

DENISON FALLS UNDER THREAT

David B. Brooks

It would have to be a new member of the WCA that has not seen one or more of the late Bill Mason's films on canoeing. And almost everyone of those films had some sequence showing Bill paddling, swimming, or just relaxing near a beautiful falls. (He was a terrible ham in front of the lens.)

Bill was careful never to mention where that falls was located, save that it was on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Well, the secret is out; it is Denison Falls on the Dog (formerly the University) River, just east of Pukaskwa National Park.

Now Great Lakes Power Limited would like to dam Denison Falls!

In an effort to block the proposed power development, a group called Friends of Bill Mason (organized by Wally Schaber of Trail Head) has taken up the issue. Letters of opposition should be sent to the Ontario Minister of Natural Resources, Lyn McLeod (99 Wellesley Street, Toronto, Ontario M7A 1W3), and to Hugh L. Harris, President of GLPC (Box 100, Sault Ste.-Marie, Ontario P6A 5L4). But first some facts.

The Falls as a Hydro Site

GLPC is an independent power corporation that supplies electricity to the region around the Sault (including Algoma Steel and St. Mary's Paper), with a total population of 100,000. The firm already has dams on other rivers in the region, including the Montreal and the Magpie, which give the company a total capacity in years of normal rainfall of some 400 MW (a megawatt is 1,000 kilowatts). This is enough for about two-thirds of its load; the other third it purchases from Ontario Hydro.

Given GLPC's need to buy power, and its efficient operation of the existing hydro plants, it is clear why it would like to build more capacity. Also clear is the fact that the company has the water rights, acquired years ago before wilderness or canoeing were only something to be put behind a growing nation.

What is less clear is the true value of Denison Falls to GLPC. Flow rates are highly variable during the year, with various data showing the falls as having a capacity of 4 to 16 MW (at 50% availability during the year). In either case, the addition to capacity seems small and likely expensive. (The last couple of plants have cost over \$2000 per kW to build.) If a dam is built, flow over the falls would be negligible during the summer when most canoeists would see it. (The falls is also accessible by a 5-km trail to Lake Superior, so people with moderate hiking ability can get to it as well.)

A Further Caution

My letter to the Minister follows. I would only add that the point about conservation in the letter is critical—and not just to save Denison Falls. In a world facing the threat of warming and other forms of climate change, hydropower is

going to look pretty good in comparison with coal. However, techniques to conserve electricity are advancing rapidly and offer a far better alternative than either coal or hydro. (See reports by Torrie and Brooks, and Torrie and Marbek to the Ontario Ministry of Energy.) As for the nuclear industry (which, not surprisingly, has concluded that global warming is the key environmental problem), analyses continue to show that, even were there no other objections, the nuclear option is too slow and too expensive to be of much, if any, help. Our energy future lies with conservation!

Sample Letter

Dear Madame Minister:

I was greatly disturbed to learn that there is a possibility of damming Denison Falls on the Dog (also called the University) River near Wawa. This falls is not only beautiful and representative of all that is best in Northern Ontario, but a site that has come to have enormous symbolic value as a result of Bill Mason's films and books on canoeing. Indeed, as more people come to know the site, I suspect that it will be something of a shrine—drawing many canoeists and lovers of wilderness to the region.

It is my understanding that Great Lakes Power Corporation wishes to develop Denison Falls as a hydropower site. Being familiar with energy issues, I can appreciate the potential and understand why GLPC might find it useful to add this site to its system. However, economic theory indicates that, as more and more sites are taken for power or other reasons, those remaining increase sharply in value beyond what their use value might be. Thus, there is a good case for preserving the falls specifically because it is the last major site available in the region.

No doubt arguments will be made that the added power is needed for the development of Northern Ontario. I doubt that this argument can be well supported. In almost every case, it has turned out to be more cost effective to economize on the use of energy than to develop new sites that cost several thousand dollars per kilowatt of capacity. Moreover, the installation of conservation measures—in homes, buildings, and industrial plants—creates at least as many jobs as does construction, and in many cases they are permanent rather than temporary jobs.

I sincerely suggest that the Government of Ontario would be serving the best interests of all Ontarians if it (1) denied permission for development of Denison Falls, and (2) took steps to recapture any water rights that GLPC may hold.

Yours truly,

David B. Brooks