TRAILS OF OUR ANCESTORS

Building a Nation

EDITED BY JOHN B. ZOE
Our Tlicho history is embedded in the landscape in place names. It is interpreted by our Elders who have first hand experience of life on the land. The Elders talk about how people headed north to the barrens by canoe in the fall to harvest caribou for food and hides for clothing, equipment and shelter. They talk about travel back below the treeline, to live with the abundance of caribou in the winter. In the spring, the Elders tell of travel to familiar fishing grounds by birch bark canoe.

The Elders talk about the seasonal nomadic lifestyle; about the hardships, and the sorrows marked by burial sites. The land and place names also remind the Elders of renewal of spirit, abundance, and gatherings to renew kinship, revive stories and share knowledge. Canoes were significant in charting the history of who we are as Tlicho. We continue to keep this history alive by traveling the trails of our ancestors to our annual gatherings, today.

Let’s celebrate the transfer of ancient knowledge of the Elders to the youth. Travelling by canoe, the youth honour their ancestors and experience the traditional spirit that will carry them beyond the many challenges of today.

It is our hope that this book shows how we continue to practice our traditions over the generations and that it plants the spirit in our future generations to strengthen and celebrate our language, culture and way of life.

Mahsi-cho.

Massi Cho
Chief’s Executive Council | Tlicho Government

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For centuries the Tłı̨chǫ of the Northwest Territories have relied on an intimate knowledge of the land and its wildlife to survive. The Tłı̨chǫ lived in a yearly cycle of following traditional trails in birchbark canoes to the barren lands in the fall to harvest the caribou herd; and then heading below the tree-line for the long northern winter until the warmth and life of spring returns.

The skills required to survive this lifestyle were taught through the oral tradition, by elders to the youth, through hands-on experience while living and traveling in the bush. With the Tłı̨chǫ language so intimately connected to the land, elders passed on place names, animal names, cultural and spiritual sites and the language of the land to the next generations.

However, this nomadic style of living began to decline as the influences of the modern 'western society' and government moved into the north. The government slowly began to take control of the lives of the Tłı̨chǫ and soon the people were reliant on funding and welfare to survive in the new society. Today, members of the Tłı̨chǫ Nation live mostly in the communities; have entered into a wage economy and classroom-based schooling. The traditional culture and teaching processes of the Tłı̨chǫ have been absent as people no longer travel together on the land. The culture and language of the Tłı̨chǫ people are now threatened.
In 1990, a plan to implement a vision was developed: The vision of Chief Jimmy Bruneau to teach the youth of the Tłı̨chǫ Nation in two ways; the way of the new society being slowly imposed on the people and the traditional practices passed on for generations on the past. The idea of the Trails of Ours Ancestors program was initiated.

Around the same time the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council, Government of Canada and the Northwest Territories were in the early stages of negotiating the Tłı̨chǫ Agreement. Meetings were being held in the communities, Yellowknife and in the South. The Agreement was the desire of the people to help protect language, culture and way of life.

In 1995, the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council in partnership with the Dogrib Community Services Board (at that time the Divisional Board of Education) managed to secure funding for the first Trails of Ours Ancestors canoe trip. The first group paddled the 15-day journey from Behchokǫ̀ (Rae) to Wekweètì passing through the Barren lands.

Unfortunately in 1997 the program fell apart, due to communication problems with a sponsor. Faced with losing the tradition and intent of the trip, the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council, to keep the program alive, sent a small group with four canoes from Behchokǫ̀ to Wekweètì. This did not, however, involve students, as only eight seats were available in total.

In 1998 the Primates’ World Relief and Development Fund joined in partnership with the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council and Dogrib Community Services Board and provided significant funding that has allowed the trips to be revived and grow. The Trails of Ours Ancestors have now been paddled between all the Tłı̨chǫ communities, sometimes on trails that have not been traveled in close to half a century. Today hundreds of youth and elders have had the opportunity to travel the trails.

Funding continued from the Primates’ World Relief and Development Fund in 1999 and 2000. Since 2001 the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council has been able to secure a more stable and continuous funding source that has allowed the Trails of Ours Ancestors program to continue to grow and develop.

In 2001 the Grand Chief of the Tłı̨chǫ Nation, who has spent many years of his life traveling the trails of his people, joined the Trails of Our Ancestors program and paddled from Behchokǫ̀ to Wekweètì. His influence has helped provide the link and recognition of Trails of Our Ancestors as part of the Tłı̨chǫ Agreement and its part as a bridge to the traditions of the past.

In 2002 at a historic ceremony in Whatì, the Tłı̨chǫ people celebrated the initialing of the Tłı̨chǫ Agreement. After twelve years and many meetings and discussions, the Tłı̨chǫ people have now completed the negotiation of self-government and land claim agreement: An Agreement that will be the foundation for the future of a nation. Many people traveled by canoe to Whatì to attend this historic event.

In August 2003 the Prime Minister of Canada, Premier of the Northwest Territories and Grand Chief and Chiefs of the Tłı̨chǫ Nation signed the Tłı̨chǫ Agreement in Behchokǫ̀. Again many people traveled by canoe to attend this event in 2004. For the first time the Trails of Our Ancestors program saw over 200 delegates travel by boat from the communities of Whatì, Wekweètì and Behchokǫ̀ to the Annual Gathering in Gamètì.

Many parallels can be made between the development of the Trails of Our Ancestors program and the journey the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council has made to reach the Tłı̨chǫ Agreement. But the most important is that the Tłı̨chǫ Agreement and the Trails of Our Ancestors program both encourage the preservation and revitalization of the Tłı̨chǫ language and culture and the Building of a Nation.

The second year a group of paddlers traveled the Trails of Ours Ancestors from Behchokǫ̀ (Rae) to Wekweètì passing through the Barren lands.

In 2000, 200 delegates travel by boat from the communities of Whatì, Wekweètì and Behchokǫ̀ to the Annual Gathering in Gamètì.
ABOVE: T'ôchô feast for Fur Trade Commission at Fort Rae in 1937. Summer is always a time to gather and celebrate.

“Du sa evaa šii k’êt’ô naêhdô-le jëf du deh ngûly šii k’êt’ô naêhdô-le nûdë du dê nàgoèhdô-le nûdë, asìi gogha wets’uet’ô høøjî ha-le …

As long as the sun shines and the river flows and the land does not change, we will not be restricted from our way of life.”

(Chief Monfwi – 1921)
01. Alexis Arrowmaker, left, playing handgames at Behchokö in 1971.


03. Two motorized canvas canoes loaded with people, dogs and gear at a portage between Behchokö and Whatì.

Below: Like an armada, the incoming flotilla of canoes from the ‘Trails of Our Ancestors’ is a vision of pride for the Tłı̨chǫ, almost like an apparition of the Ancestors themselves. With many anxious to take their turn, the canoe trips are like a rite of passage for every Tłı̨chǫ citizen, and revitalizes everyone concerned.
01. President of the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT, James Wah-Shee speaks at the first Dene Nation Assembly which took place at Behchokö in 1971.

02. Handgames with Chief Jimmy Bruneau (in banded hat) at Behchokö in 1962.

03. August 4, 2005 is a day to remember, to commemorate with ceremony, tea dance, handgame, feasting the fire, heartfelt congratulations from dignitaries at all levels of government, and a drum prayer song.

04. The new Tåîchô flag is unveiled by its designer James Wah-Shee and raised by Alexis Arrowmaker, two who dedicated their lives to making this memorable day a reality.
The midnight sun casts a warm glow on the still waters along the “Trails of our Ancestors.”

The boat trips we have taken to date have always been considered to be a vision by the Tłı̨chǫ people to become “Strong like two people.” To understand how and why that vision came about, we must look to the past and see it through the eyes of the Elders who were there. They remember young people being strong physically and spiritually, determined yet flexible; independent yet cautious; able to read the environment for survival, youth who recognize the limits of their capability, and work as part of a community. Our Elders of the past, like Chief Jimmy Bruneau, saw these things and realized that the future held challenges that would alter what they had known in their time.
Imagine in 1893 when an American graduate, Frank Russell, from the University of Iowa, came to Tłı̨chǫ country in search of a muskox specimen he could take home with him. In his journal he talks about the trip he made to the edge of the woods on the shore of Courageous Lake/Ewaànit’ī tì. There, he was in a Tłı̨chǫ encampment a few portages from Lac de Gras/Eka tì in the late winter with a dogteam. It was the camp of Ek’awi Dzimi, the father of the late Chief Jimmy Bruneau. Chief Jimmy Bruneau was about six years old when he saw this man writing in his journal and heard the language he spoke. He probably didn’t know what was going on at the time but it definitely left an impression on his mind. The camp probably talked about this strange man and reviewed his brief excursion with them through stories, and determined that there would likely be more encounters with strangers.

In 1913, when Bruneau was twenty-five years old, he accompanied another American, David Wheeler, to the edge of Snare Lake by dogteam. He spent many days with him listening and watching him write with pen and paper. This left another long lasting impression on his mind. There were many similar excursions over the years.

In 1921, his uncle Chief Mónfwi sat across from the Treaty Commissioner to talk about Treaty. He witnessed the power of the pen and paper and of the written word and realized the influence it would have on the Tłı̨chǫ.
When Chief Mônfwi died in 1936, Jimmy Bruneau became the Chief. As Chief he witnessed Tîchô children being shipped out to missionary schools for years to learn the foreign language and the skills of writing. He also saw the sorrow in the eyes of the people when their children left. He started to push the government for a school to be built on Tîchô lands so that the young people could learn without having to give up who they were, yet still learn the new ways.

At the official school opening in 1972, Bruneau said: "Senèk’e enîhtå’èkö hohåè-ha dèets’ök’àowo geehke, eyits’ô secheekeè nîhtå’èkö gitå’aà wheæô ha, eyits’ô secheekèè nîhtå’èkö goyìi eghàlagiìdè ha, eyits’ô chekoa nàowo nàke t’à hoghàgeètô ha, gonàowoò eyits’ô kwet’îï nàowoò k’ëë… I have asked for a school to be built on my land and that school will be run by my people and my people will work at that school and children will learn both ways, our way and whiteman’s way."

In 1991, when the Elders got together to reflect, Elizabeth Mackenzie spoke: "Chekoa, nàowo nàke t’à hoghàgeètô ha, ganàiwoò eyits’ô kwet’îï nàowoò k’ëë… I have asked for a school to be built on my land and that school will be run by my people and my people will work at that school and children will learn both ways, our way and whiteman’s way."

In 1991, when the Elders got together to reflect, Elizabeth Mackenzie spoke: "Chokoa, nàowo nàke t’à elexeët’e hoghàgeètô nàke dë yàë di nàke ñàani ñàjëetso ha. If the children are taught in both cultures equally, they will be strong like two people."

In this spirit we share our experiences with pen and paper so others may be inspired to follow in the footsteps, so they may do the same.

2. Elders Harry Simpson, Pierre T’loka and Jimmy Rabesca are comfortable sitting close to the ground on a few spruce boughs and telling stories in 1995.

3. In 1996 the canoe trip went out to the Barrenlands at Grizzle Bear Lake/Diga ti where Rex Lamouelle contemplates the lay of the land high above camp.

4. Paddlers were faced with the challenge of an ominous forest fire at Wheeler Lake/Tledi tì and through the traditional method of consensus, assessed the situation and all agreed to continue with the trip.

Like skeletal remains, the framework of an old canvas canoe lies outstretched at Bea Lake/Bea tì. 1995.
TRAILS:
Archeology and the Tłı̨chǫ Cultural Landscape

“Seaphda₂ saxè xegeda jë. Seda₂ eghälaggyd, eyits’p dà gaţlë k’è ts’dëe xè eghälats’eda. Dutzëj k’è cheeko goëtj xängowó gek’èez-le goc’gmañowó k’èts’èli ha ts’jëwë. Harris xàddì xàedaa si gà’iet’j ha. Eyt’à gits’ats’èdè gha eghälats’eda’ats’èt’ .”

01. Chased into Rock/Ela’at’dë on Beaver Lodge Lake/Rosepet in 1993.
02. Animal Spirit Rock/We’yed on Brown Water Lake/Rosepet.
03. Repair and contemplation of a child’s gravesite at Hottah Lake. Travelers are reminded how the Ancestors met adversity with fortitude, of being in the flow of the Ancestors, the flow of the rivers, the flow of life.
Trails of our Ancestors: Building a Nation

My elders used to tell me stories. I witnessed their work and now we are traveling and working along their trails. Though our young people of today do not really know the ways of our people, we want to retain our traditional ways so that whomever survives in the future will use them. So we are in effect, working to help them.”

(Harry Simpson – June 25, 1991)

This Tłı̨chǫ landscape is known intimately to Tłı̨chǫ Elders. Trails, which are used year-round, provide access to a vast harvesting region, and link thousands of place names, each with a narrative of some form, sometimes many, inextricably bound to the place. Names and narratives convey knowledge, and in this way Tłı̨chǫ culture is tied directly to the landscape. Travel across the Tłı̨chǫ landscape can be easily and clearly described by reference to these names, and indeed travel narratives often appear as no more than long lists of place names. While toponyms mark topographic features, the Tłı̨chǫ also employ a separate naming system to distinguish the broader physiographic regions. Though there is some overlap with the physiographic units recognized by western geographers, the Tłı̨chǫ system is more refined, and consequently more complex.

The Tłı̨chǫ landscape is infused with the presence of innumerable entities, or “powers”, both benevolent and malevolent. In traveling across the landscape, one must constantly mitigate the impact of personal actions by appeasing these entities with votive offerings, and by observing strict rules of behavior. For example, at each new water body encountered en route, offerings are left. In the Tłı̨chǫ vernacular, it is said that these places, and the entities inhabiting them, are being “paid”. The offerings may be anything of value (in modern times this had typically included tobacco, matches, coins, ammunition), or simply, a garland of birch branches. These are thrown into the water (or onto
the ice in winter), and in return the votary may ask to be granted good weather, 
safe traveling conditions and abundant food resources. At all sacred sites, 
and indeed at many important cultural sites, offerings are also left. Places 
habitued by malevolent entities (called weyédii or “animal-beings”) are 
regarded as dangerous, and consequently, always avoided. Through dreaming 
and the acquisition of Îk’ôö or “medicine”, sometimes “power,” “knowledge,” 
or “luck”, one prepares to deal with the world, and the powers inhabiting it. 
These traditional beliefs and practices have been syncretized with the beliefs and 
practices of the Roman Catholicism.

The Îdàà trail is central to the Tåîchô homeland. Two rivers, the Marian 
(Gòlootì deè) and the Camsell (Nôdìihatì), form the trail, and with a network of 
inter-connecting trails, provide access to a Tåîchô land use area encompassing 
some 295,000 square kilometres. In post contact times, the trail was used to 
access trading posts on Great Slave Lake (Tìdeè), Great Bear Lake (Sahtì), and 
the Mackenzie River (Dehcho) at the mouth of Bear River (Sahtìdeè).
01. Elders and youth work together on the Traditional Birchbark Canoe Project of 1996 at Russell Lake/Sahgöö dawhetô tì.

02. Paul Rabesca pulling up the long spruce roots which will be split and used to sew birch bark together. The seams are then sealed with spruce gum.

03. Michael Nitsiza collects sacred red ochre for the Caribou Skin Lodge Project of 1999.

04. Women apply sacred red ochre to the Caribou Skin Lodge. The colour is made of ground local ochre and grease.

BELOW: Hunters on the barrenlands pride themselves in being able to carry their own packs and caribou bundles at Grizzle Bear Lake/Oglap pī in 1999.
The Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ landscape is a mosaic of significant places, all with names and stories attached to them. Place and narrative transform a physical geography into a social geography, where culture and landscape are transformed into a semiotic whole. In Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ cosmology, these places represent the physical embodiment of cultural process, which is realized through the combination of travel and story-telling. By travelling traditional trails, which link places like beads on a string, Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ youth are told stories as each place is visited. The stories provide all the knowledge necessary for living within the Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ landscape, and in later life these places become mnemonics for recalling the narrative associated with them. In this way, narratives relevant to knowing, and living, in the Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ landscape are passed from generation to generation. Travel is critical to learning, and understanding Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ cosmology. Without the visual, mnemonic cue of place, stories could not be accurately recalled, preserving the rich detail and accuracy they are noted for. If we accept the premise of landscape as process, then it is realized through travel.

The triptych of travel, place, and narrative is embodied best in one of the legends of Yamqqzha, who is the most important of the Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ culture-heroes. Yamqqzha is noted for his creation of many components of the landscape, for assisting with the transformation of floating time into linear time, for establishing many of the laws and cultural rules important to Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ existence, for mediating the enduring relationship between the Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ and the animals with which they share the landscape. The Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ landscape is a mosaic of significant places, all with names and stories attached to them. Place and narrative transform a physical geography into a social geography, where culture and landscape are transformed into a semiotic whole. In Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ cosmology, these places represent the physical embodiment of cultural process, which is realized through the combination of travel and story-telling. By travelling traditional trails, which link places like beads on a string, Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ youth are told stories as each place is visited. The stories provide all the knowledge necessary for living within the Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ landscape, and in later life these places become mnemonics for recalling the narrative associated with them. In this way, narratives relevant to knowing, and living, in the Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ landscape are passed from generation to generation. Travel is critical to learning, and understanding Tłı̨chɁ̨̤ cosmology. Without the visual, mnemonic cue of place, stories could not be accurately recalled, preserving the rich detail and accuracy they are noted for. If we accept the premise of landscape as process, then it is realized through travel.

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Yamqozha and the Wolverine

Yamqozha woke one morning at lhti kika near Yahiití and cut down a birch tree to make a bow. After working on his bow for some time, he began to walk south. Eventually he reached Hodoòdzoo, a place where people slid for good luck. Here he found that Nogha (wolverine) had placed sharpened stakes at the bottom of the slide to entrap people. Yamqozha decided that he would make Hodoòdzoo safe for people to slide at again, so he quietly approached the stakes and carefully slid his caribou skin shirt over one of them. Twisting his nose until it bled, he covered the top of the stake with blood, and then pretended to be dead. Soon Nogha came by and took Yamqozha back to his camp. Yamqozha, through the use of his power, freed himself and killed Nogha, though letting the wolverine's family escape unharmed. In this way Yamqozha made Hodoòdzoo safe for people again.

Yamqozha continued walking south on the trail. Eventually he reached the large hill known as Ts’okwe, where he sat down and continued making his bow. Tired after a long arduous day Yamqozha slept. While he slept he had a dream. Ts’okwe forever after became a nate k’e (dreaming place).
It’s the land that keeps things for us. It is our home. Being our home it is important for us to take good care of our dwelling – our land. Wherever we travel in Tåîchô nèèk’è is our home.”

(Rosalie Tailbone of Gamètì – May 1998)

The Tåîchô elders asked their Chiefs for the traditional knowledge program as they wished to document stories so their descendents could have them to ‘think-with’ as they travelled trails – both physical and mental. They also wanted to support their leadership in building a Nation in which future generations would remember to think about Tåîchô nèèk’è (the place where Tåîchô belong).

Between 1992 and 2002, the elders along with the young people who worked with them set up spring, summer and fall camps along trails with elders telling stories while younger people documented place.
names and stories so in the future their descendents can listen to their stories on tape and remember occurrences at places.

In Gamëtì, the Chief and Council initiated the traditional governance project with the elders Jean Wetrade, Andrew Go, Marie Zoe, Harry Simpson, and Madeline Drybone telling stories of Yamøjëhah, Èdzo, Mpwí and Bruneau. Stories of these powerful leaders emphasized the social and cultural laws and agreements made in the past, and in so doing provided guidance to all Tåîchô working to build a Nation based on the knowledge acquired from travelling the trails of their ancestors. As Romie Wetrade said in September 1994, "Mpwí drew the map with his mind. He said as long as the sun rises, as long as the river flows, as long as this land shall last, and nothing will change for the people, that is what he [Mpwí] said. That is an important agreement that he made for us and we can’t let it go. He did big things for us and we came all this way and we raised our children and we have been raised on this dè (land). To this day, we still raise our children on it." (Romie Wetrade / Translated by Celine Football)

At the T乔îch Assembly in 1999 the elders, with the support of Grand Chief Joe Rabesca and Chief Negotiator John B. Zoe, formed the Elders Regional Committee. Mpwí’s grandson, Jimmy Martin, became k’àowo or ‘boss’ for the Regional Committee. One task the elders undertook was to draw Mpwí’s trail on a map and to document how Mpwí travelled and taught his descendents. For them it represented the extent of his knowledge on which they could discuss Mpwí Gogha dè Nîîtåèe (traditional area of the T乔îch described by Chief Mpwí during signing...
of Treaty 11, 1921), and the extent of the knowledge necessary for all Tłı̨chǫ to care for the Nation. As Margaret Lafferty said on October 1995:

“As long as we shall last and as long as our descendants shall last and as long as our children shall last, we want them to use this land as their father and mother, this is what we think about this land... We love this land. It’s a mother to us and a father to us.” (Margaret Lafferty / Translated by Celine Football)

The Elders’ main focus was to share their stories and to travel, with those younger, to significant places. Georgina Chocolate, Bobby Gon, Madelaine Chocolate and Sally Anne Zoe worked consistently with the elders, while others, including high school students were invited to learn and ‘experience’ the stories while visiting places. The stories were woven together telling of the relationships between all that is part of the land with a focus on the relationships between caribou, plants, water and Tłı̨chǫ ancestors.

“Du gods sii gogo'p while ade hojhp ha-le. Błaa wet'ı̨ te't'ı hpo't'ı. Eys gods sii nėk'e nats'ed'ı. Eys gods sii Ehtsı eyits'ı Ehtseè gogo'dı hpo't'ı. Ehtsı eyits'ı Ehtseè gogo'dı t'ı godhde. Giyatiı sii wet'ı'ı'ı akē hpo't'ı, jala'ı'ı'ı'ı'ı'ı gha gots'ı'ı'ı'ı'ı'ı t'ı. Giyatiı t'ı eadg'ı nants'ı'ı'ı'ı'ı gha hpo't'ı.

“The stories never die. We are still using the story. We live our lives like the stories. These stories are from my grandmothers, my grandparents. I am talking with my grandparents’ stories. Their words are very important because they will help you live in the future. Their words will help you to think for yourselves.”

(Madelaine Drybone – May, 1994)
01. Adele Wedawin displays several braids of caribou sinew made from twisting thin strands of caribou back tendon. It is used for sewing hides.

02. Elders recall the old ways and stories at TRANSLATION/Kwekøåateela near Russell Lake/Sahgøö dawhetô tì in 2001.

03. Pierre Mantla and Madeline Arrowmaker explore the remains of an old fireplace at Faber Lake/Semï tì in 2000.

04. Bella Zoe crosses the threshold of an old dwelling at Faber Lake/Semï tì in 1999.

Into the early dawn, under dancing aurora, the storytelling continues with tales of days gone by, of the great heroes and lessons from the land.

TAMMY STEINWAND

01. Having initiated the “Trails of the Ancestors” and been on every one since its inception in 1995, John B. Zoe, already a man of many campfires, says, “It’s about tranquility; to bring people back to silence, to revisit the self on the land, away from modern life.”

02. To make up for windbound days, there follows a long day where paddlers cover some 50 kilometres by alternating segments of silent synchronized strokes, snacking, chatting among canoe mates, racing other canoes and back to quiet reflection—not to mention taking a shore break at the big tumbled rocks at Castor Lake/Wek’eåets’aadzìi tì.

03. After a long stretch of breaking in new muscles, it’s good to raft-up the canoes, kick-back, and relax for a spell; an opportune time for Alex Williah to dry feet and moccasins after a wet portage.

TESSA MACINTOSH / TLICHO GOVERNMENT

MEMORIES:
Reflections of a Magical Journey

I was born, raised and make my home in Behchokó, Northwest Territories and was a junior high teacher when I first started taking part in the annual canoe trips that were a partnership between Chief Jimmy Bruneau School (TCSA), and the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council (now Tlicho Government).
The four canoe trips that I was a part of have been very special to me. This was a time for me to connect not only with the land but also in a special way with the Elders, the culture and language of our people and most importantly, the students. I have many fond memories of our time out on the land.

Each 10-20 day trip was set up pretty much the same way. With 30 people in total, five canoes each carried six paddlers; an Elder, guide/boss, teacher and three students. Each day one of the canoes was in charge of breakfast for the whole group, another canoe would do lunch for the whole group and the third canoe would do supper. The next day, the duties rotated so if you did breakfast one morning, you would do lunch the following morning and supper the third day. This gave a canoe at least one whole day of break from preparing meals. These breaks were very much appreciated. When it was our group’s turn to make a meal, we would discuss who in our canoe would make the fire, start the tea, and do the other duties such as make bannock or peel potatoes. Everyone had a chore to do and everyone chipped in and helped out. The same with the clean up after supper; everyone helped to wash, dry and put the dishes and pots and pans away. It was a group effort and everyone worked well together.

Each day began with prayers for a good day, a safe journey and sometimes the request for food. I remember on one trip when we were running low on protein and we happened to camp by a grave, the morning prayer led by the group’s Elder included a request that we be given a big animal in exchange for offerings we left at the burial site. It was a beautiful day; the sun was very bright and warm, not much wind, a few clouds, just a gorgeous day! That afternoon we had seen at least one moose. There was our food. The group was happy and very excited, especially the Elder whose prayers were answered. The whole trip was like that. Sometimes things happened that were difficult to explain. I believe that it is the power of prayer and the spirits of the land that constantly guide us, protect us and lead us in the right direction. There have been many blessings like this on these trips and each was special in its own way.

Evenings, after supper were spent in different ways. Some tired canoers would take a dip after a day of hard work paddling and portaging, others would spend the time playing cards, Scrabble or reading in their tents, and others got some much-needed rest. Each evening before bed people would gather around the fire to dry out their shoes and socks on racks above the fire. This time was also used to share stories and tell jokes, and this usually ended with prayers for a good sleep and thanks for the day.

One of my favorite memories of the canoe trip was listening to the Elders speak of the different areas where we disembarked. Many sites showed evidence of past use. Sometimes we would find tent circles outlined by large rocks that were previously used to hold a caribou hide lodge in place. In the center of this area, underneath the moss and lichen, one would find a fire pit and if you were lucky, flint or tiny arrowheads. The Elders shared their knowledge as they explained how camps were set up, how our ancestors lived at different times of the year as they followed the animals and how they connected with and worked on the land. At times the conditions were harsh but the people’s faith, courage and determination pulled them through. Other special areas included old villages, old camp sites, grave sites, Hodoòdzoo, Weyìits’atåaa, Wekwezhii, and many other sites. Our Tåîchô Territory is filled with special and sacred sites that we are blessed with. It is an honor to learn about our land and our ancestors from our Elders while actually being at these particular sites. It gave me such a special feeling and filled me with pride to be of Tåîchô ancestry.
To take advantage of a good wind, the party halts on a sandy beach at Big Spruce Lake/T’sèètì to rig sails fashioned from tarps suspended between spruce poles, thus propelling canoes more swiftly than even the six paddlers on board.

The group some 90 strong, spend a day at a sandy beach on Basler Lake/Tìegô tì. Though windbound, it’s sunny and proves a good time for laundry, card games, a refreshing swim, an air food drop and visiting with old friends.

Morning prayer provides an opportunity to contemplate the 10-day, 250 kilometre journey from Behchokö to Gamètì on trails that have been used by the Tåîchô for thousands of years. Alphonse Apples leads a gathering in prayer for continued safe passage and thankfulness, for the days have been as strenuous and fulfilling as in the times of the Ancestors.

With just the right water level, not too deep or too shallow, lining a canoe downstream can save time spent on portaging, though care must be taken with footing in the rapids.

In keeping with tradition, time is always given at a modest distance from the final destination to ‘rendez-vous’ and prepare for the final approach ‘en masse’. This way the people arrive safe and whole.


Affirm that you are Dene. As a Dene you search for yourself. You seek those who are skilled and pattern yourself after them. Learn the skills that they have. You will become the Dene envisioned. The Real Person, the Dene.”

(Elizabeth Mackenzie, Yellowknife – April 1990 / Dene Kede Education: A Dene Perspective)
Respect is paid to the water (Tì ts’àts’eedi), for its pure, clean abundance, as a mode of transportation, for sustaining the people and all life.

Through these stories and the daily work we encountered, sometimes paddling through strong winds, or portaging through muskeg and bog, it was the Elders’ words from their stories that helped to keep us going, to keep on paddling, one stroke at a time, or keep on trekking, one step at a time. This is where connections can be made to our personal lives in our communities. At times it is difficult, and some young people begin to lose their way. I believe the canoe trip has helped many young people appreciate our Elders more and get a glimpse of how our ancestors have lived and endured hardship. They learn that it will not always be smooth sailing and that you have to have faith, courage and determination, by beginning with believing in yourself... that you can accomplish whatever you set out to do.

The canoe trips were a lot of hard work but in the end, it was always worthwhile. Each trip ended with a special feeling of accomplishing something great and to share that special feeling with fellow paddlers and the rest of the group was just wonderful! The canoe trips will always hold a special place in my heart.

Tammy Steinwand, Vice-Principal
Chief Jimmy Bruneau School, Edzo.

Gocho tglh (Trails of Our Ancestors) is a course offered to a select number of Chief Jimmy Bruneau school students during the summer holidays. Students who take this course travel by canoe to the Tłı̨chǫ Assembly following the trails of their ancestors. The students are out on the land/water for a minimum of 10 days, spend time in the Assembly meetings, participate in the cultural events such as Drum Dances and Hand Games, visit and clean-up grave sites, camp at the traditional campsites, listen to the elders telling stories about the routes, and spend a lot of time paddling and portaging, cooking and learning wilderness survival. Every student is expected to fully participate in all activities in order to gain credit for the course. Elders teach the students during the trip the ways of the Tłı̨chǫ people.

The Dene Kede Curriculum, aims to ensure that the students develop respectful relationships with the land, the spiritual world, other people and themselves. These relationships are best developed with the aid of Tłı̨chǫ elders, experiences on the land, and use of the Tłı̨chǫ language.
A map is like a magnet for travelers like these from Whatì with stories of the land continuing well into the night at Slemon Lake/ Hobàa tì. And the language of choice is the mother tongue – Tåîchô Y atì.

01. A map is like a magnet for travelers like these from Whatì with stories of the land continuing well into the night at Slemon Lake/ Hobàa tì. And the language of choice is the mother tongue – Tåîchô Y atì.

02. The two-man carry of the large, modern canoes is not a traditional activity as they were much lighter in the past, however, portaging a tumpline pack of 100 pounds is still typical for the seasoned traveler.

03. Young Missy Mantla “pays the water/Tì ts’àts’eedi” of the Emile River/Hozìideè near Kwejinne Lake/Kweyîï tì, giving a small token of value with prayers of gratitude for traveling on the land and for safe passage on the arrival of three canoes with kin from Wekweètì.

04. For Clarence Nasken and daughter Lela, the youngest on the trip, there is the incredibly unifying, unforgettably moving welcome of a thousand handshakes at Gamètì.

05. In 2004, the commencement of the Tåîchô Assembly in Gamètì is marked by the arrival of canoes from the “Trails of our Ancestors” and continues with a week of meetings, drum dances/Eye t’à dagowo, handgames/Ets'idzi, weddings and camaraderie to reinforce the unified strength of the Tåîchô Nation.
PLACENAMES

Tåîchô names and terminology

REFERENCES


Legat, Alice, Georgia Chocolate, Bobby Gun, Sally A. Zoe, and Madeline Chocolate, researchers and compilers. 2001. "Caribou Migration and the State of Their Habitat". Yellowknife: West Krı̀mkot Slave Study Society.


“Your ability to communicate with the animals themselves, the ability to communicate with The Creator, your spiritual growth, is given to you by the land and animals, every time you go out. Sometimes these things will be replaced by modern spirituality. But the land, history and the spiritual growth that comes from the land never changes.” (John B. Zoe)

This book is a series of impressions and thoughts about the trails of the Tlîchô. From the earliest times, the Tlîchô have traveled this land, recording their discoveries and activities in a rich oral tradition that is their history and culture. Travel to the places of the stories is integral to the self-portrait of the Tlîchô people.

By the mid 20th century, the location of these sites, and the stories linked to them were in danger of being lost. Only the Elders, the last generation to have lived on the land, retained this knowledge. On a trip to document the trails in the early 1990s, John B. Zoe, Elder Harry Simpson, archeologist Tom Andrews and others were inspired to revive the tradition of travel on the land and to restore the oral legacy, which is connected so closely to the landscape. Recording the Traditional Knowledge of the Elders was a vital part of the over-all renaissance of the Tlîchô heritage. So now, many Tlîchô have experienced the exhilaration of being at these special places, learning the stories and feeling the emotional pull this unique land exerts on every person who travels in it.

It’s been an honour helping to gather the stories and photographs of the Tlîchô over the years, in part because it is my children’s own inheritance. I rejoice with them when their hard won self-government becomes reality. I’ve been privileged to travel the Trails of Our Ancestors, to experience something of this Tlîchô rite of passage. This book, like the canoe trips themselves, is another small part of what John B. Zoe calls Nation Building.

Tessa Macintosh
Book Hunter/Gatherer – Somba K’e, 2007
Trails of our Ancestors – Canoe Routes of Our Ancestors.