

4 The Chipewyan: Subarctic Hunters



(From Hearne, 1795.)

Before the flood, caribou were easy to hunt with the bow and arrow, but after it the arrows could not pierce them: it was just as if they were nothing but bone. The hunters had to aim at their heads and hit a vein to make them bleed to death. Then the raven said, "We cannot kill the caribou because they are only bone," and while all others were asleep it stayed up and made magic all through the night. It was the raven that gave the caribou their present form with flesh on their bones, through which the arrows could go. After that they were easy to hunt. This is what we know about the raven.

A myth about caribou and the raven (Birket-Smith 1930, 88)

THE CHIPEWYAN HAVE been chosen to represent the Subarctic culture area for cultural, ecological, historical, and social reasons. They are one of the numerous Athapaskan tribes that inhabit interior Alaska and northwestern Canada. Most Subarctic peoples depended on caribou and fish for food, and the Chipewyan were reasonably typical in this respect, although caribou were far more important in their diet. We know more about them than about most other Northern Athapaskans largely because of historical chance. They were reasonably well described by Europeans soon after historic contact, and beginning in 1960 a thorough study was made of a modern community. Furthermore, there are comparatively recent ethnohistorical studies and additional field research among these people. We do not have information of comparable scope for any other Northern Athapaskan tribe. The sociocultural reasons for describing the Chipewyan are equally significant because their lifeway was considered one of the least complex reported for North American Indians. Typically described as a band-level society, they formed temporary groups of extended families and exhibited marked local variability in social organization. Furthermore, the Chipewyan provide an opportunity to analyze the impact of the fur trade, which changed them from caribou hunters to beaver and marten trappers.

Chipewyan (chip-uh-WI-uhn) is a Cree word meaning "pointed skins," a reference to the dangling point at the front and back of the poncholike garment worn by men. These people called themselves Dene, meaning "humans," and were unified on the basis of language and lifestyle. The major subgroups were territorial and based on the exploitation of regional caribou herds. By the time of contact with Europeans, the Chipewyan possibly numbered forty-five hundred, one of the lowest Native American population densities.

The Chipewyan language belongs to the Nadene linguistic family and the Athapaskan subfamily. The Nadene are concentrated from near the Bering Strait to the western shore of Hudson Bay. They were primarily inland peoples. Some Nadene spread south to form the Pacific group concentrated in sections of coastal Oregon and California. Another cluster settled in the Southwest. The close cultural and linguistic bonds between the Chipewyan and the Yellowknife lead some modern ethnologists to consider them as a single people, as I do in this book.

The early historic range of the Chipewyan is shown in Figure 4-1. Chipewyan country is a vast expanse of tundra extending as much as 700 miles from east to west and nearly 600 miles from north to south. The climate is continental, with long, cold winters and short, hot summers. The extremes range from the high 80s (degrees Fahrenheit) in summer to -60°F in winter. Everywhere networks of waterways—foaming as well as hesitant streams and rivers, great lakes, and countless smaller lakes—interlace. Barren rocks show obvious signs of glacial wear on their smoothed or striated surfaces. Results of glacial action are especially evident in the north, where rolling masses of bedrock give way to boulder-strewn valleys with adjacent lines of eskers. Lichens dominate the highlands, but valleys are covered with dwarf birch, mosses, lichens, and willows. This region is known to the Chipewyan as the Barren Grounds, a fitting term

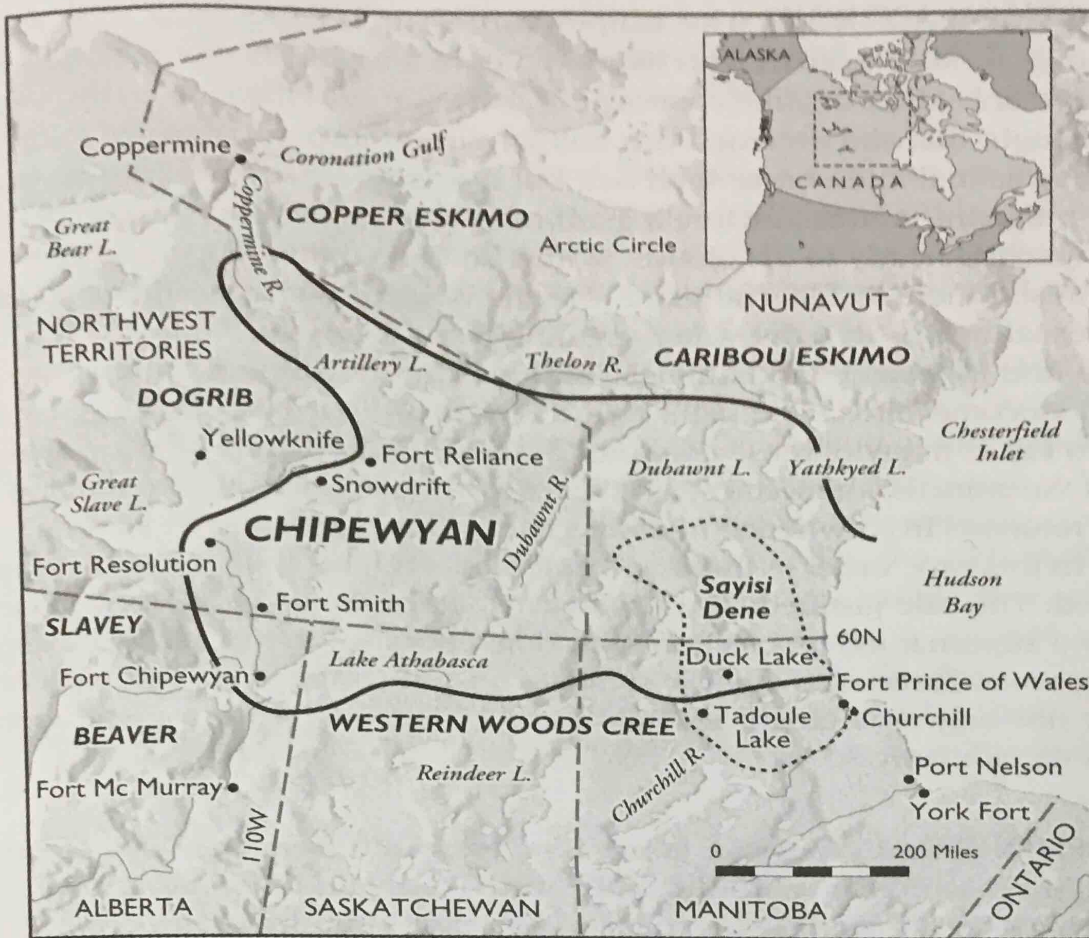


Figure 4-1 | Early historic range of the Chipewyan Indians.

incorporated in geographical writings. Along river bottoms on the southern Barrens, stands of white spruce appear as outliers of their species; this is the taiga, where the tundra and northern forest meet. Still farther south the spruce are dense, and aspen, birch, and juniper stands are fringed by marshy bogs and upland tundras. The forested area was foreign to the aboriginal Chipewyan, but it became important to them in historic times. Above all, Chipewyan country was dominated by great caribou herds that meant survival for these Indians. Interestingly, and contrary to the title of this book, the Chipewyan maintained that they did not own the land but that the land owned them.

| Traditional Life

When the Chipewyan first encountered Europeans, their economy, based on caribou and fish, was well established and probably had been much the same for thousands of years. The baseline ethnographic account that follows examines each major aspect of their sociocultural lives. Although much of the information is based on observations by Samuel Hearne, his findings are supplemented by those of later observers as they relate to aboriginal conditions.

ORIGINS ACCOUNT The Chipewyan regarded the primordial world as centering about a woman who lived in a cave and subsisted on berries. As the narrative unfolds, a doglike creature followed her into the cave to live with her. She thought that she dreamed this animal turned into a handsome young man who had sexual intercourse with her, but it was no dream, and the woman became pregnant. At this juncture a giant man approached; he was so tall that his head reached nearly to the clouds. With a stick he outlined the bodies of water and caused them to fill. The giant tore the doglike being to shreds and threw its internal organs into the water, creating fish. He tossed the flesh on the land in bits and it became land animals, and he tore the skin and threw it into the sky to become birds. The giant told the woman that her offspring would be able to kill as many of these creatures as they required and she need not worry about the animals' abundance, as it was his command for them to multiply. The giant returned from whence he had come and was never seen again.

In this way, order in the world emerged, and the abundance of game was assured. This tale justified the Chipewyans' indiscriminate killing of game and led to a supernatural association with dogs, because the woman's human offspring were descended from a creature related to the dog. The creation account not only was taught to children but also was used to guide thoughts about the adult world.

CLOTHING Chipewyan garments were made from the skins of caribou killed in the early fall when the hides were strong and the hair dense but not long. Eight to ten skins were required to outfit an individual for winter. The upper garment of a man consisted of a loose-fitting, sleeved poncho with the hair side out and the skins cut to a point in front and back. He sometimes wore a fur boa when the temperature was low, and his ears might be protected by a fur band or cap. His ankle-length leggings were of dehaired skins, with moccasins sewn at the bottom. In severe weather he draped a caribou skin cape over his shoulders. The garb of a woman included a sleeved dress that reached her knees or ankles; to hold a long dress up from the ground she wore a belt around her waist. Her leggings reached from below the knee to the ankle and may or may not have had attached moccasins. She also wore a cape, and both sexes used mittens of double thickness. The people could slip their hands out of the mittens without the chance of losing them because each was attached to a leather harness that hung about the neck.

SETTLEMENTS AND MANUFACTURES Habitations ranged from isolated family dwellings to clusters of as many as seventy units, but large aggregates usually were of brief duration. The size of a community depended on the time of year and the local availability of food. People lived in a Subarctic variety of the tepee best known from the American Plains. A Chipewyan tent was framed with poles set in a circle and bound near the top. The cone was covered with as many as seventy sewn caribou skins, and it measured over 20 feet across at

the base. An opening at the apex of the cone permitted smoke from the central fireplace to filter upward. If spruce boughs were available, they were placed around the fire and covered with caribou skins; on these people relaxed, worked, and slept.

Most manufactures could be found in and around the tents. A well-supplied camp included tripods of poles from which hung caribou-skin bags filled with meat. Among the possessions of women were cooking and storage containers of birch bark or skin. The women commonly used a basket of folded and sewn bark for cooking by filling it with water, preheated stones, and raw meat. They probably had skin bags in which they kept sewing awls and thread of caribou sinew. The men's tool kits included antler wedges for splitting planks from logs; a crooked knife with a copper blade and antler handle, the most important form of knife; a curved, wooden-handled knife with a beaver incisor for a blade, another highly useful tool for cutting small sections of wood; and a hand drill with a copper bit and an antler handle, the only drill form known. Awls were of copper, and a copper ax head was hafted on a wooden or antler handle. These uses of native copper, and its use in ice-pick points, arrow points, spearheads, and spoons, reflect a reliance on this metal. The copper tools were made by pounding a raw lump of the metal into shape. These people never heated or smelted copper but processed it as they did stone.

CONVEYANCES The little that is known about aboriginal Chipewyan boats suggests that they had only small skin-covered canoes with wooden frames (Figure 4-2). These vessels were used to hunt caribou as they swam across lakes, and canoes lashed together formed rafts to ferry people across rivers. The toboggan for winter transport was up to 14 feet long and about 14 inches wide. It was made from thin juniper planks that were steamed and bent upward at the front. The planks were joined to crosspieces, probably with thongs. Chipewyan men, or women if the occasion arose, pulled the

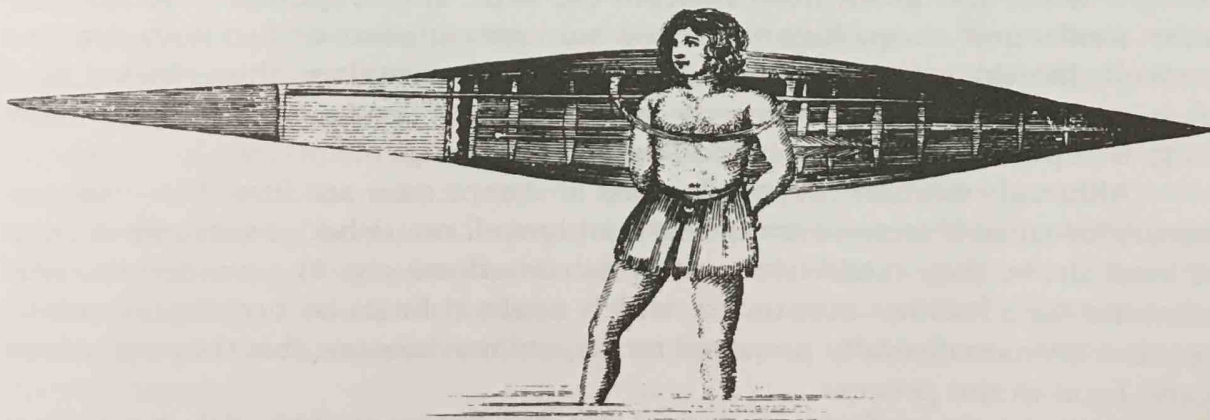


Figure 4-2 | Man carrying a small birch-bark canoe in early historic times.
(From Hearne, 1795.)

toboggans; they presumably did not use dogs as traction animals because of their supernatural associations. If wood was unavailable, the people could make toboggans by using sewn caribou leg skins as a substitute.

Snowshoes were essential for travel over deep snow, and men jogged along for hours on end at a pace faster than a walk. Snowshoes were made by lashing babiche through holes in birch-wood frames. A snowshoe had a slightly turned-up tip and was asymmetrical in outline; the outer edge flared, but the inner edge was relatively straight. Men prepared the frame, and women laced the babiche with an eyed snowshoe needle. Curiously, although women made snowshoe webbing with an eyed needle, they used awls to sew garments. This would appear to be an instance of "cultural blindness."

HOUSEHOLD LIFE In camp, women prepared meals and cared for children, as did their counterparts throughout most of the world. To these obligations was added one of their most important activities, the task of processing skins, particularly those of caribou. After a man had killed a caribou, his wife recovered it, skinned it, and removed bits of flesh and fat with a bone scraper. If the hair was to be removed, the woman propped a wooden beam obliquely in the ground, draped the skin over it with the hair side up, and removed the hair with a scraper. A dehaired skin often was smoke-cured by hanging it over a pole framework under which decayed wood smoldered. A skin to be used with the hair intact was scraped, softened in water, and wrung out and dried, and a paste of partly decayed caribou brains was rubbed on the inner surface. Later the skin was dried once again and finally scraped with a copper-bladed end scraper. The skin probably was rubbed by hand to make it pliable and relatively soft. This process of skin preparation was a key technological complex for the Chipewyan, who relied on caribou skins not only for clothing but also for bedding, dwelling covers, containers, and ropes. American Indians did not tan skins in the technical sense.

Favorite foods largely were caribou products: the head and fat from the back, a fetus, and grubs from beneath the skin. The Chipewyan did not consider steaks and chops luxuries. They ate caribou meat or fish both raw and cooked. In addition to boiling it in a birch-bark container, they roasted flesh over an open fire. The diet rarely included plant products, although a moss soup is reported, and moss could season meat soup.

Although women prepared meals at camp, men ate first. This was customary because if men were not reasonably well nourished, especially in times of food stress, they could not hunt or fish as effectively. The women received what the men had not consumed, which might at times be nothing. However, because women typically prepared meals, we may assume that they ate at least some food in the process.

Pemmican was an important food in the Subarctic, although it usually is associated with Plains Indians. Pemmican, from a Cree word meaning "manufactured grease," was made from lean meat that had been cut into strips and

dried by the sun or near a fire. The dry meat was pounded into a powder, mixed with fat, and stuffed into caribou intestines; this highly concentrated food was a favorite of travelers. Dried meat had the advantage of being light and portable. Many Chipewyan considered it more desirable than fresh meat.

SUBSISTENCE ACTIVITIES Aboriginal Indian life on the Barren Grounds probably would have been impossible without the presence of caribou as a basic food and an essential raw material for manufactures. The Chipewyan words for "meat" and "caribou" are quite similar, which is in itself revealing. Caribou migrating north in the spring were typically lean, and men hunted them largely as day-to-day food. In the early fall the herds began to wander south; at this time they were usually abundant with prime skins, a thick fat layer, and the most nourishing meat. That was the time for the most intense hunts. The subsistence cycle began anew in the early spring with caribou hunt preparations. Band members gathered at birch groves along the northern forest border, where they cut tent poles and built canoes for summer travels in the Barrens. The primary goal was to intercept caribou, and some people reported that they preyed on caribou in the manner of wolves.

As many as two hundred people might assemble for the trip north over the snows of spring. Women and young girls pulled the heavily loaded toboggans along the most direct route, and men and boys hunted on snowshoes adjacent to the toboggan trail. Dogs, burdened with parcels of tent skins, containers, and poles, accompanied the women. The female-male division of labor at this time might appear to have been more arduous for females, but this may not have been the case. Females pulled toboggans along the most direct route, and their noise scattered any game along the way. Men covered far greater distance in their pursuit of edibles. Thus a reasonable balance of energy expended may have prevailed between the genders.

In the eastern sector, winter and early spring camps were established on promontories along the forest edge, in localities frequented by caribou and near lakes containing fish. People moved only once or twice during the winter from an ideally situated camp, one accessible to lakes or wide rivers along which caribou normally passed. Here funnel-shaped caribou surrounds were built. Converging lines of brushy poles were erected, with poles at about 20-yard intervals. When caribou approached the wider end of a funnel, they were unaware of the poles, which were 3 miles apart. As animals entered the surround, the women, boys, and some men appeared from behind to herd them. The caribou were driven into a trap, which was a large enclosure of branches at the end of the funnel, with snares set at narrow exits. After the entrance was blocked with trees, snared caribou were speared, and arrows were shot at loose animals.

In the fall, six hundred people might gather at well-known caribou crossings and camp in a single locality. Families seeing each other for the first time in months or years followed an established etiquette at their reunion. At first

they sat apart from each other and said nothing. Then an older person of one party recounted all of their personal traumas since the last meeting, and women of the other group wailed on hearing of the misfortunes. The fate of the second party next was recounted and responded to. Men then greeted one another, and women exchanged presents as well as good news. When caribou appeared, their number might be truly fantastic. Sometimes so many were killed that only the skins, long bones, fat, and tongues were taken, and the carcasses were left to rot. As the caribou moved, the Indians followed, drying as much meat as they could conveniently carry.

When caribou rutted in October, a hunter sometimes attached lengths of caribou antler to his belt so that they rattled as he walked. A bull caribou in the vicinity would think he heard two other bulls fighting over females and would boldly approach, expecting to lead off the females. A bull could be killed more readily this way than by the usual method of stalking against the wind. At these times hunters used the self bow, a one-piece wooden shaft strung with babiche. Caribou-killing arrows had unbarbed bone or stone points and were vaned with feathers. An alternative and preferable fall hunting method was to drive large herds of caribou into water and kill them from canoes with lances.

When the snow was soft and deep, men, on snowshoes, sometimes tracked caribou. This meant following a single animal until it was exhausted from floundering in the snow. In the winter, the men might set gill nets beneath the ice of lakes or jig for fish through holes in the ice with hooks. In the western area of Chipewyan country, fishing was more important than among the eastern bands. Secondary means for taking game included the use of deadfalls for bear, marten, squirrels, and wolverine. The Chipewyan used nets for taking beaver in summer, but in winter, after they had broken open the beaver lodges, they took the animals from retreats beneath the ice along stream or lake edges. They set babiche snares to entangle hares or ptarmigan. Even though these Indians reached Hudson Bay at Churchill, they did not hunt the sea mammals abundant there at certain seasons.

It is important to note the advantage, in food-getting activities, of using devices that do not require the presence of a person. Set nets, snares, traps, and deadfalls are examples of "untended facilities" that operate when no one is present and can be used without danger, waiting, or pursuit. By contrast, lances and bows and arrows must be operated by hand and may be dangerous for the user—for example, against a bear. Thus, under most circumstances, it is preferable to use untended facilities when possible. Note that the Chipewyan used snares and deadfalls.

When the people could not harvest sufficient caribou, irrespective of the season or reason, they turned to their only other meaningful food source—fish, especially lake trout, northern pike (jackfish), and whitefish. Gill nets had emerged as the principal fishing method. The netting of babiche was strung with wooden floats at the top and stone sinkers at the bottom. Set across narrow streams, at river eddies where fish typically pause, and at spots in lakes, fish of appropriate size for a net were held by their gills. The people attached

charms to nets designed to attract fish. Additional fishing methods included the use of dip nets that looked somewhat like butterfly nets; fish trapped by weirs made from brush in shallow streams or rivers were caught with these nets. Likewise, men might shoot fish with barbed arrows from bows or impale them on leisters (fish spears) from canoes.

Additional details of Chipewyan hunting and fishing activities could be presented, but it already is obvious that caribou, and fish to a lesser extent, were the primary staples. Although recent studies suggest that the Subarctic may have been more productive than previously realized, relying on comparatively few species meant that food sometimes was scarce and that people might starve. At these times the Chipewyan ate berries, mosses, and other plant products and later consumed items of clothing; under extreme conditions they turned to cannibalism.

SOCIAL DIMENSIONS The Chipewyan were described in less than glowing terms by Europeans, who characterized the men as patient and persevering but also as morose and covetous. The Chipewyan firmly believed that they were more intelligent than the intrusive outsiders. The Chipewyan were peaceful within their own community, at least in terms of not shedding blood. When angry with one another, the men wrestled, pulled their opponent's hair or ears, or twisted his neck. As far as honesty went, among the eastern tribes of the Northern Athapaskans, the Chipewyan were ranked as superior to all others; they abhorred a thief. However, they considered whites to be not quite human and did not really consider taking their property to be theft.

No description of these people would be complete without commenting on the status of women as recorded by Samuel Hearne, the first white explorer in the region. According to him, women were subordinated in every way, were treated cruelly, and were held in gross contempt by men. Female infants were occasionally permitted to die, a practice viewed by adult women as kindly. In fact, they are said to have wished their mothers had done it for them. Women were beaten frequently, and although it was considered an odious crime to kill a Chipewyan man, it was regarded as no crime for a man to beat his wife to death. We probably will never know whether this was typical behavior toward women, but we may suspect that Hearne exaggerated or that his description was based largely on the behavior of his guide Matonabee. This man had six wives and was obviously a highly successful hunter and a charismatic leader; he unquestionably was a very powerful and self-centered person. The treatment of women as recorded by Hearne seems inordinately severe and out of character for Indians north of Mexico. Furthermore, a similar pattern did not exist among the Chipewyan in more recent historic times. Contemporary researchers have suggested that although women may have been devalued symbolically, in everyday life they had considerable influence and power (Sharp 1988).

As was typical for many collectors, fishermen, and hunters around the world, the constraints on individual behavior were defined largely on the basis

of age and gender. Each household was self-sufficient and could exist in isolation until a member sought a spouse. Group responsibilities or community cohesion hardly existed, and individuals had a great deal of flexibility in their behavior. Environmental resources were open to exploitation by everyone on an equal basis; family hunting or trapping territories did not exist.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION Aggregates of people structured in a formal manner and functioning as cohesive units did not exist among the aboriginal Chipewyan. Instead, as studies by James G. E. Smith (1970; 1976a; 1976b) and others have indicated, local groups were somewhat amorphous and highly flexible. In ecological terms, it is important to note that regional bands were defined largely on the basis of the separate herds of caribou exploited, and a regional group was divided further into localized bands of one hundred or more people who hunted together. Seasonally, when great numbers of caribou were available, several localized bands might assemble for a hunt. However, when caribou did not follow their expected migration routes, people divided into smaller hunting groups. Conditions influencing the movements of caribou included fires, weather variations such as sudden thaws or blizzards, and, in all likelihood, cyclical variations in their number. The most important observation about the nature of a band was its flexibility in number as a function of local food resources.

Families might unite under the aegis of a charismatic leader. Such a man was above all else an outstanding provider with an inordinate ability to take game and fish. Hearne's guide, Matonabee, is an example. Once a man's reputation as a leader was established, fathers of marriageable daughters sought him as a son-in-law. This was to the personal advantage of the father-in-law because the pattern of marriage residence was for a husband to join his wife's natal household (matrilocal residence). Subsequent wives could be sisters (sororal polygyny) of the first, but other women could also be chosen. Such a man had to be physically strong because he was obligated to validate his claim to a wife, especially a younger wife, by wrestling if challenged by another man. Less successful hunters, relatives, and nonrelatives cast their lot with him for greater security. An important characteristic of this form of leadership was its transient nature. A man could keep his wives and other followers only as long as his powers of persuasion, hunting skills, and physical strength endured. As he began to fail physically, he sometimes could retain his position of authority by craft and intrigue, but this was only a temporary respite before he slipped into obscurity.

The Chipewyan were a tribe, but only in a general sense, and comparatively little political integration existed among the member bands. Conflicts with non-Chipewyan took the form of raids and generally were carried out by the members of a single band. An account by Hearne illustrates this type of hostility. He was accompanying a group of Chipewyan to the Coppermine River mouth when they raided an Eskimo (Inuit) camp. Matonabee was the undisputed leader, and the raiders were unusually cooperative as they lent

equipment to one another. Beforehand each man painted his shield in black and red, adding one or more figures representing supernatural aids. They painted their faces red, black, or with a combination of these colors and took off most of their clothing or lightened it so that they could run fast. They launched the attack in the middle of the night and caught the Eskimos asleep. Once alarmed, the twenty or so Eskimos ran naked from their tents only to be speared to death by the attackers. Afterward the Indians plundered the camp and departed. As was typical among northern Indians, the Chipewyan attacked these Eskimos for individual prestige, plunder, potential glory, and tribal security; territorial gain was not a goal.

DESCENT, KINSHIP, AND MARRIAGE The Chipewyan calculated their ancestry through both female and male relatives (bilateral descent); the descent group (kindred) was like that which prevails in the United States today. When a man married, he attached himself to the household of his parents-in-law (matrilocal residence), and his ideal mate was his father's sister's daughter (patrilateral cross-cousin). In *recent* times at least some Chipewyan called a father's sister's daughters and mother's brother's daughters (cross-cousins) by the term for sweetheart, a convention that gives strength to the assumption of cross-cousin marriage. As the anthropologist Fred Eggan (1937) pointed out, a man relied on his son-in-law for support, and the son-in-law in turn was aided by his wife's brother's son. Although there was regional variation, it appears that, in general, in the aboriginal system of kinship terminology, the cousin terms were of the Iroquois type.

The Chipewyan system of kinship terminology is diagrammed in Figure 4-3. Father's brother's children and mother's sister's children were termed the same as siblings, but different terms were employed for a father's sister's children and mother's brother's children. This terminology would be compatible with cross-cousin marriage. For the generation above an individual, the kinship terms for father and father's brother are alike (bifurcate merging), and mother's brother is distinct. Mother, mother's sister, and father's sister are all termed differently (bifurcate collateral). This terminology indicates that probably siblings and parallel cousins of the same sex (who were terminological siblings), particularly if they were males, extended mutual aid to one another and

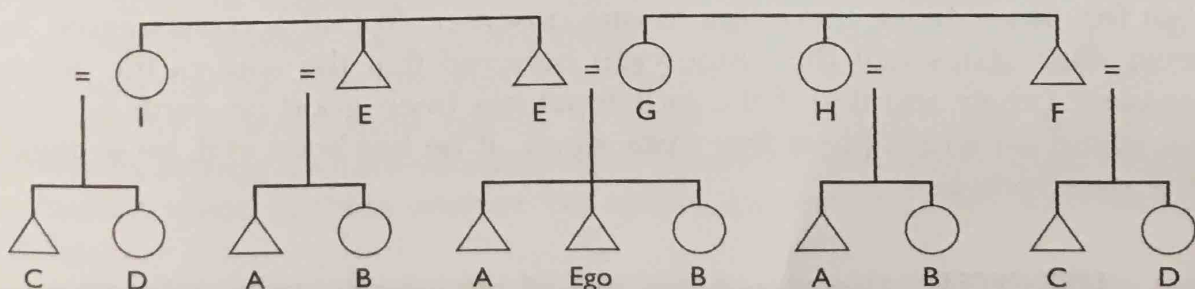


Figure 4-3 | The early historic Chipewyan system of kinship terminology.

regarded their cross-cousins as possible mates. With the further presence of wife exchange, we find an integrated network of blood relatives on an individual's generational level. On the parents' generation the same social distance separated aunts and uncles from one another as from parents. The inference is that these individuals were not as important socially or economically as near relatives of one's own generation.

SUPERNATURALISM External threats to the Chipewyan came from the neighboring Cree and Eskimos. The hostility stemmed in part from the belief that the shamans of these people sent evil by supernatural means to cause illness. The Chipewyan believed that death or disease occurred from natural causes only among the aged. Thus in theory each physical disorder of a younger person resulted from the hostile activities of a foreign shaman. Chipewyan shamans attempted to negate the effects of such evil by acting through personal spirits that they controlled. When someone fell sick, a shaman sang and danced to summon his supernatural aids or "shadows," who were animal, bird, or imaginative familiars. He then sucked and tried to blow the intrusive disease substance from the patient. For serious cases a shaman treated an ill person in a special small square tent built with no opening at the top.

Death and disease led the Chipewyan to frequent hostilities with non-Athapaskan neighbors, and they made sporadic forays into the lands of their tormentors. In the raid on Eskimos reported earlier, the attackers carried wooden shields on which they had painted designs representing their individual guardian spirits. After the encounter the raiders observed numerous taboos to placate the spirits of those they had killed. A raid of this nature united the participants against a common enemy but did not require elaborate organization.

In the Chipewyan view of the supernatural world, spirits hovered about constantly, some more potent than others. Because the spirits of wolves and wolverine were considered dangerous, these animals usually were not hunted or killed. The bear, too, was considered dangerous; when one was killed, its skin might be burned and the large bones scattered in the four directions. A woman could not touch or step over a bearskin; thus, one placed before a door was a means of keeping women from entering a tent. The spirits of a shaman were powerful, and the spirit of an ordinary person was sometimes feared. Only a vague notion existed of a future life, a life like that on earth but free from cares, according to one observer. Not all accounts agree, however. One states that the Chipewyan believed that the soul of the deceased crosses a river and that if the individual has been good on earth he reaches an island on which life is free from worry. If he has been evil, he struggles in the river forever.

LIFE CYCLE The Chipewyan, like all other North American Indians, realized that conception resulted from sexual intercourse. As the time of delivery

approached, a small tent or brush-covered structure was erected away from the main camp for a pregnant woman. Here she bore her offspring and remained apart from normal camp routine for about a month. Her isolation was enforced whether the group was traveling or at a relatively permanent camp. The mother was cared for by other women, but she had no contact with men. The father did not see his infant until the period of isolation had ended. Similar isolation was the norm for menstruating women and for girls at menarche. The blood associated with women at these times was considered antipathetic to fish and game, and men avoided contacts with females in these conditions. Apparently the women were successful in keeping the true nature of the menstrual cycle a secret from men. When a woman sought to avoid her husband, which might be several times in one month, she simply crawled out of the tent beneath a side, to indicate that she was beginning to menstruate, and went to the menstrual hut.

During the first year of life an infant was carried on its mother's back next to her skin; the baby was held in place by a belt that passed from the middle of the mother's back over her breasts. In this secondary "womb," a baby wore only a moss-padded diaper. A female infant was typically named after a form or characteristic of a marten, such as Marten's Heart, Summer Marten, or White Marten. The names for males were taken from the seasons, places, or animals. Unfortunately, little is known about the social environment of children. Males clearly occupied a favored position compared with their sisters, but children in general were treated as adults. Conversations in the presence of children were free and frank.

Childhood betrothals were customary, and parents were careful to prevent a girl from participating in sexual intercourse before she married. Matches were made by parents or other relatives; a girl had no choice. The usual marriage was between a pubescent girl and a man who was at least twice her age. There was no marriage ceremony; the man simply attached himself to his wife's household. A marriage assumed stability only after an infant was born. Offspring seldom were born during the early years of marriage, and from this it may be presumed that the young bride's adolescent sterility tended to delay conception. A nuclear family (a husband, wife, and children) was neither a stable nor a long-lasting unit. The possibility of death by accident, disease, or starvation always existed, and life expectancy was probably less than thirty years on an average. (High infant mortality rates often account for a statistic such as this one.) Dislike of a spouse could rupture a household, and the practice of wrestling to retain one's wife whenever challenged did not lead to familial stability. Skill in wrestling was developed during youth, and the rule was that the man first thrown to the ground was the loser. An opponent could be downed most readily by grabbing his hair—thus it was cut short—or by seizing his ears—so they were greased. The woman being fought over had no voice in these matters but was expected to follow the winner dutifully.

A wrestling match for a wife did not always end well. In one case the husband killed a potential rival. He and his wife then were forced to live in

isolation, and whenever other Chipewyan happened on the couple, they would take everything they owned except their clothing. Women deserted their husbands, but because of the physical isolation of most camps this was a dangerous undertaking. The woman might be caught and beaten by her husband or seized by another man before she found safety with a man she desired. Men guarded their wives jealously, not allowing them out of their sight if the opportunity for adultery existed. Wives generally were faithful to their husbands, but a particular wife sometimes shared her husband with as many as seven co-wives. The exchange of wives for a night perhaps helped temper any urge to seize a woman for sexual purposes alone. Wife exchanges were made by men and had implications that were more economic than sexual. The bonds between men resulted in continuing friendship and mutual aid. If one of the men died, his partner assumed the responsibility, at least temporarily, of caring for the widow and her children.

Games and other forms of amusement were few, and the only dancing was a step borrowed from the Dogrib Indians. A widely popular pastime was the hand game, a guessing game in which two opponents sat opposite each other with ten to twenty counters beside them. One man had an object in one hand and, behind a skin, shifted it. His opponent then guessed the hand that contained the gaming piece. A correct guess gave the winner one counter, and the game was won when one man had all of the counters.

As individuals aged and became less capable of caring for themselves, they were regarded as a burden. Old people had the poorest of tattered clothing and were given the most undesirable food. When a camp was moved, they might be left behind in a small shelter where they would starve alone. The corpse of a person who had died in isolation was not buried when it was found, and the corpse of one who died in camp was simply placed on the ground. In both cases, the bodies were eaten by animals. Property of the deceased was destroyed, and immediate relatives also destroyed their personal property. A widow cut her hair short as a sign of bereavement, and the shorn hair might be placed beside the deceased. She wailed about camp, stripped of her clothing and other possessions, to be aided and soothed by relatives and friends but not to remarry for a year.

In drawing the Chipewyan life-cycle discussion to a close, it is appropriate to comment on the manner in which the people behaved toward one another, especially on men's treatment of women and the general treatment of the aged. We should realize fully that the area in which these people lived offered either feast or famine. It was one of the most difficult sectors of North America in which to live in aboriginal times because of food uncertainties. The men, as the hunters and primary providers, presumably were often anxiety-ridden about their capacity to feed their families. This at least provides a partial explanation for their harsh treatment of women and the aged. We also must recognize that early writers about the Chipewyan were European men whose own attitudes toward these segments of the population possibly colored their accounts.

Historical Developments

Table 4-1 highlights the ethnohistory of the Chipewyan.

According to nearly all standard sources, the Chipewyan lived in the northern forests at the beginning of their history and were driven into the Barren Grounds by the Cree after the latter received firearms. However, ethnohistorical studies by Beryl C. Gillespie (1970; 1976) have shown this was not the case. Instead, the Chipewyan lived in the taiga and tundra during early historic times and began to exploit interior forests only under fur traders' influence. From here Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) agents launched the most important and lasting trading contacts with adjacent Northern Athapaskans. Because the Chipewyan earned tremendous profits as middlemen in the fur trade with more distant tribes, they were reluctant to guide company explorers. The first trader to settle in the midst of Chipewyan territory was Peter Pond, who established himself near Athabasca Lake in 1778. The organization of the North West Company in 1783 introduced an era of fierce competition with the Hudson's Bay Company, and not until their amalgamation in 1821 did trading conditions become stabilized. The history of Chipewyan country centered about a failed quest for mineral wealth, the expanding fur trade, and disappointing searches for a water passage to the Pacific Ocean. Later, missionaries began the search for souls to save.

As the people were drawn into the fur trade by the mid-1700s, some of them ventured south into the boreal forest, where they trapped beaver and marten to exchange for trade goods. The quest for beaver in particular led to a decline in caribou hunting, a major change from their aboriginal subsistence pattern. As contacts with Europeans intensified, most people perished from new diseases and starvation. Thus they became a remnant population early in their history.

The increased seasonal mobility required by the fur trade led to the construction of large birch-bark canoes to transport pelts and to obtain trade

TABLE 4-1. Historical timeline for Chipewyan ethnohistory

1717	Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trading post was built at Churchill along western Hudson Bay
1772	Samuel Hearne, an HBC employee, with the aid of Matonabee and his wives, unsuccessfully sought to find a copper deposit; he discovered the Coppermine River and Coronation Gulf; Hearne's map expanded the fur trade to the northwest
1781, 1819	severe smallpox epidemics killed most of the people
1786	at Fort Resolution, the HBC built a post that became a major trade center
1879, 1881	an unknown but large number of people died in famines
1912	an Anglican church was founded at Churchill
1921	Snowdrift (Lutselk'e) people signed Treaty Number 11
1925	a Hudson's Bay Company post was built at Snowdrift; a Roman Catholic Church was constructed in 1951; under federal pressure, people began to move to Snowdrift in 1954
1960	a federal school was launched at Snowdrift and a distant boarding school was required for some students; in each instance instruction was in English
1996	BHP Billiton Diamond Mine became operational

goods from Churchill or elsewhere. As the fur trade matured, a new leadership pattern emerged. Traders preferred to deal with representatives of a group, not with individuals, and this attitude led to the emergence of trading chiefs (Figure 4-4). Traders strengthened a trading chief's standing by deferring to him and presenting him with clothing, medals, and a formal reception on his arrival at a post. By the late 1880s, the "chiefs" were distributing the meat of caribou and moose to whomever they chose, irrespective of the wishes of the men who killed the game, although the hunters personally kept the skins of animals. If this was the norm, we must conclude that a chief possessed authority and some form of power. By 1908 chiefs represented groups in dealings with officials of the federal Indian Affairs Branch, but, as we would expect, they were not very effective.

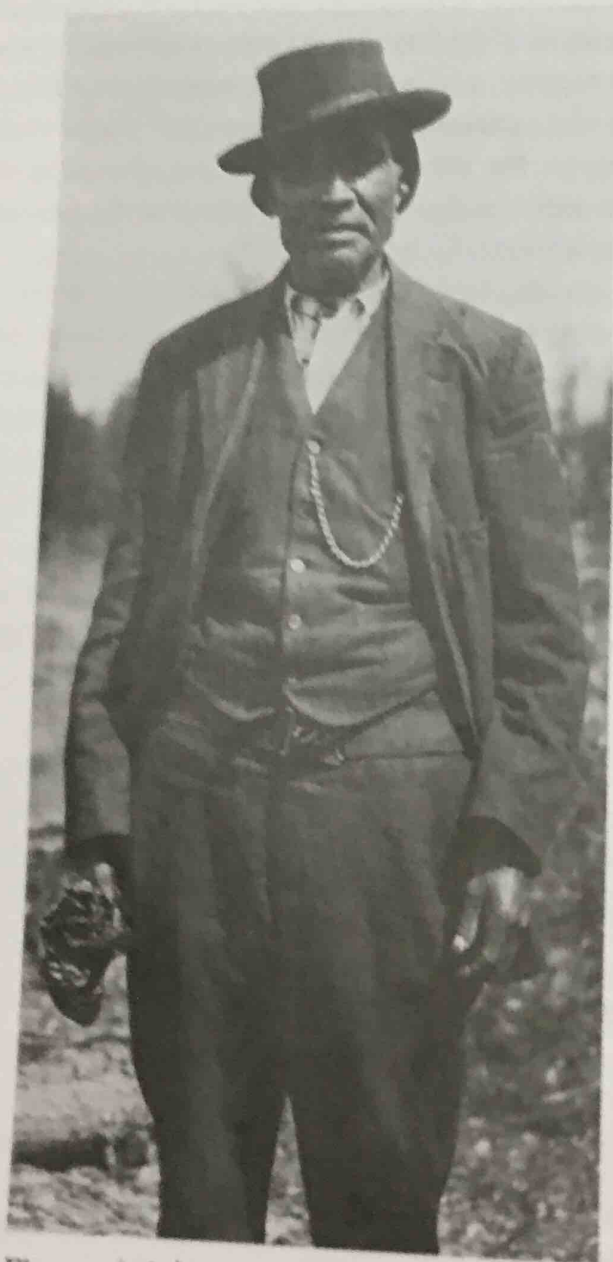


Figure 4-4 | A 1913 photograph of Chief Pierre Squirrel, a Chipewyan trading chief. (Courtesy of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, neg. no. 26070.)

It is revealing to consider the changing status of dogs. Recall that a doglike creature was thought to have fathered the people, and the dog, along with bears, wolves, and wolverine, had strong supernatural associations (Sharp 1988). In the 1820s the people were convinced by a powerful man that they should not use such closely related animals to do their work, and consequently they destroyed all of their dogs. For this reason, during the early period of contact the people had very few dogs or none at all. Apparently, dogs were not widely used as beasts of burden, nor did they pull toboggans, until sometime in the mid-1800s. Yet Hearne mentioned that in his time dogs hauled birch poles as hunters moved into the Barrens. Certain taboos still surrounded dogs in the early 1930s. For example, dogs were not shot, and to feed a dog a moose head or bear intestines was thought to bring ill fortune.

The unformalized supernatural system of the aboriginal Chipewyan population absorbed Cree concepts, and by the early 1800s they had borrowed the concept of *manitou*, a supernatural force that pervades the natural world. An evil *manitou* was blamed for sickness, disease, or bad luck. By 1908, some Chipewyan had learned Cree folktales, including tales that involved a trickster-hero. In these accounts, one animal tricks another, or a supernatural force creates something, and thus becomes a hero in the aboriginal origins account. Christianity was introduced by Roman Catholic missionaries, and most Chipewyan became converts by the 1920s, at least in name. Yet many traditional supernatural beliefs continued to prevail; Catholicism was integrated with the old religion, a typical pattern among Indians.

In early historic references to caribou hunting, taboos were rarely reported. Later in history, caribou remained the key food, but numerous taboos surrounding them appeared. For example, in one area, if a woman's skirt were to pass over a hunting knife, there was fear that the caribou would not migrate in that direction during that year. A woman was supposed to pierce the caribou's eyeball before she butchered the carcass to prevent the spirit of the deceased animal from reporting its fate to others. The implication might be that these taboos emerged as caribou hunting became less dependable.

| Becoming Modern at Snowdrift (Lutselk'e, Lutsel K'e)

In 1960, a watershed year in Chipewyan history, a professional anthropologist, James W. VanStone, began his study of a contemporary settlement, Snowdrift. At this time also the people were just beginning to undergo the most dramatic changes since the introduction of the fur trade. To examine this transitional period provides insight into the nature of present-day Chipewyan life in one sector of their domain.

Snowdrift, along eastern Great Slave Lake, is a sparsely forested area that borders on tundra country. In 1928 a devastating influenza epidemic struck the region, and families scattered widely in an unsuccessful hope of avoiding the disease. An estimated 20 percent of the regional population died from either influenza or pneumonia.

It was not until 1954 that most people began to settle there in response to pressure from the federal Indian agent. In 1960 about 150 people lived at Snowdrift, including 38 school-age children. The village consisted of predominantly log houses, an HBC store, a Roman Catholic church, and cabins of Euro-Canadian sports fishermen and mining enterprises. The commitment to settled village life represented a dramatic shift in residence pattern for these previously mobile hunters and trappers. With so many people in one community, it was difficult to obtain enough food locally. Their previous standard of living appears to have declined, and they came under far greater control by federal authorities.

THE PEOPLE AND THE SETTLEMENT In striking contrast with the not-so-distant past, clothing typically came from the local store. Most men wore imported shirts, trousers, underwear, and footwear. Older women wore imported underwear, stockings, dresses, skirts, sweaters, and shoes. Girls favored slacks, colorful lightweight jackets, brooches, earrings, finger rings, and curled hair. Younger males favored ornamental black leather jackets. The most important locally made items included skin moccasins for men and slippers for women as summer wear. Money obviously was required to purchase most clothing.

After 1950, with federal support, most families constructed substantial houses or renovated existing cabins. Some people participated with reluctance in the housing program because they hesitated to commit themselves to permanent village life. Most of the dwellings were one-room cabins with board floors and furnished with homemade tables and chairs. They had kerosene lamps, wood-burning stoves, trunks for storage, and hand-operated sewing machines. In nearby log storage sheds people kept frozen and dried fish, dog harnesses, outboard motor parts, traps, snowshoes, fishnets, and rifles. Quite clearly, with all of these material goods, a family became far less mobile.

Each family owned a large imported canoe, an outboard motor, and a small canvas-covered canoe. A type of toboggan was purchased from the store that was more correctly a *cariole* with a rear panel and canvas sides. A family had about five dogs to pull its *cariole*. Dog teams and outboard motors unquestionably increased the mobility of a family in subsistence activities. The canvas-covered canoes were being replaced by aluminum boats that required a substantial cash outlay.

MAKING A LIVING Traditional Chipewyan economic life had centered about caribou and fish, and with the addition of trapping furbearers, these foci persisted. Although trapping was an important major source of cash, hunting remained a significant part of family welfare. Most men would abandon their *traplines* if caribou appeared in the vicinity.

Trapping for lynx, marten, mink, white fox, and wolverine was physically demanding and enveloped with uncertainties. One to three days of dog-team travel meant that every need must be anticipated, including sleeping gear, extra garments, food, a tent, a stove, steel jaw traps, and metal snares. Nightly tenting at subzero temperatures was cold despite having a wood-burning stove. A trapline could be snow-laden, and a wolverine might trip the traps and eat the bait or captive animals. Traplines were family affairs until school-age children were obligated to attend school. Unaccompanied trappers grew lonely. Then, too, fur prices were not high. A trapper's average take was about C\$320—the only source of cash for many families.

In the early 1960s dependence on caribou remained great, and the late summer hunt was of prime importance. A household head believed that he required about one hundred caribou per year, yet harvests of this magnitude were no longer realized. In the fall when caribou were absent locally, which usually was the case, families traveled in large canoes in search of game. Burdened by large amounts of equipment, they could not reach the best hunting grounds. Thus the rewards were meager. The meat they obtained was smoked, brought back to the village, and stored in the Indian Affairs Branch cold-storage unit. In 1960 nearly half of the households were unrepresented in the fall caribou hunt. For unsuccessful hunters and others, fishing with gill nets for lake trout and whitefish in the fall might be intense (Figure 4-5). The catch was partially dried and stored as winter food for dogs and people.

Men began to prefer wage-labor employment, but jobs were few and usually temporary. As a result, making a living by wage labor was more uncertain than the subsistence pursuits of old.

Aboriginal foods were increasingly replaced by purchased edibles. People preferred fish and meat with every meal, but because these often were unavailable, the staple was *bannock*. This is an unleavened baked bread of Scottish origin, and it was usually made from barley or pease (peas). A variety of bannock ("fry bread" or "Indian bread"), the standard fare of poor Eskimos and Indians throughout Alaska, Canada, and elsewhere, is made from white flour and baking powder mixed with water into a paste and spread on a greased skillet to fry. Often this was the only food at a meal; bannock and tea are the bread and water of depressed Subarctic living. When families were able, they bought prepared foods from the store. The most desired imports were flour, sugar, tea, coffee, crackers, peanut butter, canned meats and fruits, evaporated milk, and seasonings.

SOCIAL DIMENSIONS Along with the changes in subsistence activities and material culture since aboriginal times, we likewise find significant differences in other aspects of living. Old attitudes and harsh treatment of women appear to have been replaced by domestic harmony. Certain female activities, such as food preparation and child rearing, remained, but men were helpful as the need arose. A woman who processed hides or sewed skin garments for someone

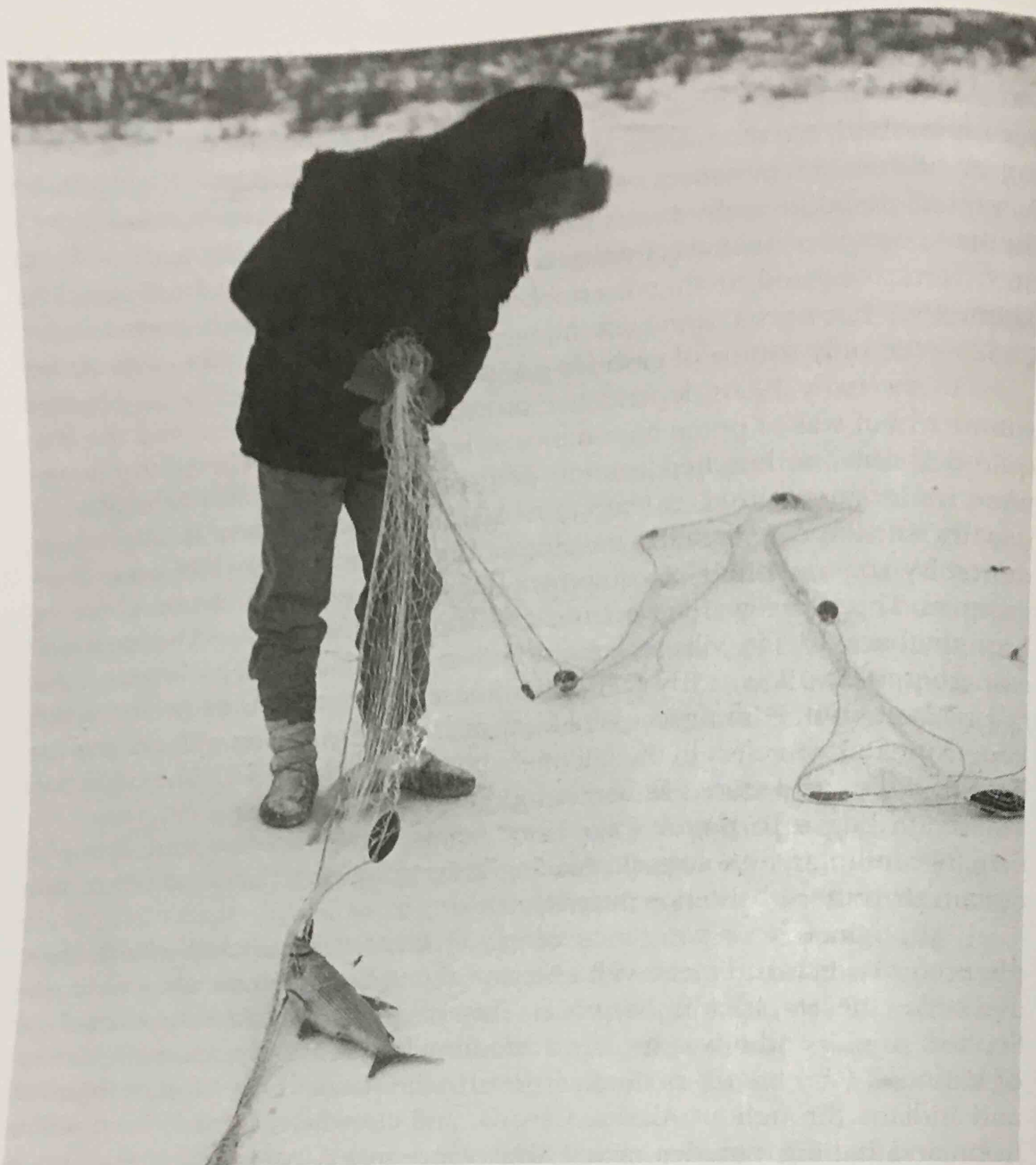


Figure 4-5 | A Snowdrift man, Louison Abel, checking a gill net set beneath lake ice in 1960. (Photograph by James W. VanStone, © The Field Museum, neg. no. A107886.)

outside of her family was paid, and she kept the profits. The favorable position of women may have resulted from the fact that they were a minority; for unknown reasons, there were fewer young women than men. Wives, which were difficult to obtain, were therefore treated with care (Figure 4-6).

The people continued to trace their descent along both the female and male lines (bilateral descent), as they had in early historic times. Cousin terminology, however, was of the Eskimo type (similar to the current classification of cousins in the United States). Preferential cousin marriage no longer existed;

in fact, people did not recall it as an aboriginal practice. Contact with Roman Catholic missionaries who spoke against cousin marriage probably had produced the change, yet premarital fornication between cousins continued.

When a person married, he or she was most likely to select a mate within the community (village endogamy), and immediately after marriage the couple lived with the in-laws who were best able to receive them (temporary bilocal residence). As soon as possible the couple built a separate dwelling and lived alone (neolocal residence). In 1961 most households were nuclear or nuclear core families, the latter comprising a nuclear family to which were added a near relative or two of the husband or wife. Plural marriages no longer existed, and capable providers did not attract followers who lived with them. The overall impression is that the nuclear family remained the most important social unit, although it was not as autonomous as before.

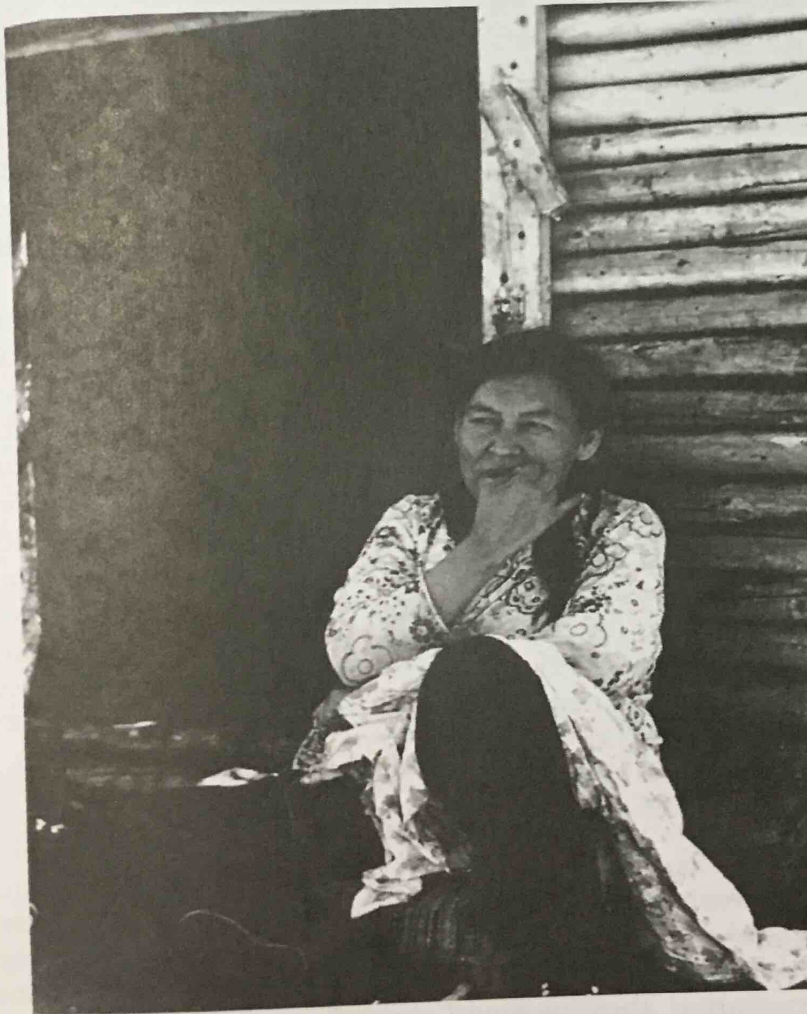


Figure 4-6 | A Snowdrift woman, Mary Louise Rabesca, sitting in front of a smokehouse in 1976.

Social bonds beyond those based on kinship were new and of expanding importance. Village life produced feelings of unity, and people thought of themselves as economically, morally, and physically superior to persons in adjacent settlements. Other evidence of village cohesion was the widespread sharing of locally available foods. By the time a successful moose hunter beached his boat, he had given away most of the meat, and the same applied to a catch of fish. Food had been shared in aboriginal times, but apparently not in as pervasive or egalitarian a manner. Furthermore, an intensive pattern of reciprocal borrowing had developed, and this included major as well as minor items of material culture. These attitudes and their behavioral manifestations clearly were integrating the community on a social and economic basis.

Square dancing was a popular pastime. The people probably had learned the steps from commercial fishermen, who often stopped for a few days of relaxation during the summer. Men played guitars or violins and learned dance music by listening to village phonographs or broadcasts from the Yellowknife radio station. The square dances were called expertly by village men, and participation at dances was good. Less formal entertainment included card games, which were extremely popular, particularly blackjack and gin rummy. Men and women often played together, and the stakes ranged from small change and ammunition to three-dollar hands in gin rummy games if men were affluent (Figure 4-7). While adults were playing cards, children sometimes gambled by pitching coins to a line. The hand game of old was known but seldom played; card games were considered more exciting.

The consumption of alcohol was as much a ritual as a form of entertainment, and prescribed drinking patterns were rarely ignored. The only alcoholic beverage regularly consumed was home brew, produced from yeast, raisins, sugar, and water. It was made secretly by two or three men and allowed to age for about twenty-four hours. It was thought better if it aged longer, but anticipation negated the possibility. The men drank the brew in the home of one of the makers or in the brush during the summer; the object was to become intoxicated. A man would dip a cup into the three-gallon pail, drink the beverage, and pass the cup to the next participant. Normally, some brew was stored in bottles, to be consumed after the brew pail had been drained. When participants became reasonably intoxicated, they visited one house after another, regardless of the time, and drank as they chatted with their reluctant hosts. Sometimes they offered to share their brew, but this practice was not consistent. The conversations of intoxicated men were about village life, and they became more outgoing during drinking sprees than at any other time of their adult lives.

POLITICAL LIFE Treaty Number 11 provided the Snowdrift Chipewyan with direct monetary and other benefits. The Indians gave up their aboriginal rights to the land but at the same time were protected in their exploitation of local resources. In exchange, they received tangible benefits such as formal education, health services, and material goods. Each year a band member received a cash payment of five dollars, the band chief received twenty-five



Figure 4-7 | A summer card game at Snowdrift circa 1960. (Photograph by James W. VanStone, courtesy of the Field Museum, Chicago, neg. no. A107881.)

dollars, and counselors, fifteen dollars each. The Indian Affairs Branch began to provide fishnets, ammunition, and items such as roofing and doors for house construction. Furthermore, families in need, as defined by the Indian agent, received a “ration” from the Indian Affairs Branch through the store. A national program of old-age assistance provided for the welfare of persons sixty-five years of age or older. Even more important was the “baby bonus,” or Family Allowance, which was a national program. Every month, each family received six dollars for each child under ten and eight dollars for those ten through sixteen. The program was designed to improve child care, and it probably served this end at Snowdrift.

Living at Snowdrift intensified contacts with the Indian agent at Yellowknife, who visited the community to hold meetings about general issues. Attendance was poor, and the agent was plagued with private requests from individuals about specific problems. Thus the democratic decision-making process failed. Then, too, visits by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police represented federal power more than the resolution of crimes. The only major crime was making home brew. Yet the people felt it was wrong to appeal to Canadian laws in general, and they rarely did so, although they could threaten such action.

In 1960 the bands of the region were reorganized, and the villagers received their own chief and two counselors. The people expected the chief not

to interfere with village life but to adopt a stern attitude toward Euro-Canadians in general and the Indian agent in particular. An Indian agent, by contrast, expected a chief to be cooperative; if he was not, the chief was bypassed and the agent acted through the trader or teacher and thereby undermined Indian authority. During this period the federal government encouraged local band autonomy. Yet in 1969 governing obligations shifted to the Northwest Territories, whose representatives fostered the democratic process through local settlement councils in direct competition with the band organization. These competing institutions intensified local factionalism and divided the community politically.

THE BELIEF SYSTEM Villagers were participating but nominal Roman Catholics. A priest visited the settlement frequently and was always present during the Christmas and Easter seasons. Church dogma and beliefs were poorly understood, but attendance at ceremonies was high. In general, the Church was regarded as wealthy and as obliged to pay for labor performed on its behalf. Thus the feeling of belonging to a church and strengthening its purposes was not understood by the members. Interestingly enough, it was in the supernatural sphere that the Chipewyan admitted openly that they were different from whites.

The concept of a "bush man" prevailed here as among other Northern Athapaskans. In their conceptualization, this creature was a man who wore manufactured shoes and appeared at a distance during the summer. He wore napped children, but apparently he did not harm adults as long as they remained beyond his reach. The Indians believed that certain supernatural beings could harm them but did not affect whites. They also held beliefs about trapping practices, but these were unknown by whites.

By the early 1960s, reliance on shamans as healers was declining. At least some people continued to believe in the power of spirit aids of shamans to cure illness and predict the future. As a secular cure, spruce gum may have been the dominant traditional medicine. Disease treatment was passing into the domain of the Indian and Northern Health Services and a lay dispenser, usually the Hudson's Bay Company manager. If a case was considered serious, the nurse at Yellowknife was contacted by radio, and she decided what course of action was to be followed. This nurse, sometimes accompanied by a medical doctor, visited the village at intervals. These Indians were concerned about their health but did not use patent medicines or turn freely to Euro-Canadians for aid. They seemed to enjoy talking about their aches and pains, but they sought treatment only when they were quite ill.

| Contemporary Lutselk'e

Settled village life was above all else an artifact of federal policies, but the community had no realistic control over government decisions. During the

early 1980s in particular the federal government launched innumerable programs to change the texture of village living. Homes were becoming better built, and water and fuel delivery were provided, along with sewage disposal, electricity, and roads (Figure 4-8). By 1996 the 286 residents included 10 Euro-Canadians. With federal and territorial support, buildings had been constructed for band administration. There was a school that educated students through the ninth grade, along with a permanently staffed nursing station, a local RCMP office, and an airport with mail service six days a week (Figure 4-9).

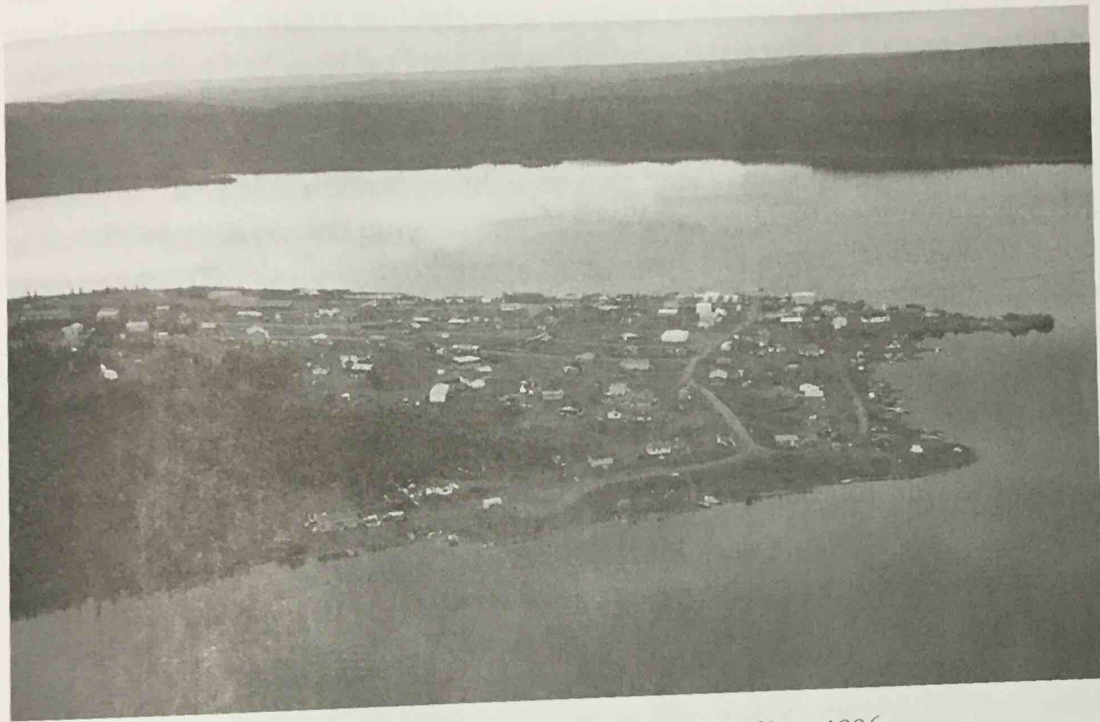


Figure 4-8 | The community of Lutselk'e (Snowdrift) in 1996.



Figure 4-9 | By 1996 Lutselk'e had mail service six days a week.

Accompanying these developments, old-age assistance benefits were provided, in addition to varied forms of relief for the needy. The Child Tax Credit (previously Family Allowance) was a nationwide program to foster the welfare of children; the amount received depended on family income. Quite obviously, government policies and practices had dramatically altered what it meant to be a Chipewyan. In sum, the federal goal had been to recast the people into a generalized Euro-Canadian mold.

In the government effort to transform villagers into "standard" Canadians, the system of formal education became a major catalyst. In 1935 families began to be encouraged by the Indian agent to send children ranging in age from three to seventeen to a residential (boarding) school at Fort Resolution that was managed by Roman Catholic missionaries. Instruction was in English, and children were discouraged from speaking Chipewyan. Thus during their formative years these children spent only about two months at home each year. Residential schooling intensified after school attendance became compulsory in 1960. The fund of traditional cultural knowledge conveyed to a child depended to a great extent on his or her family background and ranged from comprehensive to comparatively superficial. A federal village school was opened in 1960 that ended residential schooling for most young children. However, by 1996 a free high school education could be obtained only at the government residential school in Fort Smith; during that year, thirty-four high school students studied there. The school system in general, with its stress on Euro-Canadian values, did little to foster or sustain traditional Chipewyan life. A partial indicator is that most younger people do not speak Chipewyan.

For many, possibly most, adults, life had lost its purpose; they could no longer pursue their old ways, nor could they truly become Euro-Canadians. A widespread reaction was a pervasive dependence on the government to provide. A by-product of this situation was a growing dependence on the consumption of alcoholic beverages imported from Yellowknife. The situation became critical in the 1970s, and in 1980 the band council passed an ineffective prohibition law. In the 1980s multiple deaths and violence as a result of excessive drinking became alarming. By the mid-1990s intoxicant consumption had *decreased* significantly. By then about 25 percent of adults had been abstinent for about five years. During the first eight months of 1996, most of the police action cases involved alcohol, and about twenty individuals were the most frequent offenders. The following year a survey indicated that the community drug and alcohol counselor was regarded as helpful by numerous persons but of little value by others. There appears to be at least a short-term trend toward less social turmoil associated with intoxicants.

Recent years have introduced major changes in federal Indian policies. Greater administrative authority shifted to the local level, but not to local control. In 1991 a symbolic but meaningful change was made. The official village name was changed from Snowdrift to Lutselk'e, Chipewyan words meaning "the place of small fish," a nearby locality. In that same year we also find that an effort was being made by the First Nations (Indians, Inuit, and Métis) in the Northwest Territories to renegotiate their treaty rights, including a transfer of landownership to

the indigenous peoples. The federal government has been reasonably sympathetic with these efforts, and a shift toward more administrative power is taking place. A major change in the local economy has already occurred. The Hudson's Bay Company store closed in 1973, and, after a brief period of private ownership and with financial assistance from the government, it became a member of a network of northern cooperative stores. Thus the people became the store owners. Management of the local school is supervised by a community educational authority that administers the budget and hiring. With respect to local government, a band manager was trained, and the band council has emerged as a municipal government with territorial funding and expanding administrative control over local affairs. The band council includes male and female representatives from the major family groups, and the council has been working together far more harmoniously than ever before. Likewise, a Chipewyan held the office of justice of the peace, and a local Dene was trained as a law enforcement officer. In sum, changes in federal policies have led to far more local responsibilities than would have been conceivable thirty years ago.

Socially, it is not insignificant that five white women had married Chipewyan men by 1996, and four Dene women once were married to white men. Furthermore, although we do not associate respect for most older persons with the early historic Chipewyan, the villagers appeared to be changing their attitudes toward their elders (Figure 4-10). Finally, the position of women was strong. This may be a product of a higher sex ratio for men, as in the early



Figure 4-10 | Lutselk'e men in 1996: Alfred Boucher (left) and his father, Joe Boucher.

1960s. More women than men had post-high school training; one local Chipewyan woman earned a college degree.

By the mid-1990s local food resources remained of critical importance for many families. In the early 1960s game was scarce in the vicinity, and the area continues to be a "land of feast or famine." Since about 1980 the fall caribou migration has shifted to nearby localities and has included many animals; in addition, some caribou winter locally. Moose likewise have become more readily available as a source of meat. Coupled with an abundance of lake trout, this had become a land of plenty. Accompanying these increases was a decrease in pressure on food resources from hunting and fishing in the settlement area from a generation ago, because a smaller number of families depend on these activities for their primary food supply. Others depend far more on federal and territorial monies, both earned and unearned. Historically, the harvest of furbearers was the major source of cash for the local people, but by 1996 trapping was a primary activity for only ten men.

Although employment opportunities were limited by the mid-1990s, the number of year-round jobs was far greater than previously. The band employed some twenty persons, including an elected chief, a social worker, and a drug and alcohol abuse counselor. The cooperative store grossed about one million dollars a year and employed seven persons on a full-time basis. The school employed four teachers. To maintain the infrastructure, workers provided water and heating oil delivery and power plant and airport maintenance. In addition, summer construction projects were a source of employment, and ten men were available to fight forest fires. There previously had been commercial fishing at the eastern end of Great Slave Lake, but it was discontinued to help preserve lake trout. There were a number of local fishing lodges for sport fishermen, and some men in the community worked as guides for these fishermen.

The relatively recent discovery of diamonds in northern Canada, as outlined in the previous chapter, affects not only the Inuit of Nunavut but also Northern Athapaskans in the region. During the search for diamonds, Lutselk'e residents guided the prospecting parties, who staked claims at the most promising sites. This work provided an alternative source of income to the trapping of furbearers and had vast economic implications.

Before the mines could open, negotiations were required with the national government, with numerous mining companies, and with Native Americans who lived where diamonds had been found. From a Canadian legal perspective, the Chipewyan and Dogrib involved had ceded their lands to the Crown in treaties. These Indians, however, contended that the treaties did not extinguish their aboriginal title to their lands. During the early 1990s, and in retrospect, the federal government and mining companies knew full well that there were valuable diamond deposits north of Lutselk'e. They were determined to develop mines irrespective of Chipewyan concerns. Furthermore, the Indians did not have the financial resources to hire experts to testify on their behalf. Critical questions included the long-term impact of "dewatering" lakes, mine pollution, reclaiming mined-out land, and the environmental impact in

general, including effects on fish and game, especially migrating caribou. The federal timetable was relatively short and rigid. Yet the Indians were assured that their questions would be satisfactorily resolved—which clearly was untrue as far as is known; the final agreement is confidential and thus unknown.

Employment of some people from the community began affecting Indian life after BHP Billiton Diamonds, Inc., was granted land and water permits in 1996 to operate the Ekati Diamond Mine some 140 miles north of Lutselk'e. It was there that the most mine workers from the community were employed. The open-pit and subsequent underground operations at the Ekati mine soon became intense and extensive. Diamonds were mined for twenty-four hours each day of the year. Ekati mine projections for productivity are for twenty-one years, with an anticipated gross value of C\$9.5 billion. Most Native American job applicants did not have the minimal skills required in math, English, and computer literacy, but the company provided scholarships for the postsecondary education of its potential employees.

An account about Lutselk'e for 2003–2005 by Monica Krieger et al. (2005) is not as detailed as one would have hoped. Insufficient funding, staffing problems, and misplaced field notes were responsible. Nevertheless, the report strongly indicates dramatic changes in community life since the diamond mine developments of the mid-1990s. Among the young people, the Chipewyan language and traditional aspects of living began a significant decline. Then, too, the local school did not prepare students to further their educations. In 2004 only 38 percent of the population had high school diplomas or more advanced training. Among adults in general, attendance at public meetings was low, and the village had serious funding difficulties and lacked prominent political leadership.

Additional demographic information about Lutselk'e is essential and revealing. In 2005 the Chipewyan population consisted of 239 males and 175 females. This reflects a continuing gender imbalance first reported in 1960. Average family income before diamond mine development was about C\$29,000 in 1995 but nearly C\$48,000 in 2004. This increase was based largely on the expanding numbers of employees representing the community infrastructure plus fishing lodge outfitters. Most of the homes were privately owned or rented as public housing. Whereas eighty-eight beneficiaries received income support from the territorial government and social assistance in general in 1996, that number was *reduced* to forty by 2005. Police-reported crimes totaled 105 in 1996 and 119 in 2004. These statistics probably represent a significant number of repeat offenders.

A recent decline in caribou hunting and the number of animals harvested is a good indicator of the diminished importance of *the* traditional staple. Sixteen hunters in 2004–2005 killed only sixty-four animals. These low numbers were at least in part influenced by several factors: poor weather for hunting, the caribou population reaching a low point, and global warming. Fishing with nets and hooks in the region was *excellent*, yet it involved only fourteen fishermen in 2004. As fish was the traditional supplement to caribou meat, these

numbers illustrate that the old subsistence pattern had become relatively unimportant.

Anthropologists, myself included, have a relatively poor track record in predicting short-term sociocultural changes. Present-day Lutselk'e residents appear unlikely to revive their caribou-and-fish-based economy. One good reason is that the forthcoming generation does not have the essential knowledge, skills, or interest in the economy of old. Concurrently, the younger people are increasingly enveloped by the impact of Euro-Canadian culture. The importance of diamond mining probably will continue to expand in scope and intensity, with greater local government aid and increasing individual earnings from employment in the diamond mining sector. If so, there is the likelihood that federal support funds to the Indians involved will decline despite treaty obligations. Conceivably, the people will become weekend hunters and fishers. Select aspects of their traditional lifeway will be eroded by Euro-Canadian cultural involvements.

By 2006 negative local aspects of diamond mining had become increasingly troublesome, including an increase in alcohol consumption and illegal drugs (e.g., crack cocaine), especially among youths. Violence against women expanded, leading to family breakups, and family control by women had become commonplace. Then, too, the people lamented traditional cultural losses. Some residents were sorry that they had permitted diamond mining in their country.

| Sayisi Band

The foregoing account does not include unique and relatively recent information about the experiences of an inland Chipewyan band northwest of Churchill. They are the Sayisi (SIGH-eh-see), "people of the west," caribou hunters and fur trappers for generations. In Canada, as in the United States, critical innovative national policy changes began in the 1950s. Prominent among these were the cold war with the Soviet Union, the expanding influence of the environmental movement, and efforts to integrate indigenous peoples into European-derived lifeways. In Canada a concerted effort also was made to obtain more secure sovereignty over the government's Arctic land claims. Yearly RCMP patrols continued to be made to validate Canada's ownership of the region.

Following is a brief synopsis of the convoluted trials that resulted in Sayisi relocation near Churchill. The information is drawn primarily from one book. The senior author-editor was a relocated Sayisi, Ila Bussidor, who collaborated with a journalist, Üstün Bilgen-Reinart (1997). The core of the text comprises personal Sayisi accounts of their experiences.

The Hudson's Bay Company literally owned and administered the region involved until 1867, when the Dominion of Canada assumed political control. The dominion government signed Treaty 5 with the people in 1875 (Tough, 1996). They received yearly treaty money as compensation for the right to exploit their territory, subject to later adhesions (modifications) in 1910.

The Sayisi, some 300 of them, lived in small clusters about 40 miles northwest of Churchill. They ranged over their home bases with or without local trading posts. The first critical change originated in 1946, when the Manitoba government introduced small-area registered traplines to foster fur animal conservation. The new trapping regulation prevented men from ranging widely over their traditional territory to obtain pelts. Thus income from trapping declined abruptly. For this reason, and because of a period of low fur prices, trading posts began to close. By 1955, along another tangent, systematic studies by biologists were identifying a rapid decline in the caribou population. This phenomenon was attributed to predation by wolves and especially to overhunting and meat wastage by the Sayisi and other Indians.

Over the years Churchill had attracted the Sayisi as a trading center where some men worked intermittently to support their families. Churchill had become a major multiracial, hard-drinking frontier town that included thousands of nearby U.S. and Canadian military personnel. For the government to move the Sayisi to Churchill from their homeland was conceived of as a solution to perceived environmental imbalances in caribou and fur-bearing animals.

Available records stress the Duck Lake Sayisi move in 1956, but the experience was shared by all Sayisi. Without meaningful federal preparations, a huge military aircraft abruptly arrived at Duck Lake, the only evacuation trip made there. The people could take with them only hastily assembled items: dogs, sleds, household goods, family treasures, and a number of tents. At Churchill the evacuees literally were dumped with their possessions at Camp 10, adjacent to a cemetery—in retrospect, an ominous symbol.

There had been no initial government preparations, and there was no socioeconomic support to bridge the transition from living off the land to town life. Before long the dogs were killed by the RCMP as an annoyance and a rabies threat. Thus men could no longer travel inland with dog sleds to hunt and fish. The culture shock was profound and led to hardships beyond belief. The Sayisi became slum dwellers who lived in tarpaper shacks built from salvaged materials, or in discarded packing crates from dumps, and in tents. Later the government built small prefabricated dwellings at Camp 10. There were no reliable food supplies, adequate water sources, or sewage disposal.

Excessive alcoholic beverage consumption became a pervasive means of coping. Discrimination by local Cree, Inuits, Métis, and whites was formidable. Sayisi children were ashamed to be Dene. Yet in the minds of adults was an abiding yearning for their former lifestyle. Subsequently they were moved to small, jerry-built government dwellings in nearby Dene Village. Again they were left without reliable household water, sanitary services, and reasonable protection from subzero winter temperatures and strong winds off Hudson Bay. Families received some food from the government, but they also depended heavily on edibles recovered from the Churchill dump or obtained by breaking into food stores.

Between 1956 and 1973 about one-third of the population, 117, died traumatically (e.g., alcohol abuse, house fires, murder, and exposure to the elements). Euro-Canadian compassion appears to have been minimal.

Early in 1973 survivors began to filter back to their ancestral homeland, and government welfare became increasingly important. Initially they lived in log houses and tents with snowmobiles to replace dog teams and snowshoes. Intermittently they hunted moose and fished, and a few men trapped fur animals locally. Yet varied aspects of their pre-relocation lives prevailed. These included playing the hand game. Drum songs and dances again became important, especially during the spring festival. Traditional tales and stories about the past remained an interest to adults and to a modest number of young people. Most of the youth, however, preferred playing basketball, hockey, and volleyball.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples held hearings about the Sayisi relocation, and in 1996 it publicly admitted national government guilt. The Sayisi signed a tentative agreement granting them 23,000 acres of land and C\$580,000 for economic development. The people relocated along Tadoule Lake; in 2006 a population of 330 lived in government-provided accommodations. By then there were heat and water in the buildings, garbage and sewage facilities, a nearby fire station, and a recreational center, in addition to regular air service. A generator provided constant electricity, and a satellite dish provided television reception. The band office had computers and a fax machine. The school (kindergarten through grade 12) was under local control and offered Dene language and culture instruction. Furthermore, the people were assuming the responsibility for health and social services with local financial management.

Negative conditions nonetheless continued into the 1990s. Most people depended on government welfare, and the unemployment rate was high. Despite school instruction in Dene, the language was not important in home life. Bootleg alcohol was widely available, as were illegal drugs, and family violence was common.

In my biased view, there are clear lessons to be learned from this depressing addendum. Government apologies for injustices were face-saving at best. Subsequent compensating government programs, despite the sincerity of their originators, have been after-the-fact fixes. The intentional destruction of a viable sociocultural tradition remains cruel-hearted at best.

| Additional Sources

The best overview about Northern Athapaskans is the widely available volume edited by June Helm (1981) and published by the Smithsonian Institution. The best comparative analysis of Northern Athapaskan tribes is by James W. VanStone (1974) who also is the author of an in-depth study of Snowdrift (1965). An anthropologist, Ellen Bielawski (2003), conducted ethnographic studies at Lutselk'e from 1992 to 1997. She also became a village representative in the diamond mine negotiations. The community-

based monitoring report about Lutselk'e by Evelyn Marlowe et al. (2002) involved villagers trained to administer the surveys with the full cooperation of community leaders. Home visits by Chipewyan speakers was a key data-gathering method. For relatively recent and authoritative studies about the Chipewyan and their neighbors, the reader is referred to the selected bibliography that follows. The writings of Beryl C. Gillespie, Robert Jarvenpa, Henry S. Sharp, David M. Smith, and James G. E. Smith are especially important. For a conservative band of Chipewyan in the Barren Grounds, the key studies are by Sharp. The background to Indian and Inuit treaties (numbers 8 and 11) in the Northwest Territories of Canada, plus the treaties themselves and developments to 1939, are insightfully reported by René Fumoleau (2004).

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