

## **Chapter 6 Athabascan- Dené: Many peoples, many languages**

### **Intro**

In July, 2015, the Tanana Chiefs Conference, the modern tribal consortium which represents the forty-two villages of the interior Athabascan region, met to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Tanana Chiefs Meeting in 1915. That long-ago July, fifteen Dené chiefs, leaders of most of the villages on the Yukon and Tanana Rivers met in Fairbanks with Judge James Wickersham, at the time the only representative of the Federal Government in the Interior of Alaska. At their centennial celebration, in the modern tribal hall on the banks of the Chena River in Fairbanks, TCC's leaders reminded the audience that the leaders of today are fulfilling the hopes, dreams and wishes that their forefathers expressed at the 1915 meeting. The Chiefs in 2015 were clear that far from gathering for the first time, the traditional chiefs had met before the official meeting to discuss the issues at hand. In fact, the organization of the Dené people into bands led by individual chiefs went back to time immemorial, as they say. Chiefs represented their people by virtue of their superior wisdom and leadership skills. Ninety-four-year-old elder Poldine Carlo of Nulato had wished to remember the specific chiefs of her own times, including chiefs of Koyukuk, Hughes, Nulato, Kokrines, and others. But what she really wanted to emphasize was that the political economy of the Athabascan regions has always relied on a basically stable system of independent yet allied bands, each led by a chief.

At the time of the 1915 meeting, the influx of Euro-Americans attracted by the Klondike Gold Rush had been building for 15 or twenty years. Mining in the Fairbanks area had been in

full swing for only about a decade, yet the miners had already used up almost of the readily accessible wood resources in the Tanana Valley. Euro-Americans had built up Fairbanks to a sizable town of about 3,000. Now the miners and town boosters were demanding a railroad to the Interior to achieve better transportation, but also to gain access to coal resources in Healy, some 100 miles away. It was all a part of their ceaseless and restless demands for modernization and the progress of civilization, an ideology so normalized in the long nineteenth century that it was unquestioned. The railroad was set to go directly through the community Native village of Nenana, and their traditional cemetery, and the chiefs were concerned about their own rights to the land they had claimed for millennia.

Athabascan speaking peoples, the Dené, have occupied the vast interior of the Alaska sub-continent for at least 12,000 years. While outsiders think of Alaska as snow covered wastes, in reality the Interior is a mostly forested region, cut through with major river systems, including the Yukon and Tanana Rivers and their tributaries attracting and supporting a vast array of wildlife. Many of these tributaries head in the south slopes and foothills of the Brooks Range. Extremely cold in the winter, with temperatures regularly dropping to forty or fifty degrees below zero, and sometimes even seventy below, the continental climate means there are also extremely warm summers, with nearly twenty-four hours of daylight and temperatures in seventies and eighties, and sometimes even ninety. The mountains support caribou herds with tens of thousands of animals who migrate semi-annually, while the river plains and river valleys support a vast boreal forest of birch and spruce. Numerous lakes and streams support many kinds of fresh water fish. Lakes, streams and forests provide a home for fur-bearing animals including

wolf, beaver, muskrat, lynx, and ermine. Athabascan people have adapted to the climate and used all available resources to develop complex cultures.<sup>1</sup>

We often speak of the five major language speaking groups of Alaska Natives as if they are equivalent. In fact, they are not. Whereas all of the *Inupiat*, *Tlingit*, *Unangax* and *Yupit* speak the same language with different dialects, there are generally eleven actual different, mutually unintelligible, Athabascan language groups in Alaska (and fifty-three altogether among all of the Athabascan people in Alaska and Northern Canada.) *Dené* in Alaska speak *Gwich'in*, *Koyukon*, *Han*, Tanacross, Upper Tanana, Lower Tanana, *Ahtna*, *Dena'ina*, Upper Kuskokwim, *Deg Hit'an* and *Holicachuk*. These are actual different languages, just as the Romance languages include Spanish, French and Romanian. In fact each of the languages has a number of its own dialects. The *Dené* in Alaska are closely related to other *Dené* speaking peoples, like the Navajo and Hopi of the Southwest.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail, see “Athabascans of Interior Alaska” at the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, [http://ankn.uaf.edu/curriculum/Athabascan/Athabascans/appendix\\_a.html](http://ankn.uaf.edu/curriculum/Athabascan/Athabascans/appendix_a.html)

## Map



Map by Alan Boraas, KPC: The language groups from east to west: *Gwich'in*, on both sides of the Alaska Canadian Border north of the Yukon; *Han*, also straddling the Canadian border; *Koyukon* on the southern slopes of the Brooks Range, Upper Tanana, Tanacross, Tanana and Lower Tanana on the Tanana River, *Ahtna* in the Copper River Basin and in the broad glacial valley south of the Alaska Range all the way to Cantwell, adjoining Denali National Park; *Dena'ina* whose traditional lands are mostly around Cook Inlet but also all the way inland to the upper Kuskokwim river, Upper Kuskokwim, and the *Deg Hitaan*, and *Holikachuk* on the Lower Yukon

If it seems farfetched to think of so many different languages, remember that this is not a small area. Burch compares them to languages in Europe: in fact, the area of Western Europe (excluding Britain and Spain) is almost the same as that now under control of Doyon Ltd., the Alaska Regional Native Corporation for the Interior of Alaska.<sup>2</sup> (Within that area, Doyon actually has title to some 12 million acres.) While Spanish, French, Italian and Romanian are all considered Romance languages, no one would consider them the same language. So we should not wonder at the differences between Dené languages, especially those spoken by peoples occupying territories very distant from each other, like Upper Tanana, near the Canadian Border, and *Deg Xinag* (also *Deg Hit'an*; formerly known by the pejorative Ingalik) spoken more than 1,000 miles down the Yukon River, nearly in Yup'ik territory. Further, Each of the language speaking groups was further divided into dialects, mutually intelligible, but not the same.

Anthropologists Terry L. Haynes and William E. Simeone describe the traditional life of the Upper Tanana who were divided into local and regional bands. Haynes' and Simeone's description of these regional bands fits the definition of Burch's Nations. Each local band consisted of a large extended family, of twenty to seventy-five people. "Two or more local bands might comprise a regional band, as large as 200-300 people." They shared common language and tradition, were connected by kinship ties, whose members hunted caribou and fish together as members of a common estate. Boundaries were established, respected and important, and members of one band or Nation had to have permission before encroaching on another's territory. Each band controlled specific resources. Testimony of explorers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century affirms the reluctance of Indian guides to cross into foreign territory.

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<sup>2</sup> There are two additional Athabascan nations not a part of Doyon: the Ahtna people have their own Native Corporation, called Ahtna and the Dena'ina are included in Cook Inlet Regional Inc, CIRI.

Anthropologists of the mid-twentieth century commonly refer to these subdivisions as bands. After American colonization, The US government persuaded most of these bands to settle into permanent year round villages. So post-statehood these settlements and their populations were commonly referred to as villages. Now the villagers have reclaimed the designation as tribes, and regional and village corporations are moving to refer to their organizations as tribal organizations. For instance, as the Gwichyaa Zhee in Fort Yukon, explain, “Formerly known as ‘The Native Village of Fort Yukon,’ the Tribal Government serves the Gwich’in people of Fort Yukon, Alaska.”<sup>3</sup>

If you happened to float down the Yukon River in the early 1900s, people you met at a fish camp would not have identified themselves as Athabaskan, or Dené. They would have identified themselves with their own local band, like *Neets'ai Gwich'in* or *Dihaii Gwich'in*, or *Deg Hit'ane*. The term Athabaskan is not a self-name; it is not equivalent to *Inupiat* or *Yup'ik*, each of which means ‘people,’ or ‘real people.’ The language name comes from Lake Athabasca, in far northern Saskatchewan and Alberta. But the name for the lake comes from the Cree name for it, told to a British explorer centuries ago. Over the years, the term has been spelled “Athabaskan,” “Athabscan,” “Athapaskan,” and “Athapascan.” (The modern Tanana Chiefs Conference prefers Athabaskan.) However, the term that is truly equivalent to *Inupiat*, *Yup'ik*, *Sugpiak* and *Tlingit*, is Dené, a generalized Athabaskan word for “people.”<sup>4</sup> Dené seems to be the only name for Athabaskan speaking people as a whole. The ethno-linguistic groups themselves each actually contain smaller subdivisions. I maintain that it is these smaller subdivisions which are roughly the equivalent of Burch’s *Inupiat Nations*. Anthropologists

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fortyukon.org/wordpress/> [accessed Jan 31, 2019]

<sup>4</sup> See “The Name Athabaskan,” Alaska Native Language Center, <http://www.uaf.edu/anlc/resources/athabaskan/>

generally have referred to these subdivisions as Local Bands.

Almost all of these bands have their own name for themselves that that means ‘people’- with a place name for “people of.....” This term is sometimes Dené , or an equivalent, as in the Dena’ina. Or a variation of Hutane, as in the Upper Kuskokwim *Hwt’ana* or the *Deg Hit’ane*, or the Koyukon - *Huttane*. Today, the Dené people who continue to live in rural Alaska are settled in villages. Those who live in urban areas or outside of Alaska continue to identify with the village or Nation they are from.

Nearly every village identifies with people who were part of a specific band or nation in the past. While the term tribes was not used in the past, it is the preferred term today because it has come to have a specific political meaning since 1993 when villages were officially designated as Tribes. (Some villages had taken advantage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 to organize an official Tribal government, or IRA Council, even as late as 1971.) However, after the ANCSA settlement, there was much debate about whether Alaska Natives should have the same status and benefits as American Indians. Finally in 1993 Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Ada Deer determined that nearly all Alaska Native villages have the equivalent status to, and are entitled to the same benefits as, Tribes in the lower 48.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the original bands or nations, now settled in villages, are the Tribes of today. I will use the terms nation, band and tribe interchangeably.

## Clans

While the Dené were divided by language, and by their geographic expanse, they were united across nations through their organization into clans. Clans, moieties, sibs, or sides had

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<sup>5</sup> Federal Indian Law for Alaska Tribes <https://tm112.community.uaf.edu/unit-4/>

different names in different places but were generally divided into Wolf and Crow, with membership determined through a matrilineal system, or descent through one's mother. In some places there is a third or middle clan, said to be reserved for children of people who are outside of the clan system. While clans were most highly developed in the Tlingit culture, within Dené nations, they played an important role. First of all, marriage was regulated by the clan system, and had to be between people of the opposite moiety. Since children belonged to their mother's clan, they commonly married someone from their father's side.

Clans perform obligatory reciprocal duties especially in regards to funerals. Members of one clan prepare the body, dig the grave and hold appropriate ceremonies for the deceased of the opposite clan. The clan of the deceased then holds a potlatch at a later time to honor the deceased, and again reciprocate. Second, because bands were so small, often an extended family, people frequently married someone from another village or lineage. While languages divide, clans unite.

Kenny Thomas of Tanacross explained his own history and relation to his clan in his life-history, *Crow is my Boss*. He explained that his father was from the ancestral village of Mansfield, and his father married a woman from another village. Relatives from both sides played an important role in his life. But his obligations as a leader for the Crow entailed funeral duties, and organizing and speaking at potlatches, sharing the wisdom passed down to him from his elders.<sup>6</sup>

Potlatch is another important feature of Dené culture, in most places. Unlike Tlingit who lived in stable central villages, Dené people traveled from one place to another throughout the year, from hunting camp to trap-line to fish camp. Accumulating wealth was not practical, nor

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<sup>6</sup> Kenny Thomas Sr., Craig Mishler, *Crow Is My Boss: The Oral Life History of a Tanacross Athabaskan Elder*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2005.



desirable. Instead, people shared with one another, and celebrated a potlatch, a giveaway ceremony to commemorate a deceased relative, or other occasions. The more that was given away, the more prestige was gained, and those to whom gifts were given were then obligated to reciprocate.

## History and Culture

The history of each of the Athabascan language groups, and of each Nation are different but to get a handle on the topic we have to make some generalizations. Further, there are varying amounts of information available for each group.

### The earliest history

The Gwich'in have oral traditions that they have occupied their area since time immemorial or, according to conventional belief, for as long as 20,000 years.”<sup>7</sup> Archeologists have recently discovered site on the Tanana River where they date occupation to 13,000 years ago. They have actually found remains of two infants dated 11,500 years ago, “the oldest human remains ever found in the North American Arctic and Subarctic, and among the oldest discovered on the entire continent.”<sup>8</sup> Ben Potter of UAF says, “The site shows that a “sophisticated subsistence economy” existed thousands of years ago.”

*The Upward Sun River site was discovered in 2006, cremated remains of a 3 year old child were found in 2011, and then, the two infants below that in the same hearth in 2013.*

*The site is named Xaasaa Na', Upward Sun River, a traditional name. It was identified by a Native elder from Salchaket interviewed in the 1960s who had first-hand knowledge of the site and the related area: The iconic Mt. Hayes, can be seen from the*

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<sup>7</sup> Gwich'in Council International. [https://www.gwichin.org/A piece of a mammoth bone found in the 1970s allegedly human worked from a place called Bluefish Cave on the Alaska Canada border in Gwich'in territory has fairly recently been radiocarbon dated to 24,000 years before present \(y.b.p.\). But this date is in dispute along with the interpretation that it is human worked. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4125730/Humans-arrived-North-America-10-000-years-earlier.html>](https://www.gwichin.org/A piece of a mammoth bone found in the 1970s allegedly human worked from a place called Bluefish Cave on the Alaska Canada border in Gwich'in territory has fairly recently been radiocarbon dated to 24,000 years before present (y.b.p.). But this date is in dispute along with the interpretation that it is human worked. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4125730/Humans-arrived-North-America-10-000-years-earlier.html)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.adn.com/science/article/remains-ice-age-infants-uneearthed-interior-alaska-oldest-discovered-north-america/2014/11/10/>; FAQ on the Upward Sun River Site.. <https://www.tananachiefs.org/upward-sun-river-site-frequently-asked-questions/> This story is updating rapidly

*north side of the Alaska Range, and is called Xasatl'aadi 'the one of the upward sun headwaters'*

*An obsidian flake discovered as part of the grave goods found in the infant burial was chemically identified to come from the Hoodoo Mountain primary source site in Kluane National Park, Yukon, Canada, a location 600 km (370 mi) away from the Upward Sun River site.<sup>9</sup>*

Further west, Dené occupation of the area at the headwaters of the Kuskokwim River north of the Alaska Range goes back at least 5,000 years, according to TCC archeologist Bob Sattler.<sup>10</sup> Three skeletons discovered in McGrath in 2012 were determined to be 800-1,000 years old.<sup>11</sup>

When you think about 10,000-20,000 years of history, it is not surprising that there have been changes in cultures and nations. Archeologists have been able to fill in many details through their formal analysis of archeological sites. Ethnohistorians have collected information to fill in some of the experiences of the Nations based on their encounters with Russians, British, and Americans explorers and traders, and how those encounters shaped their history. It is harder to understand their histories prior to those encounters.

### **History Before Colonial Incursions**

Dené peoples in the Interior of Alaska lived most of the year in small family groups or local bands controlling specific estates, including resources harvest sites fish, caribou, moose, small game, and plants and berries. Each local band was also a part of a Nation, a larger cultural group sharing a dialect, and the larger group might gather or live together during some seasons. The family bands within each Nation were not necessarily fixed delineations: individuals,

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<sup>9</sup> FAQ Upward Sun River

<sup>10</sup> Ben Anderson, "Skeletons recovered in Interior Alaska offer clues to life 1,000 years ago." November 21, 2013, AND <https://www.adn.com/science/article/skeletons-recovered-interior-alaska-offer-clues-life-1000-years-ago/2013/11/21/>

<sup>11</sup> Emily Schwing, "Preliminary Analysis Offers More Details About 1000 Year Old Bones Discovered in McGrath," Nov 22, 2013, <http://fm.kuac.org/post/preliminary-analysis-offers-more-details-about-1000-year-old-bones-discovered-mcgrath>

couples or small family units might leave one band and join another. But while the bulk of their efforts was directed towards subsistence activities, people also put effort into gathering and making items for gifting and trade. Dené bands traded directly with each other and with outsiders for items that they did not have available on their own territories, and they were also active middle-men in an international indigenous trade network that existed long before European goods were available. The Dené were active in acquiring Russian, European and American trade goods long before those outsiders themselves penetrated Dené country.

### **Pushing Back the Boundaries of History**

Gwich'in historian Adeline Peter Raboff pushed back the frontiers of what historians and anthropologists used to call pre-history to identify Gwich'in, Koyukon, and Lower Tanana Nations as they existed in the early nineteenth century, just as Burch did in the Northwest Arctic.<sup>12</sup> She identifies the Athabascan speaking nations who once occupied the headwaters of the Noatak and Kobuk rivers, areas that are now considered Inupiat. Her work demonstrates the possibilities of extended understanding, and complicates the idea of bright, fixed, lines demarcating territories of Athabascan language speakers. She definitively shows that historic change affected the location, composition and relationships within and among the Dené nations of Interior Alaska even before the arrival of outsiders. As she notes, "Boundaries and borders have changed over the centuries, due to "changes in weather, internal and external warfare, famine, disease, changing demands for trade, change in economy, movement of people, and cataclysmic events." Most of the changes she has been able to trace have occurred since 1800. And she identifies individuals important to Dené history who lived as early as the early

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<sup>12</sup> This and the following from Adeline Peter Raboff, *Inuksuk*.

nineteenth century. These were the grandparents and great-grandparents of people she interviewed.<sup>13</sup>

Raboff's work also demonstrates the extreme difficulty of these methods. Raboff, who can translate the various Athabascan languages, analyzed oral histories of the Gwich'in and corroborated them with written documentation from the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Yukon, as well as the notes of explorers, and visitors to the region. She is well-equipped for this incredibly complex task, as each group referred to every other group in their own language, while in the written record, groups and individuals are referred to in obscure transliterations of one or another language. Thus, each group was referred to "in the literature" and in the primary sources by perhaps three names in three different languages. Even the anthropologists and archeologists referred to groups by different names.

Raboff shows that two small Koyukon nations, the *Nendagge Huttane* Koyukon and the *TooLoghe Huttane* Koyukon had occupied the western Brooks Range in what is now Inupiaq territory until approximately 1820. Driven out by the Iñupiat, they migrated east through the Brooks Range. Continuing to battle with the local Gwich'in bands, many were killed in ongoing warfare, and the rest dispersed some becoming *Dihaii Gwich'in*.

Raboff used sources like the ledgers of the Hudson's Bay Post at Fort Yukon from the 1850s and 1860s, where traders had recorded the names of every Indian man whom they traded with. To previous researchers, the names meant nothing in particular, but Raboff was able to identify them and link the obscure transliterations to names of individuals in oral history and family history stories in Gwich'in and/ or Koyukon languages. Famous leaders *Ditsee Kittlee* and *Shahnyaati* form a bridge from one era to another, from the era of stories from what had been

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<sup>13</sup> Raboff

considered “pre-history” to the modern era, as there are actually photographs of *Shahnnyaati* from the 1880s.

Raboff’s work also demonstrates the limitations of viewing language speakers as strictly genetic based ethnic groups. In this case two Koyukon bands had occupied the upper Noatak and Upper Kobuk areas. The *Nendagge Hutanne* Koyukon wore out their welcome, and migrated East until they were attacked in a final battle where most of the warriors were killed. The survivors joined Gwich’in bands, in effect becoming Gwich’in. The Koyukon at the headwaters of the Kobuk on the other hand, intermarried into the Inland Inupiat bands on the upper Kobuk, leaving many people in the area with Indian ancestors on their family tree.

I include this example to show that it is possible to understand the history of Dené nations long before the arrival of Europeans and Americans, an era relegated to “prehistory” according to conventions of both anthropologists and historians.

As we have seen from the example of the Koyukon and Gwich’in, the individual nations of the various Athabascan language groups occupied and controlled specific estates across the Interior of Alaska. They competed and sometimes battled to maintain control of their borders. When a Nation lost, they sometimes disappeared as a separate nation and refugees would often join another nation.

### **Trade**

All of Indigenous Alaska was crisscrossed by indigenous trade networks long before the arrival of the colonial powers, or even before Alaska furs were traded into international markets. Each Dené band harvested the resources in their estates, and also surpluses to trade depending on the demand. Many indigenous groups and individuals acted as middlemen in trade as the occasion arose.

The most important trade fair in Dené territory was spring fair at *Nuklukayet*, [also called *Nuchelawoyaa*] at the junction of the Tanana and the Yukon. The site was at the border between Lower Tanana and *Koyukon* territories, and also attracted *Gwich'in* and sometimes people as distant as the *Han* and *Tanacross*, from hundreds of miles upriver, and *Holikachuk* and *Deg'Hit'an* from hundreds of miles down-river. Frederick Whymper who visited with a Russian trading party reported up to 600 people at the fair, but that was long after smallpox epidemics had decimated populations.

Most of the *Koyukon*, would have spent the winter on remote traplines, and the spring perhaps trapping muskrat. Then after the ice broke up on the rivers, families would make a boat out of a moose skin, and float down-river to *Nuklukayet*, gathering to see others, and celebrate, as well as trade. People would certainly trade furs, an item desired by and Inupiat on the coast. Acting as middlemen, the *Deg'Hit'an* could obtain furs and trade them on to the *Yup'ik*, while *Koyukon* might travel up and over the pass to the Unalakleet area on the Bering Sea, and trade them on to the Inupiat. Like the fair and *Sisualik*, the fair was accompanied by potlatching and dancing, and was also a kind of marriage fair.

The *Gwich'in* might bring goods that they had obtained on trips to their caribou hunting grounds on the North Slope shores of the Arctic Ocean, or from the *Inuvialuit* at the mouth of the McKenzie River further east. The *Tanacross* or *Upper Tanana* tribes might bring copper they had obtained from their neighbors the *Ahtna* on the Copper River, or coastal goods obtained from neighbors to the east who had in turn traded with the Tlingit.

By the seventeenth century, all of these groups would have seen and possibly traded Russian and Asian goods that had been traded by the *Chukchi* in Siberia to the *Iñupiat* at *Sisualik*. The *Dichinanek' Hwt'ana*, from the Upper Kuskokwim, might have travelled over a

portage to the Yukon, bringing maritime goods they had traded for from the *Dena'ina* and *Sugpiak*, who had access to maritime resources from Cook Inlet. After the Russians conquered these areas, they would have also brought Russian trade goods, like knives and trade beads. While trade beads may seem to us “worthless,” or just trinkets, it is important to remember that to the *Dene* of the Boreal forests they were indeed luxury goods which could be easily transported, displayed as necklaces, or as decorations on clothing and other items and thus markers of wealth. In other words, the Dené were not trading for items they needed for survival. They had what they needed, so they traded for prestige items. The beads became a sort of currency, as they could easily be carried and exchanged again along trade routes.

### **Dené Nations Villages and Tribes**

Within this larger context and framework, each nation and ethnolinguistic group has a particular history. Unfortunately this history has not been represented in most history books, and is available only in very diverse sources. And the sources are not uniform, there is more information about some areas, some nations, some groups, than others. However, the histories of nations and villages each contribute to the whole, presenting ideas of the kinds of sources that might be available and where to look for them, in order expand and improve the whole. For each language speaking group, I am attempting to explore 1. Location, geography, 2. Subdivisions, 3. Indigenous trade, 4. Relations with neighbors, 5. Encounters with outsiders, 6. Arrival of Missionaries and Christianization (this will be expanded upon in Chapter 7), 7. Effects of diseases. However, there is no exact parallelism here in terms of how far into the 20th century we get for each nation, language group or village. Further analysis of missionaries and education in particular will be pursued in later chapters.

## Gwich'in

The Gwich'in speakers traditionally controlled estates on the southern slopes of the Brooks Range and their territories extend east into Canada. Until the U.S. purchase of Alaska there was no recognized border and the Gwich'in people were more unified, that is they traded, and intermarried from the mouth of the Porcupine where it meets the Yukon River in Alaska east to the McKenzie River in the Yukon and Northwest Territories in Canada.<sup>14</sup> A majority of the *Gwich'in* are an inland mountain people, though some have traditional estates in the Yukon Flats. The upland *Gwich'in* are particularly dependent on caribou herds. These herds migrate for hundreds of miles, and the Porcupine Caribou Herd, on which the *Gwich'in* depend, migrate as far as the North Slope, where they give birth in the spring. As late as the early nineteenth century some bands followed the caribou and had an important hunt on the North Slope. Travelling what most people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century think of as unimaginable long distances on foot was not unusual. This is corroborated by the observations of Captain Rochefort Maguire, commander of the Franklin Search Expedition at Barrow, Utqiagvik who, made a lengthy exploration toward the east in the spring of 1854. Maguire met up with a group of Gwich'in on the Arctic coast, and asked them to deliver a letter to Hudson's Bay post at Fort Yukon, which they did, and then delivered a return message to the British on Barter Island, at the mouth of the McKenzie River in 2-1/2 months for the over 500 mile round trip.

*"On the Arctic coast, east of the mouth of the Colville River he came across a party of Indians. Since they were about to leave for Fort Yukon, three hundred miles away, Maguire gave the Indians a letter to take to the manager of the Hudson's Bay Company post [at Fort Yukon]. They delivered it on June 27. .... It took them only three more weeks to take another message the 250 miles from the trader at Fort Yukon to*

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<sup>14</sup> GTC Department of Cultural Heritage <http://www.gwichin.ca/about-the-gwichin>



*Captain Richard Collinson, near Barter Island, when they went out there to trade with the Alaskan Inupiat and the Mackenzie Delta Eskimos.*"<sup>15</sup>

The Gwich'in today are highly organized, in part to work to protect the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herds. *Gwich'in* from both sides of the border have established the Gwich'in Council International, [gwichin.org] and meet in the bi-annual *Gwich'in* Gathering. Old Crow, on the Porcupine River, and important tributary of the Yukon, is the center of the **Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation** in Canada.

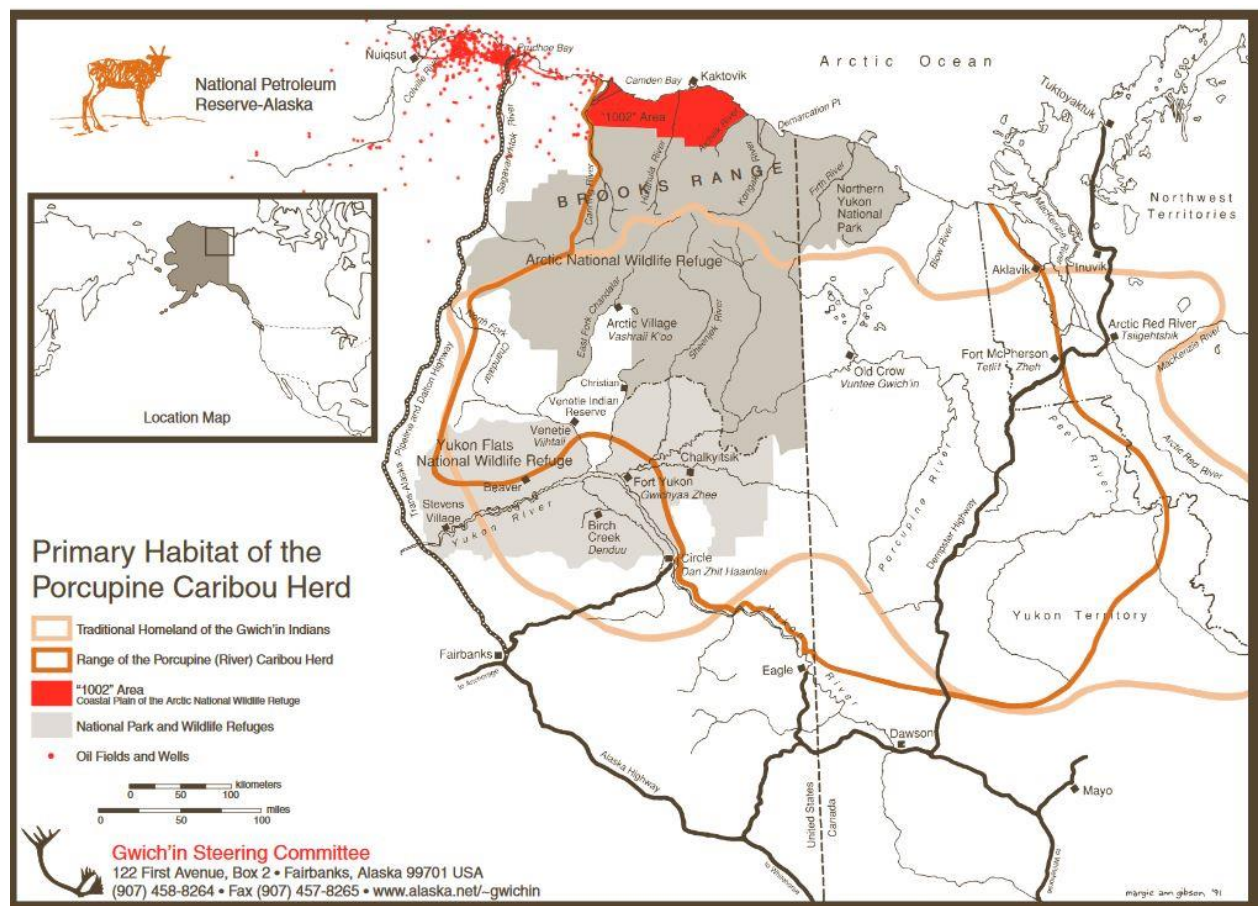


Figure 1 Note that the Gwich'in homelands overlap the range of the Porcupine Caribou herd, and extend through into both Alaska and Canada

<sup>15</sup> Burch, "From Skeptic to Believer," [http://www.alaskool.org/projects/traditionallife/oralhistory/skeptic to believer.htm](http://www.alaskool.org/projects/traditionallife/oralhistory/skeptic%20to%20believer.htm), also, Bockstock, *Fur Frontiers*, p. 256.

*Neets'ai or Neets'it Gwich'in and Dihaii Gwich'in* bands occupied estates in the high foothills south of the Brooks Range, in the drainages of the *T'eedriinjik*, the Chandalar River. Their seasonal rounds included hunting caribou and sheep, in the mountains, and fishing in the rivers, lakes and streams, and trapping in the forests along the river valleys<sup>16</sup> They were among the last to give up their seasonal subsistence rounds and are now settled in **Venetie**, and **Arctic Village**. Unlike other interior villages, the Neets'ai have a tribal reservation, and are not governed by village corporations or municipal governments.<sup>17</sup>

**Chalkyitsik**, which means "fish hooking place," is located on the *Draan'jik*, the Black River. As the name suggests, it was always an important seasonal fish camp, and now the village home of the *Draan'jik Gwich'in*, about 50 miles east of Fort Yukon.<sup>18</sup>

The *Danzhit Hanlaih Gwich'in* live today in the area of Circle on the Yukon River in the heart of the Yukon Flats. Like their neighbors, the **Dendu Gwich'in** who have settled in **Birch Creek Village**, and the *Gwich'yaa Gwich'in*, "People of the Flats" today settled mostly in **Gwichyaa Zhee, Fort Yukon**, they are people of the Yukon Flats, a vast an area of many small lakes and waterways that are the home of whitefish, moose, black bear, waterfowl and berries,. These people of the flats and the river have depended for millennia on important Yukon River salmon runs. Other historic bands included *K'iitl'it Gwich'in*, *Ehdiitat Gwich'in*, *Danzhit Gwich'in*, *Hanlaih Gwich'in*, and *Teetl'it Gwich'in*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Asaf Shalev, "Feds recognize Native names of major Alaska river system," Alaska Dispatch News, May 31, 2016, <http://bit.ly/1LqXIYU>

<sup>17</sup> Charlene Stern, From Camps to Communities, Phd Diss, UAF 2018

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.gwichin.org/gwichin.html>

<sup>19</sup> Gwichin International Council. <https://gwichincouncil.com/our-communities> [1/31/2019]

### Arrival of Outsiders

By the time that outsiders actually arrived in *Gwich'in* territory, they had already had access to European trade goods through indigenous trade networks. Many were already including trapping for trade in their seasonal rounds. And the *Gwich'in* had already been exposed to outside diseases, which had brought deaths and dislocations. A number of important battles between bands had also left survivors dislocated. In the *Gwich'in* tradition, these survivors were absorbed into the local bands of wealth big men, or chiefs.<sup>20</sup>

### The Hudson's Bay Company

In 1840, the *Gwich'in* saw the first trading post established in their own territory. This was the Hudson's Bay Company's furthest north post, Ft. McPherson on the Peel River near its confluence with the McKenzie the mighty river that flows north to the Arctic Ocean. Up until the U.S. purchase of Russian interests in Alaska, the border was neither substantial nor marked or observed. *Gwich'in* territory was understood as undivided. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the HBC had extended their trade routes and network of trading posts further west and north. The establishment of Fort McPherson meant that the local *Gwich'in* Bands would not have to travel as far for trade items, and that they could in turn, act as middle men for those further west. Moving west, from Fort McPherson over the Rat River portage, the traders established La Pierre House in 1842 on the headwaters of the Porcupine, a tributary of the Yukon and then in 1846-47, they established a post at *Gwichyaa Zhee*, in the heart of the territory of the ***Gwich'yaa Gwich'in***, which they called Fort Yukon, at the junction of the Porcupine and the Yukon. The British almost certainly knew this was west of the agreed upon border with Russia, and in Russian territory, but at the time, there was little the Russians could do.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Raboff, *Inuksuk*

<sup>21</sup> Bockstoe, *Fur Frontiers*, p. 220.

As they pursued the fur trade north and west, the HBC brought desirable trade goods, but they also consciously attempted to disrupt traditional indigenous trade by inserting themselves as middlemen. Anthropologists Craig Mishler and Bill Simeone note that “These goods intensified the Native fur trade as Native people located nearest the source of European goods attempted to protect their advantage by keeping other Natives from making direct contact with the Europeans.”<sup>22</sup> At Fort Yukon, the HBC encountered the famous Gwich’in chief and trader *Shahnyaati*. *Shahnyaati* was one of a number of *khaihkwaaii*: big men, or wealthy men, who monopolized trade. Other famous men of the era included *Larryil*, and *Dits’ii K’iithuu*. They gained their wealth in part through family connections, but maintained their positions through effective leadership, and control of important fishing sites and caribou fences. *Shahnyaati* was the son of *Dahjalti*, also an important chief who had five wives, and had adopted many children.<sup>23</sup>

While the Ft. Yukon post brought trade goods closer, the HBC had to contend with the fact that Native people in the Interior had other sources for the guns, beads, knives, and iron pots brought by the British. The *Gwich’in* were able to get British trade goods from their neighbors to the East, the *Tutchone*, who traded for them from the Tlingit who in turn traded with British ships in the Inside Passage waters.<sup>24</sup> Anthropologist and researcher John Bockstoe has spent decades compiling the first person accounts of the traders involved in the fur trade in the north, from which he has been able to draw conclusions unavailable to those studying only one group or another. While anthropologists have been aware of trade between indigenous peoples, historians have seemingly discounted its importance, focusing instead on the exploits of outside traders.

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<sup>22</sup> Craig Mishler and William E. Simeone, *Han Hwech’in: People of the River*, p. 2

<sup>23</sup> Mishler and Simeone, *Han*. See also Raboff, *Inuksuk*

<sup>24</sup> Mishler and Simeone, *Han*, p2

In fact, as Bockstoce notes, the British were at a disadvantage, in that all of their goods came to Alaska from Britain across the Atlantic to their headquarters on Hudson's Bay, and then over the long, overland, post-to-post trade routes from Hudson's Bay, a round trip journey of almost two years.<sup>25</sup> The high prices obtained for the beaver, martin, wolverine, fox and muskrat skins in Europe offset the tremendous costs of this journey. The fact that this long journey was worthwhile indicates just how profitable it was for the British.<sup>26</sup>

In the earliest days of the Fort Yukon Post, beads were the most popular trade good. Bockstoce quotes anthropologist Shepard Krech III "beads became a general purpose money, especially in fairly ordinary economic transactions. They were used to pay for items like furs and moose skins exchanged from Indians living further from trading posts."<sup>27</sup> But beads were an obvious luxury good, indicating that the *Gwich'in* had an economy of surplus.

As the British moved further into the Interior, the groups closest to the new posts found opportunities to act as middlemen, changing the dynamic of traditional trade. William Hardisty, who replaced Alexander Murray as chief factor at Fort Yukon in 1851, believed some of the *Gwich'in* "had become almost commercial people."<sup>28</sup> Certainly the *Gwich'in* manipulated the various traders to try to gain the most advantage for themselves. According to Bockstoce "some bands, like the Yukon Flats *Gwich'in* were said to have almost ceased hunting, and to have become even more intense traders."<sup>29</sup> By 1864, the HBC was sending trading parties down past *Nuklukayet*, the junction of the Tanana River and Yukon Rivers, hoping to supplant the

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<sup>25</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, p. 220

<sup>26</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, p. 220. Trader Alexander Murray reportedly came out from his post in Fort Yukon in 1848 with £1557 [equivalent to £146,358 today.] Historic UK inflation <http://inflation.stephenmorley.org/> [accessed 11/30/2016]

<sup>27</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, p. 220, quoting Murray, and Sir John Richardson who said that beads were the most important trade item on the Yukon.

<sup>28</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*

<sup>29</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, p. 220

middleman role of the Fort Yukon Gwich'in. Meanwhile, the Russian America Company continued sending parties upriver. They were astonished to see that the British were trading guns, ammunition, powder, and supplies to the Dene. The Russian supply lines were as long or longer as those of the British, and neither party was able to keep a sufficient stock of trade goods on the middle and upper Yukon. After Russia sold their rights and interests in Alaska to the U.S., in 1867, American authorities determined that Ft. Yukon was indeed in US territory, and forced them to vacate. The HBC moved their post upriver, first just across the new border, and then to a location further upriver known as Rampart House.

While most observers assume that "contact" with outsiders once initiated, becomes a continuous occupation, in the case of the *Gwich'in*, the HBC post stayed for only 20 years. After 1868, the new operations of the Alaska Commercial Company, the company that had bought out the commercial interests of the Russian America Company were not as profitable, partly because the *Gwich'in* preferred to continue trading with the HBC just over the border. And, not restricted by international relations, the ACC and American traders set up a new post in Koyukon territory, near the major trade fair site of *Nuklukayet* (Nuchaloywa.) American traders also established posts in Han territory, first Belle Isle, near Eagle, and then up river, Fort Reliance near what would become Dawson City, and then even further upriver at the junction of the Stewart River and the Yukon, on behalf the Alaska Commercial Company and other companies. Thus, the Gwich'in lost the middleman advantage they had once had.

Still, Fort Yukon continued to be at least a seasonal settlement. But by the mid-1880s it seems that while the American traders continued to trade with the *Gwich'in* and the *Han*, they became more and more focused on meeting the needs of prospectors. In any case, the history written about these traders is focused more on the unfolding narrative of gold discovery, and

begins to completely ignore the history of the Indigenous nations. Their story as told by outsiders is continued only as they come into contact with, and begin to interact with the new arrivals.

### **Missionaries**

Anglican missionaries followed the British Hudson's Bay Company traders and the Anglican mission was to have a significant effect on the *Gwich'in*, as they made the Anglican faith a part of their own culture. Partly this was a result of Anglican missionary policy during the period, which emphasized teaching and preaching in indigenous languages, and training indigenous helpers. Rev. Robert McDonald came to Ft. Yukon in 1862, but left again with the HBC in 1871, moving over the border to Fort McPherson dialect which he called Takudh, as he translated the *Book of Common Prayer*, first published in 1874, and then the Bible. This would have a profound effect on the *Gwich'in*. While in Fort Yukon he also operated a small school. Thus he brought a basic education in reading and writing to the *Gwich'in* in Ft. Yukon.

After the American takeover, there was a period of time with no outside missionaries. In a way the influence of the church may have increased in their absence: a number of remarkable *Gwich'in* spiritual leaders practiced and preached in a distinctly *Gwich'in* style and context.

Another student of McDonald was Albert Tritt, who was also ordained in Fort Yukon and took his followers, the *Netsaii Gwitch'in* to Arctic Village.

Scholar Steve Dinero who has written extensively about Arctic Village has this to say: *Tritt's interpretations of the biblical ideal fostered a Christianity that did not eliminate or erase Gwich'in identity or culture, but rather, empowered it.* <sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Steve Dinero, "'The Lord Will Provide': The History and Role of Episcopalian Christianity in Nets'aii Gwich'in Social Development - Arctic Village, Alaska," *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal*, Vol. 4, Issue 1; p. 22



## **Han**

The *Hän Hwëch'in*, 'People of the River,' and relatives *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in* occupy an estate on the Upper Yukon, extending over the border into the Yukon Territory, Canada. In contrast with the Gwich'in, the Han were never a large group. Living on the Yukon, the Han harvested salmon from the river, but also depended on the caribou in the Yukon Tanana Uplands, where they built elaborate systems of caribou fences for a more efficient harvest. The construction of these fences, which might be miles long, required the cooperation of the entire village or sometimes multiple villages, under the direction of the chief or chiefs. Harvesting and then butchering and drying the meat likewise required the labor of the entire band. Their traditional territory included the junction of the *Tronkjek* and Yukon Rivers.

## **Trade**

The Han were more or less equidistant from trade fairs downriver at *Nukulukayet* and from the trading site at what is now Ft. Selkirk, in the Yukon where Tlingit exchanged maritime resources with inland tribes. They also maintained an important trail with their neighbors to the south, the Tanacross people, which then extended south to the coast through Upper Tanana and Ahtna territory on the Copper River, and possibly to Cook Inlet.

## **Encounters with Outsiders**

In their location far upriver on the Yukon, the Han were relatively isolated from outside contact. Despite not having any direct incursions into their territories, Han had access to European trade goods through their indigenous trading partners. After the establishment of Hudson's Bay posts at the Peel River, Fort Yukon and Fort Selkirk, the Han were able to access English trade goods more directly. Notes of Jack McQuesten, one of the earliest American traders on the Yukon, suggest that Han Chief *Gäh St'ät* (*Catsah*, *Catseah* or *Gah Tsy'aa*) had



visited both Fort Selkirk and Fort Yukon, and may have had a close trading relationship with the Hudson's Bay Co. McQuesten notes also that all eleven of the firewood carriers on the ACC steamer Yukon were Han, despite the fact that the company steamer had never been up the river as far as Han territory.<sup>31</sup> While Robert Campbell of the Hudson's Bay Company made a journey from Ft. Selkirk down the Yukon in 1851 and 1852, there were no more white visitors until 1867.<sup>32</sup>

Then, after the sale of Alaska, Moses Mercier, a former trader from Ft. Yukon opened a post he called Belle Isle on an island in the Yukon opposite what is now Eagle Village, in American Han territory, and Fort Reliance, six miles downriver from the site of Dawson City, in Canadian *Han* territory. In response, the *Han* increased trapping and began to rely on more trade goods including beads and steel knives, and tobacco, and guns.

The *Han* were among the first to be highly impacted by white miners who arrived for the Klondike Gold Rush in 1896-1898. Miners renamed the famous river the Klondike, after the discovery of gold, and appropriated the land to build Dawson City. Nearly 40,000 people arrived in just 2 years. Explorers and miners met Charley's Band, on the Upper Yukon. Amid fear of famine, they actually hired some of the Han to hunt caribou for the white community. The influx of miners led to diseases, and impacted the wildlife on which the Han depended, and displaced them from their traditional villages.

Chief Isaac was the chief of the *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in*, at the mouth of the Klondike River, at the time of the Gold Rush. A great diplomat, he greeted the gold rushers, and even helped to feed them, as he explains it:

*"Long time ago before the white man come along Yukon Indian was happy. Indian had plenty game, no trouble and was fat. White man comes and Indian go out and kill meat to feed*

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<sup>31</sup> McQuesten (1952:4 ) quoted on [http://www.chiefisaac.com/the\\_chiefs.html](http://www.chiefisaac.com/the_chiefs.html)

<sup>32</sup> *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol 6, p509

*him. Indian give white man clothes to wear and warm him by Indian fire. By-em-by ... million white man come and cut down Indian's wood, kill Indian's game, take Indian's gold out of ground, give Indian nothing. Game all gone, wood all gone, Indian cold and hungry, white man no care.*"<sup>33</sup>

After miners took over the traditional land of the *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in* the people established a settlement at Moosehide, six miles downriver from Dawson City on the Canadian side of the border and in Eagle Village on the Alaska side.<sup>34</sup> But the white miners also brought diseases: Typhoid raged in Dawson City in the winter of 1898.

The Anglican Bishop Bompas established a mission at Fortymile, along with his very cultured English wife, Charlotte Selina. Once the miners arrived, the missionaries seemed much more interested in to white parishioners.

### **Tanana River People**

The Tanana speaking nations claim the entire length of the Tanana River, a major tributary of the Yukon. There are three principal language groups and numerous bands: Upper Tanana, Tanacross, and Lower Tanana: There was formerly a Middle Tanana language, but it no longer survives.

### **Upper Tanana**

Upper Tanana speaking bands included the **Nee'aaneegn', Tetlin-Last Tetlin band: at Tetlin; Lower Nabesna Band**, people who formerly lived in and around **Nabesna Village, Gardiner Creek, Cheejil Niign; Nabesna River (lower), Chisana River (lower) area have now settled at** the village of **Northway**.<sup>35</sup> **The Scottie Creek Band** nowadays live in

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Gates, "History Hunter," *Yukon News*, Friday January 25, 2013.  
[http://www.chiefisaac.com/newspaper\\_articles.html#Chief\\_Isaac:\\_The\\_Gentle\\_Diplomat](http://www.chiefisaac.com/newspaper_articles.html#Chief_Isaac:_The_Gentle_Diplomat)

<sup>34</sup> Mishler and Simeone, *Han People of the River*.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas and Mishler, *Crow is my Boss*

**Northway, Alaska and Whitehorse, and Beaver Creek, Yukon**, where they are the **White River First Nation**. They formerly inhabited the remote Scottie Creek area, on the border between Alaska and the Yukon. **Upper Nabesna-Upper Chisana, Ddhal Tot iin** "among the mountain people" formerly inhabiting the Nabesna and Chisana River areas, nowadays live in **Northway, Mentasta, and Chistochina**.

Anthropologists Terry L. Haynes and William E. Simeone describe the traditional life of the Upper Tanana who were divided in to local and regional bands. Each local band consisted of a large extended family, of twenty to seventy-five people. "Two or more local bands might comprise a regional band, as large as 200-300 people." Haynes' and Simeone's description of these regional bands fits the definition of Burch's Nations. They shared common language and tradition, were connected by kinship ties, whose members hunted caribou and fish together as members of a common estate. Boundaries were established, respected and important, and members of one band or Nation had to have permission before encroaching on another's territory. Testimony of explorers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century affirms the reluctance of Indian guides to cross into foreign territory.

Within the regional bands, or Nations individuals or small family units might shift from one local band, to another.<sup>36</sup> Hayes and Simeone go on to note that, "each band had a number of camps and semi-permanent villages; Territorial rights were held by the regional band. But people intermarried between bands. There was also significant intermarriage between the Upper Tanana people and the neighboring Ahtna.

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<sup>36</sup> Terry L. Haynes and William E. Simeone, "Upper Tanana ethnographic overview, Wrangell St. Elias Park and Preserve." NPS, 2007, p. 7-10 <https://www.nps.gov/ethnography/research/docs/UpperTananaEOA.pdf>

*“Chief Sam was a 60-year old leader of the Upper Nabesna regional band when Robert McKennan interviewed him in 1929. Here is how he described the late 19th century seasonal round of his band:*

*“In the old days the people seldom stayed in the village. Always they were on the trail, hunting and camping. In July whitefish were dried and cached at the Fish Camp [near the mouth of the Nabesna River]. Then the people went moose hunting, caching the meat. In the winter they visited the caches and then when the caribou came they killed caribou. After the moose season the people went up to the head of the Nabesna to secure sheepskins for winter. Then they would return to the village; make their clothes; and then take the winter hunting trails to Ladue Creek, the Chisana basin, and the White River. In the spring when the leaves were coming out they returned to the village. They would take birch bark and sew it together to make new tents and then wait for the caribou to come back again..”<sup>37</sup>*

But they suffered from not infrequent famines, “starvation and food shortages being a common theme in the Northern Athabascan literature.”

*“Chief Peter of Tetlin described to McKennan (1959:37) a mid-19th century famine, when caribou were scarce, few salmon ascended the Yukon and Copper rivers, and many people starved in the upper Tanana region. The Tetlin Indians reportedly survived by eating muskrats and roots stored in muskrat caches. The expedition led by Lieutenant Henry T. Allen through Ahtna and upper Tanana territory in the spring of 1885 not only observed the food shortages in Native encampments not uncommon at that time of year but itself endured hardships; the Indians in both regions generously shared their meager reserves with or sold food to the expedition (Allen 1887)”<sup>38</sup>*

“Inter-regional cooperation between the upper Tanana and Upper Ahtna bands was important as a safeguard against food shortages and enabled local and regional bands to obtain resources not readily available in their own territory.” Ahtna people from Mentasta might travel to Ketchumstuk for the fall caribou hunt with the Upper Tanana people. While people from Ketchumstuck or Mansfield might travel to the Upper Copper River to fish.

The upper Tanana people used elaborate caribou fences with corrals and snares, sometimes as long as twenty miles, to harvest the migrating caribou in the fall. The fence

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<sup>37</sup> Haynes and Simeone quoting Robert McKennan 1959:46

<sup>38</sup> Haynes and Simeone, p. 30

belonged to a particular head man or chief, and the harvest required the cooperation of numerous bands. “People came from as far away as Dawson often hiked to Ketchumstuk to collaborate with the Mansfield-Ketchumstuk band; Upper Ahtna Indians from Mentasta sometimes traveled more than 200 miles (round trip) to Ketchumstuk to procure caribou and ensure they had sufficient dried meat to make it through the winter.”<sup>39</sup>

Anthropologist Robert McKennan who visited the Upper Tanana people in 1929-1930 “considered the caribou fence in either of its two forms to be the most important technological device used by Alaskan Athabascans.”

Place names were important signifiers for each village or settlement. Julius Paul from Tanacross explained this to Simeone and Haynes, saying “hills were like flags because they represented the people, but they were also representations of a good leader.” Julius explained that a prominent peak in the Alaska Range visible from the village called *Na Dang Hu* (‘Marmot Tooth’), “stands for the people of Mansfield and is representative of a strong leader. A smaller hill,” he continued, “called *Maseeen Siitsii*, located close to Mansfield, was next in importance.” As Julius explained”

*“Na Dang Huis for Lake Mansfield, like American flag. Then maseeen siitsii is next, like the Alaska flag, underneath Na Dang Hu, which is greater than maseeen siitsii. Dihthaâd... [the leader there] this is great man, that kind of man, this, who is the good lead man. That is why they call this [hill], just like lead man, smart man in the village to lead people use to be that’s why they call this [hill Na Dang Hu], higher than other one. In old days they use to say Mansfield use to lead all over, Healy Lake, Mentasta, Northway, Tetlin, Ketchumstuk, lead the village, that is why they call this our flag.”*<sup>40</sup>

The region was criss-crossed with an elaborate trail system, many of which were later adopted by American arrivals, including a trail from Valdez to Eagle, and a trail from

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<sup>39</sup> Haynes and Simeone, p. 30

<sup>40</sup> Haynes and Simeone, *ibid.*

Ketchumstuk to Big Delta. The upper Tanana was one of the places where European incursion happened latest of all. Explorers even as late as 1898 found people living in their traditional villages, according to their traditional patterns. But there may have been significant mortality from diseases even before actual contact. That's what people told Lieutenant Allen as he made his way up the Copper on his famous exploration in 1885. They told anthropologist Marie Guedon "that large villages or camps were drained of their population by epidemics before or just before 'the coming of the white man.'"<sup>41</sup> So, even though later observers assumed they were seeing traditional villages that may not have been the case. These Upper Tanana villages were so remote into the twentieth century, hundreds of miles from both Whitehorse and from Fairbanks, that they had avoided contact with the larger society. However, a member of the band was there to greet the surveyors for the pioneer Alaska Highway in 1942, and guide them over a prospective route. Of course, the Band members had no idea the drastic change that the road would bring.<sup>42</sup>

### **Tanacross**

The **Tanacross** people, far up near the headwaters of the Tanana River, are actually located due south of, and border the Han, with whom they shared the Yukon Tanana Uplands, the migration route of what is today called the Forty-Mile caribou herd. They historically did not live on the Tanana River and did not depend on salmon from that river, instead, living in the heartland of their estate in the uplands between the Yukon and Tanana in Mansfield Village, including the ancient villages of ***Dixthâad***; ***Ketchumsuk***, ***Saagéscheeg***; and **Mansfield Hill**, ***Mesiin Tsiits'iig***. There were additional bands at **Healy River**, a **Joseph band**; **Healy Lake**,

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<sup>41</sup> Haynes and Simeone, p. 15

<sup>42</sup> See Jane Haigh and William Simeone, *Alaska or Bust*, UA Museum, 1992.

*Mendeas Cheeg*; **George Lake**, and the **Sand Lake** area.<sup>43</sup> Today the **Mansfeld-Kechumstuk band** descendants live at **Tanacross**, *Taats'altęy* and **Dot Lake**, *Kelt'aaddh Menn'*.

### **Lower Tanana**

**Lower Tanana** *Menhti Kenaga* consists of the **Minto band** – *Menhti Xwghotthit*; the **Nenana-Toklat** *Togothelle* band, now based in Nenana along with descendants of the former Wood River Band: Only one person survives from the Chena Band whose territory was the Chena River and the Fairbanks area and Chena Village (Ch'eno') The Middle Tanana historically included the **Salchaket band**, and **Delta-Goodpaster Band**. The **Tanacross people**, speaking *Nee'andęg'* are named for the modern village of Tanacross, short for Tanana Crossing. Numerous *Nee'andęg'* speaking bands occupied the an area north and East of the Tanana River, and the Yukon Tanana Uplands. The **Mansfeld-Kechumstuk band** are now settled in the villages of Tanacross (*Taats'altęy*) and Dot Lake (*Kelt'aaddh*. The **Healy River-Joseph band** occupied an estate at **Healy Lake**, (*Mendeas Cheeg*), as well as George Lake, and Sand Lake; the *Menn'*) Many different bands claimed the Ketchumstuk (*Saagęscheeg*), Mosquito Fork, Lake Mansfield (*Dihthaad*), Mansfield Hill (*Mesiin Tsiits'iig*), Robertson River, and Tok River areas. *Dihthaad Xt'een Iin* (Mansfield area people), *Yaadóg Xt'een Iin* (Ketchumstuck people).

Nenana became the site of a mission school and later, the construction of the Alaska Railroad circa 1917-1922 appropriated *Togothelle* lands. The construction attracted **Dené** people from the entire region as workers, and many settled there.<sup>44</sup> Nenana became an important transshipment point where goods brought into the interior on the railroad are transferred to

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<sup>43</sup> McFadyen Clark, *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol 6, Sub-Arctic, 1981, p. 585ff; And <https://www.tananachiefs.org/about/communities/>

<sup>44</sup> See Jan Harper Haines *Cold River Spirits* for the stories of members of the Harper and Wright families

barges for shipment up and down the Yukon. The Middle Tanana comprised the Chena Band, who once occupied the Chena River and Chena Village in the area currently including and surrounding Fairbanks, the **Salchaket Band**, and a **Delta-Goodpaster Band**. Only well-known elder Howard Luke remains in the area of Chena, where he has established a culture camp, and other members of these groups have moved into Fairbanks or Nenana.

### **Koyukon**

Continuing down the Yukon River, the Koyukon controlled estates on the middle Yukon, and on the Koyukuk River that extend to the north, draining the south side of the Brooks Range.<sup>45</sup> The Koyukon people speak *Denaakk'e*, whose speakers occupy the largest territory of any Alaska Athabascan language. "The name *Denaakk'e* [də-nae-kuh] derives from the word *denaa* 'people' and the suffix *-kk'e* 'like, similar', thus literally meaning 'like us'."<sup>46</sup> According to the Alaska Native Language Center, *Denaakk'e* is spoken in three dialects -- Upper, Central, and Lower -- in eleven villages along the Koyukuk and middle Yukon rivers. The total population is about 2,300, of whom about 300 speak the language.<sup>47</sup> Historically, there were three sub-divisions, though there was not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between the language divisions and the cultural divides. According to McFadyen, "Koyukuk and upper Yukon divisions of the **Koyukon** had amicable relations, while they considered the lower Yukon *Koyukon* to be members of a different and frequently hostile tribe."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> All of the following is from the YKSD school district page, except where noted. The Koyukon have no cultural organization like the Gwich'in

<sup>46</sup> ANLC

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<sup>48</sup> *Handbook*, Vol. 6, p. 585



The *Koyukon* have no cultural organization like the *Gwich'in*, but the Yukon Koyukuk School District has gone to great lengths to compile histories of all the villages in the district. In the early 1980s they also commissioned a series of twenty oral history biographies of important elders, for use by their students. All of this history provides background and context for the people of the region. They have put the information on their website, which provides an opportunity for them to tell their own story, and from which I have taken most of this information.<sup>49</sup>

The center of the Koyukon world is the confluence of the Koyukuk and Yukon Rivers, the site of the village of Koyukuk, and just downriver, the larger village of Nulato. Below Nulato is Kaltag, where an important trail leads over a pass to the coast. Lower Koyukon is spoken by people of Kaltag and Nulato; Central Koyukon is spoken on the Yukon River in the villages of Galena, Ruby, Koyukuk and part of Tanana, and on the Koyukuk River in the villages of Huslia, Hughes, and Allakaket; people in Stevens Village, Rampart, and part of Tanana speak Upper Koyukon.

### **Nulato**

Even prior to the arrival of outsiders **Nulato**, *Noolaaghedoh*, was an important seasonal fish camp for *Kaiyuh* people whose territory extends to the south side of the Yukon. Like Nuklukayet, it was also the site of an important trade fair, “an ancient trading center for commerce between Alaska’s Athabascan Indians and the Inupiat Eskimos.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> [www.yksd.com](http://www.yksd.com) [accessed Jan 31 2019]

<sup>50</sup> Nulato Tribal Council, “Nulato’s History” <http://www.nulatotribe.net/home-2/self-governance/nulatos-history/>

The *Koyukon position* in the indigenous trade networks was as middlemen- channeling valuable beaver, river otter, marten, wolf, wolverine and fox skins furs as well as wooden bowls and other utensils from the middle Yukon over a pass that they controlled to the Norton Sound coast. From the Inupiat on the coast, the *Koyukon* received sea mammal skins and oil, skin boats, tobacco and iron. Even prior to the Russian arrival in northeast Asia, the *Chukchi* had traded with other indigenous peoples, receiving spear heads, knives, iron goods, and later tobacco, and some of these guys made their way to the Koyukon. After 1789, the Chukchi began participating, and trading the furs on to the Ostrovnnoe fair, increasing the volume of trade, and trade goods available to the Inupiat which they could then pass along to the Koyukuk.<sup>51</sup>

While the Koyukon were able to trade for Russian goods at St. Michaels, after it was established in 1833, there had been virtually no penetration of Euro-American traders into the Interior before the Russian-American Company arrived in the area in 1838 and constructed their first temporary outpost in 1839. It was their furthest upriver venture in their efforts to co-opt the indigenous trade of interior furs to the Inupiaq. However, when the company's Vasily Deriabin returned to the post in 1841, he found that the cabin had been destroyed. As Bockstoce says, "it is tempting to speculate that the local Koyukon middlemen resented this intrusion into their trade monopoly."<sup>52</sup> Deriabin rebuilt and attempted to operate the post, however, like other RAC posts, it suffered from the poor management of the RAC system, as the manager at St. Michaels neglected to send sufficient trade goods over the next four years. Then Deriabin went to New Archangelsk (Sitka) and in 1846, as Bockstoce notes, the company announced in a letter to its shareholders, "the chief concern of the colonial authorities is now focused on entirely stopping,

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<sup>51</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, p. 200

<sup>52</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, p. 200

to the degree possible, the transfer of American furs to the Chukchi and through them to the Yakutsk merchants.”<sup>53</sup>

It is important to understand that the Russians did not develop the fur trade on the middle Yukon. Koyukon did not change their trapping patterns in response to the arrival of Russian traders. The Koyukon were already responding to the world fur market, trapping the highly desirable martin, wolverine and beaver, and trading them on the Inupiat who traded them to the Chukchi. Zagoskin also noted that the traders on the Russian side of the Bering strait paid “four to six times as much for the furs as the Russians did at Mikhailovsky [St. Michaels].”<sup>54</sup>

In return, Zagoskin found that the *Koyukon* had received trade items including the popular tobacco that the RAC itself had traded to the Chukchi on the other side of the Bering Sea. In other words, the RAC was competing with itself. paying six times more for the same furs on the Russian side of the Bering Sea, they were encouraging the Koyukon to trade their furs at Sisualik. What the Russians did not find out until 1838 was how the Koyukon traveled from Nulato to the coast over a pass that they had tried to keep a secret.

But in 1851 a raiding party from the lower Koyukuk River attacked rivals in Nulato, and the Russian traders there as well, leaving only a few survivors. An unfortunate British officer searching for the lost Franklin expedition happened to be in Nulato as well. The raid has frequently been misrepresented as an attack on the Russian traders, or misrepresented as relating to the intrusion of the Russians into the trading networks. Koyukon scholar Miranda Wright, who studied both written and oral sources concluded that it was a major raid in a series of traditional retaliatory battles centered on a battle between major shamans, or *denyaa*, that can only be interpreted in the context of the Koyukon system of beliefs. According to the Koyukon world

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<sup>53</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, p.200

<sup>54</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, p.200

view, any deaths even those from illness were deemed to be caused by shamans, spirits, or ‘bad medicine.’ Thus when epidemic illnesses killed many people on the Yukon, in addition to causing the deaths of many cultural and spiritual leaders. it seriously undermined the spiritual balance, So the raid by people on the lower Koyukon was retaliation taken out in a massacre of people at Nulato, some residents, and others who were there for a potlatch.<sup>55</sup>

Although driven out for a time, the Russians came back and re-established the post. The Russian post was operated by a series of men of mixed ancestry, who belonged to what the Russians saw as a caste or class they called Creoles. These included Vasily Deriabin and later Ivan Pavloff in 1865. The Alaska Commercial Company took over after the Alaska Purchase. Because it was a prominent trading post, the Catholic Missionaries located their first mission there in 1887. Then in 1899, the Sisters of St. Ann, already established in Dawson City moved downriver to open a school. These factors in turn contributed to the governmental decisions of establishing a hospital, telegraph station, U.S. Commissioner and Marshall’s office with a territorial jail and Nulato became a regional center. More traders also followed the precedent set by the Russians in influencing the Koyukon economic world.<sup>56</sup>

### **Koyukuk**

(From YKSD)

**Koyukuk, Meneelgahaadze T’oh**, or “the village at the base of the bluff” is traditional *Koyukukhotana* Koyukon Athabaskan Indian village. The village is located at the confluence of *Yookkene* (“Big River”) or Yukon River and *Kk’uyetl’ots’ene* (“Headwater Willow”) or the Koyukuk River, where people gathered for hundreds of years. It is said among Native people that

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<sup>55</sup> Miranda Wright, “The Last Great Indian War: Nulato, 1851” MA Thesis, UAF, 1994.

<sup>56</sup> YKSD quoting Father Loyens, 1966

Koyukuk is the land of the beautiful people, a place that people like to visit, a place where they have a good time. Athabascan linguist (and resident), Eliza Jones explains that this is because Koyukuk is known for its hospitality. Koyukuk also has a tradition of many musicians, singer and songwriters.<sup>57</sup>

## **Huslia**

(From YKSD)

The name '**Huslia**' comes from the *Denaakk'e* name for the Huslia River – *Hø-yekk'etno* which means, 'river with a steep bank.' The *Denaakk'e* name of the village itself is **Ts'aateyhdenaadekk'onh Denh** which means, 'place where a forest fire burned out to the river on the hill.' Huslia's modern history as a village is as typical as it is unique. Most of the people now living in Huslia came originally from the **Dolbi** and **Kateel** areas at the turn of the twentieth century. They established a village at a place called Cut-Off. As their village history relates:

*"There was a problem with this site, though. Every spring there was flooding that would wash out people's homes. Also, because of the constant dampness, there was a problem with diseases such as tuberculosis. So, in the 1940s the people moved their village to its present site on higher ground. Another reason for the move was that the State Department of Education was unwilling to put in a school until the village had been moved away from the flood danger. The post office was moved from Cutoff to Huslia in 1952. The first school was established in Huslia in the late 1940s."*<sup>58</sup>

Huslia has grown a lot in recent years. Huntington and others formed a cooperative store in the 1960s to meet the needs of the growing town. The people of Huslia are known as a politically active, highly motivated group. Huslia women are famous for being very hard-working and independent. Some have built their own houses and go hunting for big game on

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<sup>57</sup> YKSD The Yukon Koyukuk School District has histories of each village on their web site, <https://www.yksd.com> "Our Schools."

<sup>58</sup> See also Sidney Huntington book

their own. Huslia is also the home of many famous dog mushers from Huntington, in the 1940s, to the world famous George Attla in the 1970, both known as the Huslia Hustler in turn.<sup>59</sup>

### **Allakaket**

(From YKSD)

**Allakaket** is at the meeting place of two rivers and on an important trail from the Yukon to the upper Koyukuk. Its history is, again, typical. The village was established by people from three nations, who in the 1890s had settled at a former mining camp called Arctic City at the tail end of the Koyukuk gold rush. Allakaket became the home of people from three different nations: 1) those from the Kateel and Dolbi, 2) those from South Fork, and 3) those from the lake at *Todaaltonh Denh* (called in English Lake Todatonten), southwest of Allakaket. Except for the South Fork people, they all spoke the Upper Koyukon dialect.<sup>60</sup> In 1906, Episcopal Archdeacon Hudson Stuck established a mission at **Allakaket** called St. John's-in-the-Wilderness. After the mission was established, people moved from Arctic City and the surrounding area to settle near it.

Allakaket used to host a great number of large and elaborate potlatches. People would come from all the villages down river to hear the speech makers and see the dancers. Potlatches are still an important part of Allakaket life, although most of the fine orators and composers are now gone. Allakaket hosts a big Fourth of July celebration each year which lasts for several days and includes dances and all kinds of games. Adjacent to Allakaket, on the north bank of the Koyukuk River, is the Inupiaq village of Alatna. This village is situated on a bank above the river and has a high bluff behind it. Alatna is considerably smaller than Allakaket and its

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<sup>59</sup> **K'oyitlots'ina** Huslia is part of the K'oyitlots'ina Corporation, which is a merging of Hughes, Huslia, Allakaket, and Alatna.

<sup>60</sup> YKSD, ANLC

residents cross the river to use the air strip, grammar school, and Native-owned and operated cooperative store in Allakaket.<sup>61</sup>

### **Hughes**

(From YKSD)

The *Denaakk'e* name for **Hughes** is '*Høt'odleekkaakk'et*', 'mouth of *Høt'odleetno*' a creek opposite the Koyukuk River from Hughes. Native people from the surrounding area made Hughes their home in the early 1900s. At that time, it was a port of supply for the Indian River gold miners. Alfred Isaac was one of the people who discovered gold at Indian Mountain; this is why it is called Indian Mountain. Hughes is a beautiful community situated on a hillside overlooking the Koyukuk River. In the fall people seine for sheefish and whitefish. Hughes is an excellent fishing area and is a particularly good spot for seining because the river there is shallow and gravel-bottomed with few stumps for nets to get caught on. The people of Hughes have a great respect for, and attachment to the traditional ways of doing things and so the women do their own moose skin tanning, babiche making, etc.<sup>62</sup>

### **Holikachuk and Deg Hit'an**

(Anvik Tribal Council)

The **Holikachuk**, transliterated from **Huligachagat**, and the **Deg Hit'an** are the smallest of the Athabascan speaking nations, occupying traditional estates along the lower Yukon, between the Koyukon on the east and the Yup'ik to the north. Both groups have adopted some features of Yup'ik culture, including in particular Both the qarghi, or men's house.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> YKSD, ANLC

<sup>62</sup> YKSD, ANLC

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.tananachiefs.org/about/communities/grayling/>

The *Deg Hit'an*, the furthest west Athabascan speaking nation (formerly called Ingalik) live today in **Anvik**, **Shageluk**, and at **Holy Cross**. Anvik sits at the foot of a hillside called *Deloy Ges* (or Hawk Bluff), which means "so-called mountain" in *Deg Xinag*, the *Deg Hit'an* language. According to local lore, "Raven, or *Yuxgitsiy*, whose name translates as "everyone's grandfather" created Deloy Ges"

*Raven was walking along. Soon he came across sand. He thought to himself, "I should make a mountain." He piled up the sand real high, then started to walk up it with his cane. The sand started to slide down, as it does when you pile it up. Raven, he got mad and whipped it up with his cane; that's what made all the gulches in the hillside. Then he walked away from it.*<sup>64</sup>

### **Holikachuk**

As late as 1830 there may have been as many as five Holikachuk villages on the Innoko River. However, a smallpox epidemic in 1838, brought by the Russians, hit the Yukon Delta particularly hard, and undoubtedly wiped out much of the population. The Holikachuk formerly lived in a village by that name on the Innoko River, a tributary of the Yukon. However, in 1966 25 families moved from Holikachuk to Grayling due to problems with spring flooding on the Innoko.

### **Upper Kuskokwim**

The Upper Kuskokwim people, *Dichinanek' Hwt'ana*, or Timber River People today live in **Nikolai**, **Telida**, and **McGrath**. They were sometimes referred to as the Kolchan in the anthropological literature and also call themselves *Dina'ena*, very close to Dena'ina their neighbors. Their traditional estates are at the headwaters of the Kuskokwim River north of the Alaska Range, and at the western end of what is now part of Denali Park and Preserve. McGrath,

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<sup>64</sup> <http://anviktribalcouncil.com/>



the largest village in the area today, is near the site of a seasonal village which was a popular meeting and trading place for Big River, Nikolai, Telida and Lake Minchumina residents.

Their occupation of the area goes back at least 5,000 years, according to Tanana Chiefs archeologist Bob Sattler.<sup>65</sup> Three skeletons discovered in McGrath in 2012 were determined to be 800-1,000 years old.<sup>66</sup> McGrath, the largest village in the area today, is near the site of a seasonal village which was a popular meeting and trading place for Big River, Nikolai, Telida and Lake Minchumina residents.

Raymond Collins, a linguist who moved to the area in 1963 completed a very thorough history with the assistance of a number of local people. This history is taken mostly from his work. Collins noted that despite being at the center of an area in which people migrated in and out, and occupied by bands that dispersed and consolidated over time, the people speak a distinct language. He says, “The presence of the Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan language is proof that a distinct group of Athabaskans has been living in the Upper Kuskokwim River basin for a long period of time. It takes time and social or geographical isolation for new languages to develop”<sup>67</sup>

Even people who migrated to the area and were raised speaking a different language adopted the local language. As Collins asserts, “all those who made this area their home adopted the Upper Kuskokwim language as their primary language.” However, some also were bi-lingual

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<sup>65</sup> Ben Anderson, “Skeletons recovered in Interior Alaska offer clues to life 1,000 years ago.” November 21, 2013, AND <https://www.adn.com/science/article/skeletons-recovered-interior-alaska-offer-clues-life-1000-years-ago/2013/11/21/>

<sup>66</sup> Emily Schwing, “Preliminary Analysis Offers More Details About 1000 Year Old Bones Discovered in McGrath,” Nov 22, 2013, <http://fm.kuac.org/post/preliminary-analysis-offers-more-details-about-1000-year-old-bones-discovered-mcgrath>

<sup>67</sup> Raymond L. Collins. *Dichinanek' Hwt'ana*: A history of the people of the Upper Kuskokwim who live in Nikolai and Telida, Alaska.” Edited by: Sally Jo Collins McGrath, Alaska September 2000, Revised January 2004. Pp 7-8 <https://www.nps.gov/dena/learn/historyculture/upload/Dichinanek%20Hwtana.pdf>

or even tri-lingual, speaking or understanding the language of their near neighbors: Koyukon, *Holikachuk*, *Denai 'ina*, or Tanana (all Athabaskan languages) and/or *Yup 'ik*.<sup>68</sup>

Traditionally the *Dichinane' Hwt'ana* hunted in the foothills of the mountains, and utilized the fish and small game in the area. While the area is one of the most remote, they were able to engage in trade as middlemen taking advantage of their position on trails and trader routes connecting to the Dena'ina around Iliamna Lake to the south, north to the Yukon River and west to Yup'ik territories further down the Kuskokwim River. Thus, they participated in the extensive indigenous trade network that joined Cook Inlet the Alaska Peninsula to the Interior and the north.

When the *Dichinane' Hwt'ana* first began to have access to international fur markets the people began to devote proportionally more time to trapping. Russian explorer Zagoskin in 1843 noted that beaver and fox were abundant and that the people of the area traded in multiple directions: out to the Yukon, down the Innoko River to trade with Holikachuk and Shageluk people, or south to the Kuskokwim where they were already obtaining Russian style clothing.<sup>69</sup> Zagoskin's party even met a group of 14 canoes with people returning from trading at Nuchalawaya. "Each of the boats was loaded with marten and wolverine and a large bundle of beaver" So the local bands were themselves acting as middle men, acquiring furs from tribes upriver. With multiple possible trading partners, they were able to leverage the best deals. According to Collins, they apparently were not happy about the prospects of the Russians interfering with this trade. But as Collins also notes, the white and black beads, shells, metal and tobacco, were luxury goods for the people. "They are trading mostly for luxury items: exotic

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<sup>68</sup> Collins, *Dichinane' Hwt'ana*.

<sup>69</sup> Collins

clothing, beads and tobacco. Only the flint for starting fires, and the thongs for snares would have assisted them in making a living.”<sup>70</sup>

As in many places, warfare and hostilities between nations and bands seem to have been a commonplace fact of life. The people in Telida and Nicholai had many stories about attacks, murders, raids, kidnappings, and escapes. They specifically told Ray Collins that the arrival of Russian orthodoxy suggested to them that murder was wrong. Andrew Gregory told Collins, “that the last battle fought in the Upper Kuskokwim area was between some men from Vinasale and the area upriver, who went over to Dishkakot and killed some people. After they returned, all died but one. Before this raid, they had all been told about God and that it was wrong to kill, but they hadn't listened.”<sup>71</sup> People believe this is why they died. And that violence subsided with the arrival of the Russians in the 1840s, as more emphasis was placed on trade.

### **Ahtna**

The Ahtna and Dena'ina are Athabascan speaking peoples, but their lands are not included in the larger realm of Doyon and the Tanana Chiefs Conference. Traditional **Ahtna** territory encompassed the entire upper Copper and also the upper Susitna river basins, the area south of the Alaska Range, all the way to Cantwell, now traversed by the Denali Highway. Their traditional territory encompassed 41,000 square miles. Their villages, each designated a tribe, include **Chitina, Chistochina, Copper Center, Gakona, Gulkana, Mentasta, Tazlina, and Cantwell**, near Denali National Park.<sup>72</sup> In addition, Ahtna people live in **Chickaloon**, on the Glen Highway near Palmer, which is now part of Cook Inlet Region Inc, (CIRI) and Cook Inlet Tribal Council. While the Ahtna people have their own Alaska Native Regional Corporation,

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<sup>70</sup> Collins, *Dichinanek' Hwt'ana*, 34-35

<sup>71</sup> Collins, *Dichinanek' Hwt'ana*, 39

<sup>72</sup> See map and further info. <http://ahtna-inc.com/about/region-map/>

historically and culturally they have had close interaction, intermarriages, and trade relationships with the Upper Tanana and Tanacross people, their neighbors to the North, and with the Dena'ina, their neighbors to the Southwest.

Like other Dené nations and tribes, the Ahtna were organized into regional bands, and these regional bands were further divided into local bands. The chief of each band held a specific inherited title as explained by anthropologist Bill Simeone: “Traditionally, authority over Ahtna lands and resources rested with chiefs who held inherited titles. Each title was attached to a particular winter village and based on the name of that village and the term Dené n, or ghaxen. For example, the chief of Tyone Lake was known as Saltigi Ghaxen, or “Person of Saltigi’.” As he further explains, “There were at least 17 inherited titles: eight in Lower Ahtna territory (Copper Center south to Chitina), six in Central Ahtna territory (Copper Center to Gakona-Chistochina), one in Western Ahtna territory (Tazlina Lake to Cantwell) and two in Upper Ahtna territory (Chistochina to Mentasta).” Each title was associated with specific resources controlled by the Nation or band. “The titles were associated with copper sources, salmon fishing sites, and major trails leading in and out of Ahtna territory.” Thus, they “controlled the allocation of important resources within their various territories.”<sup>73</sup>

Ahtna scholars have identified over 2,000 Ahtna place names, each expressing the historical cultural significance of the Ahtna traditional territories and the specific places within it. “ Important villages claim a prominent hill or riverbank that represents the people’s attachment to the land and the strength of their leaders. Certain men, referred to as nen’k’e hwdenae’ – or “on the land person” – embodied this connection to the land. Elder Annie Ewan described these men as “Big chief, like you call somebody live in a place for years. Like somebody born there

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<sup>73</sup> Simeone

and died in there in that place, is more important. A rich man.”<sup>74</sup> And each chief controlled a specific territory, which they defended against outsiders. As Wilson Justin explained, *Simply put, strangers were relegated to one side of the river, while the clans and families would be on the other (Justin 2005)*<sup>75</sup>

### **Control of Copper**

The Ahtna historically controlled one of the largest deposits of copper (developed as the Kennecott Copper mines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.) They collected pure copper nuggets in their rivers, which they traded not only as raw copper, but also as manufactured tools like spear points and knives which have been found in archeological sites, like that at Dixthada near modern Tanacross in Upper Tanana Territory. They also were able to trade this copper all the way to the Tlingit and other coastal peoples among whom it was highly prized: “Metal from the Nizina district passed along their network of trade routes extending down the Copper River to the coast, across the Chugach icefields to the Gulf of Alaska, over glaciers to Prince William Sound, across the Wrangell Mountains via Skolai Pass, and through the Copper Basin to the valleys near present-day Anchorage.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Encounters with outsiders**

The Ahtna were among the first Dené to have encounters with the Russians as the Russians endeavored to explore the Copper River. The Russians became aware of the Copper River and its vast delta in the early 1780s. The Ahtna have always had a history of welcoming visitors, so the first Russians to attempt the ascent of the Copper River, under the leadership of

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<sup>74</sup> Bill Simeone, “Traditional Ahtna titles associated with placenames,” <http://ahtna-inc.com/traditional-ahtna-titles-associated-with-placenames/>

<sup>75</sup> Wilson Justin, 2005, quoted in Haynes and Simeone

<sup>76</sup> Shawn Olson, Ben Shaine, “Community and Copper In a Wild Land.” McCarthy, Alaska, Wrangell Mountains Center, 2005. <https://www.nps.gov/wrst/learn/nature/upload/Community-Copper-In-A-Wild-Land-book.pdf>

Serebrennikov in 1848 must have transgressed Ahtna law, because the Ahtna apparently killed all of them near the village of Batzulnetas. The Ahtna people rescued members of Lt. Henry T. Allen's exploration party in 1885. They had seriously underestimated the difficulty of negotiating the Copper River Canyon, and were near starvation when found by the Ahtna. Ahtna today still tell stories of Lt. Allen and his party who continued on over the border into Upper Tanana country.<sup>77</sup>

Later, they had to deal with those who wanted their copper, and eventually appropriated it, along with much of their territory. It was perhaps inevitable, but once Americans moved into Valdez and Cordova in the late 1890s, they began exploring the area and soon discovered the source of Ahtna Copper. When they staked the valuable claims that became the Kennecott mine complex, the Ahtna were left out of the negotiations. The mine went into production after the completion of the Copper River and Northwest Railroad from Cordova through the village of Chitna and on to the mines, directly through Ahtna territory.<sup>78</sup> "In 27 years of operation, over a billion pounds of ore valued at \$100 to 300 million was hauled on the railroad,"<sup>79</sup> but the Ahtna never saw any of that profit. The influx of miners also led to the discoveries of gold and a rush to the Chisana district, north of Kennecott, a very remote area on the border of Ahtna and Upper Tanana territories.

### **Dena'ina**

The **Dena'ina** people now occupy the shores of Cook Inlet, as well as areas on the Alaska Peninsula, and on the other side of the Alaska Range at the headwaters of the Kuskokwim River. Dena'ina means, again, "the people" and is derived from the generic

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<sup>77</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/wrst/learn/historyculture/human-history.htm>

<sup>78</sup> Simpson, Ronald, *Legacy of the Chief*, Anchorage, Publication Consultants, 2002

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/wrst/learn/historyculture/human-history.htm>

Athabascan word *Dené*. **Eklutna, Knik, Tyonek, and Salmatof** are on the shores of Cook Inlet, and they are included in Cook Inlet Region Inc.(CIRI) and Cook Inlet Tribal Council. Also in the CIRI region, the people of **Chickaloon** are a mixture of Ahtna and Athabascan.

**Lime Village** and Stoney Creek are at the headwaters of the Upper Kuskokwim where their lands are a part of Calista, the mostly Yupik corporation for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. This is thought to be the homeland of the ancestral Dena'ina population. According to Alan Boraas, anthropologist and specialist on the Dena'ina, between 8,000 and 4,000 B.C., “ancestral Dena'ina then expanded south to the Mulchatna River and into the Lake Clark and Iliamna areas eventually occupying Cook Inlet. At the same time ancestral Dené moved from the Copper River to the Upper Cook Inlet area. Dena'ina began to differentiate as a separate language distinguishable from other Athabascan languages.”<sup>80</sup>

Dena'ina now live in the village of **Nondalton**, near Lake Clark, and fifteen miles from the village of **Iliamna**, a part of the Bristol Bay region. According to Calista, “The Lime Village people are related to other bands who settled the Lake Clark area at **Nondalton** and the *Dena'ina* language with an inland dialect is spoken by Elders in both places.”<sup>81</sup>

Boraas asserts that the advent of the generalized climactic global warming called the Medieval Warm Period (1000 AD) led to profound changes in Dena'ina lifeways and settlement patterns. “With a world-wide climatic event called the Medieval Warm Period (A.D. 1000), salmon runs increased in the North Pacific and Inland *Dena'ina* in the Lake Clark and Mulchatna areas shifted from nomadic hunting relying primarily on caribou and whitefish, to intensive salmon fishing utilizing weirs (wicker dams) in narrow tributary creeks or side

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<sup>80</sup> Alan Boraas, “Overview of Dena'ina Pre-History,”

<http://sites.kpc.alaska.edu/anthropology/files/2014/08/Overview-of-Denaina-Prehistory-2.pdf>

<sup>81</sup> [http://www.calistacorp.com/shareholders/village/lime-village#.WQeJqcZi\\_iW](http://www.calistacorp.com/shareholders/village/lime-village#.WQeJqcZi_iW)

channels. At the same time they developed underground cold storage pit storage technology for salmon creating a food surplus.”<sup>82</sup> With a steady source of salmon, the Dena’ina and their sophisticated system of storage pits the Dena’ina were able to settle in permanent year round villages. It was at this time that *Dena’ina* people moved into the Kenai Peninsula area and largely displaced former occupants including *Yup’ik* and some *Alutiiq*. Today the people of **Ninilchik**, and **Seldovia**, on the Kenia Peninsula, have ancestors of Aleut and Alutiiq heritage as well as some *Dena’ina*.<sup>83</sup>

The Dena’ina on the Kenai Peninsula were among the first Dené whose territory was invaded by Russian fur hunters. In 1787, in the period before the Shelikov’s Russian America Company established a monopoly of the fur trade, a rival, the Lebedev-Lastochkin company, established two forts on the Kenai Peninsula shores of Cook Inlet. The first was at the mouth of the Kasilof River, a site they called St. George, and the second, St. Nicholas Redoubt, on a high bluff overlooking the mouth of the Kenai River.<sup>84</sup> The Kenai bands resisted the Russian efforts to dominate their trade, drove off the traders and burned their forts in a series of skirmishes between 1786 and 1797. But the Russians returned, and the Kenai Peninsula today shows the evidence of the Russian occupation with Russian Orthodox churches in Kenai, and Ninilchik. The Lebedev-Lastochkin Company was driven out, however, in 1798 the Shelikov Company re-established the post, which then continued operations as the Russian American Company until 1867. The company was joined by Orthodox clergy after 1841, and many of the surviving Dena’ina converted to orthodoxy.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Boraas, *ibid*.

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.ciri.com/our-lands/cook-inlet-areas-and-lands/>

<sup>84</sup> Boraas, “The 1797 Siege of Kenai: Human Agency in Colonial Conflict,” citing Black 2004:113-4 <http://sites.kpc.alaska.edu/anthropology/files/2014/08/Boraas-2007.pdf> .

<sup>85</sup> Boraas, “The 1797 Siege,” <http://sites.kpc.alaska.edu/anthropology/files/2014/08/Boraas-2007.pdf>



Boraas, an exceptional scholar who has devoted many years to Dena'ina history and anthropology, fleshes out for us a very specific story of resistance.

*“Initially the Dena'ina forcibly resisted Russian incursions into their territory but eventually many villages entered into trade alliances with one or the other of the two redoubts to obtain items made of European manufacture in exchange for sea otter and other furs. Reciprocal trade was undermined, however, by two acts perpetrated by the Russian merchant militia of the Lebedev and Shelikhov companies. First, because of their economic structure the Russian traders of the Cook Inlet redoubts were, in effect, competitors and undermined one another's trade alliances through sabotage directed at villages allied with an opposing fort. Second, subjugation of Dena'ina women as concubines and prostitutes and child abuse by Russian men was intolerable. To rid themselves of oppression, the Dena'ina chose to wage war and because of their success were able to exert a measure of control of their destiny by driving a corrupt mercantile company away from their homeland and divert Russian expansion from Cook Inlet.”<sup>86</sup>*

Boraas characterizes the ongoing violence perpetrated by the Dena'ina as a prolonged siege which ultimately drove the Lebedev out of the area, and as the violence continued, discouraged Shelikov and Baranov from further colonization of the area. Through their resistance, the Dena'ina forced the Russians to construct defensible forts, and continue to operate with more men. Following their defeat of the Russian traders, the Dena'ina were able to maintain their sovereignty over their territory for almost another hundred years. They were able to maintain their language and culture, and their economic system, giving them a longer breathing space before they experienced the dramatic cultural changes.

*“This and other divisions that resulted from later Euro-American colonial expansion into Dena'ina territory generated a cultural crisis that split villages, families, and sometimes individual psyches into a choice between fighting to maintain the "old ways," indigenizing new cultural elements, or adopting a new culture and rejecting the old ways altogether.”<sup>87</sup>*

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<sup>86</sup> [Boraas, “the 1797 siege,” <http://sites.kpc.alaska.edu/anthropology/files/2014/08/Boraas-2007.pdf> ]

<sup>87</sup> [Boraas, *ibid.*]

The traditional Dena'ina lands include the area that is now Anchorage, as well as Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. Point Woronzof, directly below the Anchorage International Airport runway was one of their most important fish sites.<sup>88</sup> The growth of Anchorage and communities in the Matanuska Susitna Valley since the early twentieth century has overrun the Dena'ina lands, and nearly disappeared their culture.

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<sup>88</sup> Jones, Suzi, James A. Fall, Aaron Leggett, *Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi: The Dena'ina Way of Living*. Fairbanks, UA Press, 2013.