

The Power of Pinawa

From water to atomic to people power, this tiny town has big dreams

BY JUDY WAYTIUK

The unpredictable ebb and flow of power has always ruled Pinawa (from the aboriginal word “pinnowok” meaning calm waters) from early 20th-century water-generated power to more recent atomic energy research.

But these days, the small community in Manitoba’s Whiteshell region relies mostly on people power to generate the energy that will be needed to keep Pinawa lively in the foreseeable future.

And perhaps there’s a mysterious shadowy metaphysical reason behind it all.

Aboriginal people in North America have long believed this Precambrian Shield part of Manitoba harbours one of their world’s “power centres.” They say that’s why archeologists have found ancient petroforms – symbolically significant arrangements of small rocks – in remote areas of the rocky, river-laced region.

Whether the spirits had a hand in it or not, Pinawa got its start in 1906 when Manitoba’s first year-round power dam – the first hydro dam in Canada between Sault Ste. Marie and the Rockies – was built 15 kilometres downriver from where the town now sits. Along with the dam, a single street of brick homes was built to house dam employees and their families. That dam was closed in 1951 to allow the Winnipeg River to serve the newer Seven Sisters Hydro Station downstream, and the old village of Pinawa evaporated. But the original dam, its ruins still intact enough to make for impressive viewing, later became a Provincial Heritage Park.

In the early 1960s, Pinawa was reborn upstream of the original dam

site when Atomic Energy of Canada Limited built its Whiteshell research centre and erected a small model community nearby to house what would become, by the mid-1970s, almost 1,000 workers. The neatly designed little town was uncrated alongside the Winnipeg River’s placid, picturesque Pinawa Channel, complete with townsite shopping centre, marina and schools for scientists’ and support workers’ kids.

It didn’t take long for townspeople to figure out Ma Nature offers plenty of unspoiled nature-oriented recreational opportunities in these parts. Boating, fishing and hiking

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are hugely popular around here, and the locals developed magnificent walking, hiking and ski trails.

Ambitious walkers can tackle Pinawa’s 26-kilometre section of the TransCanada Trail from Seven Sisters to the Old Pinawa Dam, which folds in the Heritage Walk, Ironwood Trail and Alice Chambers Trail. In winter, the local ski club maintains a challenging network of trails, complete with woodstove-heated warm-up hut and picnic table. Skiers schuss along parts of the same trails used for summer walking, sometimes crossing the game-trails of the white-tailed deer that wander through town in winter.

Day-hikers can try the Heritage



The 650-foot Pinawa Heritage Suspension Bridge spans the Pinawa Channel.

Channel Walk, starting at the locally designed and built covered picnic shelter next to the 50-metre (650 feet) Pinawa Heritage Suspension Bridge spanning the Pinawa Channel. The walk loops through town and doubles back again, following the Pinawa Channel to the Ironwood Trail that leads walkers past the 18-hole riverside golf course, along the town waterfront, and past the horizontal Heritage Sundial and its 17-foot gnomon (that’s the pointy thing that casts its shadow to tell the time). The sundial’s outer ring notes local time and an inner ring indicates time corrected for its locational longitude.

But as the 21st century dawned, interest in nuclear research waned. AECL is closing its nuclear research facility, and Pinawa, which never had any other reason to exist, faces the possibility of a second evaporation in 50 years.

This time, though, the community consists of strongly motivated people who aren’t about to let their town disappear again. They’re pulling out all the stops to attract other economic ventures, using their own educated labour pool plus the area’s nature-loving lifestyle as reasons for potential employers to locate here.

And those are two powerful inducements. ■

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