



## OUR SHARED FUTURE: THE STORY OF BRAD DARBYSHIRE

### Former Cluff Lake Employee

Orano's Cluff Lake mining operation was an integral part of northern Saskatchewan for nearly a quarter century. Beyond the jobs it created and its contributions to the region's economic prosperity, Cluff Lake's true legacy is the many people who built their lives on the training and opportunities that the mine created – people like Brad Darbyshire and his family.

During construction, operation and decommissioning, the Cluff Lake mine provided employment for thousands of people and injected hundreds of millions into the provincial economy through contracting and purchasing local goods and services as well as royalties.

Orano Canada operated Cluff Lake as a uranium mine and mill from 1980 to 2002 producing 62 million pounds of yellow cake. Decommissioning began in 2004. The site is now fully decommissioned, unoccupied, and open to the public. Orano still monitors the site, and it is safe for traditional hunting and gathering.

#### The History of the Darbyschires

One example of the many lives touched by the Cluff Lake mine is the Darbyshire family originally from the Ile-a-la-Crosse area. The Darbyschires were established in northern Saskatchewan by Fred Darbyshire, who immigrated to Canada from the United Kingdom in 1907. Fred's family first settled in the Kelvington area, and Fred then moved to northern Saskatchewan as a young adult to pursue the hard and adventurous life of a trapper.

In 1940, Fred married Nora Leuken, the daughter of a settler at Big River. Fred tried the settled life after he was married, operating a sawmill in partnership with his brother in Flin Flon, but after a few years he returned to the life he loved with his wife, travelling the rivers and lakes of northern Saskatchewan by canoe and dog sled.

Fred's exploits as a trapper are legendary. He is prominently featured in several books, and many landmarks in the Athabasca Basin are known by the names he gave them while trapping there.

Fred's wife Nora gave birth to two twin sons in 1956 and the family settled at Ile-a-la-Crosse. Fred got involved in mink farming, but he was always drawn by the trapper's life and continued to venture into the bush for the rest of his life.

#### Life at Cluff Lake

One of Fred's sons is Leonard Darbyshire who grew up in Ile-a-la-Crosse and attended a boarding school there. He completed high school at Prince Albert along with his twin brother and then went to Moose Jaw where he completed a welding program in the late 1970s.

At that time, the Cluff Lake mine was under construction and, as a northerner, Leonard was a preferred employment candidate. He applied and got an apprenticeship as a welder at the mine and began working alongside the Orano team to help create a brighter future for his community and beyond.

Leonard worked at Cluff Lake through the entire operating life of the mine, eventually rising to the position of equipment maintenance supervisor. Stable, high-paying employment allowed him to start and raise his own family in the north. He met and married Diana Pederson of the Buffalo River Dene Nation in 1974. The couple then relocated to Big River and had three children. The eldest of their sons is Brad Darbyshire who was born in 1974. While growing up, Brad says the strong work ethic of his mother and father kindled his ambition to work in the mining sector.

"I'd grown up with a tradesman for a father who was working in a mine and a nurse for a mother, so I just liked the blue-collar direction from

an early age. That's what I wanted for myself, because if it provided me the life I was enjoying while growing up I believed it was right for me as well," he said.

After graduating from high school at Big River in 1992, Brad worked in the warehouse at the Cluff Lake mine as a summer student "loading trucks and counting parts all day long."

Brad spent the next couple of years taking classes at the University of Saskatchewan and working in the forestry sector around Big River during the summers.

In 1995 he decided the university route was not his calling and decided to refocus on the trade background he had been shown from an early age. He then took a 10-month heavy-duty mechanics course at Saskatchewan Polytechnic in Saskatoon. Upon graduation – like his father – he managed to land a position as an apprentice HD mechanic at the Cluff Lake mine.

Brad worked at Cluff Lake for four years. Father and son worked in the same shop on opposite shifts, crossing paths at the airports to and from the mine.

"They didn't want family working too close together. And I didn't want to do that anyway. I'd worked enough with my Dad growing up," he joked.

Brad and his father served together on the mine's emergency response team winning the provincial hard-rock mine safety competition in 1999. Brad says it was a unique and special opportunity to train with his father and win the provincial mine rescue competition that saw them travel to Fernie, B.C. to represent Orano's Cluff Lake mine and Saskatchewan for the nationals.



### A Career in the Making

In late 1999, Cluff Lake was beginning to wind down production and the planning for the decommissioning process had begun. Brad was laid off in 2000. Leonard stayed on for another year as the operation moved toward full decommissioning.

Brad left Cluff Lake with his inter-provincial Red Seal ticket as an HD mechanic and a lot of valuable work experience and industry knowledge. He was 25 years old. He was established in a valuable trade, and fully aware of the opportunities available in northern Saskatchewan's mining industry.

He toyed with the idea of entering the heavy oil industry in northern Alberta, which was offering huge salaries and benefits to attract skilled HD mechanics at the time.

In the end, he took a position as manager with Points Athabasca Contracting Ltd., a joint venture between Graham Construction and the Athabasca Basin communities, which was just starting up to provide services to the uranium mining industry.

Though the position paid far less than HD mechanic jobs in the oil patch, Brad opted to work for Points Athabasca in order to gain management experience and to stay close to his family and community.

"It was a really good challenge starting a new business back then," he said. "The market was really tough, but the uranium market began to turn around and it became very exciting. I was working over 3,000 hours a year, spending weeks at a time at the mine sites. We didn't have any children at the time, so it was all good and the challenge was rewarding."

Under Brad's management, Points Athabasca grew to become a very strong aboriginal-owned business primarily serving the uranium mining industry. After six years, the company provided direct employment for 250 people and was generating more than \$50 million annually in revenue.

By 2013, Points Athabasca hit annual sales over \$100 million and Brad was now the CEO of the company. During the development time of growing Points Athabasca Brad also took on the challenge of pursuing post-secondary business training which would help him manage the current and future potential in the market.

"After BHP's run at PCS in 2010 there was a serious awakening in the southern industrial sector," he said. "I could see that this was the next huge opportunity for indigenous people, but nobody was really getting staged for it down here. All of the indigenous businesses were working in the north because the market was driven by Cameco and Orano."

This led to Brad's next career challenge. After 14 years working in northern Saskatchewan, he made the tough decision to leave Points Athabasca and his post as CEO to find a place in the developing indigenous engagement movement in the south.

The Saskatoon Tribal Council approached Brad to manage a joint venture they had entered to provide services to heavy industries in southern Saskatchewan. He took on the challenge, and after a few years became president of STC Industrial Contracting (STCI) – a business wholly owned by the Saskatoon Tribal Council that has a vision of providing high quality products and services to industry while building quality of life for indigenous communities and individuals.

"We're a for-profit business, but that's really a byproduct of doing everything else right ... providing good service, delivering employment and training opportunities to our stakeholders, being safe, and delivering value to our clients," he said.

### Building Sustainable Opportunities

In three short years, STC Industrial Contracting has grown from a startup to a regular contender in the industrial construction, maintenance, and fabrication sector of southern Saskatchewan. Their goal is to generate annual revenue of over \$50 million per year within the next 10 years. It

counts some of the biggest industrial resource and power generation players in southern Saskatchewan among its customers including Nutrien, SaskPower, SaskEnergy and Mosaic to name a few.

Brad notes that the goal is to build sustainable opportunity for aboriginal people.

"For every dollar we bring in we spend 90 cents on labor and materials procurement, so this means other people can set up businesses downstream to also benefit from our spend. STCI sources materials and subcontracting services from other aboriginal businesses as a priority. We're looking for organic, lasting growth both internally and externally. That's where the big opportunity is," he said.

Reflecting on his life and career, Brad recognizes that a prosperous future is only possible by looking back and appreciating past experiences. He attributes the contribution of the uranium mining industry to his own success and that of many other northerners. He also believes that strong corporate responsibility values have benefited generations of northerners and will continue to help shape their best tomorrow.

"People like me who grew up with parents who worked in these environments were able to support their families and grow and teach their kids how to work. I think that's hugely important," he said.

"Think of my own case as a young guy growing up in Buffalo Narrows. Where would I be today if I didn't have those examples, and the privileges that I gained out of those opportunities my parents and I had? That's the legacy of Cluff Lake. I'm the legacy. And my kids' futures will be the legacy."

[oranocanada.com](http://oranocanada.com)

