

La Colle Falls Coffee and Conversation packs the Historical Museum

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The La Colle Falls Dam project failure still can draw a crowd in Prince Albert.

On Sunday, the Prince Albert Historical Society presented a Coffee and Conversation on the subject. The presenter was Paul Van Pul, a hydraulic engineering historian and author from Saskatoon.

Van Pul became interested in the project as soon as he heard about it.

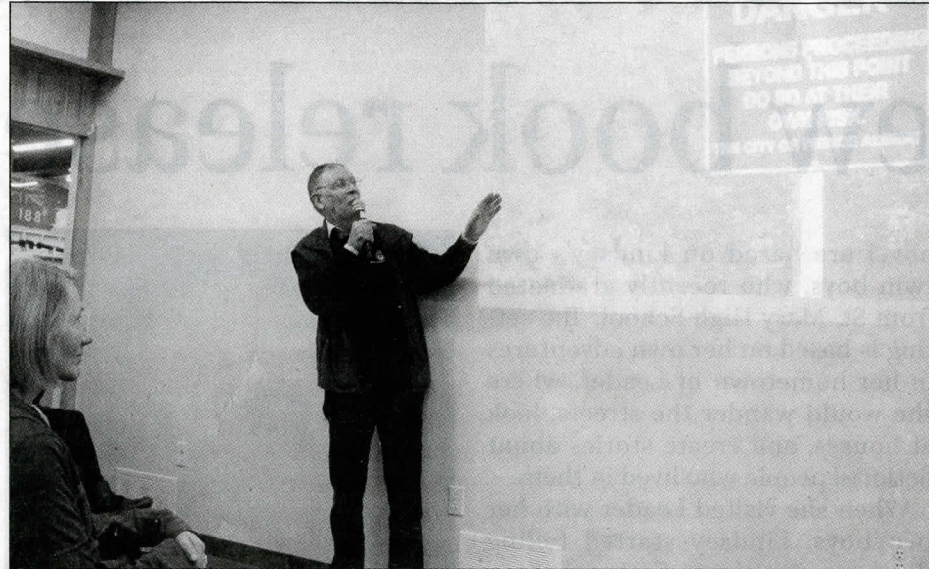
"I lived in Nipawin for seven years and then we moved to Saskatoon and when we lived in Saskatoon, I heard that there was a lock on the North Saskatchewan River," Van Pul said. "I started looking at that because I've been writing about locks and river engineering for years."

Writing about hydraulic engineering is his passion and he self-published the book "Early Hydropower in the Prairies and the La Colle Falls Debacle" in 2023.

"I came here in 2008, I think," Van Pul remembered. "I thought, wow, I have to write a book about this, and so that took us still another 15 years."

He based his idea on a chapter that briefly outlines the debacle in Gary Abrams's book *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866 to 1966*.

"I had read that of course, but I knew there was a lot more to it," Van Pul said. "I did the whole research just before the pandemic. My story starts in 1909 and goes to the 1960s when they paid off the debt."



Paul Van Pul presented to a packed house at the Prince Albert Historical Museum about the La Colle Falls debacle on Sunday as part of Coffee and Conversation.

Sunday's presentation looked back on the history of the entire project. The La Colle Falls Hydroelectric dam was set to be the turning point in Prince Albert, but it did the complete opposite.

In 1912 the city had an idea to build a dam, thinking it would bring more people to Prince Albert. The cost to build it was more than \$2 million, and the city did its best to raise the money but was unsuccessful. This included the Mayor trying to sell his bonds in London but being denied because World War I was about to break out.

"I started in 1909 because what Gary Abrams wrote about is ... they started building, they build and then

it was a disaster. That's what he talked about," Van Pul explained.

"He talked it from the viewpoint of Prince Albert. I look at it from a Canadian perspective. Why did it run amok? What went wrong? That's what I did."

He said that the failure of the project was due to several circumstances.

"It's like an aeroplane crash, it's not always the fault of this or that. It's a sequence of events that happen, and it's the same with this," he added. "That's what I'm going to try to explain. It was not the fault of the provincial, it was not the fault of PA."

When Construction stopped, all the new businesses and people that had been drawn in by it left, leav-

ing Prince Albert with half of what it started with. The city finally paid off its debt in 1966. The skeleton of La Colle Falls can still be seen today just outside of Prince Albert.

Van Pul said the project suffered from poor timing.

"It had happened 10 years earlier, 10 years later. It most likely would have worked," he said.

In one of his final slides, Van Pul listed all of the things that caused the project to fail. This included too many engineers and people involved in the project, political dithering by the federal government, an inexperienced City Council, and a provincial government that was never involved.

When he was asked in the question and answer following the presentation if the project would have been viable had the money not run out, he said it would have been.

"In PA they say, oh, it's (engineer) Mitchell, Mitchell was the wrong engineer. He was too young. It was a lot more complicated than that. That's what I tried to convey," Van Pul said.

The crowd was the largest in the history of Coffee and Conversation with 76 people in attendance. Van Pul was able to sell several copies of his book after the presentation.

"I'm glad and I hope they buy a lot of books," he said. "I self-published them because nobody wanted to pay me to have it published."

The next Coffee and Conversation in February is about Rural Churches.