operating cost while meeting all the needs of everybody who was going to be in it and located on the site and take advantage of the site and so on. So, it was put out to tender, and a Yukon architectural team won the tender, and they had supplemented their resources with some very unique Canadian expertise.

Dobrowolsky: Can you tell me who the Yukon company was?

Sinclair: I'm momentarily lost for the firm's name. They've morphed into a slightly different - it's Kobayashi & Zedda now, as they're known today, and I've just momentarily lost the name of the lead architect that they worked with.

Dobrowolsky: Maurer?

Sinclair: Florian Maurer, that's right, yes; it was Maurer and Associates [Maurer Kobayashi Architects Ltd.] or something like that, and they'd supplemented with some additional energy expertise nationally

Dobrowolsky: Do you remember names of any of those?

Sinclair: It may come to me.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, that's fine.

Sinclair: I just momentarily lost it. He's still active out there, but we're now in a situation where Yukon architects and engineers – well, they knew a lot then and they know even more now. But in its day, '97, '98, very few clients were spec'ing these things and demanding that their design teams address these issues. Anyway, this thing had to be designed and we had to make sure we did all the functional space programming. We had gone through the whole organizational thing. You needed some sense of how it was going to shake down, because you need to build a building for the future, not just for today.

In any event, that became another one of those, I think, amazing stories for the company, in that while everything else is going on, we're rebuilding the buildings around and restoring Hydro Units 1, 2 and 3 on top of this, one of the larger capital projects which was under the gun because insurance companies insist you do these things yesterday, at the same time planning this new facility and starting construction. It was a really nice piece of work by, I think, the company as a client, understanding what it wanted and having a good technical team that was based in the Yukon, which was really exciting, coming up with a whole bunch of practical things that took advantage of the site.

As it happened, the Yukon Energy building won the national award for energy efficiency for commercial and institutional buildings in Canada; and at that time, it was one of the six most energy efficient buildings in the whole country, really a statement, I think, to not only believing in conservation and efficient use of energy and taking advantage of the natural surroundings that a site like Whitehorse Rapids offers, although not everything was done, because not everything was cost-effective, but it kind of was a nice flagship, I guess, for a new Yukon Energy company to walk the talk, because that takes a lot of extra effort, and there was a lot of angst and the normal budget issues, “Can we afford to do this?” or “Can we afford not to do this?” and some of the new technologies and ideas that were being promoted, people had to get their heads around that and get there.

So, basically on the site we had ultimately the phoenix from the ashes in terms of the hydro plant is rebuilt on one part of the site, and there’s construction going on over there; and on the other side of Whitehorse Rapids hydro site we’ve got a new technical services and corporate office building going up with a fresh design and the functionality of the building it’s, I think – I don’t know anyone that works in that building that doesn’t appreciate it as a healthy place to do their work.

But that was – we moved in, and everything’s on the run, and we were, I’m sure others have told you, rebuilding files on things as you go because your memory banks, which are often in hard copy or electronic copy, become important to the continuity of business. So we’re setting up the library again from scratch, we’re setting up file systems from scratch. We’ve got new IT [information technology] platforms on which we’re doing business. All the financial systems were being created literally from the ground up, on top of all this while we’re running the company at the same time. So, for many people it was pretty amazing how many –how much foundation had to be built at the same time you were running the company day to day, and that’s not an easy job; and on to of that we were doing new things, because we had a very aggressive strategic plan and a whole range of business plan objectives to chart a new future.

Dobrowolsky: So, what kind of hours were you keeping at that time?

Sinclair: It’s pretty much a blur. I think many of us, when we were home, just carried on with our computers there when we had free moments; and it wasn’t a particularly healthy time for most of the senior people, because we were pretty much there six, seven days a week, working very long hours. We were trying to be very efficient and the old smart management and focus on the things that matter and all that, but there was a lot that just physically you had to be there to participate, and there was a lot of group process because we were building a new team at the same time that we were trying to move forward.

So, you have to spend time together, and you have to talk through some of the issues and discover where your mutual strengths are, because there’s a peer respect thing that has to build while everybody sorted out what their new roles really meant, and that took a lot of patience by everybody because we were all doing new things that we’d never done before.

Dobrowolsky: Wow! So, you were tackling, as you said, this whole range of things, this new corporate structure, these new policy and philosophical directions, the impact of Faro, the

aftermath of the fire, all these very innovative ways of rebuilding, not only the plant, but it sounds like your corporate structure, as well. How do you think it all worked out? How successful do you think you all were, or what do you think might have gone a little different if you hadn't had the added stress of the fire?

Sinclair: That's interesting, because I think the fire was almost a test of will, because it just added that extra dimension of can you do it, and there were a lot of things we were looking at that we've talked about. I think it just became the, you bear down one more time being tested. In terms of how we did and, of course, you're always trying to get better or how we've done so far amongst the team, the initial things that we set as our goal posts, the old eye on the ball thing, keep the lights on simply put the power had to continue to be delivered, and that happened, and we went through a winter period there without hydro units and there were lots of worries and things we were dealing with.

We're paying our bills, and I think Yukon Energy has been justifiably proud of its investment in the local economy and in local suppliers and local technical help as its philosophy. I mean, it's very demanding. It wants the job done well, and there's no putting up with second best. We're paying our bills, and we got people used to submitting their invoice one day and getting paid that week. I think we were quite responsive, and people respected us for that and the financial group is just amazing, along with everybody that was involved in those processes to make that happen; and we had put in place some of the critical frameworks, policy, direction and personal discussion and commitment to things like health and safety and the environment. So, along with having corporate plans in place and financial systems coming together, you had the platform to do many things.

From there I think basically we were extraordinarily maybe the word is "lucky", although that's not really what it is, but we ended up with a team of people, some of whom whose talents hadn't been taken advantage of before and were now invited to shoot the moon and challenge all those things. There's so much in what you inherit sometimes of that's the way it's done. Yes, but does that make any sense anymore, and does anybody even know why it's being done that way anymore? So, people were invited to do what made sense and use their judgment and take responsibility, and you can end up in any organization in utilities, I've observed in various places—I don't have a long history, but like any organization, people can get used to the way things are done and not question things anymore and just shovel off decision-making all over the place and so on, rather than saying, "But the right decision is this one, and I think I want to argue for it, or there's a better way to get there".

So, there was a talent pool created that's there working for the Yukon and almost all of those people hired were from the territory. So, I look back and there we were always incredulous with some of the competitions we put out, not expecting for a second there would be someone in the Yukon with that kind of background. Some of those people in the end didn't come and work for us, but we found unbelievable electrical engineering experience. It just happened to be up in Dawson. People didn't even realize these people were in the territory. It's the Yukon story, I guess. Until you go looking, you never realize how deep the talent pool is and how diverse it is.

Dobrowolsky: You anticipated my next question because you have referred from time to time that this really has been a team effort, this rebuilding. I wonder if you could - and you have mentioned Rob McWilliams' role as president and CEO. Would you like to talk about anybody else that you were working with at the time?

Sinclair: Yes, I think, Rob McWilliams is very much the facilitating leader, and a good hand on the tiller and calm, cool and collected and focused on what mattered and caring for the people, a remarkable guy. Oliver O'Rourke, and then, subsequently Don Willems, who is the current president and CEO now, after various changes have occurred since then, of Yukon Energy and his team, and there were a group of them that created all the financial and regulatory systems that a business like a utility needs from scratch, and they had help from advisers obviously and technical people, but they also engaged some of Yukon's private sector in that work. That was pretty amazing in the course of that, because you don't normally do that on the run, you don't do it effectively over night while you still have regulatory processes going on. This would take a whole long conversation to talk about how stressful that is on people.

Hector Campbell had been the manager of energy supply with Yukon Electrical. He dove in on the long-term infrastructure issues on a range of new initiatives, helping to mobilize teams to grapple with projects like the Mayo/Dawson in terms of the energy planning and the cost benefit analysis. We tackled a whole bunch of new - well, new for the company and new for the Yukon, integrated pilots around those things. Life cycle value assessment was one of the ones, and we did some innovative work, I think, in trying to think through all the angles about why a project like that made sense and then, how do you -

Dobrowolsky: Sorry, life cycle -? What was the term again? I didn't quite get it.

Sinclair: Life cycle value assessment, it's kind of in the jargon. It's like a full spectrum cost benefit where you don't overlook environmental issues and you don't overlook - just to extend that one, the materials that you're using in your line, and therefore, they come from somewhere, that are high-intensity industries, and they've got emissions and pollutions with them. So, there's a kind of a birth to death kind of thing. So, you basically think beyond your own little reality and say, "Heh, what's the full implication of doing this?" so, that we can make the best economic, including financial, the best energy and the best environmental decision in the best interests of the Yukon and ratepayers as a whole and the company for that matter.

Hector's a good spirit and a team player. Right at the heart of things, John Maissan, who had been with Yukon Energy for a number of years, came out of the mining sector before that; and while he'd been with Yukon Government in one of the iterations in the energy group previously to that. John had a wealth of acknowledge and a can-do attitude and mobilized a technical shop that started to deal with a whole lot of issues around asset management and so on that had not been getting as much attention as we wanted to put in them, I guess put it that way, and get all the systems in place to make that happen and capital planning processes that are so important to deal with your assets, as well as just an incredible wealth of knowledge on so many things. He is one of Canada's experts in wind technology and northern climates and, of course, we were being asked by the Government and getting some resources to support that, to take wind research and development to a whole new level. John could take that on, under his wing and almost in his

sleep. So, on top of everything else, running an operating company, he was also taking us to the next stage of commercial wind exploration in a way. He had a background in demand side management and energy efficiency. John had thought a lot of things through and could see what made sense, and beyond that, you couldn't ask for someone who would pay attention to the things that mattered; and if you needed help today he found time today, and if he needed to pay attention to detail, he paid attention to detail; so, a very important part of the team.

Rounding that out in the support staffing group, if you will, is Darlene Morgan, who has an infinite capacity to - she should have taken law, taken a turn and gone off to university and done law, but placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of information management and record keeping and on doing things right and responding. I think her world had changed pretty dramatically from being in a holding company environment to an operating company, and it was not easy, but she was always there. So, I mean all the board support was a function of us working together with Rob and with the chair and there was a lot of it, a lot of issues to do, as well as she was there to support the Development Corporation, too.

So, I think I can just keep adding wave after wave. We had a number of - Ric Seely, sorry I was overlooking Ric Seely and Les Boisvert. They had been originally in the energy group with Hector, and there was restructuring. Les brought a very stable, no-nonsense approach to things and had excellent credibility with operating and maintaining a lot of things across the system, a great wealth of knowledge about all the assets that were there, could always be counted on to solve a problem. And Ric, a lot of energy to do some different things and a business orientation and well respected in the system control work that he had grown up and built up. So, it was a real mix-and-match job in a way, because everybody came from completely different backgrounds, and some people were seen as "government people" and others had come out of the private sector, and we all had different professional backgrounds and work careers and stuff, and we were just thrown together in a way by circumstances; and out of that, built a team around us.

Dobrowolsky: It sounds like - well I'm still astounded that the power stayed on, the whole incidents around the night of the fire and the subsequent days; but the more I've worked on this project, the more I realize that, although that was a primary achievement as a result of the fire, it really was one thing amongst a great range of things that were happening and new developments and challenges, and it's very impressive to hear how well everyone seems to have come out of this and what they have created.

Sinclair: Yes, I think, looking back, which you were asking me earlier, you never quite know how much of this is thought through and planned. You'd like to always believe that; but we were really, at one level, doing one gigantic project with a whole bunch of elements, and basically there were people who were I mean we all had plans to work with the supportive thinking and stuff and where we were going and resource-allocated; but basically each of us had our portfolio of responsibilities, and Rob McWilliam was the conductor and the orchestrator, and we all headed off; but at the same time, we managed to find the time to do the webbing, because we collaborated amongst ourselves just as a way of doing business, one, because it was necessary. You had to take advantage of peoples' knowledge. You didn't have time to say, "Well, I'll go find someone else, or I'll figure this out for myself." You had to take advantage of strengths and run with them. So some of that speaks to unique kinds of leadership skills in periods of time that

some people never encounter in their entire career, let alone in a short cycle of years like that. So, it speaks to the dedication of some people, along with their very unique skills, to navigate in the kind of environment we were operating in.

Dobrowolsky: Well, I can't think of anything more to ask, unless you can think of any final words, but this has been really excellent.

Sinclair: I think, from my perspective, energy is a pretty central element for people and for communities, and pretty much everything depends upon it nowadays, and it needs to be paid attention to, and I think everybody does. Ratepayers give feedback, regulators pay attention, governments pay attention and that's the lifeblood, I think, of keeping the growth happening, as opposed to things tapering off and not pushing the envelope anymore. But I think the ingredients have been there and we've gone on to do many other things since '98, '99 and the aftermath of the fire and to create some other new things and stuff like that that are here today and will be there tomorrow. But I think, you look back, the big part of the team that was created in '97/98 is still there, working for Yukon people in Yukon Energy, and they should be a proud group of people.

Dobrowolsky: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Doug Smith

Doug Smith is superintendent of operations and maintenance for the Yukon Electrical Company Limited. As leadhand of the linemen, he played a key role both during the fire and during the succeeding weeks of salvage and rebuilding.

The second truck was us with our personnel in the field for the distribution side, saying, "Okay, open this switch. Close this switch." Because as [Guy Morgan] is going through a diesel plant, we've got to have another way to get out there so that the guy in the diesel plant, as he's doing his job, the guy in the field is opening the right switch and taking the reactor on and off...

Recorded June 17, 2003 at YECL Complex, Tungsten Road, Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Mr. Smith, 20 September 2003. Additional information in [square brackets].

Side A

Dobrowolsky: It's June the 17th, 2003. I'm speaking with Doug Smith at the Yukon Electrical Complex in Whitehorse; we're going to be talking about the big fire at the Whitehorse generating plant back in 1997. And maybe I can ask you when and where you were born.

Smith: I was born in 1960 in Lacombe, Alberta.

Dobrowolsky: And when did you move to the Yukon?

Smith: Twelve years ago.

Dobrowolsky: And was that through work?

Smith: Yes, that was a transfer.

Dobrowolsky: So, before then you had been working –

Smith: For ATCO in Alberta in Fort McMurray and in Edmonton.

Dobrowolsky: Okay. Well, maybe you can just tell me a little bit about the jobs that you've held in the electrical industry.

Smith: Okay, I started off as an apprentice lineman and worked up into a journeyman lineman, went into leadhead, project coordination and felt that I liked operations and maintenance. So, I swung over in that side as a supervisor, and then, into superintendent, and that's where I'm at today. [DS later stated that he had 15 years of experience in Alberta.]

Dobrowolsky: And all this has been for ATCO all along?

Smith: Correct.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you moved up to the Yukon 12 years ago, what were you doing at that time?

Smith: As a leadhand. For the linemen.

Dobrowolsky: And what does that mean?

Smith: What does that mean? That means that we basically look after everything that takes off from the generator plant, everything that's in the air, substations, wires. That's basically what it looks like. So, the guys who are out there climbing, we'd be the guys out there guiding them. "We're going to do this today. We'll do that tomorrow. This is why. This is how come."

Dobrowolsky: So, you're setting up the schedules and the work plan, and then, troubleshooting, I guess a little bit?

Smith: Yes, oh, yes, that's the major part of it on the operations side is the troubleshooting where you try to get them up to speed, and that's your main function as a leadhand is if they can't figure it out, find somebody that can.

Dobrowolsky: So, you're also doing training?

Smith: Yes. We do it, and we also do it Outside, but we're responsible for the on-hands training and who does what and what their qualifications are and "Can they get up there and tangle in it or not?" That's how we look at it.

Dobrowolsky: So, how big a crew would you have been responsible for?

Smith: It was seven men at the time then.

Dobrowolsky: And this would have been for the Whitehorse area or –

Smith: Correct, and then we had our outlying areas. That would have been Watson Lake and Haines Junction, Dawson City and all of that. It was all one combined at the time. So, what we looked after was all the transmission lines, and then, all of the distribution in Whitehorse and the outlying areas that didn't have representatives out there, Pelly, Stewart, Carmacks; we'd cover all them from Whitehorse. Dawson, Mayo, Watson Lake and Haines Junction were all manned, and Beaver Creek, and a few of them had temporary plant operators (?) so to speak.

Dobrowolsky: So, you must have been – well, I guess you wouldn't have been on the road so much as that you had lots to do around Whitehorse?

Smith: Yes, and you know, there was a fair bit of roadwork with the transmission lines and that, making sure that the one from Aishihik to Haines Junction and Aishihik back to here and from here to Faro, so there was a bit of roadwork.

Dobrowolsky: And then, when you're saying your responsible for everything in the air, so this is kind of from the substations to –

Smith: Yes, we kind of have an inter-metering point there that we'll take point of delivery from. So, when we were all one company, we would have our generation people at the generation that's right on site, and they would look after the generation in Aishihik, and we would look after the wires, or distribution end of it. They bring it to a point, and we'll take it out and distribute it so to speak.

Dobrowolsky: Okay. So, this is a combination of servicing existing poles and lines, and then, any new installation that might be required?

Smith: Correct, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And you're the guys they call when a raven flies into a breaker?

Smith: Correct, that's how it works, yes. If the lights go out, it will either be a generation problem or a distribution problem. That's the way they look at it, eh, depending which area it is. If they can't generate, well, then they've got to fix it at their end; and if they can generate and we can't keep it online, then we've got something on the lines. That's the simple way to look at it.

Dobrowolsky: Okay. So, this is what you would have been doing in the fall of 1997?

Smith: That's exactly what we were doing, yes.

Dobrowolsky: And you had an office at the generating plant or – ?

Smith: No, we had one in our complex here.

Dobrowolsky: Here in the industrial area?

Smith: Yes. That's correct.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me how you heard about the fire.

Smith: Okay. I received a call from Guy Morgan really early in the morning regarding – pretty excited he was. We talked many, many days on many, many outages; and this one he was certainly excited on, “Get over here right away,” were the words.

And he was the leadhand for the generation site, for the plant operators, eh. ... We had received a call from Guy Morgan, basically stating, “Somebody get the hell over here now.” I could tell by his voice that we had something on the go. The word “fire” was mentioned, but you never really envisioned the whole building being on fire. The shortest cut for me from Riverdale was across the dam. So, that was the way I went, and it wasn't very long before I got down the road on Alesk, and you could see the flames coming out of the plant. So, I definitely knew we had

something on the go. And when I had talked with Morgan on the phone, he had indicated that him and Mike Hannah were still on dispatch, but they didn't know for how long.

So, when I showed up on site –

Dobrowolsky: So, by “on dispatch”, do you mean in the SCADA room in –

Smith: In the SCADA Control Centre, yes, that's correct. So, once I realized where they were at and that they were the only two that were on site, certainly with the flames you could understand that, “Well, this isn't your typical transformer fire.”

So, I got across the dam. I ran up the stairs to the SCADA Control Centre.

Myself, ran up the stairs to where the Control Centre was, completely engulfed in smoke to the point that it was just hot. So, I did the quick door thing, and there was no way in hell I was opening it. I still thought that we had two men inside there.

So, I come back down the stairs, still not clear, calling them on the radio. No answer, because now they've moved to higher ground so to speak, away from the fire. Probably within 10 minutes, knowing that I can't get in the building without not getting out, within 10 minutes we probably had the fire department on site within a half an hour that they were now coming around and checking propane and that. We still hadn't – within the first 10 minutes, I still hadn't found Morgan until I come back down the stairs, and then I heard him on the radio, yelling, “Doug, Doug, Doug, we're over here. We're over here.”

So, by the time the firemen got on site, which was – it took a bit of a while, but it wasn't that long, there wasn't much anybody could do; because we didn't know what we had. We knew that we had a system that was partially energized. We knew that we had a few bells and whistles that were going off as far as alarms and that; but we did not know what we had, and we couldn't see what we had, which was very strange for us.

Dobrowolsky: You mean by being cut off from the Control Centre, you don't know what the components –

Smith: You can't see what's open. You know, do we need the reactor in Faro? What do we need to open? Where is it affecting? How far is it going to go; because once it goes, it's probably going to be a long time before we could pick it back up. So, we looked at it.

Once I got with Morgan, then we were very quick to steer the firemen up the stairs to try and save that room, but there was no hope in hell by the time they got there. It was pretty much engulfed, and I think the next thing that we worried about was all our fuel containment that we had around there. There was propane tanks. We had diesel fuel that needed to be shut off. There was diesel fuel lines that I'm sure we were finding as we were moving through to explain to the fire department, because they're looking at where to go.

We know, once we got the fire department on the site, our concern was the fire, and we were certainly helping. We had to pull planks all along the dam to get the firemen along the dam to physically spray water on the riverside. So, if you can vision that at the dam.

Dobrowolsky: I have here an older aerial photograph of the Whitehorse generating site, and this is the Hydro Units 1, 2 and 3 where, I believe this photo was taken before they put the office addition on one corner ... So, just before we took a little pause there so I could fish out my plan, you were saying that you were making the site more accessible to the firemen?

Smith: Yes, we had four firemen down at WH 1, 2 and 3, which was, that was the fire, and it was spreading through the roof. There was no getting near it. We needed water and we needed lots of it, and we couldn't get the part that we needed in the far corner where all the combustibles were as far as oil and that.

Dobrowolsky: By "the far corner", can we use a compass direction here maybe?

Smith: Sure.

Dobrowolsky: So, let's say south would be this way [upriver].

Smith: Okay.

Dobrowolsky: This would be north going further downriver. So ...

Smith: We'll call it "southwest" then?

Dobrowolsky: Southeast?

Smith: Southeast, okay, let's go that way. So, on the southeast corner, and basically what there are, is there are railings and ties that come out of there that operate the chutes for the water, how much water comes out and how much water stays out. We had to put planking across there to be able to get the firemen out on there, so that they could spray on the major part of the fire; because fighting it from the pavement wasn't working very well. At the time, there was probably a 12-foot door there, a big bay door; and that was one of the few places that they had to go through to be able to spray. So, I had to get them onto the far end of this for the way the wind was engulfing that building, and all we did was put two-by-eight planks, whatever we could find laying in this parking lot, along these steel girders so that they could walk out physically like a boat dock.

Dobrowolsky: And this is on the downriver side of the plant?

Smith: Yes, of WH 1, 2 and 3.

So, once we established that they were on site, and they were certainly having their hands full and we had our hands full as far as who's doing what, that seemed to be the big issue about 3:30 in the morning. Not enough water, which sounds funny, because the river was right there. So, the

firemen had their chore cut out as far as bringing in pumps, extra hoses. So, there was a lot of running between us, trying to make sure we'd keep the lights on, because there was really nothing we could do at that time, other than to communicate with our outlying areas and say, "Okay, here's what we've got."

Dobrowolsky: So, before – just to backtrack a tiny bit – you have the fire ... I'm just trying to get the order of who came on site. So, it was Mike who called Guy and then, called the fire department. Then Guy, in turn, called a bunch of people including you.

Smith: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And then, you were – who else might have been on site by the time you arrived?

Smith: No one; myself, Mike Hannah and Guy Morgan.

Dobrowolsky: So, the three of you were there when the fire trucks came?

Smith: Correct, and we were also the ones that brought in our management from both generation and distribution side, and that was, you know, Hector and Maissan and John Carroll and them, to bring them in, because how do you tell them that their plant is on fire?

Dobrowolsky: Now, I heard a story about some of the managers were up in Faro at –

Smith: Correct, Boisvert and the boys were up in Faro when they were contacted in the wee hours of the morning.

Dobrowolsky: So, that would be Les Boisvert?

Smith: Les Boisvert was one of them in Faro. Ric Seely was in Faro, and I'm not sure where Hector [Campbell] was. I won't speak on that. But I know for sure Les Boisvert was at the other end. They didn't realize what they had when we talked to them I'm sure, because when they showed up on site, it was definitely a "Holy cow, what have we got here!" But yes, the good portion were down in Faro, looking after things down there.

So, they made a quick trip back; and by the time they got back, we pretty well – we didn't have everything in control, but at least we had the situation under control.

Dobrowolsky: Okay. So, now I understand from talking to [fire chief] Clive Sparks that, of course, the water ended up being a huge issue in fighting that fire; but before that, they had to ensure power was cut off to the building?

Smith: Correct, they were worried about power and any explosives that were around there. So, not only did they have a water issue, which, you know, come afterwards almost; but they had the issue of what are they dealing with. So, I believe he had two men – two that I recall anyways that were trying to get a circumference of "Gees, there's a propane tank there. We need to –" You

know, because we're diverting our water to where do we think we need it. We certainly don't want a diesel tank blowing up or a propane tank. So, they had their issues with that.

Dobrowolsky: So, these were all fuel sources in the vicinity of the plant that you were either trying to move or isolate somehow?

Smith: Yes, both on the – I'd say on the south and on the west side of WH 1, 2 and 3; and these are not just your small propane bottles. They're the 250-gallon tanks and 1000-gallon tanks. So, he – Clive certainly had his work cut out. I don't think he had any men who were hurt, but he certainly had some exhausted men by the time he was done that.

Dobrowolsky: Yes. And what about the whole issue of ensuring that power was cut off to the plant, do you know who looked after that?

Smith: Me and Morgan pretty well – we looked after the lights period back then so to speak. We had supervisors and that, but we looked after it; so we chopped it down in the sections that we needed to. And at the time, there was a few different lines because this was getting in the process when we were going to upgrade this end of the substation. So, basically what we did –

Dobrowolsky: So, by “this end of the substation”, you mean the north side or –

Smith: Yes, we'll say the north side here, okay. So, basically what we did was we assessed – Guy Morgan and I assessed it as we went, and we decided that the worst thing we could do is get into a cascading effect where we started knocking things off. We knew we had to kill lines. We would have preferred not to, is the way we looked at it. But we certainly knew – and that's basically what we had to do was to ensure that everything that was in here was de-energized. The problem that we had was that we didn't know, from the main control structures, what was melted and fused together and might cause something else to be.

So, we basically took it step-by-step; and we realized that, well, this stuff isn't going to work. So, we're going to have to kill the main line on this side of the bus or this substation. It's on the north side there. And that's pretty well the main attraction for Whitehorse is that substation that can take it and distribute it.

The second problem we had as we started to knock this off, we don't know what we're doing with vars and things like that, because we can't see any more what our engines are doing and –

Dobrowolsky: Sorry, “vars”?

Smith: “Vars”, it's just something that I'm sure Guy Morgan must have talked to you about keeping the reactor on in Faro and that. That's part of what that reactor and things are there for is to stabilize the other units out there; and depending on if you need it to hold the vars or to release. All it is, is it's just an engine that doesn't like – too many vars is not good for us in the electrical system.

So, our job, between Morgan and I, was to make sure that we didn't cause any more confusion in the rest of the world, because there was lots of confusion as there was as to "What does this mean for us for the next day or two? Who is going to make the call of what to shut off?" And basically that night, there wasn't a whole lot of people around there except for me and Morgan who could I understand what we need to shut off and when we needed to shut it off; and the big thing was for these guys to get in there and everything popping and hissing inside. It took a while for everybody to get a comfort level where "We don't think we've got any more hazards in there and away we go."

But it was unstoppable I think for the first two hours. We were probably on site – I don't have my daybook right here, but we were probably on site an hour before we got a lot of people moving. And there was no stopping it. I mean, it was huge.

So, by the time they got on site and realized where they were at – and you've got to understand that –

Dobrowolsky: So, by the time the fire people got on site or the ...

Smith: By the time – I'd say by the time the key fire people got on site and the key management people from our end to be able to decide, well what's worth saving and what's not. You've got to I understand that Clive and his gentlemen had a very complicated time on this, because they can only fight it from one side basically. That's all they could do. Once we got the smoke cleared and we could get them down onto this access, it certainly helped; but there's no going near the building, because the roof is collapsing as you're trying –

Dobrowolsky: So, when the fire vehicle came in, I assume they would have come in on this easterly road, around on the north side of the substation and around here? So, you're saying that the smoke was such a hazard that they couldn't actually take this further road going south of the generating plant and around to the behind?

Smith: Correct, because they wouldn't have been able to position down in there for the first bit. You know, it's not exactly daylight, typical daylight with all that stuff flowing in the air. So, they had concerns. They had their big paramedic emergency response unit on site for their guys for oxygen and that, and it was smoky. I mean, the boys were [coming in?]* pretty charcoaled. That's why we were helping them initially haul stuff in so that they could get access on the water, because, you know, there's a hell of a lot of work going on there, and the smoke is happening.

Once they got it died down, then they were able to come in from this side, but still bear in mind that, you know, they basically only had two sides they could fight that from, as opposed to being able to get to all angles.

Dobrowolsky: Which is essentially this parking lot to the west, –

Smith: This is where everything took place.

Dobrowolsky: – and then, around to the south of the building?

Smith: Yes, and over here would have been their auxiliary people that went over, and they kept all their main equipment in here. All their pumps we hauled down.

Dobrowolsky: This would be on the north side in that parking lot?

Smith: Correct, yes. And that was a major headquarters for them until well into the next couple of days, until 3:00 for sure they were there, heavy duty, and then, they started to pull some of the equipment off once we got it into a smoulder. The roof, you've got to envision the roof is all engulfed in flames, and it's all collapsing around these guys. There is more oil and fuel and stuff inside that building than one would anticipate, and then, they've got the different levels; because we definitely have our turbines down on the floor there where they're near to the water so to speak.

So, there was – they had their hands full, and we had ours full; and I think the first two hours was key in getting all the players and who was going to do what, because as you can envision, there wasn't very much site control on this site until Guy Morgan and myself started to establish “Well, we're going to take control of things over here.”

We set up two trucks that we could communicate. We had SAT phones in them trucks. We had guys locked on the SAT phones in Faro so that we could see what the reactor was doing at that end to help us compensate at this end, because if we lost it, who knows what it looks like to pick it up when you can't physically see, “Okay, well that's closed, let's go to the next step.” It's all being –

Dobrowolsky: Because you no longer have the monitors, so you have to kind of use the map in your head.

Smith: Head, and you've got to use the eyes of the guys in the field, eh, and that was the biggest thing. Communication has always been big. I mean, wars have been lost ...

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so we're back to the fire. You were telling me how you set up two trucks for communications. Now, I've heard about how Guy had set up in one truck, and he was talking to – well, apparently Mike Hannah had moved on to WH 4, which is what I think of as the fourth wheel. And he was communicating with the fellow in Aishihik, and in turn, communicating with Guy, who was communicating to the diesel plant in Faro.

Smith: Correct, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Now, what was happening in the second truck?

Smith: Well, the second truck was us with our personnel in the field for the distribution side, saying, “Okay, open this switch. Close this switch.” Because as he's going through a diesel plant, we've got to have another way to get out there so that the guy in the diesel plant, as he's doing his job, the guy in the field is opening the right switch and taking the reactor on and off; and who's going to do what, because what we had to do was then establish a whole new command centre out of a book.

Here's your map. Everything that you used to have in computers, aids, lights, whistles, bells, horns, they're not there any more. So, you're relying on the guy in Aishihik to say, "Well, gee, I'm having problems here," and everybody's nerves are way up; because nobody knows really what's happened. It's probably 4:30 to 6:30 in the morning, in that vicinity when it starts, when we know we're going to have our morning peak load so to speak and making sure that all our players are in tune, making sure we're going to have rested players for the next day...

What the two trucks did was one handled the distribution. That would be my job. And one handled the generation side, which was Guy Morgan's job, and we worked hand-in-hand to say, "Okay, we're going to dump this, but we're going to pick this up; and we're going to get ready if we have to rotate," because who knows what this – this is still not done causing us grief. Because everything that goes from WH 1, 2 and 3 ties into the main control centre. So, who knows what it looks like? And all we knew, by probably 6:30, 7:30 in the morning, was that there's a lot of work ahead of us here, no doubt.

Dobrowolsky: Now, so after you arrived, you mentioned you had called some of your managers.

Smith: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: I should maybe, just for the record, get some names here.

Smith: John Carroll was one of them, and Harvey Kerslake was another one. What John Carroll did was he had to go through – John Carroll handled it all as far as a general manager's perspective. Sid Mathur was our manager. What Kerslake was, he was the general manager pre to John Carroll. So, it wasn't actually that Harvey was in the loop, but he would come in at the end of the day, because as you know, we were getting ready for the big split; and we weren't very far away from splitting the two assets when all of this transpired. So, what we did was from our distribution point of view, we brought our people on site. At the time, John Carroll was overseeing both Yukon Energy and [YECL]. So, he was kind of key in what was going to happen as far as insurance, who was going to drive when they passed the insurance file over to [Don] Willems and that. So, Carroll was kind of instrumental in saying, "Well, I'm going to have to be the guy that talks to Edmonton to see what we do for this and what reserves do we have? What can we have?"

Carroll was the one who lined us – we jettied in eight ATCO electric linemen right away, brought in ATCO's Lear jet and dropped these guys off. We brought in three engineers. And that would be basically what we needed in the morning was "Here's what we've got," and let's face it, anybody who we phoned on the management side to say, "We've got a hell of a fire here" didn't quite see it as – you know, they weren't rushing as they would have if they knew what we had. There was nothing they could do anyways.

So, that's what we did. We brought everybody on site, who was going to do what; and basically our job was we needed to re-establish some way of knowing what we got open out there, because if we would have got into a wind storm or something else would have melted down the main control centre. Right now we haven't lost everything, but we've lost a major portion of the generation that we know we're going to need.

Dobrowolsky: So, you would have been, as well as, again, calling in the managers who had been dealing with these big overview issues and what long-term or extra resources do we need; would you have also been calling in some of your field crew?

Smith: Yes. Once we made the initial calls, because they're very quick calls, "Hurry up, we've got a fire," probably we had what we needed called in within the first hour; but people straggled in. There's those that come very fast, and there's those who said, "Well, gees, it can't be that much." And some of these guys aren't used to waking up at two o'clock in the morning for a fire. They don't do that.

So, once we called them in and we had our men on site, the biggest thing for us was keeping the two trucks, because everybody wants to come. It's a free-for-all. We've got people coming to look for work already and the smoke isn't out. There were people on the site that – we didn't have the gate locked as to who was coming in. All this took time as the day went on to say, "Well, we've got this," and I recall –

Dobrowolsky: So, there was no initial security at the gate or traffic control?

Smith: Yes, it was just too early –

Dobrowolsky: There was no time for that.

Smith: Yes, it was too early in the game to get into that.

[Rob] McWilliams [YDC President], I recall him and John Carroll showing up probably after 8:30 once they'd talked to their people, and we just basically put out a 100-foot circle that nobody could get inside them trucks. We had what we needed kind of, radios, SAT phones and maps were the big things that we were scrabbling for.

Dobrowolsky: And where were those?

Smith: We would carry our distribution maps; but as far as the generation maps, a lot of that was in the fire, eh; and a lot we had in our complex building, but a lot of that was in the fire; and that was one of the struggles is, "What are we going to do for the –" You know, you're not used to losing everything that you have. "Well, I'll just get another copy of it."

So, we had a real problem as the day went on with people coming in the site and who's doing what, because we're not exactly running the utility the way it should be run so to speak. Whatever needs to be cut open, we're cutting open. It's not just a matter of flicking switches any more. You're not physically cutting with hotline cutters and taking stuff out. That's the best that we can do here. Okay, that'll isolate it so Clive can get in from this angle."

Dobrowolsky: Sorry, you just used a term, "physically cutting with hotline cutters," this is like splicing wires?

Smith: The exact opposite, we're actually cutting them open so that we have a physical opening. We don't necessarily build a system to have a fire here so that we can switch this, this and this. So, you wouldn't have six plug-ins here just because you might lose one. The theory is that you would replace this. So, there were a lot of places that we didn't have switches that we could operate.

Dobrowolsky: And no redundancies.

Smith: Correct. So, it was just like going back to the early days where all you're going to do is cut it open, get it clear. If you don't need to take an outage, that's good, because we won't shake these units up; and that was the biggest thing that we had. Any little disturbance would affect us, whereas before we would see it, and we'd say, "Okay, we're going to put everything over here on Mac" or "We're going to put everything on the Takhini Switching Station."

Dobrowolsky: "Mac"?

Smith: MacIntyre Switching Station; so that's the part that stands out the most is not having the eyes or the maps to be able to – so, you're relying on your people.

Dobrowolsky: You're operating blind; and with all these seeing-eye dogs out there.

Smith: Correct, that's what you're doing, and you're saying, "Okay – " And we had different codes. We'd take the code red meant that all of our guys, the eight of our men, knew which substations to hit so we could shed load really fast so that we may not trip off the main units; and that's what Guy would do. He would be our eyes for us, because he's got [Mike] Hannah there. We had Bill Cullin who worked for us in Faro on distribution, but yet he was acting as a bit of a generation guy for us to be able to tell us that "The reactor is going off" and "It is coming back on," to stabilize the other units; because you can't just start a unit and hook the wires on. You've got to keep everything balanced.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, I just want to clarify the big picture. My understanding, please correct me if I'm wrong, is that the big task in all of this was to switch control over to Aishihik, take a whole bunch of the heavy machinery and stuff at the Faro mine off line so it's not going to put too much of a demand on the system.

Smith: Yes, correct.

Dobrowolsky: And ensure that you have enough power for when people start getting out of bed and you have that big surge when the stoves and the showers and the all that's happening.

Smith: Because you don't want six or seven surges, one from Faro – you don't want all of that at once. So, the whole mission of the game was to treat this – what we call the "treating it" as delicately as we could. If anybody moved any load, they would communicate that. We did no planned switching. We did no unplanned switching. We patrolled everything we could, every day we could, to make sure that there wasn't going to be that freaky tree that falls on the line or "What can we do over here."

Dobrowolsky: So, by “patrol,” this is actually driving along and looking at wires?

Smith: Physically patrolling, you know, quad, foot, whatever it takes, on the main feeders; and I think that’s one important thing that you see is the power system kind of goes in three stages. It’ll have the transmission, the high voltage, the 138 kv they call it. They’ll step it down to a 34 kv that we grab out of MacIntyre and that S-150 where your dam fire was. And then, we step that down again into lower voltages, 25,000 kv, 17-7, 19-9, 14-4; but the main objective is to keep the big stuff on so that you can feed it out to the little stuff. So, when we say we’re patrolling, we’re not physically patrolling every pole downtown, but we’re patrolling everything that we call, that’s on the loop, so to speak, look at the bigger voltages, the 34 and the 138.

Dobrowolsky: So, it’s kind of like you have this mother ship, which in turn feeds down to these satellites of decreasing power?

Smith: Yes, good way to look at it, and what happens is if one of them satellites isn’t in tune, then it causes a kaffuffle, let’s say, in the rest, and it’s what we call a “cascading effect”. So, it was very important that we didn’t have anybody, I mean cranes or anything, working on power lines, anything that would cause us a major bump, especially that day until we got established and we understood, “Okay, Aishihik can do that for us. Mike Hannah, he can do that for us. Bill Cullin can do that for us in Faro, dadadada.” And that’s all we were doing, was keeping the main system on, and we felt if we could keep that, we could sustain – because we knew we’d done it in the past.

Trying to do that when you don't know how much you're putting out on these fields is a bit tricky. So, you're back to looking at all your cheat-sheets, going, “Well, gees, Riverdale is only three meg over here, and there’s 10 meg over there.” But we looked at streetlights. We looked at anything that we could. If we had to shed, what could we do?

Dobrowolsky: So, first you have, you know, your very broad “How can we take the power that was lost from these three [hydro units] and reorganize the system so we can still keep the lights on in the Yukon? But a lot of what you’re telling me right now is what you’re having to do in the immediate days and weeks after to make sure that things stay stable, or was that still in that initial emergency period?

Smith: In the initial, it was keeping everything stable. That's why we were very instrumental in that parking lot, me and Guy Morgan, is keeping the control of who's doing what. “Don’t anybody touch anything until we know what we’re touching.”

And remember in the first six, seven hours, everybody’s pretty pumped up. Like, “Holy man this fire, gee, what are we going to do.” And then it seemed like once we got to the eight o’clock shift we’ll call it, we call it “the breakfast club,” once we got to that eight o’clock shift, there seemed to be a lot more players involved, and that became a lot easier but more difficult in the sense that now you’ve got 50 people who have questions, and they all want to know, “Well, how’s the system? What’s the system look like?” And what do you really tell them about it. “We lost three major units” and all the cable tracking and everything that goes to that, because the units have to

be able to push that power out on some fairly huge cables, and they're not made for fire unfortunately.

So, the first day, we worried about that hugely. Then after that we were into a routine. I think it would be safe to say that we were in a pretty good routine that said, "Okay, Code Red, everybody just go," you don't even ask; and what that was for was partly in the fact that in a blackout, we're going to have a heck of a time picking up things. And we knew already from the first go-around that communication wasn't a luxury that we had always had where you've got 16 different channels you can use. So, that was a big factor.

Dobrowolsky: Sixteen channels of radio or of –

Smith: Of mobile anything, and we had lost a lot of that in the communication end, which didn't permit us to communicate with the luxury, the way we used to. So, for instance, from 4:30 until 8:30 in the morning, we had Faro locked on on a SAT phone, because that was the only way we could communicate; but we needed that reactor to go off and bring it back on to stabilize the load. That's kind of what it does is it keeps the engines at a nice, stable rate so to speak.

In the days to come, it was easier, but it became more tiring to understand, "Well, how far can we go today and what does it look like?" And you know what it's like after the fire's been gone, for 80 percent of the people the fire is over, except for the Darlenes [Morgan] and that who had to clean the records, and who's going to find this and "I've lost this." So, after the initial two days, after 48 hours, I think we were pretty stable. Certainly concerned. I think it was 48 days before anybody actually rested, but we had it so that we could talk to who we needed to, and we were busy. Every day we would make improvements and say, "Okay, here's a backup over here." [Ron] Bianowsky and Bob Burrell at the phones, physically we would have to dig in a whole new line to patch through; and you wished that you could just patch it in and everything's going to work, but you know how it goes. "Gees, this phone didn't work. That doesn't work." And when you lose your communication lines, to us it's more than just a phone line. It's our actual digital lines that are feeding us info. So, that's the way I looked at it.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, yes, it's quite remarkable. You used a term before, "Code Red."

Smith: What we developed – once we realized what we had and the men that we had, because remember jetting in people was all right, but it didn't do us a lot of good because they're very blind to the system.

Dobrowolsky: They don't have the intimate knowledge of the guys in the field.

Smith: Correct, and in the Yukon you're running a different system than a lot of the world sees. A lot of the world sees what we call an "infinite bus" or an "infinite grid". What that means is if I'm in Alberta, I can grab power from Saskatchewan or Manitoba. In the Yukon, you don't have that ability. Therefore, you don't have the push on your system to be able to blow the faults away and get them the heck off. So, when we lose these units, we also lose the ability to be able to keep a nice, good flow through. You can't just grab another switch. Everything is much more

delicate. In Alberta we would move 20 megawatts around on a switch. In the Yukon you don't move much more than 2.4 megawatts because of what it does to the system.

So, what we couldn't have happen is we couldn't have an unknown fault. How easy would that be? Very easy because we can't see anything, other than what we can visually see with our eyes. So, that was our initial job was to keep steady, smooth, everything flowing smooth and anything that broke – There were lots of pieces of equipment. John Greer, for example, I imagine you talked to him a little bit.

Dobrowolsky: He's on my list. I haven't got to him yet.

Smith: You know, I recall being up in the wheelhouse with him and helping him with the motor and trying to manually turn these to open and close, you know, in the middle of the night, where you're walking up these stairs with pumps and you've got –

Dobrowolsky: So, we're looking – is this the –

Smith: We're now looking at the penstock for Units 1, 2 and 3, I believe.

Dobrowolsky: I see, okay, so this is up in this little reservoir area –

Smith: Correct.

Dobrowolsky: – or big reservoir area?

Smith: And what they needed to do is they needed to – there is basically a small wheel in there that controls a gate, for lack of a better explanation; and these were the things that we would have to do above and beyond just playing with the wires because the wires is what we're good at; but this other stuff we don't usually do. So, I can recall helping John Greer trying to get these gates open, and there's no way in heck – trying to weld and cut pieces so we can get them open and get them closed.

Dobrowolsky: Sorry about that, we weren't recording, and you were just explaining – we were just looking at this useful little diagram on this pamphlet that shows the gates that control the water supply to the generator –

Smith: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: – and how you have now lost your what? electronic controls or

Smith: We've got ourselves into a position, because of what we lost electronically, that we now have to manually operate this. That consisted of operating equipment that may not have been operated in a long time, as we found a lot of pieces wouldn't move on the service gate, where it would not go up and down without a lot of force. So, it was actually being done manually there for a few days. And like I say, the stairs just to get to that building is a hoof-and-a-half straight up the embankment is what it is; because like you said earlier, it's a bit of a holdback for the dam

overflow. So, you make 11 trips up them stairs just with the pieces that you have, and you're in a hurry because they need that open, you're not –

Dobrowolsky: Puff-puff.

Smith: Many, many nights puff-puff. But, you know, that was one of the interesting things is all of the pieces that it affected in the different areas, in Aishihik. You know, it wasn't just a case of "Well, we'll move everything to Aishihik." We move it to Aishihik, and "Gees, we've got this problem here with Number 1. We've got to hurry up, and somebody better get out there to do this." So, it was, everybody was –

Dobrowolsky: Lots of equalizing things around.

Smith: Everybody was kicking in, that's right.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me how much sleep you got that first night?

Smith: Not very much.

Dobrowolsky: How long were you on the site the day of the fire?

Smith: Around two o'clock in the morning we began, and I think at three o'clock the next morning we were home. We were back up at 6:00, because we were having people come in. our insurance adjusters came in that Saturday. They wanted to have a big powwow, and once they came in, then they kind of started to drive. Their interest is to get this back up and running now, and that's when a lot of things started to come together. They were very clear who's going to do what and when we're going to do it, and that's kind of where the John Carrolls and the Les Boisverts and them guys kind of helped direct but they're at the mercy of the adjuster.

For 48 days we never took a day off, and I don't think we worked under 16 hours to be perfectly blunt; and then, after the 48th day is when they started to commission some of this, and then, we started –

Dobrowolsky: And this is actually some of the rebuilding.

Smith: And having the right bodies; the contracts have now gone out. So, there's a contract for "X" amount of bodies to come in and clean up the debris. We spent four days pumping water out of WH 1, 2 and 3, just for an example of how much we had to do before we could actually get people inside the building.

Dobrowolsky: And I understand, of course, the water would have been contaminated by all the fuel. So, it wasn't just a matter of putting it in the river.

Smith: Correct, no.

Dobrowolsky: You had to actually take it –

Smith: Physically suck it into tankers, filter what we could; and like you say, there was debris of everything in that. And it was just a whole lot of water before anything could move.

Dobrowolsky: And then what, it would be brought to the dump? or –

Smith: It was brought out, and it was put into – where did they put it into? Sort of like a holding tank, and then, I don't know where it went from there; but certainly a lot of energy and a lot of man hours spent just in that plant area, sucking water out from the different areas that it needed to be.

Big pumps, and they were going as hard as they could; and that was the important thing, eh. It seemed like, you know, once 35, 40 days went by, the resources started to come in pretty high, that “These guys are going to do this” so that we could get back to our jobs now. Me and Morgan, we could run the system, as opposed to have to run the system, “Who’s pumping water? Where did this go? We need a transformer over here.”

And our system constrains us at times, because we have weak links; and they’re not weak as far as causing any problems in a normal situation. But because of the cost and what we had to pass on to the people who are paying the bills and so on and so on, we don’t necessarily build our whole system so it can feed New York City; and as you start taking away a few of these lines in the substation at the site, you’ve now restricted yourself, and you can’t use both lines going across into Riverdale. You can only use one. And as you know, the bigger the load, the hotter everything gets; and there’s places that when it was built it wasn’t warranted to spend the megabucks on it to make it the topnotch Cadillac system. And they definitely watch us in the regulatory world that we’re not buying new shirts all the time. We’re mending the ones that we have. So, that was the part that I don't think a lot of people saw a lot, you know, “Gees the fire is three weeks old.” We still have these weak links out there that we weren’t used to pushing a big load through the back doors so to speak is the way we looked at it.

So, a lot went on for the first 48 days, and then after that it seemed to mellow out quite a bit. You know, not everybody went that hard, but there were certainly the Morgans and the Greers. I don't know who else I can think of.

Dobrowolsky: The Smiths.

Smith: The Smiths; and that was the part that was the ongoing part, eh, “What does it look like? Who’s coming in?” These guys have a lot of strangers on site now. I’m trying to think who came in from Alberta to do the turbines and that, and there was people from Quebec for the wire. So, it’s kind of you’re back there on the system, but you’ve still got a responsibility; because each time these guys are working, they’re working on a piece of the system, or they need a piece isolated. “We’ve got to take this out so we can run the cables inside this (? inaudible)” And our codes don’t allow us – a lot of people think, “Well, you just go ahead.” And our codes make us have a vertical separation from an energized and exposed part if we’re not rubber-gloved-up and blah, blah, blah. So, when you look at the picture right now, it looks pretty sweet and simple, you just cut a few lines and away you go; but there was a lot more that was underground. There was a lot more cleanup, I think, than anybody ever thought. I think Darlene Morgan with the paper

there and the cleanup; they had people over there for days going through “What’s good, what’s not good”.

And one must bear in mind that at that time, everything that belonged there was going back there, because there was going to be a transfer between the two utilities’ assets so to speak. So, it wasn’t exactly like it was just we had our – there was a lot of stuff that was already moved. There was stuff that I’m sure they didn’t even know they had yet in boxes, and there was nothing left in their main control centre that they could use. I think Mike Hannah even – yes, I think he even lost little things, like little cards and stuff. There was nothing left in there.

Dobrowolsky: He was talking about how he had an antique coin collection in his locker.

Smith: Is that right?

Dobrowolsky: And apparently some firemen actually helped him dig to where the locker was and get out his belongings, and there was, like, I don’t know, a ring belonging to a relative that was a gold blob.

Smith: Correct.

Dobrowolsky: And the coins were no longer distinguishable as coins.

Smith: So, it was, you know, what Mike Hannah must have saw the first, because he was sitting there all night, you know, “Another night, here we go.” And bing, bang, boom, within the morning, that was pretty much shut down; and how we operated was pretty well night and day is the way I looked at it.

Dobrowolsky: So, how did you deal with the logistics? You mentioned you were responsible for the Whitehorse crew of seven men.

Smith: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And now, of course, there’s that much demand on your resources. How did you cope with that whole thing of shifts and extra people in the field?

Smith: Well, the first thing we did was we knew three days into it that we couldn’t keep up. We’re going to have guys burnt out. So, we were lucky at the time, because, you know, we were still ATCO then. We could go back to ATCO and say “Hey.” So, we picked – that’s when the insurance guys were in there Saturday morning and we were all at the downtown office. There were about 40 people in there. That’s when the decisions started to get made a lot faster and very quick decisions. They want the lights on. What do we need to keep them on? We don’t want any more problems. Okay, well, we need men.

So, I brought in eight guys: two that were transmission, linemen; two that were distribution; two that were very good at generation and two that were hotshots. No matter what you put them on, they’re good at it. That’s what we brought in. We tangled these guys up immediately with our

guys and spent half – because our guys were running tired. By Monday morning, they couldn't even hardly move. So, we put the green guys that we flew in, because they have no maps. We have – “Here's our system, but you can only see this in a nutshell.” So, we tangle them up with our guys for a day, and we said, “Get what you can. Here's a city map. Here's what we have for maps. Here's who you need to talk to. Here's what we're going to do.”

Side B

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so you were mentioning how, in large part because of the insurance, you now had access to all these resources. The insurance adjusters they brought in, did they have any particular expertise in utilities or electrical – ?

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Smith: Yes, I would say that these gentlemen, that's what they deal with. They were very accurate in the room of 40 people to know who was pushing the buttons. They were very quick. For example, when they were done that meeting, Guy Morgan and I were responsible for site supervision, because we had asked the question, “Do you even know how many men you've got out there today; because we don't, and we're responsible legally to code for who's on the system, like, If they're on the generation system, then Morgan is responsible; if they're on the distribution –

So, what the insurance people did, just so I don't disillusion you, is that they allowed the movement to start happening; because nobody was really sure “Should we bring in this many men, or should we bring in this many?”

And their questions were very direct. “We want to get it back up and running as soon as we can, like, whatever it takes. What do you need now to help you achieve that?”

We needed rest, and that's what they said, “What do you need for men, then?”

So, we brought in eight linemen. We brought in a couple of engineers, people who could help design fairly quickly; because, as I said, we still had a business to run. I mean, we still had customers out there. So, we can't put all our efforts into the fire, which we had been doing. If you can physically envision that when we think we were going to have a hiccup on the system, we would get our people into Code Red. That is a man in every substation in Whitehorse, along with Guy Morgan's guys watching all of their equipment and waiting and praying like hell that it's not going to go down so that you don't know which way to go or who caused it. That was the biggest thing we were worried about, is what do we do if somebody's out there? How do we know if they're not going to be able to get through, dadadada.

So, what the insurance company did was they kind of laid down the ground rules, and they said that, “We're paying for this.” They seemed very knowledgeable on what it takes to get these hydros back up and running. They knew what they wanted, and they knew what they needed to do immediately. So, once they were done with the cosmetics of “Who needs men? What do we need for site supervision?” then they kind of went into their own room with the senior management and went from there. And I think from my and Guy Morgan's perspective, we kind of got what we needed when we needed it. But bear in mind that every time you jet somebody in,

he's just – he's not quite in tune like your other gentlemen are to know where to go to Shipyards Substation or up to Mount Mac or blah-blah-blah.

Dobrowolsky: So, there is a certain amount of extra work engendered just getting these people trained and up to speed and even finding their way physically around.

Smith: Huge!

That was the biggest key is “Can you do this for us, without us?” Because the ones that we brought in from Alberta, they would get a city map, and we'd tell them, “Okay, go over here on Jeckell Street and turn a left, and there'll be a switching module there.”

So, we had our hands full. Certainly, I don't think there was any shortage of resources as it got going, it was just understanding who's doing what and who's responsible. I'm sure John Carroll wasn't used to having insurance people tell him what to do, and I'm sure there were people on both sides. I know Boisvert was concerned with what his people looked like and how long it would take.

Dobrowolsky: And what does Les Boisvert – what was his position?

Smith: At the time he would have been Guy Morgan's supervisor so to speak, and now I believe he's more on the safety end of things now; but he was head of the operational on the diesel mechanics' side. So Guy kind of looked after the operations, and Les Boisvert kind of looked after the plant. That's the John Greers and things like that, eh. So, there was kind of a break in the mechanics, and Guy Morgan had his five operators, blah-blah-blah. But that's where Les Boisvert was ... I mean, it was a different thing for all of us that all of a sudden now you're taking commands from somebody else but making sure he understands what you're dealing with and do you understand that, “By the way, that guy's pretty tired, and his wife's really sick, and just leave him alone.” so to speak.

So, there were all them things that people never really got to see for the first week that it was pretty huge for Yukon Energy now to be able to pull all of them people together and to manage it when there's an Outside influence. I'm sure Les Boisvert would have something to say about that, because there were a couple of times that he certainly had to let them know they were in the Yukon and not in a big city where there are all the available resources. Just getting cranes and stuff to get in there to tear the roof so that we could let people go in and pump water was an ordeal, to find a crane in the Yukon big enough to reach over that building.

Dobrowolsky: So, the crane would have had to operate from this parking lot, and then be able to extend across –

Smith: Yes, he operated from this parking lot, and he operated it from that parking lot.

Dobrowolsky: So, these are the parking lots on the east and west side of the plant?

Smith: East and west side, correct. And what you see – like, you can see antennas that they have here, communication towers, we physically had to pick them towers off of this bypass road, because there’s just – there’s no height in the Yukon for cranes. So, it’s all them little things that anywhere else, you’d just phone up a 180-foot crane, and he’d come in. If you’ve only got 100 feet, this is how you’re going to have to do it.

So, there was lots of manoeuvring, even with Bob Burrell just jerry-rigging wires here and there; because everybody’s flustered, eh; everybody knows that “Well, if we can’t talk on the radio, who are you going to look at” kind of deal.

Dobrowolsky: Well, just from talking to different people, I’ve really come to think, “Well, if you could run power on adrenalin, there would have been an amazing surge that night!”

Smith: We would have won, that’s right.

(laughter)

Smith: There was a lot there for sure. It was amazing.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were talking about people getting tired and people getting stressed, people working long days without a day off.

Smith: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, talk a little bit about that, just how your crew and all your other coworkers were handling this.

Smith: Well, I think what we did was we kept it in corps, and we kept three or four that we’d run for two weeks hard, and then, we’d kind of back off and grab another two so that we could run them through. The biggest thing was the response time. It wasn’t like a typical “Well, geees the lights are out, and we’ll get there when we get there.” It was more of an urgency that “Gees, right now we’ve got to shift load,” or “Gees, I lost station service at the plant. We can’t see any more” as we were picking little pieces up. So, the first week you don’t really notice it, because you’re thinking, “Gees, there’s a heck of a lot of work there, and what are we going to do? What are we going to do?” So, you’re just trying to get everything set up, getting new offices set up, setting up temporary trailers on site. This is not just a case of pulling a trailer on. Now you’ve got to run power to the trailer and get a computer line.

So, I think a safe way to look at it is we worked them until we thought that they couldn’t do much more, and we’d spin them around and grab a couple more; but we kind of kept a core group. Guy Morgan would have his core group, and I would have three guys that they knew that that’s what they were going to do. They didn’t have any other worries as far as, “This customer is out or this customer needs an underground locator. They’re going to build a fence, and we need to go and expose it.” So, all they had to do was to look at that, and then, trying to get them time-trained, eh, so that any time they had a couple of hours go and sleep because you may not get it tomorrow kind of thing.

So, that's pretty well how we looked at it; and then, like I say, after about 30 days once tenders and things went out and people started moving, it became a bit easier for all the different areas, for John Greer's mechanics. I think it become a little bit easier that at least this was being handled, because there was no such thing that you were just going to handle your department now. "You're now going to suck water out of the bottom here." "Please get a crane, Doug, and we'll help pull off these antennas, and we'll do this and we'll do that." So, it was a lot – and a lot of people wanting to go to work. You know, that's a key thing that I think a lot of people missed, other than being worried, is the amount of people that, "I've got a dump truck. I can come in there. I can come to work."

And nothing could move, until the insurance people said, "Okay, let's put them to do this and put them to do that."

Dobrowolsky: You're talking about local contractors.

Smith: Correct. That was probably the next day between the media and the local people wanting to come see, and then, saying ... I mean, there were gentlemen who owned business here, "I've been trucking for 15 years, and I've been coming in here every day. Why can't I come in here?"

"Sir, we've got strict instructions." Trying to take the media through, because they want to see the guts and the gore and that.

Dobrowolsky: Get the good pictures.

Smith: And you know, them being restricted that they've got to stay on the catwalk, but it's better for us ... So, Guy and I are walking the media through it at the same time, because we have to control what's going out, and that was one of the most important things is "Keep everybody settled." We have a situation where it's not going to kill us so to speak; but you'd be surprised how many people felt that, "Holy, we're in a huge ..."

Dobrowolsky: Well, and people who just don't realize, if the hospital goes out, there is an emergency system there.

Smith: Yes, and all the work in the background. Like I say, you know, we looked at the street lights and shutting all of them. Anything that we could do that would help us if – because we're not thinking – we know we've already lost this. We're thinking if we lose other things in the game, you know, –

Dobrowolsky: What your contingencies are going to be.

Smith: Where can we pull it from and how quick?

Dobrowolsky: But the thing that amazed me about the night of the fire is that there was this corps of people who seemed to know exactly what had to be done, you know, everything from controlling the flow of water up at the dam –

Smith: Yes, I think it was pretty good.

Dobrowolsky: – from immediately rerouting the system; and other people I've talked to, it's not like you had an emergency plan set up for this kind of thing.

Smith: I don't believe we would have. I think we probably do now a lot better than we did then. But that's what we did, that we developed. It was a good thing about this. It makes you look at things. We never looked at restoring the system with two men. We never, ever looked at that because no matter what we do, we would always have bodies on the weekend. Somebody would come and help, because we run a two-man call on the weekend for the wires end; and Guy Morgan would run one man on the desk full time, around the clock. So, we developed a two-man restoration. We never had that before.

Dobrowolsky: A two-man restoration?

Smith: A two-man restoration for a blackout is what we call it, and that means that we physically have to hit these substations, the switching stations, get things clear of the load so they can pick that their unit's running. Then we'll pick up load slowly, because you guys can't just pick everything up and throw everything at the unit, it'll just die. Because once that unit starts a full load, it wants to share with another unit, and that mentality, eh. So, it's kind of like pulling in the harness I guess so to speak.

And what happened out of this is that we developed so many things that the Yukon is miles ahead of even what I see going on in EMO in Saskatchewan and Alberta right now. We've already thought about –

Dobrowolsky: EMO is the Emergency Measures –

Smith: Emergency Measures Organization. In Alberta, they play a fairly instrumental role when things happen and they have to take control of the lights and that, and they'll actually take control of the lights. In this case, never once did we have anybody even wanting to take control of them; and out of that, we had to develop things. How do you put the lights on with two guys, because one has to be over here. So, the other man has to know, especially if we don't have radio communication, because we didn't have a lot after that night for a few days. So that was the key issue, how do you tell a guy up there that he has to open a switch. So, Code Red would say, "Look at, once you're done and you go under that sub, we would physically clip the load with we call a big ammeter." It's not your typical volt metre. It's made for high voltage. We would go in and clip and ensure that that was on. "Okay, that's good," because we would have to chase the disturbance. "Where is it?"

Dobrowolsky: So, this is a new procedure you developed as a result?

Smith: Yes, developed how to restore what we call a "full restoration." We didn't use the words "Code Red", but full restoration under a blackout with all of our people and where would they go. So, that means we were pretty fast at putting it on, because we would have people in the locations; but in a two-man restoration, and that's what we were running into, where our people

were timing out, legally we can only work them so many hours; and you have to be cognizant of that, because if you hurt somebody down the road, they're certainly going to come back and say, "Well, how many hours did that guy work?"

So, that's what we said. We said, "We're going to get ourselves into a situation where we've only got two guys that we can use. So, we're going to have to have a two-man restoration." And all it was was it was sitting down at the table and physically drawing it out if you were constrained like having your hands tied. And you know, we developed some pretty good stuff between me and Morgan as far as – we still use it, as a matter of fact. We said, "Well, we can use this cheat sheet for that." And that's what happens when people – I don't even think half the people realized what they were doing at the time. We were just making sure we got it done, eh so that we can move on to the next step.

Dobrowolsky: Well, I understand a lot of other Canadian utilities were very interested in what happened here.

Smith: Very!

Dobrowolsky: I mean a fire at the beginning of – well, as you're just going into winter and especially, as you say, in this closed system where you can't just buy some power from California or whatever.

(laughter)

Smith: Yes. Your best option is the Military is going to Herc in some units, eh.

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Smith: So, we looked everywhere. We looked at every avenue. We looked at what we needed and what could be provided, and I think within seven days, you know, we were definitely tired. But everybody was on the right track after that as to what it looked like; because remember on the night of the fire, generally you're in a pretty luxurious mode, because I'm automatically – I know when I went down my full list, and that's what Morgan did the same way, you're calling the key people is what you're doing so we've got some pretty good people out there. Not to say that the rest weren't, but, you know, you generally call on your top-notch saying, "Get the hell in here."

Dobrowolsky: The ones with the most experience who are going to be able to rise to the occasion.

Smith: Correct, and making sure, you know, have they been through a flood before or were they in a forest fire? Can they come in and see what we've got, and then walk away and do what we need? Because that was the biggest key. Because this is a magnet now. Everybody wants to come see; everybody wants to see.

And our interest is, you know, like I say, Faro, Aishihik, I don't know how many hundreds of dollars we spent on phone calls down there, astronomical.

Dobrowolsky: So, are there any crew members you'd like to mention who took part in keeping all this going or who stand out in your mind? I mean, my impression is that everybody who had anything to do with this went above and beyond.

Smith: That's a safe way to look at it. You could go around this forever.

Yes, you could go forever, but there were certainly – John Greer would be a good one to talk to, because he was very instrumental in making sure ... You know, he was there night-after-night, and his job now is not just this clean-up to try and help, but it was also to keep everything else spinning, eh; and as a mechanic, you're not predicting to go into a winter worried about "What does your winter look like now?" Generally in the utility, we don't pray for a warm winter. We like them meters to spin, and that was one occasion where I don't think anybody wasn't not looking at "Please give us a break here somebody."

Dobrowolsky: And it seems like we were lucky that winter.

Smith: Very lucky actually; there were many times when we were watching the old meter there and saying?* That's what happens, eh, and out of that, you start looking and saying, "Well, we now know that we can probably pull two-and-a-half mega street lights off the system." Like, who cares about that on a normal day, but that's how in-depth we had to look at it and say, "Well, can we get rid of this? You know we've got these 17 locations that have their own generation, as you mentioned, at the hospital and that, and what will they look like? Are they in tune?"

Typically what we'll find in the utility is they have a beautiful generator downstairs, but they never really look at it until they need it and "Whoops, it won't go!" So, we did a lot of leg work there, making sure – we'd send our men right over with the building people and get them to crank up their units. A lot of the people –

Dobrowolsky: So, these would be people in establishments that had emergency generators?

Smith: Correct, yes; and a lot of them were unaware of what their system could do. And you know, remember how very delicate it was, a utility going out there saying, "Yes, we've got a huge risk here" but certainly wanting to know what options we have. I think we broke it right down into what we were going to do if we did take that miracle storm in November where we had to escalate certain people at a certain place, "This is what we could do." Probably three days was spent just from our end, the distribution end, just going to the customer and saying, "Heh, how are you doing? Have you run your generator in a long time? Here's what we can do –" (laughter)

Dobrowolsky: "Let's turn it on. Let's just see."

Smith: "Yes, we've got a mechanic and a tech who can come out and look." So, it was a lot, but I think it's safe to say that nobody put in more than the next guy. It was just key people who had

to be there, sort of had to be; and what happens is you start relying on people, your age and your experience of your people, “What do they remember of the system,” because that’s all it was for the few days that I remember.

Dobrowolsky: Well, also I’m very impressed by how many people literally worked their way from the shovel-up within that organization.

Smith: That's right.

Dobrowolsky: Have been through the time before all the fancy computers and it was all, what did Guy Morgan call them, “the pistol-grips.”

Smith: Pistol manual grips, that's right.

Dobrowolsky: And the big rows of buttons; and I think having that kind of ground-up experience really served the corporation well.

Smith: You can’t lose, that's right. And that’s what it was, you were basically running a manual system period. And it was that simple. I mean it’s just a pistol-grip; but if you put it the wrong way, what you’re going to do to cascade the system, and that was the biggest thing for us that we were lucky on, I think, is that the system had changed a lot, but it changed very much in five years. So, there were a lot of us who remembered standing in the little pistol-grip rooms, going “Hee-haw” and there’s a little beacon going to tell you that it’s your turn. So, that certainly helped. I’ve got to tell you it certainly helped; but John Greer was the one who had a lot of past experience with them units on just down-and-dirty mechanics. I mean, he’s got no electronics there to see. So, manual, the people who were there, there were a lot of people and a lot of people that had been around and seen it and a lot of people who understood it, because there were a lot of people who didn’t understand it; and that was the thing that really amazed me. As you started looking around, it become very apparent who could see it and who couldn’t.

Dobrowolsky: In terms of people who were more familiar with the new, automated system, as opposed to those longer-term employees who understood the bits and pieces that –

Smith: Very much so, yes. And management people that never had to worry about it, and now they’re looking at you, and they’re saying, “Will it stay on?”

“We hope so.” And what can you tell them? That was the interesting thing to see, what each of the players had to do, what the insurance – I mean, you’re never going to see it again where an insurance company comes in to that degree; and like you said earlier, I don’t know how many utilities we had phoning and asking, “What does it look like?” because they also probably shook their heads and went, “Holy crap, what’s the odds of something on the Yukon River that’s a hydro unit burning down?” And I mean, it burnt down. We just have a little hole where she burnt down.

So, a combination of the right people, right timing. It was good timing. We hadn’t split. I think it would have been a bit different had we split. There would have been questions that we would

have had to hold back legally due to code and violations and that, that we just can't go into somebody else's ... So, that was a big blessing in my mind that it hadn't taken place. So, there was no confusion as to who – very clear.

Dobrowolsky: And there was still access to all those ATCO resources in Alberta?

Smith: Yes and also, there wasn't anything engrained. Everybody was getting ready for the split, and it was all – and this almost kind of brought everybody back where I don't know if it's so much who cares about the split; but, you know, right now that isn't a concern, and that was a big blessing was that everybody was clear on what their duties were and “Can you take this extra duty?”

“Yes, okay, we'll take this one, and this is what we'll do with it.” So, to me that was a real blessing.

Dobrowolsky: So, this kind of admin reorganization became secondary to working together to deal with this emergency?

Smith: Correct. I'm sure the big boys – between McWilliam and them and John Carroll at the time, I know they certainly had – I was in a few of their closed-door sessions, so they had a few. And they probably viewed it different than we did on the front line. Their issues would have been a lot bigger, I think, as far as what does this look like? And where is it going to end up? And who's going to finish filing it out? And so, there was a lot of the admin stuff that certainly they may have had a different outlook on it; but as far as we were concerned, in the operating world, it worked perfect, because we had everybody that we needed. It brought everybody back together so that there wasn't – there was a lot of hard feelings that “This guy is not going to come to work for us” or “This guy can't go to work over there.” So, basically what it did was it brought everybody together for that last hurrah so to speak, which helped with the animosity at the end of the day, “Well, I want to work here and I can't. He won't give me a job over here.” So, it helped.

I think one of the things that became apparent is how valuable that the Whitehorse people are to the outlying areas. I mean, without the help here, there's not a lot that would go on, and trying to establish do you have – you know, I remember Guy Morgan and I talking “the right guy out in Aishihik” and “the right guy here in Faro.” So, there were certainly a lot of after-hours, a lot of inventive stuff as well, saying “Hey, this is what we'll do. We'll put a generator over here.” We brought in two mobiles from Alberta from ATCO. We didn't have a lot of luck with one of them. We actually had to –

Dobrowolsky: A mobile generator?

Smith: A generator that was supposed to come in and help us a wee bit. And other than that, like I say, no, we didn't need the military. Nobody had to come in and say, “Holy crap, it's a state of emergency.” But as you mentioned, it was certainly getting close to winter and everybody was wondering “Who's going to have to tell who to shut what light off?” We never got into that state, which was amazing.

Dobrowolsky: So, all these people doing this incredible hard work, do you think that was appreciated by your various companies?

Smith: Oh, yes, they had a little bash, and I think me and Guy Morgan got little plates and plaques or something. So, they saw. They knew who was doing what for sure. There was no doubt about that.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, yes. Well, this is amazing! I really think that it's a wonderful example of a crisis bringing out not only the best in terms of working hard but in terms of ingenuity and creativity and coming up with solutions to problems you never thought you would ever have.

Smith: Exactly! And I think that was the key, eh, you never expect for something like that to burn down. Even I recall Boisvert showing up on site, just looking at me just dumbfounded, eh, "How could that happen, it's steel?" And I don't know, all I know is when we come across the bridge, she was – you could see the flames back up on Alsek probably two blocks before you hit the Fish Lake Ladder Road.

Dobrowolsky: What did your stomach do when you saw it?

(laughter)

Smith: Oh, it just turned into knots. It was like "No way!" Because what we expected, and that's the good thing that didn't happen, is we expected to crash. I think me and Morgan were pretty convinced that we were waiting for everything to die, and then, "How are we going to pick it back up?" and that never happened. So, we got about a three or four-hour break.

So, we were expecting, there was no doubt in my and Guy Morgan's mind that we were expecting the lights to go down. We had the added pressure of knowing that they're going to look at us to put them back on, and they just never crashed. Between keeping the people in Faro on the reactor and stuff like that, I don't even think we had a hiccup. There was nothing that we had heard from anybody. Remember we can't track what we had, because there was nothing to track with any more; but we didn't even have a glitch, and that bought us some time the following morning to say, "Okay, what are we going to do? Like, where are we going to set up? And what are we going to have by the end of today and tomorrow?"

So, that was something that kind of helped us big time is that the lights didn't go off, because that would have thrown another chaotic panic on top of some people who were already panicky so to speak. And it never happened so that was a blessing that I'm sure Morgan even remembers it, saying "Holy-moly!"

Dobrowolsky: So, one person I talked to said that, in some respects, he enjoyed that time. He enjoyed the fact of having this great challenge and being creative and coping with it and knowing that you came out on top; I mean, apart from the stress and the emergency and –

Smith: Yes, if it wasn't for the sleep, I'd – you'll never have another opportunity to learn about a system like we did then. So, there's no doubt that I think – I think if you're into electricity and

you want to know what it does, that was a good time to be around because you're never really going to get that experience again. You can't. There's no one who's going to wake up and do that again here in the Yukon with the people who are over there now. It just won't happen, no way.

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you very much for this.

Smith: Well, that's good.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, this has been very helpful.

END OF INTERVIEW

Note: Doug later asked that a note be added to this transcript to acknowledge the work of the SCC crew and the linesmen. "They did a hell of a job."

Clive Sparks

Clive Sparks, the current chief of Whitehorse Fire Department, was acting fire chief at the time of the hydro plant fire. His interview gives an excellent picture of the procedures used and the challenges encountered when managing the battle against a large fire.

Recorded May 28, 2003 at Whitehorse City Hall. Transcript reviewed and edited by Clive Sparks 29 July 2003. Additional information in [square brackets].

Our first priority, of course, is to save lives, and then to save property; but we don't endanger the lives of firefighters needlessly to do either of those things. So there was no reason to send a firefighter in there. It was simply a building with three generators in it, a very expensive building with very expensive generators, but it was a building with generators in it; and nobody's life ... So I said, "No, nobody goes in the building to fight the fire."

Side A

Dobrowolsky: It is May the 28th, 2003. This is Helene Dobrowolsky in Whitehorse talking to Clive Sparks about the great fire at the Yukon Energy generating plant back in 1997. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

Sparks: I was born right here in Whitehorse in 1950. So, I've lived here all my life

Dobrowolsky: You said you grew up in Whitehorse. Have you always been a firefighter?

Sparks: It's been one of the things that I've done since I got out of high school. I didn't start doing it full-time until 1979, but I started as a volunteer firefighter in 1969 with the Porter Creek Volunteer Fire Department that was amalgamated into the City in the early '70's; and then, in 1979, I took a full-time position with the City of Whitehorse.

Dobrowolsky: And how do the ranks of the firefighters work? How did you achieve your present eminence?

Sparks: I started out as a firefighter, and then, in 1986 I was promoted to the position of captain; and our department at that time had firefighters, captains, platoon chiefs and a fire chief. And then, in 1990, the position of deputy fire chief was created, and I applied for and got that job. And again we had a change in the department in 1999 when the person who was fire chief left the department, and I took it on as an acting capacity and was actually promoted to the position of fire chief in July of 2000. Since then we looked at our department structure again and removed the deputy fire chief's position and instead hired a training officer to look after all the training of the department, which used to be part of the deputy fire chief's job.

In the early '90's, we had also put into place a fire prevention officer's position and that still exists today. So we have 23 full-time members in the department and up to 30 volunteer

firefighters as well. So, we have 20 firefighters, a fire chief, a training officer, a fire prevention officer and the 30 volunteers.

Dobrowolsky: So, is that a pretty normal size department for a city of this size?

Sparks: It varies, depending on the city, depending on the area that has to be covered and, also, we're probably a little bit unique in that we have full-time staff for a city that is not overly large; but there are a lot of cities that have what we call a "composite fire department," which is both full-time and volunteer firefighters.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, I think Whitehorse must be unique, in that we are so spread out and the City does cover such a large area, despite the fairly small population.

Sparks: Yes, that's always a challenge because we cover – I can't give it to you in kilometers, but about 163 square miles is the boundaries of the city, which is a fairly good size area to cover; and when those boundaries were established, we were one of the largest cities in Canada in land, although we had a very small population. Until the late 1990s, we had no mutual aid agreements with any fire departments outside the city limits. So, it was only the resources we had within the city that we could use for firefighting, which is one of the reasons why our department is set up with both full time and volunteers; and it's always posed a bit of a challenge. We now have mutual aid agreements with the surrounding departments, which certainly benefits everybody; but there are still a number of challenges with the distances, the water supplies that we have and just generally being able to get firefighters out to a fire because everybody is working or busy or doing something.

People in the Yukon are great people for being in the outdoors and want to go camping and that sort of thing in the summertime, so that further reduces our staff of volunteers in the summer, not only us but all the surrounding departments, as well. So, we all face the same challenges.

Dobrowolsky: Let's talk about a late fall/early winter fire. Tell me what you were doing on, well, the day of October 29th and up until the early morning of October the 30th.

Sparks: Well, really October 29th was similar to all the other normal days at the fire hall. At that particular time, the fire chief was out of town on a business trip; and so I was the acting fire chief at that point. He had jokingly said to me, "Well, I can leave you the hotel phone number where I'm going to be staying."

And I said, "Sure, that's going to be really good. You're in Quebec City and I'm here so you can give me moral support." And we left it at that, little knowing that two days later it might have been, you know, we had a major fire in town. So, we have always joked about that a bit, because, you know, I could have phoned him and got moral support, and that's about it from that distance. So, it really didn't make any difference.

My shift is a straight day shift. So, I work 8:30 to 4:30. So, again, the day of October 29th, I just went home as usual, and I then got woken up at just before three o'clock in the morning regarding the call for this fire out at the Yukon Energy plant.

Dobrowolsky: Now, when a fire is called in, if someone calls “911”, what is the reporting relationship for notifying the department, and then, eventually you?

Sparks: Presently through the 911 system, when somebody dials “911”, the phone is first answered at the RCMP dispatch centre, and they ask the caller what service they want, whether it’s police, fire or ambulance. If the person says “fire,” then they have to determine which fire department it goes to, because there are six fire departments in the 911 system in the territory at the moment, which is Whitehorse plus the five departments surrounding the city. Once that has been determined and they know which department to send it to, then they transfer the call to that department. So, the calls would then be transferred to our department for anything inside the City of Whitehorse.

Dobrowolsky: And you would have a full-time dispatcher or just someone on hand to answer the phone?

Sparks: The firefighters who are on duty, who also respond to fight fires, operate as the dispatchers. We always leave one firefighter between the two halls when we go out on a call so that they can become the dispatcher but we have a minimum of two firefighters on duty in each fire hall. So, three of them will respond to the incident and one remains behind to be the dispatcher.

Dobrowolsky: So, the call would have come, then, to the downtown fire hall, as opposed to the one on top of Two Mile Hill?

Sparks: No, it really doesn’t matter, the telephones can be switched back and forth; and the two fire halls split the monitoring duties. So, it’s done one day in one hall, one day in the next. Because of the date, that particular call would have come into the downtown fire hall, but that’s just by chance. It really doesn’t make any difference. The two halls are always in contact with each other during an incident and just the way our system works, we split the answering of the telephones. So, the call did come into the downtown hall.

Dobrowolsky: So, the call comes. Obviously you have to pull together a crew fairly quickly, would the two people on duty immediately go to the site?

Sparks: Yes, yes. We got the call at 2:57 in the morning, so virtually three o’clock in the morning. The two members who were on duty at the downtown fire hall here would immediately respond, along with the platoon chief, who was the shift officer from the hall up the hill; and they leave immediately. The person left behind starts calling in and paging the volunteers and calling in the help that’s needed.

So they go out the door, respond to the situation, and then the dispatcher sends additional help to the scene as required.

Dobrowolsky: So, then people just drive their own vehicles to the scene and then get into their gear; or they have to come to the fire hall first to collect stuff?

Sparks: The volunteers carry their gear with them in their vehicles, and we direct them either to the scene or to one of the fire halls; and we always make sure that we have a crew coming into the hall to back two – to cover off anything else that happens. Also, we need people to bring additional equipment, additional pumpers, whatever it is that we require on the scene so that we have a minimum calling procedure that we deal with that sends two additional people to the scene and two people to each of the fire halls. So, we call about six people out every time, and that allows us to move extra equipment or send additional people as we need them. So, that's the initial call for every fire call that we get or every emergency we respond to.

If we know immediately that we have a serious situation, we will sometimes call in more personnel or keep calling in personnel, even though the first crew hasn't arrived on the scene.

Dobrowolsky: So, is that pretty much what would have happened on the morning of the 30th? Well, this is handy, you've got a log.

Sparks: I brought copies of a logbook with me so that I can see. No, for that call they paged the initial six people. I don't have a – we don't record our incoming phone calls, so I couldn't tell you what was said on the phone; but from my recollection of it, the operator at the plant called in that he had a fire alarm showing in one part of the building there. So, that would have been treated just like a normal call, and we would send a pumper truck with two people, the platoon chief, plus two additional volunteers, to the scene; and then, of course, the two people at each fire hall. So, that was how the call was started.

The crew arrived on the scene. We actually got a larger group being called out two minutes later to say that we actually had a fire; because at that point, we did what we call a "group page" where we can trip all the pages at once and call anybody who's available. And the dispatcher was also phoning all the off-duty members that we have to try to pull together a big crew; because by that time, we knew we had something fairly serious.

If we can see a big glow in the sky or flames before we get to the scene, we'll initiate additional staff being called. We don't necessarily wait until we get there.

Dobrowolsky: Have to wait till you get there.

Sparks: No, we can do that at any time; and that's based on what the crew wants to do or what they feel they need. There are no strict rules that you have to wait until you get to the scene to call in more help or you can only call in three at a time or anything like that. It's what you need is what you can call for.

Dobrowolsky: So, would that have more or less been what happened when they called you, they were on their way, they saw this was going to be a big situation, far beyond an ordinary "Let's see if this fire alarm is functioning"?

Sparks: Yes, I would have received the page at the same time they did the group page, which was two minutes after the initial call; and by that time, the crew would not have quite been on the scene yet, but they would have been able to see something going and known that they would

have needed additional help. So, at that time I left my house and went to the fire scene. At that time I took the City car home at night so that I had access to it all the time so I didn't have to come down to the fire hall to get the car.

Dobrowolsky: Which would have had the radio and everything.

Sparks: It had the radio. It has the red lights and siren and everything else to get through town. So, at that time, we were allowed to take the vehicles home, and I did have it at home. So, I responded directly from my house to the scene.

Dobrowolsky: And how far away is your home?

Sparks: Oh, I live downtown, so I'm only a minute or two further from the hall than the pumper is. So, I wasn't very long getting to the scene.

Dobrowolsky: And what were your impressions as you came up to the scene?

Sparks: When I got near there or got at the scene, you could actually, because of the way we access that property, you can actually see the fire quite a long time before you can actually drive in and get to the generating stations.

Dobrowolsky: With the building being on the curve on the road, and then, that access road that went in as kind of a hairpin hook there?

Sparks: Yes. If I remember correctly, we could still go in right off the corner.*

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Sparks: There was a better way in there, but you still had to weave your way around through the buildings a little bit to get there. So, you could see the fire before you could actually get on the scene. When I got there, the southwest corner of the building was burning, and there was quite an intense fire there; and it had already burned through the end of the building and up into the roof of the building and was proceeding along the building in an easterly direction towards the river. There was quite a lot of fire there, and our big concern at that point was two things really: One, making sure that the electrical power was turned off because this is a generating station, and we had to be absolutely certain there were no live electrical lines there that we were going to have to contend with, because we're going to put water on the fire at that point.

The other concern we had was a water supply for that fire. The building was built in the 1950s, and it was built by the federal government outside of the city boundaries, and they did not have to follow any building codes or practises that were in place, whatever they were at the time. When the city boundaries expanded in the 1970s, that property was still owned by the Federal Government; and they didn't have to make any changes or do anything – they don't have to do

* It was later established that the reconstruction of the South Access into Whitehorse had occurred the previous summer so vehicles would have used the current entry into the site.

anything that corresponds to any building codes, because they are a senior government. They are allowed to set their own rules for these things.

In general terms, they do follow building codes, but one thing that was never done at the Yukon Energy site or what it was at that time, the Northern Canada Power Commission, there was no water for firefighting provided. There were no fire hydrants in the ground. There was what we call a “wall hydrant,” which is an outlet on the building that we can connect to that had been put into the hydro-generating station so that we had a water supply to fight a fire in the diesel-generating station. However, in order to access that water, you had to send somebody into the hydro-generating station to open a valve; and that particular valve and that wall hydrant was right in the area where it was burning.

So, we had no water. Although there is a river right there and all of Schwatka Lake, we didn’t have the ability to get at it.

Dobrowolsky: So, you didn’t have the right kind of pumping set up?

Sparks: Our trucks are not designed to lift water very far. We can lift a maximum of about three meters is about standard. We have to be reasonably close to the water supply to do it. So, you have to be able to drive almost alongside the water supply, and we only carry about six meters of what we call “hard suction hose” to draw water out of a water supply. We couldn’t get that close to the river. So, we were having to add in extra lengths of hose, which causes problems with being able to do what we call “draft” the water out of the river; and we were unable to do that because of the distance we had to go and the height we had to lift the water.

So, we had to truck water in to fight the fire, which certainly causes problems.

Dobrowolsky: Yes. Well, let’s go back to the first problem that you mentioned, the whole issue of isolating the power lines to the building. How long did it take to track someone who could assure you that those had been turned off?

Sparks: That didn’t take very long at all. There was, of course, the operator from the power plant on the scene there, and I was only two or three minutes probably behind the first responding crew; and when I had discussions with the employee from the power corporation, he assured me at that point that they had isolated the generator and that the power was off and that we could start fighting fire, but that was our first major concern. So, that really didn’t take any time at all. It was a matter of saying, “Is it off?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure it’s off?”

“Yes,” and away we go.

Dobrowolsky: So, that would have been with Mike Hannah, the operator?

Sparks: I don't remember who it was. It was just whoever was on the site there from the power plant was who I was talking to.

Dobrowolsky: Right. So, just to back up, the operator called "911". I assume he would have been, at the same time, calling various [YECL] personnel. The one truck with two people would have gone; and even as they were approaching, they were calling in other volunteers and pumpers. So, what was the scene like when you arrived?

Sparks: When I first arrived, the pumper from downtown here was on the scene, and the platoon chief was on the scene, and I was the next one on the scene. So, that was virtually what we had. I don't recall whether the first two volunteers were there, but unless they were very handy to it, I doubt it; because I can get through town a little quicker than they can. So, there would have been about four-to-six people there at the most from the fire department.

We were setting up to use the water we had on our own pumper, and we were calling for the additional pumpers to come down. We called for one initially, and our rescue truck, which also has the command post in it so that we could get that set up and ready to go. So, those were the next two trucks that were being called for in order to bring additional water and to set up the command post.

We also had, at the time, a city street flusher that we used as a tanker, and we called for that right away, because we knew we were going to need extra water. So, we were starting to assemble what we could for water supply to the scene. So, that was the first few minutes of the incident, were trying to control the fire with what we had, which was impossible; but also getting in extra resources to try and start controlling the fire.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you talk about the truck that acts as the command post, is that mainly for communication with firefighters, they would have individual radios and this would be some kind of central communication?

Sparks: It is a vehicle that we have that not only has our command post in it, but it also carries all our auto extrication equipment. It carries spare breathing apparatus. It has a space in it where firefighters can get in and warm up, sit down and have a bit of a rest. So, we use it as a rest place and a shelter and refreshment.

Part of the function of the vehicle is that it has a small area that has a desk and some white boards, and there is radio communication in there and a couple of chairs where the people who are actually running the fire or the incident commander can go in, sit down, make some decisions; if they need to talk to somebody, they can do it inside. They don't have to be outside, yelling over the noise of the equipment. And a fire itself is very noisy. A fire, when it burns, even without the equipment there, is very, very noisy, because there is a lot of air movement to start with; but just the noise of the fire can be quite hard to talk over.

Dobrowolsky: So, the crackling of the flames and things collapsing?

Sparks: Yes, it's all that, and the air rushing in as the fire burns. There can be minor explosions of aerosol cans, but just in general terms a fire can make a lot of noise; and then, you add in there the noise of the fire trucks. When they're pumping water, they can make a considerable amount of noise, because they have to –

Dobrowolsky: Because their engines would be going.

Sparks: Yes, and even the pump itself makes noise. So, this is an area where you can get a little bit of peace and quiet to try and make some decisions. So, that is one of the purposes of the truck. And we do have a number of portable radios that the firefighters carry. We don't have one for each person, but we generally have one for each crew of people that we're sending in. So, every three or four people will have somebody with a radio that can be in contact with the person in charge of the fire so that direction can be given to what needs to be done.

So, it gets quite busy for the first – probably an incident like that, the first half an hour to an hour is really very busy, because everybody is trying to organize and get things set up as to what you need, additional equipment and back and forth to your dispatcher to say, “I need this, I need that;” and that dispatcher at the other end is kept very busy trying to make the appropriate phone calls and get the additional equipment if we're looking for water tankers or drivers or whatever it is we need. So, that first half an hour to an hour is very hectic until you get everything sort of organized and settled into place, and then, it becomes a routine of what you're doing and hauling water and pumping water and rotating crews, that sort of thing.

Dobrowolsky: So, who would have been the person who would have initially been in charge? You mentioned the, is it platoon chief?

Sparks: Yes, yes, that individual would have been initially in charge until I got there, and at that point, I took over the fire or at least the command of the fire, and he took over looking after the actual firefighting on the scene; because by the time we got there, we knew that we were going to have to deal with firefighting and we were going to need somebody in charge of making sure that we had water supply. We needed people to look after the safety of firefighters, sort of keep track of who was where and make sure nobody got hurt, keep track of who we had on the scene for that matter so that we didn't lose track of a firefighter and if something had happened we wouldn't know that they were there. So, there were a number of duties that needed to be sorted out.

So, the on-duty platoon chief, who was Norm Jensen, retained that position of being the actual in-control of the firefighting end of the operation. So, he was told that he'd look after that, which also reduces the number of people who need to talk to the incident commander directly. We try as best we can, not to have more than about five to seven people reporting to any one individual on a fire scene because you can't control any more than that. You'd lose track of who's doing what. So, we have a rule that if you've got about four or five people reporting to you then, if you need more than that, you probably need some help and you need to divide it up into groups again and get things sorted out. So, I would have had three or four or five people reporting to me for water supply and safety and looking after, you know, the rest and rehabilitation of the firefighters and air supply and those sort of things. And Norm would have had three or four people reporting

to him, because that would have been sort of the leaders of the group of firefighters. You know, “You go to this side of the building and do that, and you’re in charge of them.” So, you and I talk sort of thing, and that way I wouldn’t have had 15 people talking to me. I would have had four or five.

Dobrowolsky: So you arrived, you become the incident commander, you have your command truck. You’re calling in all these extra resources. At the height of this, how many people would have been on the scene to deal with the fire?

How handy, you have a list! (laughter)

Sparks: We used a total of about 27 people on the scene at that time, and that’s a large crew, and that was 27 of our department. That didn’t include any additional personnel who were there from other agencies. It didn’t include any other city personnel that we called in to give us a hand. So, that was just 27 firefighters were on the scene. So, that’s quite a large crew to be dealing with on that.

Some of those people would have come and gone during the operation. Some of the volunteers may have had to leave to go to work. We would have got people who maybe got off work off the night shift that we could pick up, those sort of things; but in total we had 27 people out there.

Dobrowolsky: That does seem like a lot, and, yes, I can see how just keeping track of everyone would be a big task in itself.

Sparks: It can be. We have certainly improved our system since then, and we have a method that works a lot better than we did then but even at that point, we had to have somebody who just kept track of everybody, who was all at the scene and where they were and what they were doing so that if anything had happened, we’d be able to account for everybody. That’s always a bit of a challenge, but it’s a very important task, because we always want to go home with everybody we started out with at the beginning of the incident; but also, if something does go wrong, we need to know where people were so we can very quickly say, “We have accounted for everybody,” or “We haven’t,” and we need to find that one person. So, that’s why we do it.

Dobrowolsky: So, let’s go back to the water. You spent some time, I imagine not that long, before you would have realized that you couldn’t get water from the building, you couldn’t get water from the river, you needed to bring in extra pumpers and the City street-watering truck.

Sparks: Yes, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me how all that went and how long that ...

Sparks: I don’t have exact times on how long it took, but –

Dobrowolsky: No, just a ballpark.

Sparks: What we did right at the beginning was a decision was made to use water tankers, because we couldn't get a reliable water supply any other way. I made a couple of calls to our dispatch person to ask for our city tankers. We had two city tankers we could get at the time. We also have – one of our fire trucks has a very large water tank on it. It's probably getting close to 10,000 litres. So, we called for that, just to get the water from that truck. Even though that meant that we were severely reducing the amount of equipment we had available for another call in town, we wanted to get it there quickly, get that water out and be able to start using that.

I had also called my director very early on in the incident because of the nature of the fire and the fact that this was in the main generating plant, which also included all the switching gear and all the equipment for controlling all the power grid. One of my concerns was that we might possibly lose the power grid; and if we did, that would cause all kinds of problems for the city, nothing major at that time of day, being three o'clock in the morning. But certainly, if you lose the power grid, you lose all your traffic lights. Most of our pumping stations have backup generators and diesel pumps on them, so it's not too bad that way; but it does just raise a whole level of problems that can occur if you have a major power outage.

This being the 30th of October when this actually happened, it wasn't overly cold. It was only minus two when the crew came on at six o'clock at night. So, it had dropped down some, but it wasn't overly cold. So, you know, that would start to cause problems with heating, people not being able to heat their houses. All those sort of things would come into play, anybody who needs electricity for any kind of medical equipment they have at home, all those things. So, I called my director to say, "We have a very serious problem. I think you should come down here. I need you for a couple of reasons. One is that if it gets beyond and the power grid does go out, you're going to have to start doing a number of things with the city and the rest of the territory that's on the grid."

But there was also the fact that the media was very quickly going to become aware of what was going on, and they were going to be appearing on the scene, and I wanted somebody who could just take care of the media right off the bat and that I wouldn't have to deal with them in the first little while of this incident. So, my director came down.

Dobrowolsky: And who was your director?

Sparks: At the time, it was Rob Roycroft, and he is no longer in the city; but he came down, and I passed on what information I had, told him of the situation. He did some liaison work with the [YECL] crew that was on site, working to maintain the power grid, and I do have to compliment them on the amount of work that they did to make sure that the power grid didn't fail.

I'm going to backtrack just a little bit, because I grew up in the power plant at the Fish Lake Road.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, really!

Sparks: My dad ran that powerhouse, so I had a bit of an understanding of some of the things that they were going to have to go through. I didn't know the ins and outs of it but certainly understood that it was more than just, "Oh, well, we'll just turn off that switch, and it'll be fair."

There was quite a bit to it; and the fact that they'd lost the ability to do their switching from within the building there caused them considerable problems. So, they did a very good job, I think, of maintaining the power supply to the City of Whitehorse with virtually no interruptions; and anybody who woke up in the morning wouldn't have known that there had been a major problem out at the generating station.

However, I also discussed with Rob the fact that we needed to establish a water supply and told him I wanted to have our dispatch contact the private water supply tankers in town and get them started to bring us water, as well; and that was approved. So, we hired – I think we had about five tankers supplying water that way. None of those tankers are set up to deliver water for firefighting really quickly. They don't have a way of dumping very fast. So, we were hampered with a slow water supply. We were able to establish a water supply that was continuous, but it wasn't huge volumes of water.

Dobrowolsky: So, the people who do water delivery, I'm assuming that's who you're talking about, would they have to then in turn transfer their water to your pumper trucks; or could somehow a hose be set up right at the (inaudible)?

Sparks: What we did at the time was I contacted the Forestry, one of the managers from the, at that time, federal Forestry Department and requested that we be able to borrow some portable water tanks, which are basically a big square frame that has a canvas liner in it that you can just dump water into; and then, we would be able to pump out of those tanks with our truck so that we could just keep backing the tankers up and dump into these portable tanks, and then, we would pump it out of there and carry on. So, we virtually set up our own small lake beside the truck, which we weren't able to do right out of the river. So, that was one of the methods we used to establish a water supply. Like I said, although it was steady, it was not a huge amount of water.

The other thing that we tried to do was borrow a large-volume portable pump from the territorial government; and at that time, the only one that was available in and around Whitehorse was with the Golden Horn Volunteer Fire Department. So, they sent one or two of their fire crew in with this pump, and we set it up in the river and started to use that; and we thought it was going to be very effective, only they had a mechanical problem with the pump and the pump quit. So, we had to stop using that. That would have supplied us a lot better water supply. However, that wasn't going to happen that morning.

So, we did deal with the fire using the tankers that we could get and providing water. One of the drawbacks of using the water delivery trucks is they have to always return to a water supply that is designed for potable water, because that's normally what they haul. So, they're –

Dobrowolsky: So, they couldn't just zip up to Schwatka Lake?

Sparks: No, and nor could they just go to the nearest hydrant that would have been down around the *SS Klondike*. They had to actually return to the Takhini Fire Hall on top of the hill in order to fill, because that's –

Dobrowolsky: They didn't want to contaminate their tanks.

Sparks: That's right. If they do, they have a very long process they have to go through to clean them out. So, understandably, they're not going to go except to where they can get water that's basically approved for drinking. Although the water in the fire hydrants is exactly the same water, it's the method of putting it in the tanks and the contamination that can occur around a fire hydrant, those sort of things.

So, we did have a bit of a challenge with that, as well, but we did get all the tankers rolling, and the water was coming in.

Dobrowolsky: So, how many private delivery trucks did you end up involving in this?

Sparks: I think we had a total of five private tankers.

Dobrowolsky: And each of them would have had a volume of about how much?

Sparks: About 15 to 20,000 litres of water; and then, we had the two tankers of the city, the street flusher and one small tanker, and combined they would have had about 20,000 litres of water. So, those trucks were continually going, filling and coming back, and that was how we set up the water supply for that.

Dobrowolsky: Is it at all possible to estimate how much water you might have used over that night?

Sparks: I can do a rough guess that we probably – I'd have to just take a second and do the math here, but I could say that we probably pumped about somewhere around 100 gallons a minute water supply for probably 10 hours. So, that's ...

Dobrowolsky: So, you were just doing a rough calculation about how much water it would have taken in total to put out the fire.

Sparks: I'm estimating that we probably pumped somewhere around 200,000 gallons of water onto that fire; and at that point, that would have brought it to not completely out but certainly down to a point where we just had very small bits of fire left that we had to deal with.

And what we call the "overhaul," the going through and making sure we've got all the little bits of fire out in a building that size takes a long time and uses up not as much water because you're not flowing water all the time, but it takes a number of hours and working and poking and pulling and digging things apart. We did end up going back at least once to that site because of small flare-ups. I can look back here in a minute and see if it was more than once.

With a building that size, it's not uncommon to have a little spot that sits and smoulders for a number of hours or even a day or two, and then, flares up; and you go back and put out a very small fire, which in effect doesn't cause any more damage to the building. It hurts your ego more than anything that you have to go back for some of those, but basically, there was no further damage to the building after that initial amount of firefighting we did.

Dobrowolsky: And you were saying you were fighting the fire continuously for about 10 hours, was it?

Sparks: We had – the majority of the crew was on the scene until about three o'clock in the afternoon. So, it was about 12 hours we had a large crew there, and then, we did leave a crew after that for a while. So, we were probably 12 to I think it was about 15 hours before I left the scene to go home. So, we had a good-size crew there, working on the fire for 10 to 12 hours doing a lot of firefighting, and then, we sort of slowed down and got things under control.

The fire would have been – a lot of the control would have happened within the first probably four or five hours, because the fire burned sort of all the way along the building, got to the end; and then, at that point, there's still a lot of fire there but it's not getting any bigger. It's a matter of keeping working on it. So, I would say we probably had the majority of the fire contained and under control before lunchtime, before noon.

Dobrowolsky: So, the point that the flames are no longer shooting up into the sky, that would have ...

Sparks: That probably happened before eight o'clock in the morning we would have had that, but we would have still had a considerable amount of fire in the building that we would be dealing with and certainly a lot of heat and a lot of smoke and fires that came from the electrical insulation on the lines, those sort of things. That is plastic that is really a very nasty type of fire to have to work with.

Dobrowolsky: You mentioned it was about minus two that night. I haven't asked anyone. What was the weather like? Was it a clear night? Was it windy?

Sparks: I actually happen to have a bit of a weather report here. The wind was not very strong. It was about four kilometers an hour from the southwest, so it was not a big factor in the fire; and the temperature was minus two at the time when the crew came on shift that night, and I don't think it changed much over night. It really didn't get as cold as it could, given the time of year. I've certainly been here where there's been snow on the ground and much colder temperatures than that, which would have certainly made the firefighting harder. The colder it is, the harder it is to work.

So, those sort of things – the weather didn't really become a factor in this fire. It was not bad.

Dobrowolsky: Well, that's good; and was it cloudy or fairly clear, do you recall?

Sparks: I don't remember.

Dobrowolsky: I guess the smoke would have been making its own cloud cover.

Sparks: Yes, I don't remember it being a particularly cloudy night, but then I wasn't really paying a lot of attention to that.

Dobrowolsky: So, how challenging was – I mean you had the incredible challenge of the water; but apart from that, how challenging was this fire compared to other big fires of your experience, say the big hangars at the Whitehorse Airport? That's the only thing I can think of offhand that might be comparable.

Sparks: Certainly each fire has its own challenges. Things like the hangars, again they're a large wooden structure, so they burn very quickly.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm.

Sparks: Within about an hour on the hangar fires, an hour to an hour-and-a-half, everything that is there is down on the ground so you don't have a problem with things falling any more.

One of the biggest concerns with the fire at Yukon Energy was the fact that the building is a steel structure or was a steel structure and that there was a very large overhead crane in the main generating section so if they had to do repairs, it could move back and forth on a big track up there; and there were numerous openings in the floor, and there was a fairly deep basement in it that would be easy to fall into because there were stairs, there were holes, there were things that just have to be there in a generating plant.

Dobrowolsky: So, kind of a dangerous site to navigate?

Sparks: Very much so, and my biggest concern was the steel in the building; because when you heat up steel it not only softens, but it also expands. And my fear was that we have this overhead crane in there, plus the steel building; and I gave a direct order that we were not going to send any firefighters into the building to fight the fire because of the dangers of the steel. You can't see it, you can't measure it from the outside.

So, there just was no reason to risk a firefighter's life in that building from the fact that the building could collapse, although it didn't, and the fact that there were all these holes and openings in the floor. They're not holes, they're openings; and there were a lot of things in there that would make it very dangerous for a firefighter to be in there. There was no risk to anybody's life, because there was nobody in the building. And our first priority, of course, is to save lives, and then, to save property; but we don't endanger the lives of firefighters needlessly to do either of those things. So, there was no reason to send a firefighter in there. It was simply a building with three generators in it, a very expensive building with very expensive generators, but it was a building with generators in it; and nobody's life ... So, I said, "No, nobody goes in the building to fight the fire."

Dobrowolsky: So, that was a decision you were able to make quite early on?

Sparks: I made that immediately I arrived on the scene and saw the extent of fire that we were dealing with and how that it was spreading up along the building. I knew that we had a very limited water supply, and I didn't want a firefighter in the building, and then, running out of water; because that puts them in great danger from the fire because what they're using to push the fire and keep the fire away from them is the water in the fire hose. So, the decision was right immediately I got on the scene that nobody was going to go in that building until we had the fire out and were able to assess the structural integrity of the building.

Side B

Dobrowolsky: So, we have been talking about the 12-hour saga of fighting the fire, and you mentioned earlier that it isn't uncommon for there to be flare-ups subsequent to the main battle of the fire; and you said there may have been a few of those in this case?

Sparks: For this particular incident, yes, we actually went back twice for a couple of incidents that had happened. The office end of the building, which was sort of the most westerly end of the building, was an addition that had been put on subsequent to the original generating station being built, and it was of a different design of building, and a lot of that collapsed in various portions. It was a two-storey building, and various parts of it had collapsed here and there.

We were actually called again early in the morning of Friday, October 31st by now, which was sort of 27 hours after the initial call. We got called again that there was a flare-up in the office portion of the building. When we left the day before, we had actually cordoned off areas where nobody was allowed to go in. There were people on site to make sure that nobody went into certain areas, and there were people from the power corporation who were going to watch and see if there were any flare-ups. Because of the collapse in this building, we couldn't get to certain portions of it very easily.

The other thing that hampers the firefighting a little bit in this case is, of course, it is a generating station, which means that at least one side of it is up against the river for the outflow from the generator. So, we had some limited access around the building. We couldn't drive around it to get to the office end. You actually had to take another road into the building. So, although they didn't really interfere with any of the operations, they were some things that added to the problems that we had out there. When you had a lot of smoke coming from the building originally, there was sort of the north side of the building, we couldn't have anybody on there, because there was nothing to stop them falling in the river. If you missed your step in the smoke and the dark, you could be right in the river and that would be it. So, again that sort of eliminated doing anything on that side of the building. Although that wasn't a major concern, it was just one more thing that we had to take into account.

So, we did get called back. The first call came in about seven o'clock in the morning on Friday, October 31st that in the office end of the building, there was another little bit of fire starting up; and we applied water to the situation but also realized that we couldn't do anything unless we had some heavy equipment. So, we needed a large backhoe to come in to be able to lift things off to be able to get at this fire, and we requested that, and the backhoe was there at about ten

o'clock in the morning. So, we were able to tear off some of the office portion of the building and get at where the bit of fire was left and extinguish that.

We did get a call back again on Saturday, the 1st of November in an area that actually hadn't had a lot of fire damage but something hot had fallen down in between some 2 by 4s that had been nailed together to fill in an opening and had got in behind and smouldered away for the three days and finally got enough air that it just flared up a little bit. So, we had to go back and cut out all the 2 by 4s and do that. Neither one of those two fires caused any further damage to the building, but it's not uncommon to happen in a structure of this size; and a lot of times when we have a fire, a major fire, we extinguish the fire, and then either the department or a security company is left on site to watch out for these type of flare-ups so that we can call the crew back, but we try and get the crew back to the hall and get them rested up and ready for the next call, too. It's a bit of a judgment call on that sort of stuff. We don't like having to go back to an incident, but on occasion it does happen.

Dobrowolsky: Were there any other fires during this time, or was it a fairly quiet time on the fire scene otherwise? You're just having a look here at your log.

Sparks: We actually did have a call at 10 to 8:00 that same morning to Macaulay Lodge, which wasn't a large fire, but it certainly did mean that we had to move equipment and people around.

As I go through the log here, no, nothing more during the major part of the fire.

Dobrowolsky: Right.

Sparks: We had a couple of calls, you know, over the next few days but nothing large or that either hampered this fire or, you know, the other fire had a problem either. So, it was luckily quite a quiet time for firefighting at that point, because we had enough on our hands.

That first day, we, of course, had the fire basically under control by noon and starting the – really it's the very hard, labour-intensive work of getting into the bits that are burning underneath everything else, and it's a long, slow job; but the main generating floor of the powerhouse, we could get into that and start to assess the damage to the building and determine the integrity of the building to see if we could actually send people in to start salvage work and get rid of a lot of the water that had flowed in. A considerable amount of the water that we had pumped onto the fire would have flowed down into the basement of the generating plant where the turbines themselves are, and that needed to be removed and damage assessments done and everything else. So, there was a need for the power company to get into the building to assess the damage in there and see what was happening and what needed to be done in order to preserve the generators and anything else they had there from further damage and how they were going to do it.

In conjunction with the [YECL] staff and the Yukon Energy employees, we assessed the damage to the building and made the determination that we could enter into parts of the generating facility. There was one area that was determined not to be particularly safe, and it was also an area that we had a high interest in with regard to investigation of the fire. So, we didn't want anybody in that area. So, it was immediately – everybody was denied access to that part of the

building, and that didn't cause a problem to the power crew, because that wasn't an area they needed to get into right away anyway.

We did assess the building and determined that people could go in and go to work. There were a few things that we had to be careful of, because there was some steel that had been heated. We had one overhead door that wouldn't open properly. We forced it open and propped it up. You know, there were some things like that that we had to be careful of. There were still some areas of the office building that nobody could go into because of the crew still working to get the last bits of the fire out, but [YECL] and the crew were able to get in and start removing the water from the basement of the building. They had to pump that out and actually take it away from the site, because it was contaminated with oil from various things there.

Dobrowolsky: Oh, of course.

Sparks: So, it couldn't just be pumped back into the river, which would have been the easy place to put it.

Dobrowolsky: Yes.

Sparks: But there was certainly the concern that we couldn't put oily water into the Yukon River. So, they had to remove it and take it off site, and I don't know where it was taken, how it was dealt with; but it was removed. That was a process that started after noon on the 30th of October.

Dobrowolsky: And that would have been [YECL] staff that would have been handling that?

Sparks: Yes, yes. They also called in some contractors to help them, because they needed vacuum trucks and one thing and another. So, we had to do some manoeuvring around on the site and rearrange where fire trucks were parked and one thing and another so that it allowed this process to happen, because we didn't want to keep the site closed off and cause, you know, further damage to the generators if there was no fire danger to them any more. It was a matter of now we needed to start to salvage the equipment that was there and get it in a condition that would preserve it until such time as a new building could be built.

The time of year certainly was not conducive to things drying out by themselves, being the end of October. Certainly with the onset of winter, there was a considerable need to close in any of the gaps, openings that were there, and get heat back into the building and one thing and another to dry it out. There was also a concern with a lot of the paper records that were in the office building. Of course, those that hadn't burned had got quite wet; and one of the things that we recommended they do was immediately freeze all those documents, and then, they could worry about them at another point, because if they're frozen, they're not going to be getting any further damage. So, they were taken away and put into freezers or something, I don't know where but that was the process that was used, and then, they could be taken out a few at a time to be dealt with and worked on. Because they had a lot of archived records in that building, from my understanding, and so, they wanted to preserve those as best they could.

The other thing that was important were the computer hard drives that ran all the switching gear, all that equipment. So, we salvaged all the computers we could find; and I don't know how much was able to be restored or recovered, but that was certainly one of our priorities when we could get into that office building was to get all the paper records and the computers out so that the salvaging of that stuff could start, as well.

So, there was quite a coordination on the site to make sure that, first of all, everybody was safe and nobody was going into an area where they could get hurt, that we had the fire sufficiently under control to allow non-fire personnel into parts of the building, that we maintained the areas that we needed to look at for fire investigation and that we recovered records and things for them. That posed a few challenges, as well, but they were easily overcome by all the people who were there; and the [YECL] staff were very good at working with us to make sure that things were done properly.

Dobrowolsky: So, my picture, just correct me if I'm wrong, of the fire, is that there were a number of hours where literally you couldn't get in the building or it was totally unsafe to. So, it was several hours of pointing fire hoses at strategic areas of the fire.

Sparks: Yes, yes, through openings and through the areas of the wall that had burned off. Because it was a metal-clad building, parts of the walls would burn off; getting water in wherever we could in order to fight the fire.

Dobrowolsky: So, kind of assessing the progress of the fire to where you could best, most strategically direct the water?

Sparks: There was that; it spread quite quickly through the building from the southwest through to the west end of the building to the office portion. The spread of fire in there was quite rapid. Of course, we were hampered with limited water supply and the fact that we couldn't easily drive around to the other side of the building and set up another position to fight the fire from. There was one small road in there.

Dobrowolsky: So, access was a big problem.

Sparks: Of course, all the hoses had to go around one side of the building; and that's always awkward, because buildings in that sort of – particularly there, because there normally wasn't much access down that south side of the building between the berm from the reservoir and the actual powerhouse. There wasn't really much need for anybody to go back and forth through there, so there wasn't a path or a road through there. It was sort of in the gravel, loose, nothing easy to work on; and having to drag all our hoses down there and be able to work, again it was one of the problems we had, but it was something we could overcome. It's a little harder to do in those cases.

Again with a limited water supply, I wasn't willing to send firefighters into a burning building when I couldn't guarantee that I could maintain the water supply to protect them inside the building while they were fighting the fire. So, all our work was done in what we call a "defensive" firefighting, from the outside of the building, as opposed to being "offensive" and

going into the fire. And that was just the reality of that particular site. It certainly did hamper our abilities to fight the fire.

Dobrowolsky: So, then daylight came, and there were not so much the leaping flames and things are a bit more visible and under control; and then, from what you were saying, my understanding is then you were able to start slowly checking portions of the building and controlling parts on the inside, which actually might mean pulling materials apart to get at things?

Sparks: Yes, there was certainly that. As soon as we were able to get into the building safely to assess the damage, we did that; and to make sure that the structural integrity was there. And we had some portions of the building where people were not going to be allowed to go, simply because it was not safe. And then, to remove the things that we could that needed to come out of the building in order to allow [YECL] to maintain their daily operations from there and to start removing the water and assessing the damage to the generators themselves.

Dobrowolsky: So, what about traffic control during all this? That was mainly at another part of the site. That wasn't something you really had to worry about?

Sparks: Traffic control was really a nonentity there, because it's a self-contained site with really one entrance to it. The one entrance is off the South Access, which is a major thoroughfare; and it was relatively easy for, I would assume, the RCMP to set up control of the traffic there and say, "No, you don't go in." I know [YECL] also did some of that to control who they wanted on site and who they didn't; and it was probably one of the easiest sites we've had to control, because it has virtually a gate on it, and you can say, "No, you don't go anywhere. You're not allowed in."

Other fires in town have caused us a lot more problems, because people would stop on the road or block a road and that sort of thing. We didn't have that there. There was no traffic problem. There were no crowd problems. Even the media were relatively easy to control, because we had control of the site, and it was very easy.

Dobrowolsky: Before we began this interview, you drew to my attention that there is still some legal action underway concerning the insurance, and there are a number of issues regarding the insurance that are unresolved. As a result, we agreed we would not do anything in this interview as far as talking about the cause of the fire or the Fire Marshall's Report or anything to do with the insurance; but this is your chance for any final thoughts.

Sparks: I certainly do have to take into consideration the fact that it's still under litigation and at the present time, I am not willing to discuss what we have come up with as a cause for the fire until such time as it is solved through the insurance companies and through the legal system if it goes that far.

We were able, right from the beginning, to know which area of the building the fire started in, which was the southwest corner; and we had initially said, "Nobody goes into the building until we determine what we need to do," and then, once I knew that we could start allowing the [YECL] people in to assess the damage to the generators, the south side of the building was

placed off limits to them. It was fairly easy, because there were physical walls there that didn't allow people in, and a lot of that area actually held the switch gear that controlled things, and that all had been damaged and one thing and another. So, we said, "Nobody goes in there."

Further consultation with the [YECL] people, we realized that they did need to get in there to do an assessment of what was damaged, what wasn't, what they may be able to salvage, what they couldn't. So, I did escort people in to allow them to look, but they weren't allowed to remove anything or relocate anything in there or touch anything. It was basically a visual inspection.

Of course, the insurance adjusters and the insurance companies got involved very early on in this process. A fire this size, you know, makes the national news. It's a good-size incident no matter what city it occurs in; and the insurance adjusters were arriving on the site on the morning flight virtually of October the 30th I think the first one, and they were arriving very early on at that time; and the decision was made that the insurance adjusters and insurance investigators weren't going into the building without the fire department being there. It was still our fire scene, and we did have control over it.

Through further consultation with my fire chief, who did actually happen to phone in the end, and both he and the fire marshal happened to be at the same conference. They were coming back early on the following week, and the decision was made that we would hold off the investigation until the fire chief and the territorial fire marshal arrived back in town; and at that point, we would do the fire investigation in the building and that we would allow the insurance adjusters or the insurance companies investigator to accompany us so that we weren't ending up having two fire investigations done and that all of us would see everything at the same time in the same condition; but I had stipulated that none of the insurance company adjusters or their investigators were allowed into certain portions of the building until such time as we reopened the fire investigation. It didn't cause any real problems. Although there were a few concerns expressed, it was a decision that I made that I still know it was right. That was the way it was going to have to be. We wanted to determine the cause of the fire, and we were going to wait until such time as we were ready to start the investigation.

We did do an investigation of the fire, and we have determined a probable cause to it; and until such time as the legal issues are sorted out, I would rather not go into that at this time but certainly would be willing to discuss my findings and/or any resulting decisions made through the legal system when they are done.

Dobrowolsky: M'hmm. So, of your crew, is there any one that you would like to single out, or do you think they just all did a good job?

Sparks: I think the whole crew did a very good job. I am particularly proud of my department in that I think we have an excellent record of firefighting. I think that our record of the amount of building we save during a fire is comparable to any city in the country. Most fire departments, and we were certainly no exception, always dealt with the amount of loss we had on a building, and that was what would get reported every year and that we had two million dollars worth of fire loss this year or in this particular case, it was probably closer to the seven-million-dollar loss on that particular building out of about a 35-million-dollar property. So, even with that and all

the problems we had, you know, way more was saved than was lost. You know, that's still a good record that way.

But we have always prided ourselves in being a very aggressive fire department. We do a lot of offensive firefighting. We don't stand outside the building and wait for the fire to come to us. We go in and get it. And over the years, that has been a very effective way of fighting fire, and we have started to actually compare how much of a building we save, compared to what we lost; and we run at around the 95 percent save rate on all the fires we go to. Certainly a fire like this and the hangar fires can take that figure and skew it, because they are a huge building with a huge loss; and fire departments now, as they start to do this sort of recording of this information, take those buildings and set them aside from the rest of the fires that we normally go to. We deal with those and talk about whether or not we could save or didn't save a building; but if you take them out, we'd still be at the 95 percent rate, which is as good as any fire department can actually say they can do.

So I don't want to single out any particular member of our department. I think that all 20-odd people we had on the site, plus we still had people working back in the fire halls, doing the dispatching and covering off the rest of it, they all worked very hard for 10 to 12 hours with virtually no breaks; a quick stop for a sandwich somewhere along the line and a bit of a rest, but virtually 10, 12, 14, 16 hours without a break and did a very credible job of fighting that fire!

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you very much.

Sparks: Well, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Ray Wells

Ray Wells had been appointed Chair of the Board for the Yukon Development/Yukon Energy Corporation in August 1997. His experience working for Northwestel, another major utility, proved useful to the Board during various major decisions and crises in the months to come.

“The Perfect Storm.” Yes, after that movie came out, I think that it was three low pressure systems that combined out over the North Atlantic to cause this perfect storm, and just the fact that we had a trilogy of disasters here ... it truly was a significant event. ... So, through perseverance and ingenuity, people kept the lights on and kept the company running, and, yes, it was a major accomplishment.

Recorded December 3, 2003 at the Northwestel building in Whitehorse. Reviewed and edited by Mr. Wells on 22 December 2003. Only one side of tape recorded.

Dobrowolsky: It’s December the 3rd, 2003. This is Helene Dobrowolsky talking to Ray Wells in his office in the Northwestel Building in Whitehorse. Mr. Wells, could you please tell me when and where you were born?

Wells: I was born on December the 3rd, 1952, in Toronto, Ontario.

Dobrowolsky: Happy birthday!

Wells: Thank you.

Dobrowolsky: So, I understand before you became Chair of the Board for YDC in 1997, you did have some background in working with utilities. Well, you’re employed by one.

Wells: Not directly with the electrical utility, but I had spent my career with Northwestel, and there’s a fair amount of commonality between the two businesses; less and less as time progresses because of the competitive nature of the environment that the telecommunications industry is in. And in the north, of course, the power utility is not and probably won’t for the foreseeable future, seeing any level of competition. Having said that, they are both utilities where items, such as capital investment, is a fairly significant part of the business. There was just enough commonality, I felt when I put my name forward to sit on the board, because I did not put my name forward to chair the board, but there were openings for board positions, and I had put my name forward. I had been involved in community organizations, Chambers of Commerce and that, over my work career; and I felt maybe there was something I could contribute as a member of the board. And given some of the business commonalities between the two businesses, I thought I could be a contributor. So, there was an ad in the newspaper, I think, asking if people were interested in sitting on the board. I put my name forward with a résumé, and I got a call from Trevor Harding. He was the Minister responsible for [Economic Development] – one of his portfolios was YDC. Now, this board at the time was a dual board. So, it was the board for YDC and Yukon Energy.

Dobrowolsky: And that's the Yukon Development Corporation [YDC] and Yukon Energy Corporation.

Wells: Right. And Trevor asked me if I would consider chairing the board. So, I spent some time thinking about that, and I actually went and talked to Rob McWilliam, who was the president of YEC/YDC at the time, and chatted with Rob a bit to get a sense of what his feelings were about that and how we might work together, and I accepted the position.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, so just to nail down some dates, do you remember approximately when they were advertising for board members? Would that have been earlier in '97?

Wells: It would have been I think in the summer, late spring/early summer perhaps, and my appointment – I see you had a question mark on here – I think it was in the August/ September timeframe of '97, the appointment. So, it was probably in the summer of '97.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were appointed as chair. I assume you immediately had a lot of reading to do to get a sense of the organizations that you were going to be involved with. So, up until the end of October, had there been any formal board meetings yet?

Wells: Yes, we had a board meeting, in my recollection we had a board meeting probably in the September timeframe, maybe a couple of meetings before the fire. So, I was beginning to just get a sense of [the issues]. –

You have to remember that the chair is not a full-time position. It's a position that's paid on a per diem basis, and we met once a month as a board. So, I was just starting to get a bit of a sense of the issues. Of course, one of the reasons I deliberated a bit on chairing this was because I knew that the intent was to take on direct management. Historically, Yukon Energy, which is truly the active corporation out of the two corporations; an ongoing concern was planning to change the management of the assets from a contract with YECL [Yukon Electrical Co. Ltd.] and take it on directly, and that decision was made before I had joined the board. So, that also raised a different issue. It wasn't just going to be now sitting on a board that was basically getting monthly reports from a company that was operating this, but it would be truly sitting on a board that had direct board governance over an operating entity. That was one of the reasons that I had to deliberate a bit around that.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were jumping in on a lot of big, new challenges, in that the company was taking on some very big, new responsibilities and negotiating their way with the Yukon Electrical Corporation Limited [YECL].

Wells: Right.

Dobrowolsky: And this, of course, made things very challenging for the board, I would assume.

Wells: Yes, well, more so obviously for the management team, for people like Rob McWilliam who were at the heart of orchestrating this. I think the board's role, as it should be, the board

does not get engaged in day-to-day management. You want to keep a reasonable separation there.

Part of our primary role is to make sure you had the right management team in place. I mean, that's important at the senior levels to make sure you've got the right president and CEO in place and that he or she, make sure that they've got the right management team there. And early on I gained – and the board had confidence in Rob's capabilities. So, in that fall time, that was one of the issues, of course, for the fire so that was something of significance. And while the Anvil Mine was back in production, there were some early signals that there may be some other issues around the longevity of that mine, and that mine represented a large portion of Yukon Energy's revenues. So, without that mine, it was going to have a significant impact on the rate structure in the Territory.

Dobrowolsky: You've already indicated a little bit what you perceived the role of the board to be. Maybe I could get you to expand on that just a little. You were talking about not so much day-to-day management but I gather more broad policy decisions; and as you were saying, seeing that the right management team is in place. So, does the board have a hiring capacity?

Wells: Well, the board, when I joined the board, there was no real subcommittees of the board, other than finance; and we created a human resources committee that in future years we would use to make sure that as we recruited for new presidents, because we did go through that phase, and looking at salary and compensation, that was a role that they had. So, the board's – my point of view on the board, there are probably two or three key things, roles, that a board needs to play; and one is making sure that you've got a good, solid senior management team in place. I think that's incumbent upon the board along with the associated compensation, salary, etc.

You also want to approve the strategic plan and business plan. So, the high level strategic plan and the annual business plan you want to approve. You want to make sure you understand where the investments are being made and where the revenues are coming from, the forecast. You want to make sure that they're going to target and achieve the return on equity that's allowed by the regulator. You also want to make sure that there are adequate processes in place, make sure that there are audits being done, that there are safeguards in place for the assets of the corporation, safety for the employees. So, without getting into a lot of detail, the responsibility of the board is you want to have that separation from management so that you can be critical of management; because if you're too engaged with management on a day-to-day basis, it's pretty difficult to stand back and criticize, to be critical, to have the distance that you really need to have. So ...

Dobrowolsky: That's very tricky it would seem.

Wells: Yes, it's – you're really representing the shareholder and the interests of the shareholder when you sit on the board, and there are stakeholders obviously, shareholders are one of them and the customers are, employees are, key stakeholders in any corporation. And the responsibility of the board is to make sure that there is a balance in achieving the interests of the stakeholders. Primarily, though, you're there to represent the shareholder, and you want to make sure that you are distant enough from management decisions that you can be critical of them, as opposed to being entrenched deeply on a regular basis in the ongoing workings of the

organization; because then it's very difficult to stand back and say – to be critical of something that you've been involved in.

And early on, later, probably within six months of joining the board, I actually moved the board meetings from monthly to quarterly, because I found that it was just an incredible strain on management to be preparing for a board meeting on a monthly basis; and most corporations hold quarterly board meetings. Again, it's back to you're not there to manage the business.

Dobrowolsky: So, by preparing for these board meetings, I would assume you'd get a binder perhaps full of issue papers, financial reports anything the board had asked for at previous meetings.

Wells: M'hmm. That's correct, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, yes, that is a lot of work, putting together those kind of packages. So, you had recently started on the board. Did this board work on the basis that there's a certain intake at regular periods so you have an experienced core of people to kind of help initiate the new people, or how does that work exactly?

Wells: Well, the board is appointed by – members of the board are appointed by the minister, by the government, and I don't believe through the time I was there that there was any plan, any structured plan, to ensure that there was continuity. Obviously as government changes, governments come in with new policy objectives, and they will look for people to participate in the board they feel are going to be supportive of those policy objectives, and so there was change.

There was change as you moved through different political parties, but we did bring in an adviser to the board within probably a year of my being there. I'm not absolutely sure of the date, but I recognized that the board needed to get some external advice from somebody with a depth of knowledge of the business, and we brought in someone to advise the board on key issues. Maybe the strategic plan, any major investments we were going to make, this person would give us advice; because when you looked around the board table, there were not people there with a lot of depth and knowledge of that particular business, and I include myself in that.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, it's a pretty arcane field if you're not directly involved.

Wells: Yes, it is. The board was put in place more with the government's trying to keep Yukoners a broad prospective so you have people that had background, you had a First Nations representative, you had people with some environmental background, you had people with some business background. It was more a cross-section of Yukon society engaged on the board, versus a board made up of people that understood the business, if you will.

Dobrowolsky: So, who would have been your adviser, your outside adviser that you brought in?

Wells: Walter Niebor.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, yes, Duncan [Sinclair] mentioned him. So, tell me about the end of October, 1997. Now, it seems to me you had a board meeting scheduled for right around that time.

Wells: Yes, we did. We had a board meeting scheduled for the day of the fire; and my recollection is driving in in the morning, I'm early into work usually, so driving in and catching the news, I'm not sure if it was the seven o'clock news, that there was a fire and ...

Dobrowolsky: So, this was the morning of October 30th.

Wells: Right, and I got into the office and had a phone call from Rob McWilliam, and I think he said, "Don't take this the wrong way but, you know, we won't be able to have the board meeting today. The facilities are – we had a fire in the facilities." and he described what was happening and the efforts to keep the lights on, and I wasn't going to get involved or engaged or ask a lot of questions. I knew everybody was very busy and they were the experts, and they were doing their jobs. And I thanked him for letting me know and keep me updated on any important developments that he felt would be of value for me to know, and that was it.

Dobrowolsky: So, at that time you weren't aware of – I guess by that time, the fire would have been more or less under control. You wouldn't have seen, like, smoke?

Wells: Yes, six, seven o'clock in the morning; no, not to my recollection, it would have been dark, I guess, that time of morning, too. I don't remember seeing – that, like I say, may have been around seven o'clock in the morning, and I know they had been fighting the fire, I think you had said in here for four hours, and I'm assuming it may have started around two or something in the morning. So, it was probably well under control or out by that time, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, then what happened?

Wells: Well, we had actually a number of board members in town for the meeting that day. They had come in the night before. And so, we held the board meeting the following day in I think the law firm's facilities here in town.

Dobrowolsky: Davis & Company?

Wells: M'hmm, and I don't have a real vivid recollection of that particular board meeting. There obviously would have been a lot of – we would have had a lot of discussion around issues of the fire; and if I recall at some point, whether it was that board meeting or a subsequent board meeting, the question about "Should we carry on with the transition to direct management, given this significant occurrence," and not with any intent to change direction totally, but should we delay this for a significant period of time? And the feeling was, "No, I think we should carry on with the plan," and there were some provisions, I think, in the agreement to extend some things.

So, the management team felt fairly strongly that they had gone a long distance here and that there was not a risk; and at the end of the day, they were right, that there wasn't any significant risk to the customers or to the shareholder to move it forward, and so we continued down that

path. And of course, that was right around November, December timeframe when Anvil Range started to get a little shaky and we were – I think we had gone to the utility board [Yukon Utilities Board] and asked for leave to begin to charge Anvil Range in advance, because it's quite easy to build up quite a debt when you pay after 30 days of usage of power, and I remember on a phone call with the CFO at Anvil, Rob McWilliam and myself on a phone call, where they were asking for some leave not to pay right away, et cetera.

And I remember our position basically being, “We’re not experts in the mining business. The people that are experts in the mining business obviously are not coming to your aid with money. So, it’s the last thing we want to do is to bankroll you as a utility. We don’t know your business. The people that do know your business out in the capital markets aren’t coming to help you.”

So, we said, “No;” and I’m sure that, along with a number of other issues, anyway the mine did close down and hasn’t reopened since. So, we had the mine closure, a huge impact obviously on the ratepayers. We had the devastation of the fire. We had to continue forward with the progress and transit into direct management and all of the things that go along with that, and it is quite complex. I mean you’re building an organization from the ground up and at the end of the day when you look back on it – even at the time I remember reflecting in the early spring just how significant these three events were, coming together at the same time, and through the hard, focused effort of the management team and the leadership of people like Rob McWilliam, they were able to pull that off.

Dobrowolsky: Well, and then, the whole thing of operating without your SCADA systems.

Wells: SCADA systems, yes.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, that continuing challenge that went on for quite a while.

Wells: Oh, yes. Well, the fire alone would have been – was a significant event that any company – and if I recall Rob may remember more of this, I think we actually had some power companies come up to analyze; because these disasters are few and far between, and, of course, operating companies would take advantage of learning. Like, you can’t mock – you can’t stage these sort of things; so to have a real catastrophe, it’s a great learning experience and I know that there were companies that came up to try to understand “How did you guys keep this going and what did you do.” So, yes, it was a significant achievement period and would be worth noting; but then you combine these other couple of issues around it, and it was a very stressful time.

Again, I want to minimize the role of the board in this, really, because the board -- I didn’t have any significant role, other than taking management’s – again being critical, not in a negative sense, but just standing back and saying, “Okay, should we move forward with this direct management in the short period of time,” and listening to – because that was the decision, listing to management’s position on that and the board making an adjustment to support what management wanted to do after weighing all the issues. I would say that was probably a key role. Other than that, it’s truly management that did this, and the board was there. It needed to make decisions that a board would normally make, but our role was very minimal in all of that, as it should be.

Dobrowolsky: I'm going to get you to quote this wonderful phrase you used earlier to describe –

Wells: Oh, "The Perfect Storm", yes. Yes, after that movie came out, I think that it was three low pressure systems that combined out over the North Atlantic to cause this perfect storm, and just the fact that we had a trilogy of disasters here or issues or whatever that came together at the same time, it truly was a significant event. Yes, those folks need to – and I'm sure they are, I remember we had a celebration after where we invited all the people out, and we talked about the significance of it at the time. You know, you really had a sense that this was a large challenge for – you're isolated, the Yukon is isolated to start with. It wasn't like you had the opportunity to be tied into a grid somewhere else and say, "Yes." So, through perseverance and ingenuity, people kept the lights on and kept the company running, and, yes, it was a major accomplishment.

Dobrowolsky: Well, and fascinating for you to be there to witness and participate in all this. So, how long did your term on the board actually extend?

Wells: I was on the board for four years, '97 until 2001, until the fall of 2001. Yes, it was a very interesting experience and we made – the board also went through some development of its own during that period of time and more work to be done. When I had left there was still work in the offing. There were issues around governance and different things that we were working on, but I was quite pleased with the work that the board had done over that period of time and, again, it really goes back to management at the end of the day. The board, as I say, has four or five key roles to play; and if you play those well and effectively and you get the proper teams in place, that's a large part of it, because the running of the operation is really incumbent upon the leadership in the management team.

Well, we made some changes. You know, Rob McWilliam went back into – Rob was on an assignment, I guess, from government; and as we got things stabilized and started to look to the future, Rob had some desire to go back in. And we were looking for, again, to bring someone in, president, CEO level, that had some knowledge and experience in that industry, because you're not talking a – this isn't a B.C. hydro where you've got thousands and thousands of employees and a very large management team and depth of experience across it; and it's truly 60 employees. So, it's very operational, and it was felt that it would be valuable to have somebody in place that had good depth in operating experience.

Rob had obviously learned a lot over the years that he was there; but when he went back into government, it was an opportunity for us to look for somebody to come in that could bring in industry experience. Unfortunately, that individual didn't stay very long. It was quite disappointing. He, I think, had a lot of potential, and I think he was headhunted and ended up down on the east coast. So, he wasn't there very long. And that was just before I left the board that he left, and we had put someone in an acting role. I think we were going back through the process of – or I think we had gone through the process of looking for someone else on a replacement; and when I left, Don was still the acting president, CEO, and then, Lorne – there was somebody in between I think.

Dobrowolsky: So, this is Don Willems?

Wells: Don Willems, yes; I think Angus Roberts. . .

Dobrowolsky: Angus Robertson?

Wells: Yes, the government took over as chair of the board on an interim basis, and then, Lorne took over as chair after that. I had met and spent some time with Angus on the transition. We talked about a few issues, and I spent some time with Lorne, as well, a couple of meetings, and that sort of brings us up to the current day, I guess.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you said you felt that the board accomplished quite a lot during your term, well, other than helping to steer the move to direct management, what are some of the things you feel – you give me the impression things got put on a more business-like basis, quarterly rather than monthly meetings.

Wells: Well, I'm biased obviously on this; but – and it would be best to maybe talk to Rob McWilliam or Duncan or some other folks for their perspective, because obviously I have a biased perspective, or you could talk to – Pat Irvin is someone who has been on the board a long time. Pat was there before me and was there after me, so he would have a bit of a perspective on the transition; I think that probably driven as much by direct management, the need for change in the board as anything, but my sense of it was the board met monthly.

So, looking forward after I got involved, I guess the first thing I sensed was management. This was not effective for management or the board to have these monthly sessions, so we moved them to quarterly. We put some structure – more structure, improved structure, I think, around the meetings. We tried to get more and more out of some of the detailed reports that were provided and tried to deal with more of the strategic issues. We did set up a human resource committee, so, we put some more structure around it.

We did work with the government of the day in my role as the chair of YDC because Yukon Energy is not a Crown Corporation. It was owned by a Crown Corporation, YDC, and I did my utmost to keep the political – the minister at a distance from the Yukon Energy piece, and that was sort of something that I had tried over time to – because I believe that it's – the most efficient, effective running of a corporation would be done under the stewardship of a board and a management team than having political engagement in that and decisions being made more in the political arena than being made by a board that was looking at it from a business perspective. So, that's some of the things that we had done.

Obviously we had gone through the business planning for the Mayo-Dawson build when I was there. We must have spent at least a year, I can't remember all the detailed timeframes, but a fair amount of time on analyzing the opportunity there and the management team going back a couple of times and re-crunching numbers and doing sensitivity and bringing in the Outside – we had B.C. Hydro get engaged in the technical feasibility. And so, I think as a board we didn't accept – this is again about being critical on being a board – we didn't accept on face value that this was a good thing to do necessarily. We pushed back and asked on numerous occasions, I don't know what management's perspective would be on it, but they may have got a bit

frustrated by it; but it was such a significant investment that we felt it was really important that we do the analysis on it. So, I think that that was a key decision that was made.

It's important that board members have longevity. To an earlier question you had asked, ideally, you get people on a board that are there for five, ten years, get some depth and knowledge and understanding ...

Dobrowolsky: And history.

Wells: Yes, and knowledge about the business and the kinds of decisions that are being made and ...

Dobrowolsky: And knowing we've had this discussion before and where it went that time.

Wells: Yes, yes. So, that's one area that we weren't able to change; but we did bring in, as I say, the individual to give guidance to the board on key issues, someone that had a lot of depth in the business. So, I think putting that in place was important, too. Having Walter Niebor engaged was important for us. It gave, I think, myself but I believe others, too, a bit of a sense of comfort, knowing that for key decisions, you also had the advice of someone that for many years had worked in that industry and at a fairly high level in a large organization, that could help us do our job.

You know, at the end of the day, that's what we were there for. We had a job to do, and I very much saw it as a critical – the electrical infrastructure and the sustainability of energy in the Territory, trying to keep rates as low as you possibly can, but at the same time making sure that you've got good investment and infrastructure, safety policies, et cetera, all in place is pretty critical I think. The Yukon hasn't had a significant outage, but if you just looked at what happened on the eastern seaboard earlier this year, you can sure see how critical energy is to a community, to people, to peoples' livelihoods, to peoples' safety and everything else. So, it's very important. I felt we had a very critical job to do, and I think everybody that I was involved in with the board, one career or another, added to the makeup of that board and brought a lot of different perspectives to the board, because people came from all walks of Yukon life. So, it was a good experience, yes, I really enjoyed it.

Dobrowolsky: Great! Well, I can't think of anything to ask. Yes, looking back, it seems like you had a fair awareness that you were wrestling with a key transition period in the corporate history and that you had an opportunity to help make a difference.

Wells: Yes, sure, I had a real sense of it, in part perhaps because I was so new to it, and of course, all these things then coming together within a few months of my role as the chair of the board, it was not too difficult. It wasn't one of those moments where it took a couple of years to look back and say, "Wow, you know, what those folks did, the management team did, was significant."

I remember having that sense very early in the new year, after you went through the fire and the Anvil Range, and then, carrying on with management saying, "Yes, we can do this transition

thing,” it was pretty immediate that you had a sense that – and if you go back and look at – we go before the – we went before the House every fall; and if I recall probably in ’98, the fall of ’98, in my remarks that I made there, I think I talked about the significance of that and shared that with the Legislative Assembly, that this had all been done by this management team at this critical period in the development and evolution of Yukon Energy. So, I think that’s probably in the Blues or the Hansard or whatever they call it from that period of time.

Dobrowolsky: One impression I got, from talking to a member of the management team, was that you also played a bit of a role in keeping up morale. There was a nice story about how they were frantically trying to set up offices in the middle of boxes up on Range Road and people were putting in these incredibly long days and feeling amazingly stressed and you showed up with all kinds of Christmas decorations.

Wells: Oh, yes, I forgot about that.

Dobrowolsky: And I think that was warmly remembered.

Wells: Yes, I remember that now. It’s probably not my nature frankly, but I did do that. I remember that now. Yes, I was downtown and Christmas was coming on, and of course, yes, I just thought maybe it would be nice to just go up with some things to help lift their spirits a bit. So, yes, I forgot all about that. Well, it’s nice they remembered.

Dobrowolsky: Thank you very much for this.

Wells: You’re welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Dave Wray

Dave Wray was en route to a job interview on October 30th, 1997, when he first saw the Whitehorse generating plant from an airplane window. After viewing the smoking ruin, he concluded that either there would be no job or else an awful lot of work ahead. He was hired as Yukon Energy's supervisor of electrical engineering and is now the director of operations.

Recorded July 21, 2003 at Yukon Energy Offices, Whitehorse. Transcript reviewed by Mr. Wray on 23 September 2003. Additional information in [square brackets]. Only one side of tape cassette recorded.

You have to try to find out what happened. It's always different every time. So, it's not just routine cookie-cutter designs or something ... Yes, it seemed to go over big in the interview when I said, "I like it when things blow up."

Dobrowolsky: It's July the 21st, 2003. I'm in the Yukon Energy offices with Dave Wray. What is your official title, Dave?

Wray: Director of Operations.

Dobrowolsky: Dave, could you please tell me when and where you were born?

Wray: When? I was born April 6, 1962, in Calgary.

Dobrowolsky: Could you tell me a little bit about how you ended up in the electrical business?

Wray: I guess my dad was in this business, and I would go around with him when I was young. He was an electrical engineer, and I would go with him to substations and hydro plants and all these places; and I liked it. So, I took it in school and became in the same line of work.

Dobrowolsky: And where had you been working before you came to the Yukon?

Wray: All the time in Calgary for Enmax, which is the electric system that supplies Calgary.

Dobrowolsky: Okay, and what brought you to the Yukon? Were you just ready for a change?

Wray: Yes, actually I was salmon fishing or on my way to go salmon fishing, and I was in the Vancouver Airport and saw the advertisement in the newspaper for Supervisor of Electrical Engineering at Yukon Energy. So, I just submitted a résumé and ended up here. Yes, I was ready for a change from the industry in Alberta, which was deregulating, and I didn't like some of the things I saw happening there. So, I thought it was time to go somewhere else.

Dobrowolsky: So, about when would this have been that you saw the advertisement? Would that have been the fall of '97 or a little earlier?

Wray: No it was the September long weekend, I believe, was when I was out there.

Dobrowolsky: Well, then you sent up your résumé, and then what happened?

Wray: Then we had a phone interview, and then they flew my wife and I up, and we had an interview downtown. But on the flight up, people were talking about how the power plant had burnt down; and then, as we were landing there, we flew over top of it and I could just see all this smoking ash and stuff like that, which I guess was the hydro plant. So, I just said to my wife, “Well, there’s either going to be no work or lots of work here.” It turns out it was lots of work, I guess.

Dobrowolsky: Yes. Now, I was talking to someone who quoted a comment at your job interview, something to the effect of, “It can be lots of fun when things blow up.”

Wray: Yes, “I like it when things blow up,” yes.

Dobrowolsky: Had you had any previous experience with that?

Wray: Oh, yes, lots of experience with – not with hydro plants burning down. That was my first one of those; but, no, I used to deal with lots of failures of equipment, things exploding and stuff, and I liked it. It’s fun.

Dobrowolsky: Just it’s a challenge; it’s interesting.

Wray: Yes, and you have to try to find out what happened. It’s always different every time. So, it’s not just routine cookie-cutter designs or something. Every time it’s doing different things, so I like it. Yes, it seemed to go over big in the interview when I said, “I like it when things blow up.”

Dobrowolsky: I’m sure it was quoted back at you many times after.

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, you obviously were successful in your interview and when exactly did you start work?

Wray: Let’s see, December 8th was my first day. I spent the first four or five days here, and then, flew down to Los Angeles to inspect the switch gear that we’d bought for the new plant. So, we were down there, and then, came back, and then, went home for Christmas. That was part of the deal, because I wasn’t supposed to start until the New Year, but then, you know, they hadn’t planned on the fire and everything. So, if I started early, then they were willing to fly me back home for Christmas, which was good.

Dobrowolsky: So, tell me about the switch gear, what exactly would that have – what part of the operation was that?

Wray: That's where all the generators feed into the switch gear, they feed their power in, and then, there's breakers and stuff that control how the power goes out. So, it's – well, it looks like a big bunch of cabinets is what it looks like, and we had to go down there and test it and inspect it and make sure it was okay. So, we spent a few days down there.

Dobrowolsky: So, this was the first step in converting the energy that drives the turbines.

Wray: Yes, that's how you control the power that comes out of them, how you control the electricity is through that switch gear.

Dobrowolsky: So, was that something that Yukon Energy was trying to get reinstalled as quickly as possible, or this was on order and you were checking whether this would be suitable.

Wray: Yes, it was actually on order to go to the Mayo Plant, the Mayo Plant originally; but when the fire occurred, then it was changed to come here instead. So, we went down there to make sure it was suitable for here and to make sure it worked properly and all that.

Dobrowolsky: So, after Christmas, then what happened? What kind of jobs were you working on?

Wray: All the electrical stuff for the plant was under, I guess, my responsibility. It was quite a lot of pressure because we had a business interruption clause in the insurance. So, the insurance was very excitable if it took us any kind of time to get information to the consultants or to do anything that would cause them to have to pay another day of service interruption. So, generally in the morning – the consultants worked out of Montreal or just outside of Montreal, and –

Dobrowolsky: What were their names?

Wray: That was GEC Alstom. So, they were, of course, three hours ahead of us. So, we had to turn around all their questions in a day. So, when we would get to work, they had already had three hours to fax us questions; and we would get the questions off the fax, and then, I'd have to go and find out the answers for them by the end of the day.

Dobrowolsky: Their working day or your working day?

Wray: Well, it was supposed to be theirs but usually there was too much. We couldn't do it. Usually it was late on our working day.

Dobrowolsky: So what kind of issues would come up, what sorts of ... Well, perhaps I should just backtrack a little bit. I understand that very quickly after the big fire there was a consortium hired to handle the rebuilding. So, this particular group would have been one of the three companies involved in that consortium?

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And what was their particular responsibility?

Wray: Their responsibility was to get the generators back in shape to go back online and to do all the electrical stuff in the building, right from – like just the station service-type stuff that just runs the lights and the plants and all that stuff to the high voltage stuff. That was all under them.

Dobrowolsky: Now would this also have linked to the SCADA system?

Wray: Yes, yes, all the controls and everything like that was all under their responsibility, yes. So, we had to work with them to get their control system to talk to ours so that we could control the plant remotely.

Dobrowolsky: So, about how long did this very intense period last? Maybe to backtrack, I guess part of one of the generators, WH3, and what I understand was a partly salvaged SCADA system, was operating by late December?

Wray: M'hmm. Yes, yes, by late December; we had to dry out, of course, it got a lot of water on it, the generator. So, it had to be dried out a bit, and then, we could salvage enough of the old switch gear to put Number 3 back in service; but the other two units were not available at all. Yes, that was back running, I guess it was – I can't remember now.

Dobrowolsky: It seems to me the 22nd was the date that –

Wray: Yes, I was going to say it was just before I left for the Christmas holidays, yes, that we had that back available anyways on line.

Dobrowolsky: So, were you involved in helping with that part of it, as well?

Wray: Yes, a little bit. Yes, not so much on that salvage, because that was kind of underway by the time I got there. I didn't have so much to do with that as I did with all the new stuff.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you came up for that, and that's something I should have asked earlier, when you came for that initial job interview, did you actually get a chance to go out and look at the site, or was –

Wray: Well, not as a tour, no. We rented a car, and so, I kind of drove over by the fish ladder across the way there and looked at it; and it was still smoking a bit that second day, on the day when I had my interview, too, so ... There wasn't much to see though. It was all lying flat and burned.

Dobrowolsky: So, what were you thinking when you looked at that?

Wray: Oh, I had a pretty good idea if I got the job what I would be doing for my first year anyway, yes, which was good; because I wanted to get into generation, which is something I hadn't had a lot of experience in.

Dobrowolsky: So, was most of your work in distribution before that?

Wray: Substations mostly, just about all on substations; substations and control centres is where I worked mostly.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were working with GEC Alstom?

Wray: Alstom, yes.

Dobrowolsky: I do have the spelling of that somewhere. And they were, I guess, manufacturing or assembling the electrical components of the new plant. So, how exactly did that work? Did they come up here and kind of put together sets of drawings, or did you folks have all the specifications that they could rebuild, and I guess new and improved stuff; or how was the working procedure? I understand a lot of things were improvised because of again pressure from the insurers.

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And well, just needing to get that system up and running again period. So, how was that kind of working procedure?

Wray: Yes, well, they had a lot of the control cabinets built down east in their plant, and they had a design from another hydro plant, I believe Ear Falls, I believe it was, which is in Ontario, that they could adapt to our – it was not a dissimilar plant. It was quite similar. So, they could start from there with these designs from this other project, which sped up their time required to complete that, and then, they sent these things up, and we put them in place and tested them.

A lot of the things we did we had to do, they would do the engineering on site with us as well, as well; and, you know, I would go around and ask people that had been here a long time, “Well how did it work before? And was it any good before, or do you want to see it some way different or improved in some way?” And that’s how we would try to do it this time.

Dobrowolsky: So, who were some of the people that you would consult about that?

Wray: I talked to all kinds of people, Les Boisvert, who was the Manager of Maintenance for the plants at that time. Various electricians like Jay Allen, Al Hammond, Bob Burrell, people like that; and then, some of the Alberta Power people that were up in the early stages at least helping us. I talked to all of them about – mostly to get the history, because when the place burnt down and the office was on top of it, then it virtually wiped out any record that we had of even what was there. Other than what was in peoples’ heads, that’s the only way you could get any information, because the records were burnt. So, yes, some stuff they could do in a more classical way, like engineer it down east and get it assembled there, and then, ship it up; and other stuff we had to engineer on site and put together on site.

Dobrowolsky: So when you say, “engineer on site,” what does that mean exactly?

Wray: Discuss what’s the best way to do something, and then, order the equipment in and find a place to put it.

Dobrowolsky: So, essentially designing –

Wray: – on the fly.

Dobrowolsky: – or determining what is most appropriate and well, designing your system?

Wray: Yes, on the fly and sometimes, you know, it didn't – sometimes we had to do it twice because it ... you know, when you're under that kind of time pressure, you don't get everything right every time. So, sometimes we had to do things more than once to get it right, order different equipment; we thought it would work just ended up not, and we'd have to order something else. So, that was a big part of it, and then, cleaning the generators was another big job. During the fire, I guess the roof opened up. It was a tar roof on that building, and it opened up right overtop of Number 2 generator. That's where the flames came out; and when the flames came out, the melting tar roof dripped down, and we had tar all over Number 2, and then, it hardened, it went back to being hard tar all over the generator. So, that was a job getting that clean.

Dobrowolsky: Yuck!

Wray: We had to use solvents, and then, we used dry ice to blast off the stuff.

Dobrowolsky: I've never heard of that before.

Wray: Yes, dry ice is just frozen carbon dioxide in pellets, and you just propel it in high pressure air; and you control the hardness of the pellets by the temperature that you keep it at. So, you don't want it too hard or you'll damage the insulation; and too soft, it won't do anything. So, you have to keep it at the right hardness, and then, it's just like a sandblaster except after the ice hits whatever it's hitting, it turns into carbon dioxide and it's gone.

Dobrowolsky: Fascinating.

Wray: Yes, but Number 2 generator it took a long time to clean. It was hard.

Dobrowolsky: So, that was definitely the worst of the three?

Wray: Oh, yes, that was the worst of the three for sure, yes, yes. That one and Number 1 was the next worst, and Number 3 was the cleanest.

Dobrowolsky: Which is why you were able to get it up and happening relatively quickly?

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, take me from physically cleaning up the site, having to take the tar off the generators to the stages of what would have been happening next. I mean, at the same time I gather it would have been getting cold; you're getting snow. How did that affect all the working conditions?

Wray: Well, we didn't clean until the summer, so that was okay; but at first, all we had was little plywood shacks that were over top of the generators and in kind of a little makeshift control room for Number 3; and they were just erected out of two-by-fours and plywood and had, you know, various forms of heat, whatever, portable electric or, you know, little propane heaters, that type of thing and it kept it warm enough that you could work in there. It was okay; but it was just, you know, there was no big central building or anything like that. It was just little cubicles over the generators and the one control room. So, we were like that for a while until they got the building rebuilt, and then, we could take all that stuff off.

Dobrowolsky: And about what was the time frame for that? When was the building ...

Wray: When was that? It was about – I think we were in – I recall it being in May anyway it was available to us. So, yes, most of the cold period was just with the plywood shacks.

Dobrowolsky: And in the meantime you'd be putting your steel frame and everything up?

Wray: Yes, all the girders and everything were going up all around us, yes. So, there were times when we had to watch what we were doing because – you know, because they would need outages. They couldn't have high voltage cables under them energized when they were lifting some big steel stuff overtop in case it dropped or something like that. We had to coordinate what we were doing.

Dobrowolsky: That would have been a bit tricky.

Wray: Yes, but, you know, you just have to shut down that plant or whatever while they're doing some things, rely on other plants.

Dobrowolsky: So, you were working primarily with the contractor who was doing the electrical stuff; and I gather, at the same time, there were two other companies who would have been actually putting up the building.

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: Would that have been their main function, or was there any overlap with what you were doing. I mean, obviously there would be, because it's all part of the same building.

Wray: Yes. Well, we worked quite a bit with a guy called Kevin Steels, who was the site supervisor for that consortium. So, yes, we were getting involved in the building stuff, as well. There wasn't too much of my focus had to be on that, though. Bill Haydock was the mechanical supervisor, and he looked after the building as far as, you know, making sure that we had the proper airflow for keeping the generators cool and all that type of stuff.

Dobrowolsky: So, here you are salvaging, cleaning your turbines and what are the other pieces that go with that that you were looking after? You were talking about switching gear.

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: And what other types of ...

Wray: Oh, we had to do – all the cabling had to be redone. There's cables, of course, to transmit the power from the generators to the switch gear, and then, from the switch gear out to the substation. Those all were burnt and had to be replaced. So, we had to determine the size and the rating and get those installed. There was all the surge protection for the generators, which protect them from voltage bumps, had to be all redone and upgraded. We upgraded all that stuff, because the old stuff was a lot older technology. So, we improved all that. All the control cables had burnt, so we had no way of talking to various devices that give us alarms about the machines, let us know if they're getting too hot or if there's not proper water flow or low oil on the bearings. All those alarms, they all had to be redone and reverified that they worked.

There's a huge amount of control things, and then, we had to get the ability to start and stop or raise and lower the power output of the machines from our SCADA centre. There was a lot of work to do with that, and then the actual switch gear itself, and then, the connections out to S-150, the substation, had to be made; and we had a couple of failures there. We had a cable termination fail on us, and we had the cable fail on us, as well, which had to be replaced.

Dobrowolsky: So, this would be a matter of installing them and testing them, and they didn't work and you'd have to replace them; or they would actually fail while they were in service?

Wray: They failed while they were in service, yes, which caused an outage. We just had to re-terminate it, which wasn't a big deal; but the cable replacement, we had to buy all new cable and put it in again, or they had to. It was under their warranty.

Dobrowolsky: So, it sounds like there's a lot of detail and a lot different pieces to keep track of.

Wray: Oh yes, yes, lots of coordination has to happen to keep the various people going and not interfering with each other, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, how big a crew would have been working on that aspect of things with you here at the plant, as well as ...

Wray: Oh, they had – it depends on what you were – it depends on the various parts. Some people would come and go, depending on their jobs. Some people were installers, and so, they would be here for a while, and then, there would be other people who would test and commission, and they would come in for a while; but there would be almost always a work crew with at least a dozen people of theirs over the course, plus a lot of our people, as well, yes, just on the electrical side. There was like huge amounts of people when they were putting up the building, you know, because you've got cement people and people putting up the steel girders and people putting on the siding, and then, the drywalling and, you know, lots of different trades for that.

Dobrowolsky: So, traffic management would have been an important part of all this, I guess, just to make sure.

Wray: Yes, traffic management and safety, because, you know, especially the building people, they're not used to drywalling around, you know, high voltage installations like that. So, you have to make – they're just not aware of what they could be touching. So, you have to be really watching, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, were there any safety incidents or accidents during the construction that you know of?

Wray: No, no, not that I know of at all. I mean, I don't know, I'm sure people had cuts and stuff like that, but there was no major safety incident, no.

Dobrowolsky: That's great, considering the haste and the tricky building site and, as you said, all the different groups having to coordinate.

Wray: Yes, Kevin Steels was pretty good. Ken Sawyer on our side had – was quite involved in making sure that these guys were working safely, as well, yes, and following all the rules, making sure we had all the fire extinguishers and all the different site stuff; because, you know, the OH & S people would come down, too, and make inspections and make sure that things were being done according to the rules.

Dobrowolsky: This is Occupational Health and Safety, Yukon Government inspectors?

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, they paid frequent visits, did they?

Wray: Yes, fairly regular, yes; it's a pretty easy drive from their office to here.

Dobrowolsky: "We need to get out of the building for a while."

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: "Lets go down to Yukon Energy." So, were there any aspects of it that were particularly challenging or different or new to you?

Wray: Probably some of the generator controls were new to me. I hadn't had anything to do with that before. Cleaning the generators with dry ice was new. The other stuff I had done a lot of it before but just not in that – you know, it's a particular application but it's the same – it's not –

Dobrowolsky: The same general principles?

Wray: Yes, yes, that's right. But yes, it was lots of work, huge amounts of hours on that.

Dobrowolsky: Well, tell me about your hours. What kind of days were you putting in?

Wray: Usually – on the weekdays, it was usually 10 to 12. And then, I lived – my wife didn't come up till March. So, for the little bit of December that I was here and January, February, March I lived in the High Country Inn; and usually every Saturday, we put in about 10 hours, and then, try to take Sunday off.

Dobrowolsky: Now, how long did that go on?

Wray: Well, that really went on until probably early summer, and then, it got a little bit more manageable as things got more complete; but I was working on pretty well full time until the next October, before everything was done, yes.

Dobrowolsky: So, I know there was an official opening of the new plant in early November, '98. But when did things actually get operational? I assume there would have been a period of testing and actually making sure that things were running.

Wray: Yes, it was mostly operational quite a bit before that. It was operational pretty well in – well, I can't remember the dates now, it's getting too long; but in the summertime I'm sure we had all the units available to us, yes, early summer. That was – you know, it was critical to us to get the units at least available to us, you know, for system supply. Even though a lot of the stuff around them wouldn't be, you know, 100 percent complete, you wanted to have the ability to at least use the generation that was there.

Dobrowolsky: So, when you were saying that – in your interview, that “It's fun when things blow up,” was it fun, or was it just an awful lot of incredibly hard, tiring work?

Wray: It was a lot of work but, you know, it was an enjoyable – I liked the project. It was good to – I learned a lot, huge amounts. I learned huge amounts. You know, there was a lot of pressure, that's for sure. Like, that part wasn't – I guess that part wasn't fun; but just getting all this – all this stuff happening and seeing it come and seeing it progress like that, it was worthwhile, yes.

Dobrowolsky: But do you necessarily want to do one of those again?

Wray: No, no, no; it was one of those things that was good to do, but maybe not do it again, you know.

Dobrowolsky: Yes, a once-in-a-life time experience.

Wray: Yes.

Dobrowolsky: Looking back, any final thoughts about that whole experience and that whole, I guess, “trial by fire,” your first year in the Yukon?

Wray: Yes, it was just – it was enjoyable to do that. It was – there were lots of concerns about the rest of the work, capital work not getting done, you know, because we were so focussed on the plant that other parts of the organization would get mad that their work wasn't getting down

by us in tech services. So, that was a bit of a headache, but, no, it was something that not a lot of people are going to get to do, build a hydro plant over after it burnt down. So, it's good on the résumé.

Dobrowolsky: That's true, and, I guess, in some ways, you ended up with a state-of-the-art plant, something vastly superior to the old NCPC.

Wray: Oh yes, yes, yes, that's as modern as, you know – the generators are still, you know, they're still fairly old, but, you know, there's nothing wrong with them; and now all the controls are, yes, and the relaying and the protection and everything is all as modern as you can get. I never saw the old plant except, you know, ashes; but when I talk to other people that have been here, you know, the difference in the plant is remarkable, I guess, compared to what it was.

Dobrowolsky: Well, thank you very much.

Wray: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW