

During my recent visit to Arctic Red River [April 26 - May 7/91], I tape-recorded information regarding the use of fishtrap up the Mackenzie River from Hyacinthe Andre, Annie Norbert and Tony Andre. The time period in question was a hundred years ago, in the 1890s. The interviews were conducted in the Gwich'in language. A copy of the audio tape, a translated transcript of the interviews along with this report has been submitted to Jean Luc Pilon at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa and also to the Arctic Red River Band for their records.

At first I anticipated speaking with several people, notably Hyacinthe Andre, Andre Jerome, Annie Norbert, and Gabe Andre, since they would be the people who I figured may have heard stories about the use of fishtraps from their parents. Gabe Andre had just left for his Tree River camp and would not return to the community of Arctic Red River until after breakup. Upon speaking with Andre Jerome, he said he could not remember any stories. So I interviewed Hyacinthe Andre, Annie Norbert, and Tony Andre.

Agnes Mitchell translated and transcribed the tape from the Gwich'in language into English. Hyacinthe Andre agreed to make a model of a fishtrap since in his interview his hand motions describing the construction of one could not be captured on audio-tape [a video recording would have been ideal].

Briefly, Hyacinthe Andre talked about the use of fishtrap in the Tree River and "Ga tat dil la" [or Anderson River] area. Annie Norbert provided stories about the use of fishtrap up Pierre's Creek while Tony Andre recounted stories about fishtrap use at Fish Lake.

By their accounts, one fishtrap would be constructed and used by a group of families during the spring and fall fish run. The fishtrap would be made from willows and shaped like a huge bag. It was placed across a narrow creek to catch all sorts of fish (whitefish, bluefish, jackfish, suckers, etc.). Fish was very plentiful. The families would dry the fish then cache it away in an underground pit for winter use for themselves or their dogs.

Hyacinthe Andre explains that Travaillant River was not a good fishtrap location because the outflow of the river was too strong.

As usual, information cannot be gathered without a story or two so Annie Norbert and Tony's stories are added.

Gwich'in language tape translated by: Agnes Mitchell

Interviewed by: Alestine Andre

Interview with Hyacinthe Andre

May 2, 1991

Alestine Andre: Today is May 2, Hudson's Bay Birthday, May 2, 1991. Hyacinthe Andre, regarding fishtraps at Tree River, "Dachan chuu gehnjiga" and Travaillant River, "Khaii lug tshik".

Hyacinthe Andre: Although I don't know very much about it, if I seen a fishtrap I'd talk about it but I haven't seen one. I heard that fishtraps were made up the creeks of the Travaillant Creek and Tree River. Fishtraps were made all over but I don't know where they were made, but fishtraps was made at Thunder River [Vihtr'ii tshik], above Travaillant Creek. Thunder River, that's where I heard they made fishtraps. Also at "Ga tat di la" [English name unknown]. Ah, they made lots of fishtraps, but where they made them I do not know, I don't know how, now I'm going to talk about it.

Alestine: Do they make it with willows?

Hyacinthe: eh?

Alestine: With willows?

Hyacinthe: Yes, yes.

Alestine: Yes.

Hyacinthe: I'm going to talk about all that. In English, they make it with willows.

Alestine: In our language, in our language.

Hyacinthe: First they place a stick across like this. Then a stick is placed where it's going to flow through. At the bottom they put a stick like this, and a white stick is placed towards the back like this, it's like this. After that on top of that, they make something of willows and they do this, this was made very long and placed inside like this. The fish travelling down, the fishtrap is place like this, it is not placed straight.

Alestine: It's like a funnel?

Hyacinthe: Yes. It's like this and it flows with the stream. Fish swimming down stream go into this, the willows is like a bag, and the fish go into this, and they cannot get out. The fish only stay in there, when this happens, the fish all taken out, that's what they call a fishtrap. My moth said that was how a fishtrap was made that's what I mean.

Alestine: What kind of fish? Was that suckers?

Hyacinthe: Eh?

Alestine: Was there whitefish in there?

Hyacinthe: All kinds of fish, big, small, jackfish, all kinds of fish go into it.

Alestine: What this around Tree River?

Hyacinthe: Yes, Tree River and I mentioned "Ga tat dil la" around there. At Tree River, suckers and bluefish go into it. Whatever fish is around will go into it.

Alestine: Do they fish in the spring?

Hyacinthe: Yes. They made fishtraps in the spring and fall, but mostly in the fall when there is lots of fish [during the fish run].

Alestine: Do they dry the fish?

Hyacinthe: Yes. They make dryfish, that's why they do that.

Alestine: Do they use fish for dogfood?

Hyacinthe: Yes, also for dogs.

Alestine: And people also eat fish?

Hyacinthe: Yes. That's not only for one person, when one fishtrap is made, it is for all the people and lots of people. Even if there's ten families, they would all use it.

Alestine: How much fish is caught in the spring?

Hyacinthe: Lots of fish in the fall.

Alestine: 200, 300?

Hyacinthe: Oh, more than that. But in the fall there's more fish, millions and millions of fish, this is at "Ga tat dil la", but at Travaillant Creek there's mostly bluefish.

Alestine: Is that the only fish camp?

Hyacinthe: Eh?

Alestine: Tree River, is that the only fish camp?

Hyacinthe: Yes.

Alestine: How about Travaillant Lake?

Hyacinthe: Travaillant Lake, they make one around there but ...

Alestine: No. Travaillant River?

Hyacinthe: Oh, Travaillant River, they say the water is flowing too strong, and it is no good, and no fish go through there, no fish, nothing. Only up at the open creek, only there. [where the water flows out at Travaillant Lake]

Alestine: Was it about 1920?

Hyacinthe: No, before that.

Alestine: Before 1910?

Hyacinthe: Maybe about 100 years ago.

Alestine: Around 1890?

Hyacinthe: Yes around 1890. Since nets were brought among the people, they do not know how to make a fishtrap anymore.

Alestine: They make it with willows, do they sometimes use birch? Birch trees?

Hyacinthe: No. Only willows.

Alestine: Willows?

Hyacinthe: Yes.

Alestine: Where do the people live before they go to their fish camps?

Hyacinthe: Oh, I don't know where they lived, but when people hear a fishtrap is going to be made, they would move to that place. They would go like this [motions with both hands to a centre in front of him].

Alestine: Where to?

Hyacinthe: To where they would spend the winter. If they make lots of dryfish, they would make an underground cache [pit] with logs and store their fish in there, and during the winter they would go back and look for it.

Alestine: Is this around Tree River?

Hyacinthe: Yes, wherever they make a fishtrap, only around there.

Alestine: Oh.

Hyacinthe: Not any other place.

Alestine: This summer, the man I am working with would like to see these places.

Hyacinthe: Yes.

Alestine: That's why [I'm asking these questions to find out about the use of fishtrap]

Hyacinthe: Oh.

Alestine: So this summer maybe you will be travelling with us.

Hyacinthe: Maybe.

Alestine: Yes. They will be digging around where people were fishing, and look under the ground.

Hyacinthe: Oh, boy.

Alestine: That's why [we need to find out more about fishtraps]

Hyacinthe: Maybe Andre [Jerome] hear something about this. But ask anybody about that. Me, I know through your grandmother. I was too small. That fishtrap we seen set [at Arctic Village, Alaska], even that caught suckers and bluefish. It's like that but where they make them, I really don't know. It will be hard to find the location though.

Alestine: This man says he wants to see Tree River maybe around where they fished with fishtraps.

Hyacinthe: Too bad, the old people would know. Only them, Fort McPherson people, but they stay at Fort McPherson.

Alestine: Yes.

Hyacinthe: There's lots of old people there, but very few here, nothing.

Alestine: If you travelled with us then you can tell us where to look.

Hyacinthe: Yes.

Alestine: Then we will do the work. Maybe two or three days work.

Hyacinthe: Maybe then if you travel up the Tree River a little way with canoe.

Alestine: Yes, he said that, at the first major fork, he said in a letter he sent to me.

Hyacinthe: yes.

Alestine: At Tree River, the first major fork, he will also look around Travaillant River, he wants to travel there too.

Hyacinthe: I hear they didn't make fishtraps at Travaillant Creek, nothing, it's not a good place and fish don't come down that creek, nothing.

Alestine: How about the other fish ...

Hyacinthe: At Travaillant Creek, only suckers come down, but they come down from Sucker Lake. There's nothing from "Haii luk gwinjik", Travaillant River.

Alestine: You talked about a fishtrap place?

Hyacinthe: Where:

Alestine: Not at Tree River.

Hyacinthe: Ga tat dil la?

Alestine: Yes, how do you say that in English?

Hyacinthe: It's up the creek, where Willie built a cabin for that whiteman, not far from his cabin there's another lake, it's up the Anderson River, "Go vaa luu" river, in our language it's call "vu te diu jik". It will shown clearly on a map.

Alestine: That's all. Anything else? That's all.

Hyacinthe: Yes.

FISHTRAP PROJECT

May 1991

Gwich'in language tape translated by: Agnes Mitchell

Interviewed by Alestine Andre

Interview with Annie Norbert

May 2, 1991

Also in the room is Annie's husband, Nap.

Annie Norbert: Alestine, when they say fishtrap, they're talking about a real oldtimer word. At the time people didn't know about nets, they'd help each other to build a fishtrap. People would gather at one place, and there were a lot of people, that's what I hear my mother tell about. I hear my mother talk about "Chii chaa van" at one time, it's a big lake above Pierre's Creek, "Chii chaa tsik", on the far side they built a fishtrap and that summer there was a lot of fish, lots of people were staying there making lots of dryfish, they'd make plenty of food for winter, tied their dryfish up good and store it there. After freeze up they look and find it still in good condition. My mother tells me stories of this.

Now there's an old woman named "Shaa k'eh", her parents made a fishtrap at "Na aii choo tsal", that's half way to Fort McPherson, she's one of my aunt, now she's dead.

These are the two times I hear fishtraps were made. I guess there were many made but my parents didn't work with fishtrap very much before they died. Then the whiteman brought the nets, but before this happened nets were made out of willows that is growing under the ground, they'd pull them out and use the bark to make nets, it was after this that the whiteman brought their nets, my mother said.

Alestine: What kind of fish did they catch at Pierre's Creek?

Annie: Pierre's Creek was rich with whitefish, one month there would be big whitefish, but when they swim back, they were medium size, that's how the fish is at Pierre's Creek.

Alestine: Was fish used for dogs? Or for people to eat?

Annie: For people to eat, but if they didn't have enough dog food, they'd use it for dogs.

Alestine: How many fish? 200, 300?

Annie: Oh, lots.

[Nap: we stay there two weeks we would make 700, 760 dryfish]

Alestine: With fishtrap?

Annie: No, out of net. My mother said that when a fishtrap is built they would be busy day and night because there was so many fish. Some people would look after the fishtrap at night and the others during the daytime, even that there is still lots of fish caught in the fishtrap, and my mother say people get tired from that.

Alestine: How many weeks? Months? Maybe two months? All summer?

Annie: Yes, all summer, then its freeze up and the fish is rich at Pierre's Creek. That's all I know from what my mother told me.

Alestine: And they make dryfish from all of it?

Annie: Yes, all of it.

Alestine: Okay, where did the people go after.

Annie: To their place where they are going to stay for the winter, trapping, or ...

Alestine: Before they come to their fishtrap, where did they come from?

Annie: Spring camp.

Alestine: How many families?

Annie: My mother says about twenty families, about the size of Arctic Red River now. They will all stay where the fishtrap is made.

Alestine: Is this before 1920?

Annie: Oh, way before 1920, I was born in 1920.

Alestine: Before 1900, eh?

Annie: Yes, this happened even before that, they're talkinga bout real old timers.

Alestine: Anything else?

Annie: [Shakes her head]

Alestine: Okay, that was Annie Norbert. Thank you very much.



Annie: I was telling Alestine a story. There's a place they call "Shoh k'dha", it's a day's journey from here. It's a day's travel. At that lake the old timer's made a fishtrap here and they lived off the fishtrap all summer. It was pass the middle of summer when they started moving away to different places. And they left the fishtrap the way it was. Not long after people moved away, they came back from their cache which was underground, when they came upon a bear who claimed the fishtrap. He was eating all the fish which were caught in it and he was buying some in the ground. Since then the place was called "Shoh k'dha" by the old timers. I don't know how they call it in English. I'm telling you a story I almost forget.

FISHTRAP PROJECT

May 1991

Gwich'in language tape translated by: Agnes Mitchell

Interviewed by: Alestine Andre

Interview with Tony Andre

May 4, 1991

Also in the room is Tony's wife, Caroline.

Alestine: Today is May 4, 1991 and I'm talking with Tony, Tony Andre. Okay, you can talk.

Tony: In the fall fish pass through Fish Lake. Oh, there's lot of fish, when a net is set, you would be travelling back and forth across this lake. After a while a person would get tired of it and pull out the net, but tomorrow the net was set again.

Paul Niditchie found that place and said to built a fishtrap there, so on was made, my dad and Pascal [Baptiste], there were lot of people there. I seen this done in front of me when I was a little boy. They built lots of stages to store the fish, there was no end to them, that's where they put all kinds of fish, whitefish, crooked back, louche. All that pass through, even jackfish, lots, but there was more of crooked back, maybe 1,000 at a time, two, 3,000, maybe 10,000. There was no end to them, the stages, they kept building them. They were tough people, and they brought the poles from long ways and kept building stages.

Alestine: How many families?

Tony: My dad lived there, old Paul and Amos stay with him, and Pascal was married with his first wife. These three men and they had lots of children. They made a big fishtrap.

Alestine: With willows?

Tony: Willows. First they put logs across the creek then covered it with willows and made the floor out of trees. But I have never been on a fishtrap when it was being built. There was so much fish that the willows that was made like a bag was overflowing with fish and when they did this [sweeping motion with hands], some of the fish would go the other way, towards the ground, they would make a cache right there. Ten crooked back would make one cache.

Alestine: Was that for eating?

Tony: Yes, for eating and dogfood for all winter. In the winter people get hungry. Not these people. Some people are hungry and weak and cannot hunt for themselves. The people with food would move to these hungry people. They lived with them and that's how the people get fish. They feed all the people, every day they would give the people 1, 2, 3, even 4 caches of fish. They don't sell them fish, they help each other other, that's how they work. When the fish is almost gone.

[Caroline is pounding on caribou bone in the background]

On the shore of the lake, Amos' father "diijik anjit dii a tan (?)" [would signal for moose]. In the evening moose would come to the shore, sometimes a big bull moose can be heard coming down, and I would get scared, I'm small and it is hard for me to shoot a gun. They killed about 20 moose, beside all that fish that they caught. They made a birch mark canoe on the lake and sometimes the canoe would be showing this much [about 4 inches] out of the water. That's what they use to haul the hide and meat back to camp. They could not put too much meat in the canoe, only a certain amount, not too heavy. After this is done, they would start making drymeat.

Alestine: What year would this be? 1920?

Tony: 1924 I was born. I must have been 8 or 9 years old at that time.

Alestine: around 1930.

Tony: Yes, around 1930. That's the last time a fishtrap was made, you know. It soon rotted and was lost. There was lots of grass at the creek at Fish Lake, after the fish pass through, there is not one grass left. The water was as gray as the Mackenzie River water. You can see the bottom of the lake before the fish camp, when the fish come the water turns black, it looks like gray mud.

Alestine: Did they make up the creek at Tree River?

Tony: Yes, way up the Tree River, they made one for bluefish, but they didn't use it all fall. Only for one month, to eat right away. They lived well.

Alestine: What kind of fish?

Tony: Bluefish. There's a place called Blackfish Lake [in the Sunny Lake area]. Here is Blackfish Lake, here is "nit din nii a" and here is "leii dalaii", this river is "teii dalaii". This lake that flows into it is a fish lake, this too is a fish lake, down this way, is they call "vee nadh ddha dlaii". This big hill, from there there it's "vee nadh ddha dlaii", that's how the lake at the bottom is call "vee nadh ddha dlaii". Even it's a fishlake, they call it "vee nadh ddha dlaii". They catch lots of fish sometimes. When the fish is passing from that lake, from "nit din nee a" and also from "dit chan la k'ddh" there's two fish lake beside each other. This stream flows all the way from Sunny Lake. "Ga tat da ddha" flows into Blackfish Lake. Besides Blackfish Lake is "Dit chan la k'ddha" and this flows to Travaillant Creek, and that's where fish is caught.

Alestine: How many years ago?

Tony: Oh, don't know, it was a long time ago. Ela and Runitjis's father should know [Caroline: Ela, I remember him that's all, I was about 8 years old].

Tony: Big Hyacinthe use to get fish from there. Gee that was 30, 40 years ago, maybe I mean 50 years ago. That's where they take fish from they say.

Alestine: 50 years ago, around 1940?

Tony: 1940, way before then.

Alestine: Yes, almost 100 years ago?

Tony: Yes that time fish trap were made, water is always flowing through it. They place logs like this. When I seen the place the log was this big, and it was sticking out of the ice, we were travelling around when there was very little snow on the ground, there were two sticks, pointing towards each other from the side of the shore, they were rotten, that's when I seen a fishtrap, and that's the spot a fishtrap was built.

Alestine: Did they have it all year round?

Tony: No, only in the fall, before it froze up. When there was tin ice on the lake, only then the people moved away from there. The whitefish were this big. The kind you see around outside. Big whitefish.

Alestine: That's for eating?

Tony: Yes, for eating. They don't make cache out of it. They'd stick a willow through the gills of a lot of fish and tie the willows and put it up on the stage on logs, and sometimes they built a fire under and smoke them, some are yellow, but if it is not smoked the fish is white. After when you eat the fish you can taste which fish was smoked.

Alestine: Before they use the fishtrap, where did they come from?

Tony: They come from Arctic Red River, then they called people that stay at Travaillant Lake, Travaillant Lake People, then Fish Lake people, there's Red River people, and people down the river as Delta People. All these people would gather here on a big day. During the month of July they would all move away. Some would track their boats up the river to Travaillant Creek and some up this river and still some moved down the river to the Delta. That's how they worked. They did not stay in this town

every day. They would see one another only when they gathered here and then they returned back to their camps. This was not a town in these days people didn't want store things, as it was very hard to get, sometimes you'd get lard.

Alestine: Sugar?

Tony: No.

Alestine: There was no sugar?

Tony: Just round sugar, lump sugar, there was lots of that. That sugar was very weak (laugh).

Alestine: Are you finish?

Tony: Yes.

Alestine: Okay, thank you very much. It was really good.

Tony: In the fall all the cow moose go to the lake with their calves to drink water and eat, and the young ones grow up around there. They eat the grass that's at the bottom of the lake. That's why in the fall when it's turning colors, and the leaves turn yellow, the fish start running and moose go to that area also, that's when they'd kill lots of moose, so every time a moose goes to that lake, you're sure to kill it. I remember we were staying there when I was a little boy, I could hear Amos' father shooting moose, I hear with my ears. They'd bring back loads of meat thick with fat by canoe. Did we ever eat good. I sometimes think, thank you. After I ate that, it doesn't matter that I am going blind.