



# The La Loche Project

*Our film crew wanted to be part of the solution. But for many La Loche residents, we were part of the problem.*

*By Kent Morrison*

**"It's cold out here, eh?"**

From his spot perched on the snowy back step of his cousin's porch, Larry Montgrand pulls the collar of his faded, army green jacket closer to his chin.

It is a grey February afternoon in La Loche, Saskatchewan, a remote northern village not far from the Alberta border. Specks of snow swirl in the air. The legs of my tripod grind and stick as I fight to extend them to the ground. Even through my gloves the cold dark metal stings my fingertips as I adjust it to the appropriate height, to meet Larry eye to eye. He watches me as I continue to set up, his dark eyes as bleak as the dense fog that has covered the village since I woke up this morning. The air is so thick it smothers the noise from the street, leaving us in overshadowing silence.

# COME TO

# DOG HOUSE

"I'm usually not cold, but today I am cold," he says.

He wears a thin, tattered jacket. I'm told he wears it everywhere he goes no matter what season. In the summer he drapes it over his bare chest, but today a stained grey sweatshirt guards his skin from the elements. I know it isn't much protection. The neck of the sweatshirt is cut low, revealing a four inch scar just below where his throat meets his collar bone, one of many knife wounds he would show me later.

**J**ust as I am studying him, he is studying me. He watches carefully as I click my Sony DSR-250

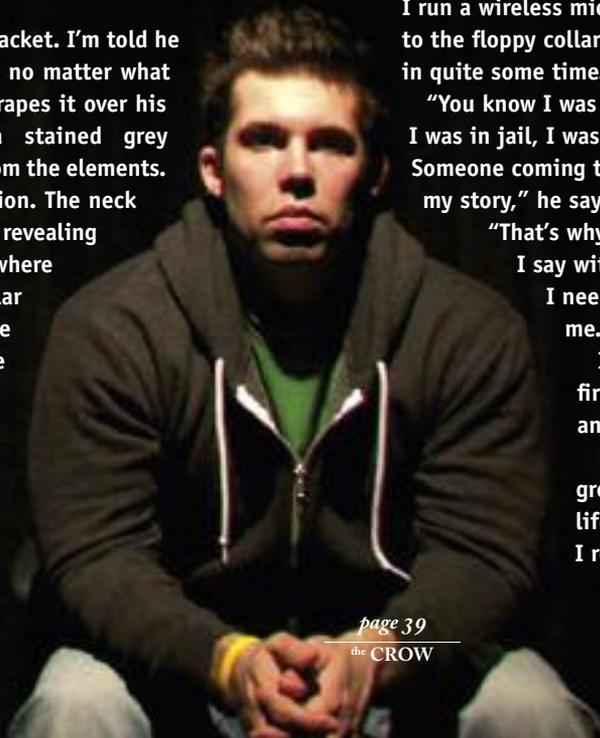
digital camera in place and keeps a cautious eye as I run a wireless microphone up his coat and attach it to the floppy collar. I can tell he hasn't had a shower in quite some time.

"You know I was thinking about this last time I was in jail, I was thinking about this, you know? Someone coming to me with a camera so I can tell my story," he says.

"That's why we are here, to tell your story," I say with a smile. He doesn't know that I need him much more than he needs me.

It was over a month ago when I first heard of Larry and I had been anxious to meet him ever since.

"I need a character who has grown up in La Loche, lives a tough life and can tell me about it," I remember saying to my friend



## *"This is the way life has been twisted."*

Tanner from inside a cramped phone interview booth at the University of Regina's School of Journalism.

"I know just the guy. Everyone around here calls him Larry Monkey. He used to run this town and, oh, I bet he's got some stories," Tanner replied. I could hear him smiling through the phone; he used the tone someone uses when they are holding back more information than they probably should.

"If he's sober he'll be great."

Ever since that first conversation I've been picturing Larry in my mind. What he looks like, what he sounds like, what he will say. The fact that he lives in a trailer with no address and no phone made it impossible to contact him before we got to La Loche. I didn't even know if I'd find him once I got here. All I had was a character sketch and an idea of what I thought he looked like.

Yet here he is in front of me, willing to tell me exactly what I need him to and looking almost exactly like I thought he would. His black hair is pulled back in a ponytail, streaked with long strands of grey. He rests his hands on worn pants caked with dust and mud. The leathery skin on his hands is rough and cracked and his fingernails are stained yellow. When he talks his tongue seems to get caught in the gaping hole where his front teeth used to be.

"I just have to make sure you are in focus and make you look good," I say. It's the line I've said ever since I began interviewing people with a camera. Usually it lightens the mood and draws a smile from the person on the other side of the lens. Today the line seems out of place. Larry just nods. I wish I hadn't said it.

In the beginning, the challenge of making a film about La Loche is what enticed me to do the story; I had no idea what I was in store for. So many things about the La Loche project took me out of my comfort zone. Racism, colonialism, poverty and despair are all subjects I have usually shied away from, but La Loche forced me to think about them every single day.

The idea was born in our JRN 411

Documentary Film class. I'll admit when I first pitched the concept I didn't know what I was getting myself into, but I knew I had a good story. With the help of five other group members, all of whom gave up their own story ideas to join the group, I turned the idea into a project that would become a half hour show. None of us had attempted to tell a story like the one in La Loche, but together we were able to come up with a focus we believed would have a big impact on the people of Saskatchewan and how we look at race and equality in our own province.

At the story's core was the idea that problems in Canadian aboriginal communities are rooted in the way white people injected themselves into the communities and imposed their will. The process began nearly four hundred years ago during the fur trade and continues today, as white officials once again inject themselves into northern communities to fix the problems that their people caused. Of course, what complicated things even further is the fact that we, an all-white film crew, would have to inject ourselves into La Loche to tell the story.

La Loche lies near the Alberta-Saskatchewan border on the east side of Lac La Loche, directly north of the Clearwater River Dené Nation. Dené people make up most of the 2,348 villagers. Nomadic by nature, the Dené came to settle in La Loche when both the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company established fur trading posts there in the late 1700s. When the fur trade abandoned the area nearly a century later, many residents were left without jobs or a source of income.

In 1949, Tommy Douglas's provincial government introduced the Northern Administration Act. The Act stated that government jobs like teaching and nursing would be filled by white people brought into the community, until local aboriginal people, who were considered unfit to fill the positions, were properly trained. But the training never came. The best the government did was to make it mandatory for parents to have their kids enrolled in

school to collect their family allowance, an allowance many came to depend on because of the severe lack of job opportunities. The new regulations made the Dené extremely dependent on government services.

The struggle for employment continues today. Out of the 2,348 residents only 550 are in the labour force and only 405 have jobs. That leaves two-thirds of the community incapable or unwilling to be employed. Today 40.6 per cent of the community's total income comes from government transfers. That's twenty-eight per cent higher than the average for the rest of the province.

I zoom in on Larry's weathered face. I know each wrinkle represents a lifetime of hardship. Childhood is a distant memory for Larry. He tells me he quit school in grade three because the teacher hit him. Since then he has been on his own in La Loche, literally fighting to survive.

Like most La Loche residents, he struggles to find a job. The problem is compounded by the fact that a lot of people aren't trained to do anything. Many people did not graduate high school. As it has been since the Forties, essential service providers like nurses, teachers and policemen are mostly brought in from outside to work. But they don't stay long.

Despite the minimal work opportunities, money isn't an issue. Every few weeks the government provides unemployment and child tax credits that are enough to live on. The challenge for people like Larry is what to do with their time and their money. In a town that offers little to do, people make up their own entertainment. It usually comes from a bottle.

It's hard to believe the quiet man in front of me has been in jail more than twenty times. But, from what I am told, the man in front of me disappears when he drinks.

"He's a pretty bad dude," one person said.

"He doesn't even make sense, he even foams at the mouth," said another. "I heard he got arrested once and kicked out the window of the police truck."

I have no doubt that Larry Montgrand has a dark side, like many of us do. But now as I reach for the record button on my camera I gather the courage to ask the question I came here to ask, one that has troubled me since this project began.

“Why are you like this?”

Our crew set off for La Loche around six a.m. on Tuesday, February 9, 2010, a group of five travelling in two cars. As we wound our way north from Regina, I could tell everyone in the caravan was nervous yet anxious for adventure. By noon we stopped in Prince Albert for a late breakfast. Crammed into a booth in the back corner of the local Smitty’s we discussed our game plan for the first evening in La Loche. It was then that my BlackBerry began to vibrate. It was an email from Georgina Jolibois, mayor of La Loche.

*Dear Kent;*

*...I no longer support your request to come to my community and do a documentary. My council would like you and your team to come to a council meeting and address the group to thoroughly discuss your plan.*

I hadn’t spoken with Georgina in over a week. When we first began the project I approached her for help making contact with possible interviews in the community. She immediately volunteered to help us line up interviews. She gave us a long list of people and community projects that she felt would lend balance to our film. However, the last time we spoke, she asked me to give her some time to deal with a family tragedy. I respected her request for space, but the final week before our trip was a crucial time to solidify interviews. We proceeded with our preparation and set up our interviews without bothering Georgina. I thought we were making things easier for her.

Obviously, she read our actions differently.

I knew from our first conversations that La Loche’s mayor wanted to exercise some influence over the film’s content. Now it was clear she intended to stop us from



Photo: Karin Yeske

coming to La Loche. But appointments had been set; people were waiting for us, wanting to tell their story and the story of La Loche.

The trip began with high spirits. We all believed we were on the road to do the right thing. Now we were pegged as intruders before we even arrived in the village. As we got closer to La Loche we decided to get out our handheld camera to record a bit of the journey. Looking back at the footage now, it captures exactly how I felt as we rolled into the village. Dark grey clouds cast a bleak shadow across the entire village as we crept along the main street, La Loche Avenue. It seemed so cold and dark as we drove along, passing the post office and Trapper’s bar on the right and the gas station and liquor store on the left. As we continued we drove up a slight hill into the rest of the community. At the top of the hill was the town office, Georgina’s office, and the RCMP detachment. It wasn’t until we got past these buildings and closer to the residential part of La Loche that we could see the last rays of the sun disappear beneath the frozen waters of Lac La Loche.

Soon we reached our destination, the place that would become our only place of solitude for the next five days. Tucked away down a slight hill behind the local church, barely visible from La Loche Avenue, lay a hidden bank of lakeside homes. This is

where the members of the RCMP live. Tanner had insisted we stay with him, half out of kindness and half out of necessity. There is just one motel in La Loche and I don’t think anyone stays there.

We quickly unloaded the cars that we’d packed so carefully that morning. Three cameras, two tripods and two lighting kits soon took over Tanner’s back pantry. Our luggage commanded the living room, but the biggest space consumer was food. There are no restaurants in La Loche and the local grocery store stock is scarce. We cooked supper and then Tanner took us all on a brief tour of the village, including a stop at the RCMP detachment. There we met a few of the officers and their wives; they were the only welcoming faces we saw that night.

By ten o’clock we were all exhausted; the ten-hour trip had taken a lot out of us. We sat in the living room that night and discussed our game plan for the next day. As much as we tried to prepare, none of us knew what to expect.

Even before we arrived in La Loche I knew Larry was the person I needed for this documentary. But it wasn’t until he was sitting in front of my camera that I realized how important he was. It took nearly two days to find him once we got to La Loche. The first try came after spending the morning at La Loche Composite High



Photo: Karin Yeske

School. That day the school was having a career fair. Representatives from universities and employers across the province were there to inform kids about opportunities after high school. The principal knew we were coming, but when we arrived, we got an unexpected greeting.

"Hi, who are you here with?" asked an anxious man at the door.

"We're here from the University of Regina," I replied.

"Oh great, come with me I'll show you where to set up," he said, taking off quickly down the hall.

The stressed-out teacher assumed we were there to give a presentation on behalf of the university. We explained that we weren't. He suggested we do the presentation anyway. The U of R recruiters never did show up, but neither did anyone from Keyano College in Fort MacMurray, only two hours away.

Principal Stephen King was kind enough to tour us through the school that morning amid the chaos of the fair. The school had undergone a major face lift beginning in 2005. It now boasted an industrial kitchen, foods lab, welding shop and gymnasium. As I walked through the halls, the whole building felt like new. In fact, it was the nicest high school I'd ever been to. Still, the La Loche Community School struggles to retain students. Of the 1,510 residents over age fifteen, just 9.6 per cent have a high school diploma. The provincial average is thirty per cent.

Leaving the school, we stopped by Larry's place. He lives in a trailer in his cousin's backyard, but the trailer was empty. We knocked on the front door of the house.

"Is Larry here?"

"No."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"No"

"Will he be around in the next day or so?"

"I don't know."

Though missing Larry was disappointing, the day would only get tougher. Our next stop was a place the locals call The Triangle. At the south edge of town on opposite sides of La Loche Avenue stand Trapper's Bar and the provincial liquor store. Beside the liquor store is the L.A. Sports Bar, open Thursday to Saturday. Together the buildings are the most popular spot in the village at night, especially when the government cheques arrive. According to locals, when the cheques come out, most people make the short walk up the street and take their money right to the liquor store.

That day about a dozen people were hanging outside, just behind the buildings in what they call "the jungle." As soon as we pulled up and took the camera out of the bag I could feel the tension rise. The welcoming smiles of teachers and students at the north end of the road were replaced by the questioning scowls of the jungle. For the next forty minutes I turned the camera on anyone who would let me. A man named Roy was happy to oblige me when I asked him why he comes down there.

"I'll be honest with you, I'm drinking wine," he said. An older man with a squinty face they called Popeye barked at me to turn off the camera and get away. "It's just a hobby for us," Roy continued.

The worst part about The Triangle is that it is clearly visible to anyone in the area.

During our visit, six different trucks pulled up, their passengers yelling at us to stop filming. I don't blame them. The Triangle represents everything wrong with La Loche. If I lived there I wouldn't want people to see what it's like either. There was no way to explain that capturing this environment would provide the contrast needed to show what was good about the village. At least, that's what I thought was our reason for being there.

Meeting Georgina Jolibois face to face was one of the hardest things I've ever done. She had left a voicemail on my cell phone while we were filming at the liquor store.

"I have heard you are at the liquor store filming and I request you meet with me right away," the message said. I knew she could see me down there from her office. It was just a block away.

When I met her she didn't shake my hand when I offered it. I felt her dark eyes in the pit of my stomach. She explained how she felt I had betrayed her trust and that we had invaded her community without proper clearance from the town council. I knew I didn't need her permission, but seeing someone that upset because of my actions was something I found very hard to deal with. The film's intent was to educate people about the exploited people of the north. Now I felt like the exploiter. I knew Georgina was just trying to protect her village; she didn't see merit in what we were doing. But I told her we had come to hear what people had to tell us, good and bad. I assured her we would carry on with the utmost respect to everyone in the village.

## *"I don't think there is anything you can do to help me."*

It was the last time I saw the mayor during our stay in La Loche.

After missing Larry on Wednesday, we stopped by his trailer on Thursday. Again he wasn't there. As we turned away down the street my mind was racing. I knew finding Larry was a wild card, but I also knew I needed him to explain what we were seeing. We were nearly halfway through our trip and we hadn't even met him yet. But, just as we began to talk about a possible substitute for Larry, the man who lives without an address or telephone did the unexpected. He called us.

"I heard you were looking for me," he said.

I met Larry Montgrand at two o'clock in the afternoon on Thursday, February 11. It was the moment my perspective on colonialism changed forever. It became more than an idea you talk about in class or read about in books. Colonialism is real. It affects the lives of millions of people, people like Larry.

As we talked together on that snowy back step he told me all about his life in La Loche, the only home he has ever known.

"They didn't have no drugs, no alcohol when I grew up. It used to be beautiful, everything was there," he said. "We used to be healthy. But now look at us today."

Larry doesn't have a job or formal education but he understands the relationship between First Nations and white people better than anyone I've met, both at home and in La Loche. Why? Because he has lived it for fifty years. He'd been a good student until the teacher hit him, he told me. Since then he has struggled to survive in the village where he says he "belongs." When he was younger he slipped into a life of crime, spending a good part of his youth behind bars. Now he struggles to make money. He sets traps out in the bush to catch food. His tiny shack barely provides enough heat to stay alive in the winter. It's a story similar to many people living in La Loche and across Canada, robbed of their natural way of life and forced to assimilate to a completely foreign system.

As Larry tells me his story it is apparent that he doesn't want to be called a victim. He doesn't blame anyone for his way of life. He knows when two cultures share a single space there will be conflict. He doesn't think white people really meant all the harm they caused by moving in; they simply didn't understand the result of their actions.

"It's just the way we've been affected from the outsiders moving in," he said. "This is the way life has been twisted."

I met Larry for a second time on Friday, February 12. When we left him the day before, we did so with the promise that we would be back the next afternoon. I wish I could say it was for a noble reason, but the truth was that I needed to get video of Larry interacting in the town to give him a presence in the film. Once again he wasn't at his house, but we found him a few blocks away walking down the street, his faded green jacket open in the front and flapping behind him.

"Listen, I don't think I want to do this anymore," Larry said leaning in to the open window of my car. "A lot of people around here don't like that I'm talking to you."

He told us a few of his neighbours came into the backyard to scold him for talking to us, moments after we had left.

"I just wanted to get them out of there, but I couldn't touch them or I'd go back to jail," Larry said. Despite his firm voice, I could see hurt in his eyes.

Just as it has done his whole life, white presence in the community was making life harder for Larry. The human inside me said to leave Larry alone, let him go on his way and not cause him any trouble. But the filmmaker in me knew our documentary depended on getting shots of him in his environment. I convinced him to let me film him as he walked home. Then I asked if I could come to his trailer. I'm still not sure if it was worth it.

As we walked he told me more about life in La Loche. I could tell that he was trying to get back to his trailer as fast as he could. When we got within a block of the backyard I heard a loud banging. I looked up and saw a man standing in the window

of one of the houses. He gave us the finger.

"Do you think that finger was for me?" I asked him.

"No, that's probably for me," he replied. To me, that was worse.

Once we got to the backyard he took me into his home, a trailer just bigger than the bathroom of the house we were staying in. A thin sleeping bag hung in the doorway; I think it was the only form of insulation the place had. For the first time it was just Larry and me, alone in his world. Dirty dishes were piled on a small counter, the closet hung open just a foot from the bed. There were no clothes inside.

He told me about the times he had been stabbed. "Too many" to count, but the most recent scar, the one just below his throat, nearly took his life last year. I had heard that he'd been shot twice as well, but I didn't have the guts to ask him about it. When he was finished talking I put my camera down to my side. There was a long pause as he and I just looked at each other.

This man had just bared his soul to me, for consequences that could be much greater than the success of a simple film. But it was I who felt vulnerable. As we stood there I struggled for something to say.

I extended my hand. He shook it.

"Listen, Larry, if you ever need anything just let me know," I said.

"What do you mean?"

It was an empty offer. Both he and I knew it. Soon I would be gone and Larry would be back to the life he had just described to me.

"I don't know, I just want you to know if you need help, you can let me know," I said.

There was a long pause; Larry studied me one last time. I can only imagine how ignorant I looked and sounded.

"I don't think there is anything you can do to help me," he said. 🐾

Postscript: The resulting film, *Denendeh*, was chosen Best Small Budget documentary for 2010 at the Human Rights DocFest in Toronto. View it at [www2.uregina.ca/yourblog/?p=566](http://www2.uregina.ca/yourblog/?p=566)