

Tree River / Devlan Oral History Project

Prepared for:
Golder Associates, Calgary, AB

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*To document, promote and preserve the practice of Gwich'in culture, language,
traditional knowledge and values.*

Introduction

In late 2002, Devlan Exploration Inc. submitted a land use application to the Gwich'in Land and Water Board to revisit the three wells the company drilled in 2000 and to drill a new well (C-36) in the Tree River area. In reviewing the proposed development outlined in the 2002 Environmental Assessment Report for Delvan's Winter Drilling Program in the Gwich'in area, the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI) recommended that oral history research to record possible heritage sites and traditional use of the area around the new well site was warranted given the numerous place names recorded previously for the area.

In January 2003, a small oral history project was carried out by GSCI for the new well-site area (C-36) within the context of the larger area. Three elders from the community of Tsiigehtchic who are knowledgeable about the Tree River area were interviewed about old time trails, their seasonal use of the area, the names of places, traditional camp and cabin sites, and burial sites.

The three Gwichya Gwich'in elders that were interviewed for this project were born on the land and spent most of their life in the Travaillant Lake, Tree River and Siveezho areas. They all have specific knowledge about the Tree River area and the area near the new drill site. The elders interviewed were: Gabe Andre (73 years), Noel Andre (74 years), and Cecil Andre (63 years). Gabe Andre has a camp on the Mackenzie River at Trineht'ieet'iee [674], down stream from Chugwich'yaa tshik (4). Noel Andre has trapped in this area for decades and today he continues to run a trap line through this area from Tsiigehtchic into the Tree River area. Cecil Andre has a cabin on the Mackenzie River at Goonelkak or Cecil's Cabin [617], down stream from Chugwich'yaa tshik (4).

The place names and their identification numbers (in rounded brackets) in this report correspond to those reported in Kritsch and Andre 1993 with the exception of three place names and their identification numbers [in square brackets] that correspond to GSCI's Gwich'in Place Names Database (2002).

Methodology

This research project took four days to complete. The first day was used to prepare for the interviews, to set up an interview date and time with elders and to conduct the actual interviews. The next three days were used to write up the report, to verify it with the elders, and to transfer the heritage information on a 1:50,000 map.

Two of the interviews were conducted in the Elders' home and one interview was done at the GSCI office. The elders' information was recorded on three 60-minute cassette tapes and marked on two 1:50,000 scale map sheets (106 0/5, 106 0/4). A faxed map provided by Golder Associates was used to orient the elders to the Tree River C-36 area. The cassette tapes, the transcripts, and the maps used for the project will be held on file at the GSCI office in Tsiigehtchic.

Results

The three Gwich'ya Gwich'in elders recorded an old time trail as a means to anchor information about this area and to provide information about the seasonal use of this area, and the location of cabins, camps and burial sites along the trail. They also provided the Gwich'in and English names of the places and lakes for the area south of Chugwich'yaa tshik or Smith's Cabin (4).

The old time trail which goes to Siveezhoo (3) begins at a small draw at Smith's Cabin or Chugwich'yaa tshik (4), on the Mackenzie River. Noel Andre and Cecil Andre remembered the many times that people traveled first by dog team and then by skidoos along this trail in late summer, fall, winter, and late spring. Gabe Andre recalls moving out on this trail in late summer. He said the trail was also used in the winter. Cecil said they moved out at the end of September when there was no snow on the ground. Noel said he used the trail a couple of times at the end of September and again late in May. Noel also said, "A good many thousand people went through there too."

There used to be one old cabin at Chugwich'yaa tshik (4) on the east side of the draw. Gabe marked a burial site that is located on a high hill at the top of this draw. He did not know who was buried here and if the wooden cross marking the grave is still showing because it was very old. The trail continues inland to the only small lake in this area, which people crossed, then went across the country to the north shore of Nant'ee van (75). Both Gabe and Noel referred to Nant'ee van (75) as Gwit'it van choo ehchejijiltin. Cecil said it was one day of traveling from the river. According to Gabe, Cecil, and Noel a big area on the northwest shore was a well used camp site and this was where people used to set their first camp. From the camp site, people would usually hunt for ducks and moose along the long lake, Gwit'it van choo (39).

The old time trail ran between two lakes, according to Noel. From the narrow strip of land between Gwit'it van choo (39) and Nant'ee van (75) it divided into two trails. One trail ran straight across the country to a camp site on the north side of Chugwich'yaa ehchejijiltin (42). Along the other trail, there were two camp sites. The first camp site was situated near two small lakes not far from the present location of well site C-36. Cecil said of this first camp, "We could not make it very far because we were travelling on bare ground." Another camp site was near a small lake about halfway to Chugwich'yaa ehchejijiltin (42). The old time trail went on to Chugwich'yaa or Chugwich'yaa van (5).

Chugwich'yaa or Chugwich'yaa van (5) was known by another more recent name. Cecil said, "The boys call it Ugly Lake in English." Cecil explained the name referred to the many "corners" or irregularities in the shoreline and the fact that deep snow cover on the lake in the fall always created overflow which made travel over the lake very difficult and unpleasant (wet). Gabe, Cecil, and Noel marked five camp sites around this fish lake. The main camp area was on a point of land at the north end of the lake. There was another camp site at the far end of the lake. Noel said there was also a camp site on the island on this lake. He remembers their late sister, Lucy, was born here in 1935. There were up to four families staying on this island. Cecil and his wife, Louisa, had a camp site

on the east side of the lake. Cecil said a canoe belonging to Noel and Gabe is still on this lake where the trail hits the lake, on the north end. He saw the canoe about ten or fifteen years ago but the trail has since grown in. The location of the canoe was marked on the map.

The old time trail to Siveezhoo (3) networked out from the camp site on the north point of Chugwich'yaa or Chugwich'yaa van (5). A portage trail went across to Chehluk goonlii (6) and on to Siveezhoo tsal (41). Another trail went onto the lake, around a big point, to Nan zhit van or Tàìh zhit van (40). And a third trail went south to Siveezhoo (3). This area was burnt a few years ago by a forest fire. Gabe and Cecil provided the following detailed information about these trails.

There were two trail routes that went eastward to Nan zhit van or Tàìh zhit van (40) and to Chehluk goonlii (6) or Loche Lake in English. Cecil said there were two places to cross on Chugwich'yaa or Chugwich'yaa van (5). According to Gabe there was a camping site on Nan zhit van or Tàìh zhit van (40), and nearby on the west ridge, Gabe's mother, Julienne Andre, told him about a burial site on the side of a hill. "When my mom was alive, she told me all this. When we camped, she pointed out the burial site on the hill." He said this area was burnt so the grave would be hard to see but he marked the location anyway. He did not know who was buried here. Well site Ontaratue River D-39 is located near this camp and burial site. Gabe also said there were two places to camp near the north end on Chehluk goonlii (6). Cecil said he and Gabe had set a tent on Nan zhit van or Tàìh zhit van (40) and they set a fish net for their dogs. It must have been early fall because there were still swans on Chehluk goonlii (6), he said. Gabe pointed out a place where a cabin was built on a small lake called Chehluk goonlii tsal (6a). This lake is a new place name. The old time trail then continues southward to Siveezhoo (3).

As a young boy, Cecil traveled through a side trail which his family made as they went along, from Chehluk goonlii (6) over to Siveezhoo tsal (41). It took them almost a week to get here. In September, they fished for crooked backs and caught a few hundred fish here using a net. Following this he and his father, Hyacinthe Andre, trapped throughout this area, leaving at the end of November. There was a camp site near the narrows on this lake and Noel said there was a cabin on a narrow strip of land adjoining the next lake over. This trail went westward back to Chehluk goonlii tsal (6a) and connected to the old time trail that ran to Siveezhoo (3) by there. By the end of November, Cecil noted that there was ice on the lakes so they traveled by dogteam to Siveezhoo (3) and eventually headed back towards the river to their Tree River camp.

For those eager to get to Siveezhoo (3) from Chugwich'yaa or Chugwich'yaa van (5), the trail went straight south via Siveezhoo ehchejijiltin (43). Noel said this was a big lake with no fish on it. At Siveezhoo (3), Gabe and Noel marked out three cabins on the east shore, near the northern end of this lake. They all said that Siveezhoo (3) is a good fish lake.

According to Noel, the above area is good marten country, mink is plentiful further up in the hills, and lynx close to the river. For example, the creek at Smith Cabin is good for

lynx. Every lake around this area is a beaver lake. There is whitefish, crooked back, jackfish, and loche on Chugwich'yaa (5). There is jumbo crooked back on Chehluk goonlii (6), and regular crooked back on Siveezhoo (3) and Siveezhoo tsal (41). There is also fish on Nan zhit van or Tàìh zhit van (40). There is no trout on these lakes though. There is moose and caribou west of Gwit'it van choo (39). This area was well used, especially from Tree River.

Summary

This project collected heritage information about the old time trail system between Smith's Cabin or Chugwich'yaa tshik (4) and Siveezhoo (3), the names of places and lakes, and the location of camp sites and cabins and burial sites for the area south of Chugwich'yaa tshik or Smith's Cabin (4).

The heritage information recorded for this area (between Chugwich'yaa tshik and Siveezhoo) now includes:

- 1 Old time trail system
- 12 Place names
- 2 Burial sites
- 6 Cabin sites
- 14 Camp sites
- 1 Canoe location

More cultural information was collected than expected, over and above the heritage information that was originally sought. The locations of one new place name and two burial sites and additional information about place names were recorded. Chehluk goonlii tsal (6a) is a lake located south of Chehluk goonlii (6). The locations of two burial sites were marked near Chugwich'yaa tshik or Smith's Cabin (4) and Nan zhit van or Tàìh zhit van (40). Noel said that Seven Island [650], which is located a few kilometers up the river from Smith's Cabin was where an oil camp and airfield was set up and seismic work began in the area in 1960. This information will be entered into GSCI's place name database.

Attached to this report is a xerox map on which the heritage information referred to in this report has been noted.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that a site visit be made in the near future by GSCI staff, one Gwichya Gwich'in elder, and Devlan representatives to look for possible disturbance at three places in the area near the Tree River C-36 and Ontaratue River D-39 well sites. In particular, the winter and access roads have been built over an old time trail near three lakes: Gwit'it van choo (39), Nant'ee van (75) and Chugwich'yaa ehchejjiitn (42). Both areas have several camp sites nearby including a camp site that is located near Tree River C-36. And furthermore, the Ontaratue River D-39

well site is in close proximity to a nearby burial and camp site on Nan zhit van or Tàjh zhit van (40). If possible, the location of the burial site must be marked for future reference.

2. The old time trail to Siveezhoo (3) was an important route that was used year round by Gwichya Gwich'in to get to fish and animal resources inland from the Mackenzie River. Along this trail, the Gwich'in lived their lives with some people being born here, and others dying and being buried. The old traditional trail, the many named places, and camp, cabin and burial sites makes the area between Chugwich'yaa tshik or Smith's Cabin (4) and Siveezhoo (3) an area of high potential for future ethno-archaeological work. It is recommended that an ethno-archaeological survey of this area be carried out at the developer's expense in the summer of 2003 with GSCI. That this ethno-archaeological survey must be conducted before any further development occurs and that the survey also includes the areas developed previously by Devlan.
3. The names of places on the land have been and continue to be important mental geographical markers for elderly Gwich'in and Gwich'in that use the land who know the Gwich'in place names. It was therefore confusing and misleading for Gwichya Gwich'in elders to hear that a Devlan well site was named after a place name that is located miles away from its actual location. For example, the name and location of Devlan "Thunder River" N-73 well site is located directly across the river from Travaillant River. The Gwich'in landscape has many place names and for clarity, it is recommended that the names of future well sites correspond directly with nearby named place. And further that the name of the Devlan Thunder River N-73 be changed to Devlan Travaillant River N-73 if possible.
4. That original maps of the area proposed for development be provided to both the Tsiigehtchic and Yellowknife GSCI offices for review and use. It was very difficult to see and identify the exact location of the new well site, Tree River C-36, marked by Golder Associates on their faxed maps. The latitude and longitude readings for each test and drill sites should be provided as well. It would be ideal to have these maps in an electronic format (PDF or jpg files) or in hard copy form. To expedite the oral history work, it would be ideal to see all the cultural and heritage information identified to date for the area clearly marked on these maps along with the proposed area for development.
5. That upon completion, the archaeological report for the work carried out in 2002 be sent to the GSCI offices in Tsiigehtchic and Yellowknife.

References cited:

- Kritsch, Ingrid and Alestine Andre
1993 Gwichya Gwich'in Places Names Up the Arctic Red River and South of the Mackenzie River, Gwich'in Settlement Area, N.W.T. Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, Tsiigehtchic, N.W.T. 85pp. plus maps.