



Photo courtesy Manitoba Hydro

The Winnipeg River is a major source of hydroelectric power for Manitoba.

# ONE POWERFUL RIVER

The Winnipeg River was the first body of water to bring electricity to Manitobans year-round. Here's a brief history.

**THE** history of the electrical industry in Manitoba tells the story of expediency, foresight and public responsibility. It began over a century ago during the pioneer days of street lighting and street railway transportation in Winnipeg. Before long, as the novelty of the new energy source gave way to necessity, other large communities in the province wanted the benefits that electricity would bring. They received electrical service, but often at very high costs.

The Minnedosa River plant was the first hydroelectric generating station in Manitoba. It went into operation on the Minnedosa River (now known as the Little Saskatchewan River) in 1900. But it was actually the Pinawa hydroelectric generating station on the Winnipeg River that was the first hydroelectric generating station in Manitoba to operate year-round. Located on the Pinawa Channel, it was built for \$3 million by Winnipeg Electric Railway Company (WERCo.), a privately-owned firm. It went into operation in 1906.

The river was a powerful source of energy for Manitobans, but oddly enough, no one knew it when the Pinawa plant went into operation. It was built at a time when nobody knew whether or not the river was suitable for hydroelectric

development. The Dominion Water Board, which was responsible for the administration of water power resources in Manitoba, did not begin its investigation into the potential power capacity of the Winnipeg River until July 1911.

In addition to not really knowing the hydroelectric potential of the Winnipeg River, building Pinawa was an engineering challenge in 1902. The area where the Pinawa

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generating station was built was rough and unsettled, with no roads and no rail lines into the site.

Once the potential of the river was realized, other generating stations followed. The Pointe du Bois Generating Station was built in 1911 by City Hydro. It was the first hydroelectric generating station built by the publicly-owned utility and today is the oldest power plant still in operation on the river. The Great Falls Generating Station was finished in 1923. The Seven Sisters Generating Station would follow in 1931, as would Slave Falls.

The Pine Falls Generating Station went into operation in 1951. The same year, the Pinawa Generating Station was dismantled after 45 years of continuous service. It was retired to provide a more efficient use of water flows at Seven Sisters Generating Station. The grounds of the historic Pinawa power plant are now a provincial heritage park known as Old Pinawa.

In 1954, the McArthur Falls Generating Station went into service. Its construction marked the end of hydroelectric development on the Winnipeg River. Although McArthur is the smallest generating station on the Winnipeg River, it also has the distinction of being the largest in the world operating with such a low waterfall — seven metres.

Manitoba Hydro itself wasn't formed until 1961 after a series of amalgamations. It now operates all the hydroelectric plants in the province.

"The Winnipeg River is going to continue to be a hugely important source of providing power to Manitobans now and in the future," says Scott Powell, Manitoba Hydro's public



Photo courtesy Manitoba Hydro

**Employees and their families at the townsite beside the Great Falls Generating Station in 1923.**

affairs manager.

A major project to upgrade the Pointe du Bois spillway was just completed — it was needed to maintain public and dam safety and to provide a modern and safer working environment for staff. Upgrades are also underway or planned for the other Winnipeg River plants, Powell says.

"So much infrastructure we're replacing now was installed back in the early- and mid-20th century. We continue to see growth in electrical demand and we have to upgrade in order to meet that demand. It's a testament to how well it's been maintained over the years."

—with files from Manitoba Hydro's *A History of Electric Power in Manitoba*



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