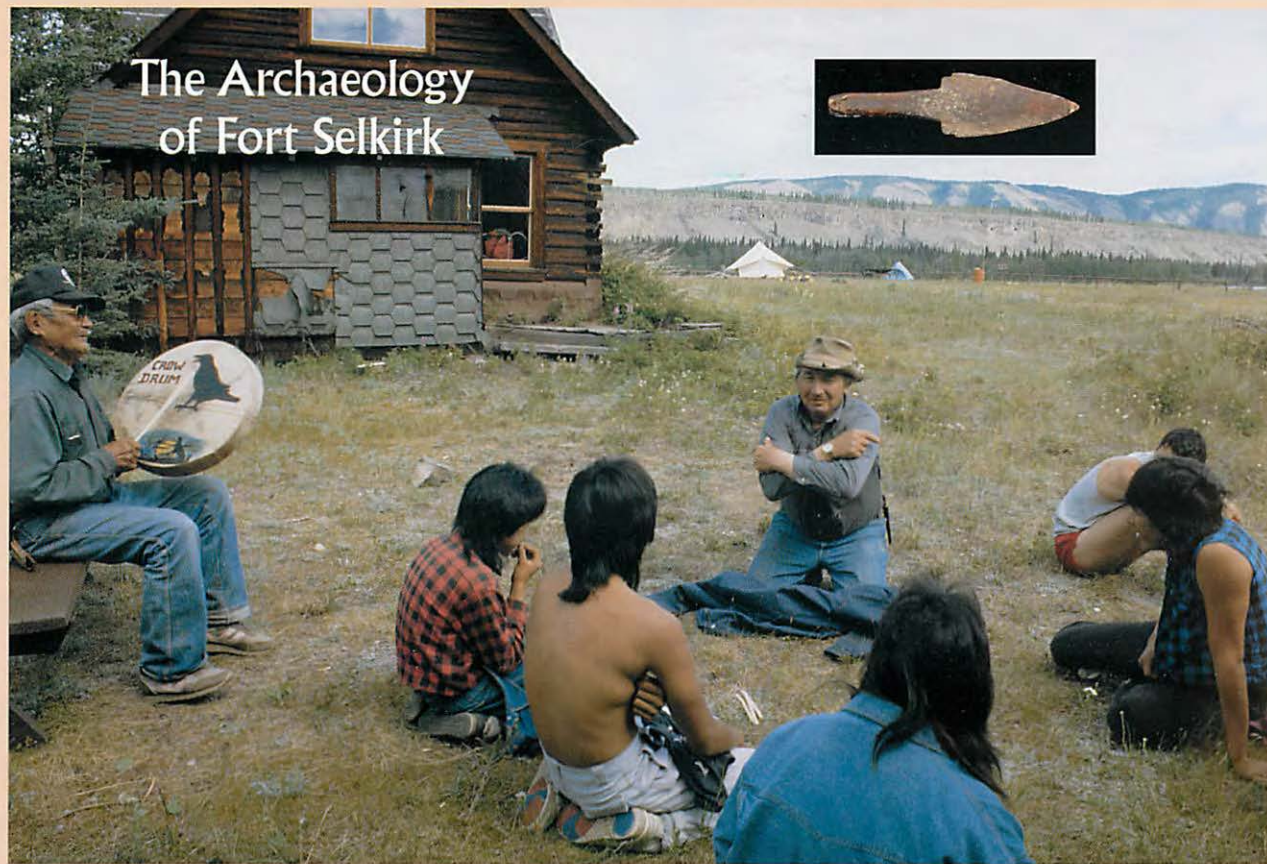


A Look Back in Time





*Cover photo: Harry Baum and Tommy McGinty
instructing students in stick gambling.*

*Inset photo: This copper arrow point was excavated
from Fort Selkirk.*

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Written by: Greg Hare &
Ruth Gotthardt,
Heritage Branch,
Department of Tourism,
Government of the Yukon

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*Fort Selkirk with Thi Ts'üchän in background.
Photo by Doug Olynyk*

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Elders Harry Baum and Tommy McGinty telling stories at Fort Selkirk. Students (l-r): Darren Johnny, Bernice Johnny, Eugene Alfred and David Grennan.



Introduction

The Fort Selkirk area of central Yukon embodies one of the most colourful chapters in the short written history of the Yukon. It was here that Hudson's Bay Company factor Robert Campbell established his ill-fated trading post in 1848. Later, it was the location of one of the largest towns in the Yukon and was even proposed as the capital of the territory. Today, it is one of the Yukon's most important historic sites.

But the history of the Fort Selkirk area did not begin with the arrival of Robert Campbell. Since before the end of the last Ice Age, people have lived in this part of Yukon. For more than 10,000 years, people have hunted, camped and travelled throughout the central Yukon landscape.

The history of these first people is the focus of this booklet. With the help of Elders, archaeologists have begun to write the ancient and traditional history of the Fort Selkirk area. This booklet is an introduction to that history. In the following pages, we will discuss some of the results of archaeological investigations at Fort Selkirk, and see how students and Elders from the Selkirk First Nation worked with archaeologists to rediscover the past.

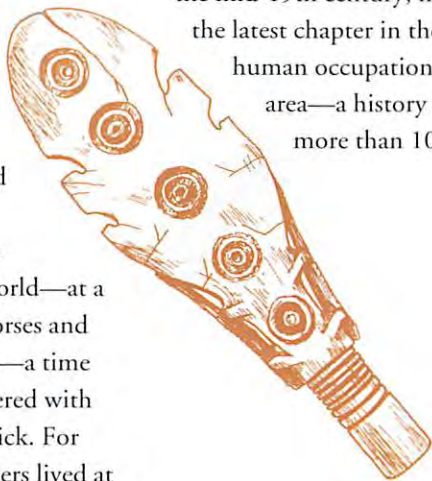


At the Edge of the Ice

When the explorer and trader Robert Campbell first descended the Pelly River in 1843, he entered one of the oldest inhabited regions in the New World. The junction of the Pelly and the Yukon rivers was once the extreme eastern edge of Beringia, the fabled Ice Age land of woolly mammoths, lions, giant bears and giant beavers.

Beringia was the place where humans first entered the New World—at a time when vast herds of bison, horses and caribou grazed the tundra grasses—a time when the rest of Canada was covered with glaciers more than a kilometre thick. For thousands of years these first settlers lived at

the edge of the ice. As the glaciers melted, they expanded their range south into the continent. When Robert Campbell established a trading post at Fort Selkirk in the mid-19th century, he merely introduced the latest chapter in the long history of human occupation in the Fort Selkirk area—a history which extends back more than 10,000 years.



Generations of Knowledge

The first Selkirk people left no written records, no stone monuments, but aspects of their history may still be found in remains of their ancient camps preserved in the ground, and in the oral traditions of today. A small part of that history is told here, drawn from several generations of archaeologists and the many generations of Elders who have passed down to us their knowledge of the past.

Very little is known about the first inhabitants of central Yukon. Traces of ancient living sites and fragments of stone tools dating back to the earliest days are rare. At present, the oldest, nearby evidence comes from 60 miles to the northeast, where a tool made from caribou antler has been dated at 11,300 years old. This confirms that people were living and hunting in central Yukon alongside woolly mammoths, bison and horses.

Throughout most of central Yukon, the glacial ice had probably melted by 10,000 years ago. Over the next two thousand years, the massive glacial lakes drained and forests slowly became re-established.



People of the Long Spear

Archaeologists call the earliest recognized stone tool tradition in central Yukon the Northern Cordilleran, after the mountain ranges where they were first found. Little evidence of these first people remains except for their distinctive stone tools, such as large chipped stone spear points, tools made from large blades of stone and burins (probably used for shaving or whittling bone and antler). From the meagerness of their sites, it seems that Northern Cordilleran people travelled light, made only small camps and moved often.



Microblade People

At about 7,000 years ago in the Yukon, stone tools changed radically. The large spear points were replaced by composite tools made of bone or antler and with “microblade” insets. Microblades are very small stone blades, about 5 cm long and 1 cm wide, that were set into grooves in a piece of bone or antler to make a cutting or piercing edge. When the microblade insets became dulled, they were replaced with new microblades, very much on the principle of modern disposable razor blades. Some archaeologists believe the change in technology was brought on by the migration of a new group of people into the area, but others think that it was more likely the movement of new ideas about making tools rather than the movement of people. The tradition of making



microblade tools can be traced back to late Ice Age cultures in Northeast Asia.

Working with archaeologists, students from Selkirk First Nation excavated a small but important microblade site only two miles upstream from Fort Selkirk on the Yukon River. Here, we recovered a number of delicately flaked stone microblades, burins, graters and scrapers. The tools were generally very small (less than 2 cm), perhaps indicating that the makers did not have a lot of good stone for tools. But they were made from more than 10 kinds of exotic and very fine-grained cherts (a flint-like stone); this suggests that the microblade people selected their stone carefully from diverse bedrock sources. It is estimated that this site is between 5,000 and 7,000 years old.

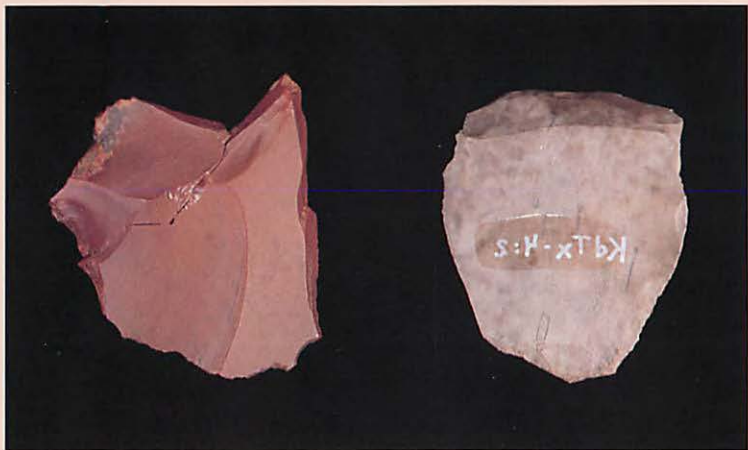


A sample of microblades from the microblade site near Fort Selkirk.



Students carrying out test excavations at the microblade site upriver of the Fort Selkirk townsite. Thi Ts' ach'an is in the background.

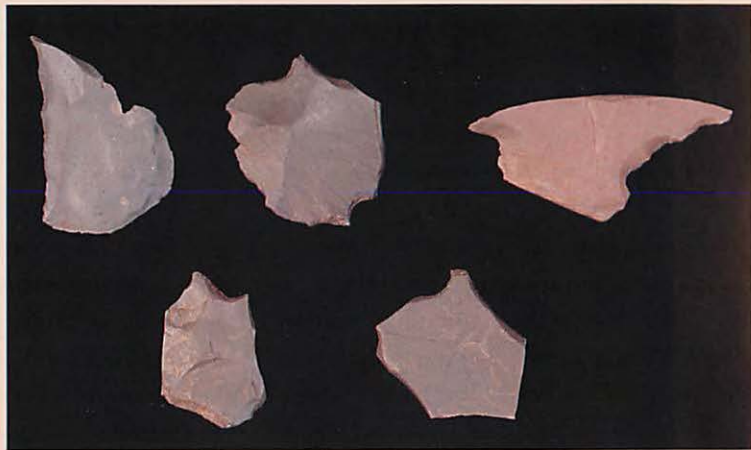




Above from left to right:

Gravers made on stone flakes from the microblade site near Fort Selkirk. The small spurs or projections on the stone flakes were used for incising and carving bone and antler.

Two burins from the microblade site near Fort Selkirk. Burins were used for shaving and whittling pieces of bone, antler and wood to make tools.



Notched Point People

Five thousand years ago, styles of making stone tools changed again. Microblades disappeared from the archaeological record and distinctive “side-notched” spear points, and an impressive variety of end scrapers, used for a working hides, antler and wood, became commonplace. For the first time, stone net sinkers appeared at ancient sites, indicating a seasonal round that now included fishing in the lakes and streams of the Yukon. It is likely at about this time that the annual salmon runs became established on the Yukon River and its tributaries. Archaeologists refer to this period as the Northern Archaic tradition, and it is very well represented in the Fort Selkirk area.

On a high hill overlooking the road to Swinehart Farm, west of the Fort Selkirk town site, we discovered a small camp site where 3,000 years ago a small family group

stopped to cook a meal or two, watch for game and make stone tools. Three millennia later, we were still able to identify remains of the ancient hearth, burned bone and stone chips from that event.

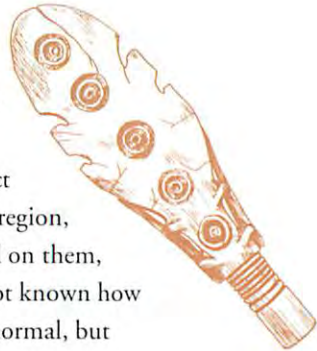
One of the most important sites in the Yukon from this period is located on a high terrace overlooking Pelly Farm, just up the Pelly River from Fort Selkirk. Archaeologists working at this site in the 1950s and '60s uncovered impressive collections of stone tools and animal bones which related to multiple occupations of the site throughout the Northern Archaic period. Numerous spear points, scrapers, choppers, graters and hammerstones were recovered alongside the bones of bison, caribou, elk, beaver and birds.



Test excavation at the Northern Archaic tradition site on the road to the Swinehart Farm. The traces of an old campfire with charcoal can be seen near the base of the pit. The charcoal dates the campfire to about 3,000 years ago.

White River Ashfall

The onset of the next stage in early history of southern Yukon and the Fort Selkirk area was marked by a massive volcanic eruption in the White River country to the west, near the Alaska/Yukon border. This eruption was one of the largest in the history of the modern world and for many days the air was filled with clouds of volcanic ash that would have scarred the lungs and blinded the eyes. When the clouds settled central Yukon was blanketed with a thick layer of white volcanic ash. This event occurred about 1150 years ago and it is suspected that the impact on the plants and animals of the region, and on the people who depended on them, may have been disastrous. It is not known how long it took for life to return to normal, but



the White River ash fall marked the beginning of a number of changes in the way people made their tools. This most recent period in the archaeological record is called the Late Prehistoric.



Volcano Mountain, called Nelrúna in the Northern Tutchone language. Nelrúna is an active volcano located a short distance north of Fort Selkirk. The last dated eruption of the volcano occurred between 4,200 to about 7,000 years ago. Stories about eruptions of Nelrúna persist in the Selkirk people's oral history. The last one occurred in the winter season and was witnessed by Selkirk people who were hunting on Prospector Mountain. According to geologists, future eruption of Volcano Mountain may occur at any time.

Late Prehistoric Period

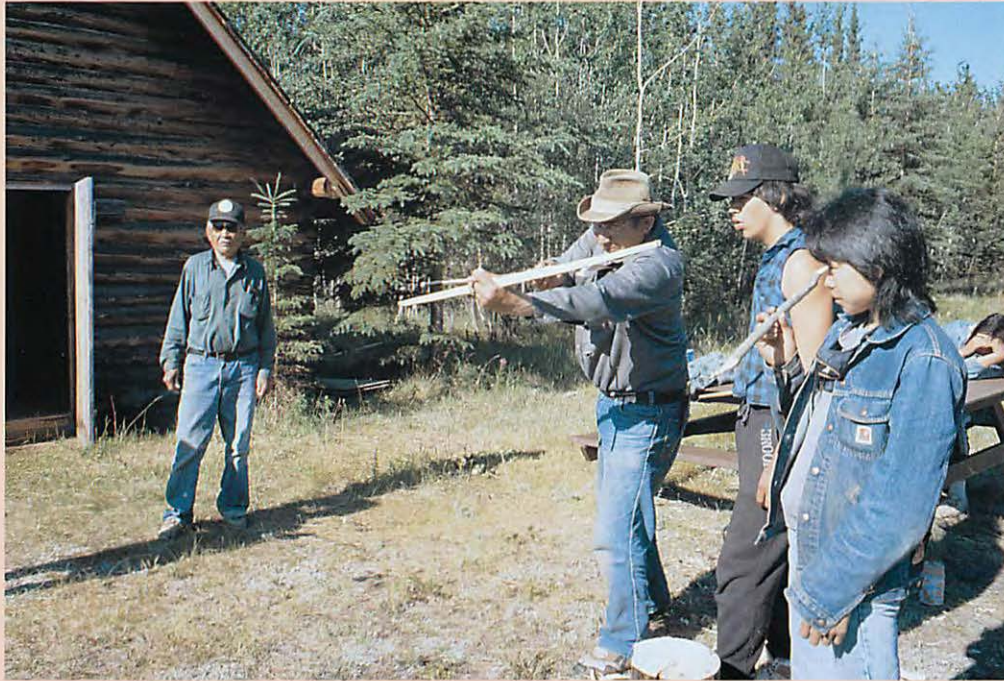
In the thousand years following the White River ash fall, significant new innovations in technology appeared in Yukon and Alaska. Within the Late Prehistoric period we see the first use of native copper for making tools. Copper from the White River region of the Yukon was traded extensively throughout the territory. It was carefully heated and hammered into various tools such as awls and arrow points, and into ornaments such as tinklers. Tools and implements made of bone and antler began to dominate the technology, often with the distinctive line and dot or circle and dot motif for decoration. And for the first time, small, stemmed and notched arrow points appeared in the tool kit (the stemmed points were sometimes made from copper) indicating for the first time the use of bow and arrow. The bow and arrow, often considered one of the

most traditional weapons in the Indian tool kit, can ultimately be traced to contact with Inuit populations.

The Late Prehistoric may be viewed as the archaeological tradition which links the ancient with the traditional. Many of the typical tools of this period continued to be made and used right up until this century. Favoured fishing and hunting camps used a thousand years ago were still being maintained when Robert Campbell arrived at the mouth of the Pelly in the middle of the last century. Oral traditions, passed on from generation to generation, extend back many centuries into the Late Prehistoric.



The link between the traditional knowledge and ancient practices is so strong that archaeologists often depend on Elders to identify the different activity areas. Areas that the Elders tell us were important as fishing, hunting and camping sites have likely been used in the same way for centuries if not millennia.



Opposite page: A collection of copper arrow points. The point on the far right is chipped stone. The point on the far left was excavated from Fort Selkirk. Left: Tommy McGinty demonstrating the proper use of the traditional bow and arrow, while Harry Baum, George Magrum and Darren Johnny look on.



Traditional History

Robert Campbell was the first European to encounter the Selkirk people when he journeyed down the Pelly River in 1843. At this late date, the Selkirk territory was one of the last places in North America to be visited by European explorers. Campbell's journals provide the earliest written account of the Selkirk people, who he called *Gens de Bois* (People of the Forest) or Lewes River Indians.

Elders tell us that the Selkirk people used to call themselves in the Northern Tutchone language *Thí Ts'ach'än Huch'än*, after the name of their former king salmon fish camp at Victoria Rock (*Thí Ts'ach'än*). The Selkirk people were one of the eleven Northern Tutchone bands or local groups, for which the headquarters were located at



Tatmain Lake, Stewart River, lower Macmillan River, Aishihik Lake, Hutshi Lake, White River, Braeburn Lake, Tatchun Lake, Little Salmon and Big Salmon Rivers.

Like other Yukon native groups, the Selkirk people followed a seasonal round of hunting, fishing and gathering activities.

Their traditional territories extended from the Yukon River west to the Dawson Range, and up the lower Pelly to the South Macmillan River. The main fish camps of the Selkirk people were located above and below Fort Selkirk and on the Pelly River. Through the years, as the channels of the rivers changed, however, the location of these camps has



shifted as well. Around the turn of the century, *Thí Ts'ach'än* (Victoria Rock), located about two kilometres below Fort Selkirk, was the main king (chinook) salmon fishing camp, where people would gaff fish from the rocks in the river. Fort Selkirk itself was once an important salmon camp for both king and dog (chum) salmon before the channel

changed, perhaps within the past 200 years. In more recent years people fished for dog salmon on the north side of the Yukon River across from Wolverine Creek and at Minto.

When Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka led an expeditionary force down the Yukon River in 1883, he described a large fishing village called *Kitl-ab-gon*, at the site of the traditional dog salmon fishing camp at Minto. He called the Selkirk Indians “*Ayan*,” the Southern Tutchone name for strangers. The main village of the *Ayan*, Schwatka said, was *Kab-tung*, located 12 miles downstream from Fort Selkirk. Here, Schwatka encountered a camp of 150-200 people and met the *Ayan* Chief, whom he called *Kon-itl*.

Opposite page: Eugene Alfred, Darren Johnny and David Grennan checking long-time Fort Selkirk resident Danny Roberts' fish net at Thi Ts'ach 'än.



Fish camp at Thi Ts'ach 'än in the early 20th century. (Yukon Archives H-116#181. Van Bibber Collection.)

Three Way Channel

Selkirk Elders identified the island on the north side of Three Way Channel as a traditional king salmon fishing camp and one of their most important fish trap locations. It was here that people built weirs across the shallow waters of the slough and set the basket traps in the stream just below the weir. Located 19 km below Fort Selkirk, the slough is now seasonally dry. The Northern Tutchone name for Three Way Channel is *Nju Yentlyak*. (Subject to further confirmation.) During the archaeological survey of the island, we discovered a wealth of artifacts at the eastern end of the island related to the old fishing camp. These included the remains of several conical fish baskets that had been cached in the willows, dozens of poles used to make the basket traps, a bow made from birch, and three large hammerstones used to drive in the weir posts. Imbedded in the





Opposite page: Three Way Channel. View north from the east end of the island, where the village site was located. Darren Johnny is pictured, looking for fish. Left: One of the fish baskets that was left at Three Way Channel. A yellow two-metre long ruler has been set alongside to provide scale.



muddy bank of the slough, we also found the well-preserved remains of another fish basket that was still bound together with its spruce root ties.

Based on the pieces of fish baskets that were recovered and the recollections of the Elders, we know that the baskets were conical in shape and about 9 feet (2.75 m) long. The ribs of the basket were usually made of straight spruce or willow saplings. These were tied to hoops made of birch or willow with split spruce root, with baskets having generally three to four hoops.

The fish baskets were anchored in shallow sloughs that had been blocked with a weir made of poles and woven saplings. At the mouth of each basket a ramp made of sharpened willow sticks was set. The ramp allowed fish to enter the basket but not get out again. The Elders say as many as three or four

baskets would be placed in a slough. All of the salmon trying to swim up through the slough would be funnelled into the trap.

The village site associated with the fish weir appears to have been located about 100 m to the east, at the extreme east end of the island. Selkirk Elders indicated that people had to camp some distance from the site of the fish traps to avoid bothering the fish. Archaeological testing at this location exposed traces of many layers of old fire hearths, showing that people returned to this campsite annually over hundreds of years.



Close-up of the end of a fish basket that was left in the channel. Note the spruce root ties where the hoops were fastened on the poles. One of the poles in the water shows the typical carved shape of the end of the poles.



Collection of poles under a tree, uncovered at the fish trap site at Three Way Channel.



One of the large hammerstones found at Three Way Channel. All of the hammerstones had this characteristic shape.

The village at Three Way Channel was abandoned almost a century ago, probably as a result of a sudden shift in the course of the Yukon River which left the slough too dry for fishing.

No evidence of brush camps or other structures was found, but according to Selkirk Elders the island floods frequently, and most of the island was logged earlier in the century to provide wood for the steamboats. Anything that had been standing would have been destroyed either by flooding or logging.

The recovered artifacts were found on a portion of the island that appears not to have been logged.



*Above: Stanley Johnathan making a replica of a fish basket.
L-R: David Grennan, Darren Johnny, Greg Hare and Eugene Alfred.*

Traditional Territories of the Selkirk Huch'än



Fort Selkirk

The townsite known today as Fort Selkirk was at one time an important fish camp and trade rendezvous for the Selkirk people. When Robert Campbell established the first Fort Selkirk post, he selected a location across the river on the lower Pelly, because so many people were living on the grassy meadow on the south side. It was only when he discovered that his first site was subject to flooding that he moved the post across the river near the Selkirk people's camp. The Northern Tutchone name for Fort Selkirk is now lost, but the importance of this site in the history of Selkirk people is clearly evident in the oral histories, the archaeological record, and from the mid-19th Century Fort Selkirk post journals written by the Hudson's Bay factor, Campbell, and his assistant, James Stewart.



Aerial view of Fort Selkirk.

The artifacts and traces of old camps preserved in the ground at Fort Selkirk provide a window into the long and eventful history of the site.

History From the Ground Up

From the style of artifacts found and their depth in the ground, two separate periods of occupation were identified at Fort Selkirk. The oldest occupation is represented by three notched spear point fragments and a small collection of flakes and chips that relate to stone tool reworking or sharpening. The presence of notched points indicates the occupation is related to the Northern Archaic tradition. The stratigraphic location and style of spear points tell us that this occupation is older than 1,150 years ago but younger than about 5,000 years. The small number of artifacts, all of the same type of stone, also suggest that that this was a single-use, short term campsite, probably used by hunters.



*The location of the traditional village at Fort Selkirk, at the east end of the townsite.
The photo shows the area of the 1988 excavations.*



David Grennan and Bernice Johnny excavating at Fort Selkirk.

Above the White River ash are the remains of a much larger camp, to which people returned seasonally over many generations. Hundreds of stone flakes and numerous tools were collected in the soils immediately above the ash, including spear and arrow points, knives, scrapers, hide scrapers, hammerstones and net sinkers, all fashioned from stone. A single stemmed arrow point made of native copper was recovered as well. What is not preserved in the archaeological record are all the objects made of bone, antler or wood that people might have used, as these decompose quickly in the acidic soils of the northern forest. The variety of tools found here also reflect the many routine tasks of a base camp: fishing, hunting, working hides, cutting meat, and making tools and utensils.



One of the most interesting features of the Fort Selkirk site collections is the presence of twenty-eight different kinds of stone that people were using for their tools and implements. Many of these, highly prized for their colour and quality, cannot be found

locally. These include obsidian (volcanic glass) and many exotic cherts, chalcedonies and agates. Several pieces of native copper were also found, including the stemmed copper point, and fragments of copper sheet left from the manufacture of copper tools.



*Left: A stone knife uncovered during the reconstruction of Big Johnathan's house at Fort Selkirk.
Above: A large stone chopper excavated from the Late Prehistoric levels at Fort Selkirk.*

The overwhelming variety of raw materials used for making tools at Fort Selkirk provides us with the evidence that the site has had a long history as an important trade rendezvous, even before the time that the Coastal Chilkat Indians began to trade into the interior, and long before the Hudson's Bay Company established their first post at this location. Obsidian found at the site likely was traded from or brought to the site by people living near the St. Elias Mountains; copper came from the headwaters of the White River; red and gold agates and white chalcedonies are found near Carmacks, at Miller's Ridge, and to the west, in the Mount Nansen area; and several varieties of chert may be ultimately traced to the south, to sources in the Coast Mountains, within the territories of



the Southern Tutchone and Tagish peoples.

With the expansion of the fur trade to the Yukon in the 18th and 19th centuries Coastal Chilkat began to make annual journeys to the interior to trade European goods for the highly valued Yukon furs. Near the ground surface, intermingled with the stone tool fragments, we

discovered traces of this trade, including items such as mother of pearl buttons, coloured glass beads and a single musket ball. These artifacts take us into the final chapter in the early history at Fort Selkirk.



One of the excavation pits at Fort Selkirk. The thin lens of grey in the wall of the pit is the White River ash.

Campbell at Fort Selkirk

The written history of Fort Selkirk begins with arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company at the confluence of the Yukon and Pelly Rivers in 1848. Remote from supply centres on the Mackenzie River and, as a consequence, always short of items for trade, the Fort Selkirk post made very little impact on the material culture of the Selkirk people. The appearance of a new trading interest in the region, however, was of serious concern to the Coast Chilkat, who had a long established trade with the Selkirk people.

When Robert Campbell moved his post to the present location of Fort Selkirk in 1851, the Chilkat traders' tolerance of his competition in the trade with Selkirk people came to an end. In 1852, a group of Chilkat Indians, led by chief *Kobklux*, raided and pillaged the post at Fort Selkirk, forcing Campbell and his men to flee. When he



Summer residents watching boats arriving at Fort Selkirk.



returned several days later, everything of any value had either been removed or destroyed.

Following the Chilkat raid, the Hudson Bay Company decided to abandon Fort Selkirk and the Yukon. For most of the next 40 years, Fort Selkirk returned to being a trade rendezvous for the Chilkat and Selkirk people. In 1883, when Frederick Schwatka led a reconnaissance mission down the Yukon River all that remained at Fort Selkirk were the burned and crumbling basalt chimneys that marked the location of Campbell's Post.

The excavation at Fort Selkirk provided information about both the ancient and early historic occupations at the site. Through extensive shovel testing, we were able to locate and map many of the original buildings from Campbell's Hudson's Bay post. At various locations in the townsite, the archaeological record uncovered traces of the more recent,



and well documented history of Fort Selkirk—a history which saw the establishment of Harper’s trading post, the Anglican mission, the arrival of the Yukon Field Force, and the human stampede of the Klondike Gold Rush.

For almost a decade, Fort Selkirk was one of the largest and most important settlements in the territory. But with the Gold Rush, Dawson City rose to prominence. In 1902, the winter trail from Whitehorse to Dawson was constructed which bypassed Fort Selkirk.

And although the Coastal Chilkat ceased to come to Fort Selkirk with the onset of the Gold Rush, the tradition of Fort Selkirk as an important centre for trade and meetings continued, with Selkirk people hosting visitors from as far away as the Mackenzie River in the early decades of this century. Stick gambling competitions with Fort Norman people often lasted many days. These events are still fondly remembered, and the sound of the drums recalled, echoing off the basalt walls on the opposite shore.



Opposite page: Ayans at Fort Selkirk 1883 (Yukon Archives, Schwatka Collection 94/102-119). Inset photo: Carved paddle from Fort Selkirk. Above left: A gambling stick found at Fort Selkirk. Above: Excavation of the base of a chimney from Campbell’s second Hudson’s Bay post at the present townsite of Fort Selkirk. This was the post that was pillaged by the Chilkats.





Opposite page: Five men dancing in ceremonial costume at Fort Selkirk in the early part of the century. (Yukon Archives, Anglican Church Collection 89/41-1020.)

Left: The basalt palisade opposite Fort Selkirk, called Meghliú in the Northern Tutchone language. The basalt originates from lava flows which are estimated to be about one million years old. The silt that underlie the basalt wall were laid down over a million years ago. A caribou bone was found here that was dated to 1.3 million years.



Fort Selkirk in the Recent Past

Selkirk people continued to use Fort Selkirk as their home base up until about 1950. During this period, Selkirk people were employed on the sternwheelers and at the woodcamps, but also continued to make their living in the traditional way, trapping, hunting and fishing. The town of Fort Selkirk was where they had their homes, where they got their supplies, where some went to school, and every year, where families returned for Christmas.

After 1950, the sternwheelers ceased to run on the Yukon River and the store closed at Fort Selkirk. One by one, Selkirk people moved their families to their old village at Minto, which was located on the new all weather road between Whitehorse and Mayo. In the 1960s, when the store and school were



Tommy McGinty and Harry Baum telling stories about the old days at Fort Selkirk.

built at Pelly Crossing, Selkirk people again shifted their home base. As Mrs. Rachel Tom Tom observed, “People just ended up following the store around!”.

Pelly Crossing is today the principal community of the Selkirk First Nation. The memory of Fort Selkirk remains in people’s minds, however, and within the past decade, through restoration projects and through researching their past, the Selkirk First Nation has worked hard to preserve and commemorate Fort Selkirk and its place in their history. For Selkirk people, Fort Selkirk remains the heart of their traditional territories.



Mrs. Kitty Jobnathan instructing Eugene Alfred and Bernice Johnny in how to make sinew.



Danny Roberts, one of the last residents of Fort Selkirk and now caretaker of the town site greets a young visitor to the site.



