Tatl'á Män

By Ruth Gotthardt

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the Elders of the Selkirk First Nation who have shared with us their knowledge and their stories to bring the past alive.

Maasi Cho

Sketch 1—"Drag Net Fishing" by Eugene Alfred

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Archaeological research on Tatl'á Mān was carried out in 1990 and 1991 as a joint project of the Selkirk First Nation and the Government of Yukon Heritage Branch. Major funding for research and publication in 1991 was provided by Communications Canada—Access to Archaeology Programme. Additional funding for this publication was provided by Government of Yukon, Dept. of Renewable Resources, Fisheries.

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Special thanks are due the Selkirk First Nation Elders who shared their knowledge of the history of Tatl'á Mān with us over the years: Mrs. Jessie Alfred, Mr. Stanley Jonathan, Mr. Tommy McGinty, Mrs. Kitty Jonathan, Mr. Danny Joe, Mr. Johnny Alfred, Mrs. Margaret Simon, Mrs. Rachel Tom Tom, and Mrs. Jessie Suzé. Mrs. Lizzie Hall deserves special credit for undertaking the interviews for this project and for providing excellent transcriptions.

Tatl'á Mān has been an important place within the territories of Selkirk people for a very long time. The end of the lake, at the head of Mica Creek (Taghwát Tagé), is the site where spawning whitefish (ta'rá) were taken late in the fall. In winter, people gathered to here to net whitefish through the ice. Spring was the time of muskrat and beaver hunting.

The name of the lake,'Tatl'á' describes the bay at the end of the lake, where people fished. It is here that one of the largest traditional villages of the Northern Tutchone was located in the time before the white man. For about 100 years before the arrival of the white man, Coast Indians came here to trade with Selkirk people. It was at the village that one of the battles between Selkirk people and Coast Indians occurred and is remembered in the oral traditions of the Selkirk Elders.

With its wealth of whitefish, trout, and jackfish, Tatl'á Mān has helped many generations of Selkirk people through the long winters of the North. In the past and today, Tatl'á Mān is the heart of Selkirk people's territories.

The history of Tatl'á Män begins a very long time ago, soon after the massive ice sheets had melted from the land and the last of the Ice Age animals—the mammoth, horse, and bison—had become extinct. In this remote time, there is no written record to tell us of the lives of the people, there are only the traces of their former camps and their discarded tools to give us a glimpse into the distant past.

Bringing light to the very early, unwritten history of people is the task of archaeologists. The time before written history is called prehistory. The histories that are written by archaeologists, however, are only fragments that may tell of how people made a living, the kinds of tools that they made, and sometimes of old routes of travel and trade. Our knowledge of the people themselves can only be imagined through the stories that have come down from the past.

The following is a history of Tatl'á Män that has been built both upon the results of archaeological research and upon the stories and memories of the Selkirk people.

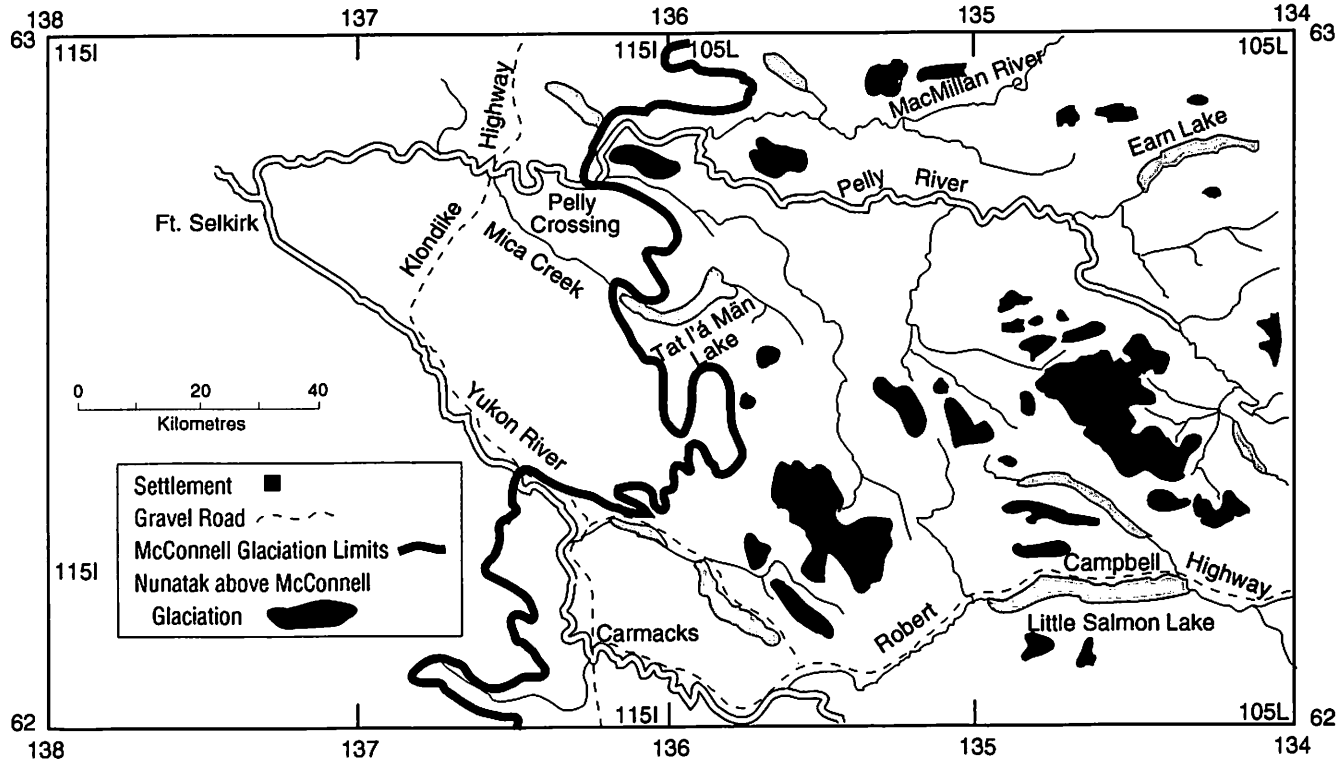
The First People at Tatl'á Män

At the time of the last ice age, Tatl'á Män lay beneath a massive ice sheet, which covered all of southern Yukon. The edge of the glacier lay exactly at the end of Tatl'á Män. To the north, the land was free of ice, but very cold and very dry. This country was a vast treeless tundra where mammoth, horse, bison and caribou roamed.

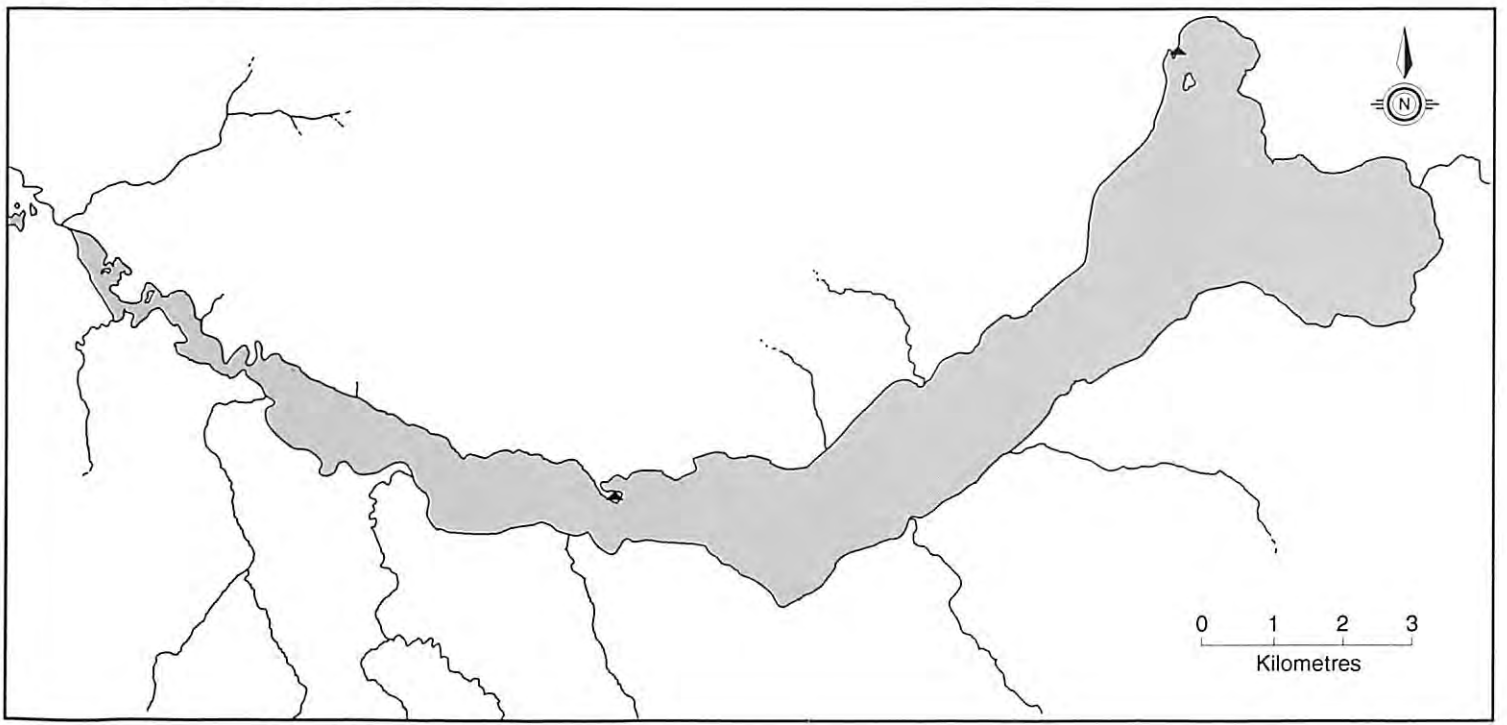
The first people came to Tatl'á Män soon after the ice sheets melted away, about 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. One of the last places that the ice melted was at the end of Tatl'á Män, in the low spot where the village was. When people first came to the lake, they found it different from

Sketch #2—"Making an Arrowhead" by Eugene Alfred

Map 1—Limits of Glacier Ice During the Last Ice Age (McConnell Glaciations)
(From B. Ward 1991—Reproduced with Permission)



Map 2—Camp Sites of the First People at Tatl'á Män



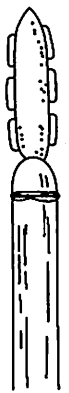


Figure 1.
Drawing of Antler Spear Point with Microblade Insets

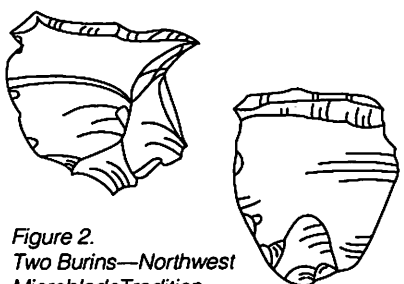


Figure 2.
Two Burins—Northwest MicrobladeTradition

what it is today: the lake waters were slightly higher and the forest had only just begun to spread into the region. At that time, caribou was probably the main game animal; perhaps a few bison could be found as well.

The remains of two small camp sites have been discovered on Tatl'á Män, on the north shore of the big lake, which are the camps of the first people. The sites were only briefly visited, so that not a great deal is known about them. The few stone tools that were found there, however, are of a style which was shared by many people in Alaska and Yukon between about 11,000 and 5,000 years ago. Archaeologists have given the name Northwest Microblade tradition to the particular stone tools that were made in this period. Ultimately, the roots of the Northwest Microblade tradition lie in the Ice Age cultures of North East Asia.

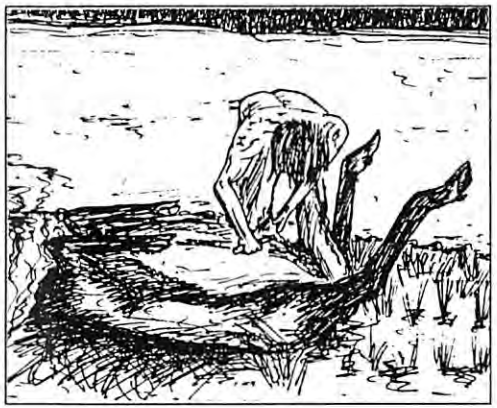
Stone Tools

Perhaps the most distinctive among the Northwest Microblade tradition tools was the microblade. These were small stone blades, like razor blades. The blades were set in a row along the edge of a knife or spear point to form the cutting edge of the tool. When the blades broke or became dull, they were removed and new blades were set in place.

Another stone tool of the Northwest Microblade tradition was the burin. This tool, which was probably set in a handle of wood or antler, was used along a sharp edge for scraping or whittling antler and bone. It is very rarely that bone and antler tools are found in archaeological sites, however, because these materials quickly rot away in the acidic soils of the northern forest.

The stone tools and chips recovered from the Northwest Microblade tradition sites at Tatl'á Mān can also tell us something of the people's routes of travel and trade. At one of the camp sites of this early period were found two exotic types of stone: obsidian and a red chert or flint. Obsidian is a natural volcanic glass that is usually black in colour, but can be found with red or green colours too. It was highly prized for making stone tools in the past because it is easy to work and very sharp. The closest source of obsidian to Tatl'á Mān is in St. Elias Mountains of southwest Yukon. The obsidian that we see at Tatl'á Mān likely came there through trade with people close to the sources. The source of the red chert is not known as yet.

Plate 2—Two burins from the oldest camps on Tatl'á Mān; the tool on the far right has been used for scraping, much like a burin.



Sketch #3—"Skinning a Caribou"
by Eugene Alfred

How People Made a Living

Looking at where the two earliest sites on Tatl'á Mān are located, it appears as if the main activity of the first people may have been hunting rather than fishing on the lake. The traditional fishing localities at the end of Tatl'á Mān and at the narrows of the lake do not appear to have been used by the first people.

Both of the early sites were probably short-term camps made by hunters. They are located on slight rises along the lake shore. One site is located on a spit of land at about the centre of the lake, at the narrowest point of the big lake. This is also a very shallow section of the lake. Perhaps the site was a strategic location for intercepting caribou herds crossing the big lake.

The Middle Prehistoric Period: 5,000 to 1,250 Years Ago

By about 5,000 years ago, the land had recovered fully from the effect of the Ice Age and conditions were very much like the present: the forests were once again widespread; moose had come back to the country; and salmon returned to all the rivers and streams.

At Tatl'á Mān, sites of the Middle Prehistoric period are the most numerous of all the sites on the lake. Of the 29 sites that have been found on the lake so far, 20 were occupied by people in the period from 5,000 to 1,250 years ago. At a number of the sites, there is evidence to suggest that people returned to camp at these locations over many generations.

Map 3—Camp Sites of the Middle Prehistoric Period

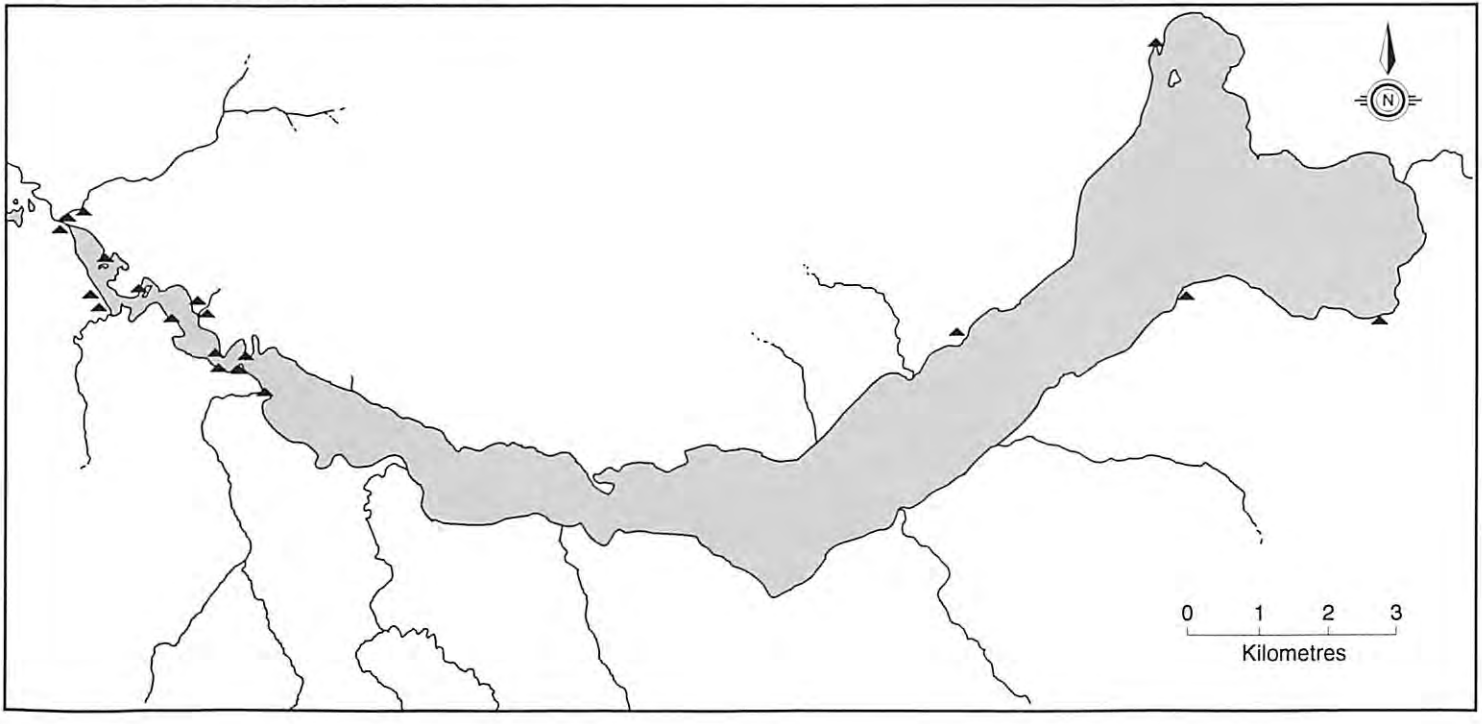


Figure 3.
Unfinished Stone Spear Point found at the Village Site, Below the White River Ash (Northern Archaic Tradition)

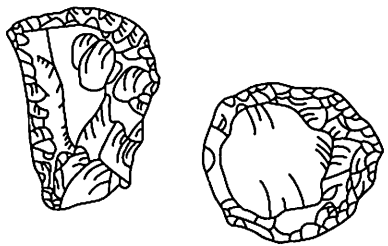


Figure 4.
Two end scrapers—Northern Archaic Tradition

Stone Tools

The Middle Prehistoric period saw major changes in the way in which people made their stone tools, not only at Tatl'á Mān but throughout Yukon. People stopped making microblade tools; in their place, spear and knife points appear made entirely of stone. Many of these had notches at one end so that they could be tied onto a spear shaft or handle; others had stems so that they could be set in socketed hafts; still others were thinned at one end and tied in place in split shafts or handles. Burins all but disappear after 5,000 years ago; in their place, people made use of different types of stone end scrapers. Archaeologists label the stone tool technology of this period of Yukon prehistory the Northern Archaic tradition.

Why people changed the style of their stone tools at this point in time is not well understood. Some archaeologists have suggested that new people were coming into Yukon and with them, new ideas about how to make stone tools. Other archaeologists propose that the disappearance of the large herds of barren ground caribou, as the forests spread over the country, may have affected how stone tool were made. Their suggestion is that caribou antler was the only material that was suitable for making tools with microblade insets. When large quantities of caribou antler were no longer readily available, the styles of tools changed to one in which tools were made entirely of stone.

Patterns of trade and travel during the Northern Archaic tradition time are reflected in the types of stone people were using for their tools. Obsidian is very common at Tatl'á Mān, which shows that the trade with people from southwest Yukon was continuing. A gold-coloured chert that is found around Carmacks shows up at Tatl'á Mān too, indicating trade with

Tatchun people. Other exotic and beautifully coloured stones suggest an active trade with many different groups. This is very much like the traditional trade that Selkirk people had with all their neighbours.

How People Made a Living

As the forests spread through Yukon, people had to make changes in their hunting strategies. With the disappearance of the large caribou herds, they learned to hunt the more scattered and solitary animals of the forest. Snares, dead-falls and other traps were probably perfected at

Plate 3—The two spear points on the left are from the Middle Prehistoric period (ca. 5,000 to 1,250 years ago) at the village site. The two points on the right were found above the White River ash and were made after 1,250 years ago. The point on the far right is an arrow point.

this time. And more and more, lake and river fishing became important in people's yearly round.

The way of life of the Northern Archaic tradition people has continued over 5,000 years down to historic times. We see this very clearly at Tatl'á Män. Almost all Northern Archaic tradition sites were found on the small end of the lake. It is this end of the lake which was traditionally the most important for winter fishing as well. And the largest camps of the Northern Archaic tradition time are exactly those places which were for Selkirk people the main camp sites: the village at the end of the lake, and the narrows of Tatl'á Män. The village site occupations have in fact been dated, using charcoal from

Plate 4—A sample of five end scrapers from sites at Tatl'á Man. All date to the Middle Prehistoric period (ca. 5,000 to 1,250 years ago).

an old camp fire. People have been coming to this site to camp for at least 3,630 years.

The Late Prehistoric Period: 1,250 to 150 Years Ago

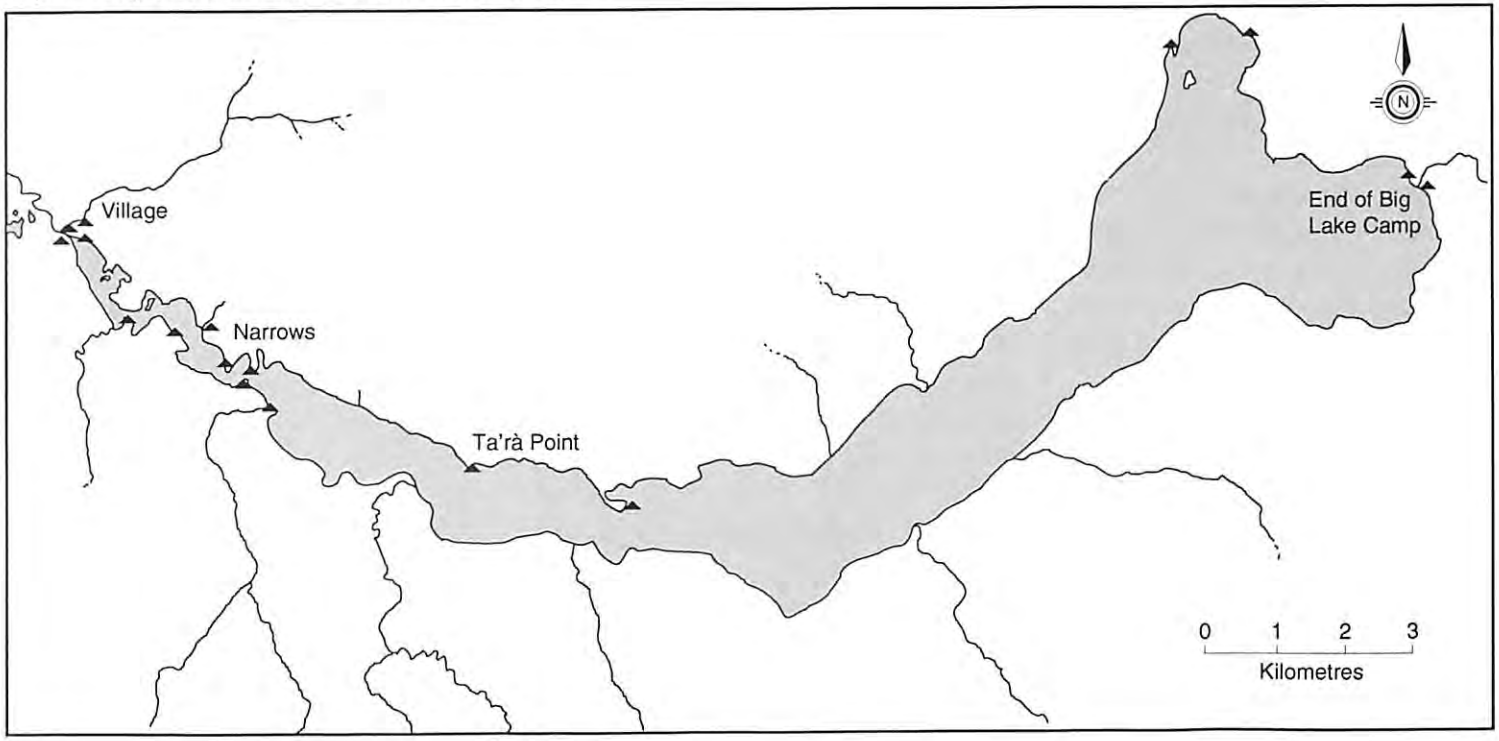
The date of 1,250 years ago (750 AD) is very important in the history of southern Yukon. It was at this time that a truly immense volcanic eruption occurred in the headwaters of the White River, which blanketed most of southern Yukon with volcanic ash.

The way in which the ash now lies on the ground suggests the eruption took place during the winter. As a result, the effect of the ash fall on the lives of people, and on plants and animals, was fortunately less than it might have been. Much of the ash was probably cleaned out of the lakes and rivers fairly quickly with spring run off, and removed from the slopes to lower lying areas as the snows melted. The Tatl'á Män valley appears to have been one such low spot: the ash here is very thick, on average 10 - 20 cm in most places.

It is difficult to imagine the effect of the White River eruption on the lives of the people, and on the plants and animals of southern Yukon. Very likely the people closest to the source of the eruption had to move out of their territories until the plants and animals recovered from the effects of the eruption. Perhaps some of these people moved into central and northern Yukon; others may have traveled further to the east or south. It has been suggested that it was the White River eruption which caused the Apache and Navaho to leave the Yukon, and eventually travel to their present homes in the southwest United States.

As people were forced to move and adjust their territories following the eruption, changes appear in their technology—how they made

Map 4—Camp Sites of the Late Prehistoric Period at Tatl'á Män.



their tools. These changes seem to reflect a rapid spread of new ideas and new ways of doing things, which may have come about when people who had been separated before now come into contact with each other.

Stone, Copper, and Bone/Antler Tools

It is in the Late Prehistoric period that people first began to make use of copper for their tools and weapons. For the people of Fort Selkirk and Tatl'á Mān, their source of native copper nuggets was the headwaters of the White River, on Kletsan Creek. Stories tell of Selkirk people traveling to this source themselves in the time before the white man, following the trail along Big Creek and across the Nisling River to the

Plate 5— This copper point was found at the village site. It probably dates between 1,000 and 150 years ago.

White River. Selkirk people also traded with the White River people for copper.

Certain styles of copper tools, particularly a small, rat-tailed copper arrow point, were widely used by the people of Yukon, the District of Mackenzie, and Alaska, even including Inuvialuit. One copper point was found at Tatl'á Mān village.

Equally widespread were small, rat-tailed points made of stone, rather than copper. Archaeologists call this the Klo-Kut point; among Inuvialuit cultures, this is the Kavik point.

Another major change in the Late Prehistoric period was the greater use of bone and antler for tools. Barbed spear and arrow points of

Plate 6—This bone point was found in the water in front of the village. This may be one of the prongs on a fish spear.

bone and antler were common, as were a variety of bone tools, such as fleshers and awls for working hides. Small stone wedges, which were used for splitting long bones, are also very common.

Trade with their neighbours continued to be an important activity for Tatl'á Mān people in the Late Prehistoric period. Obsidian and a number of other exotic types of stone that are found in Northern Archaic tradition sites are also found in the Late Prehistoric period site. This suggests that the trading patterns were much the same before and after the White River eruption.

How People Made a Living

Looking at where the sites of the Late Prehistoric period are located on Tatl'á Mān, it is clear that people made their living in much the same way as their descendants did traditionally. Fourteen camp sites have been discovered which date after the White River ash fall. The largest camps of this period are the village and on the narrows of Tatl'á Mān. Other sites are smaller camps probably used for fishing, and beaver and muskrat hunting, or were camps made while people were traveling along the trails.

Plate 7— A collection of stone moose skin scrapers (some are broken), which were found at the old village and at the camp at the end of the big lake. All were made between about 1,000 and 100 years ago.

Sketch #4—"Cutting Fish"
by Eugene Alfred

Despite the changes that came with the Gold Rush and the coming of the white man, Selkirk people continued to travel to Tatl'á Män in the winter to fish. Sometimes, they were joined there by white men, who had learned about the very good fishing on the lake. Robert Campbell, who was the first white man to come to the territories of the Selkirk people for the Hudson's Bay Company, sent his men to Tatl'á Män to net whitefish in the winters of 1848 and 1849. During the Gold Rush, commercial fishing on Tatl'á Män supplied white fish to the gold miners in Dawson. Billy Atkinson was probably one of the fishermen who came here at that time.

To learn the true history of Tatl'á Män, however, we must turn to the stories that are told by the elders, that have been passed down from generation to generation among Selkirk people.

Tatl'á Män People

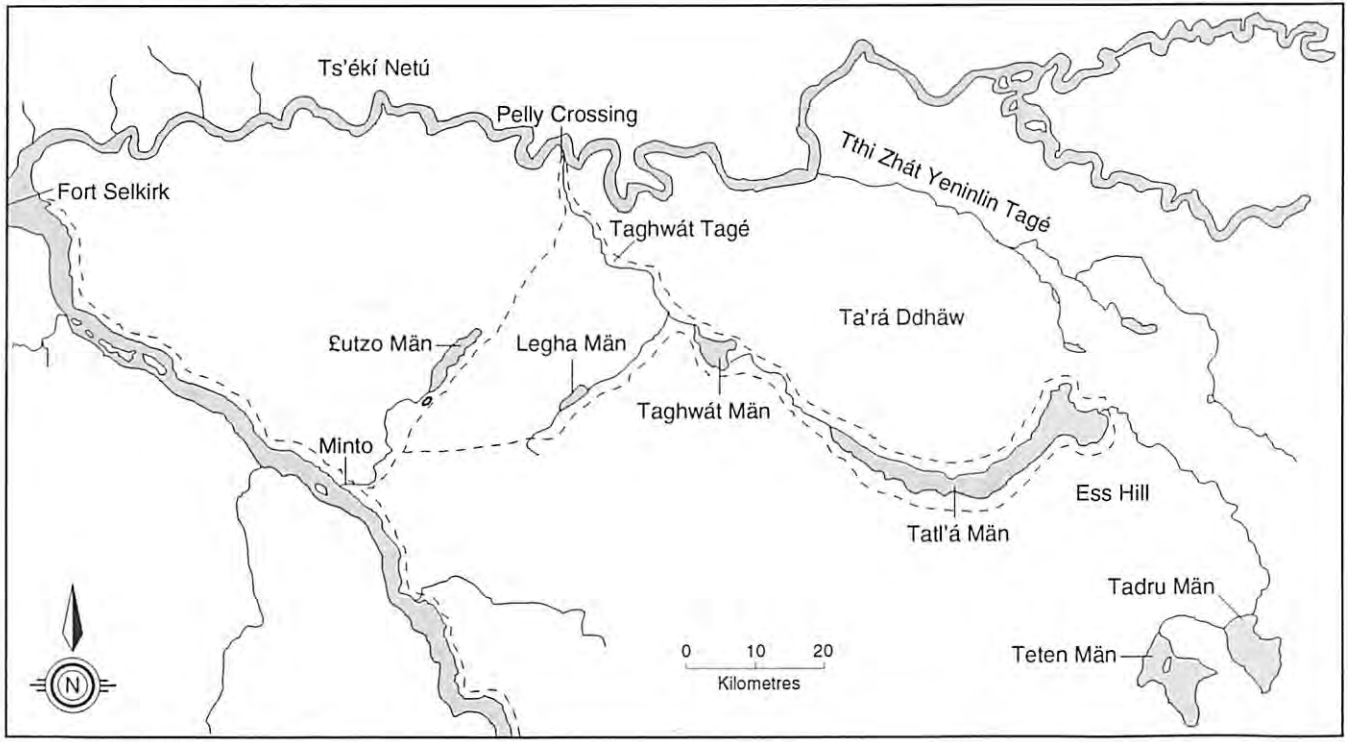
Tatl'á Män people now make up part of the Selkirk First Nation. Their traditional territories extended from the north end of Tadru Lake to Tatl'á Män, Ptarmigan Mountain (Ta'rá Ddhäw), Towhata Lake (Taghwát Män), the Pelly River (Ts'éki Netú), Legar Lake (Legha Män) and £utzo Män, down to Minto and upstream on Big Creek (Tu Nátsat Tagé). Minto was their main meeting place and where they traded with the Coast Indians. Other villages were at Tatl'á Män, the mouth of Mica Creek on the Pelly River, and at Taghwát Män. When Robert Campbell was at Fort Selkirk in 1848-1851, he reported that Tunaetah Hun Etha was the chief at Tatl'á Män.

In the early part of this century, there were about 50 people in the Tatl'á Män group. Selkirk elders recall the people living there with their families included: Leda and Peter Johnson, Anna Johnson's mother, David Silas, Old Suzé, Billy

and Jessie Isaac, Annie and Jimmy Silverfox, Jessie and John Alfred, Old Isaac and his wife Eliza, Old Simon and Julia Simon, John Ellis, Rachel Dawson, Charlie and Peter Johnson, Peter Joe and Ben Joe, Edward and Margaret Simon, Anna and Dick Johnson, and Little Sam and Annie Jack. The elders tell of many families coming to fish at the lake, however, especially people from Fort Selkirk, Carmacks people and even people from Champagne. People from Tatchun used to come through Tatl'ä Män every year in the springtime hunting rats and fishing.

Plate 8—The end of Tatl'ä män and the head of Taghwät Tagé. Location of the old village.

Map 5—General Area



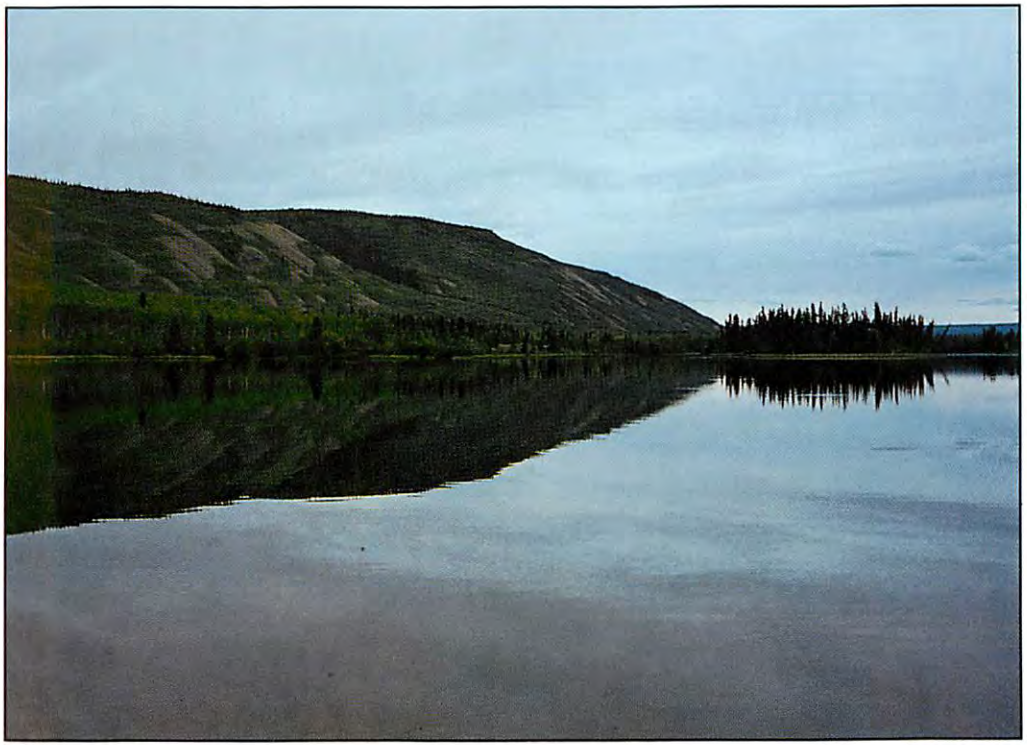
Traditional Camps

The main camps for Selkirk people on Tatl'á Mān were the end of the lake, the narrows, Ta'rá (or Tezra) Point, and the end of the big lake, where the creek flows in from Tadru Lake.

The End of Big Lake Camp

This was a winter fishing site, where people would fish for trout with hooks through the ice. Jessie Alfred tells of how her grandfather, Old Isaac, made their hooks for them out of willow. The hooks were strong and they would put four together to fish for trout. This was also a hunting camp and where people cached their meat. Billy Isaac built a cabin here in the 1930s but it's gone now. The trail to Ess Hill and Tadru Lake goes from here. People would go out to hunt on

Plate 9—Area of the camp at the end of the big lake. View west from a hill behind the camp.



Ess Hill for sheep. A trail also goes from this end of the lake to Needlerock Creek (Tthi Zhát Yeninlin Tagé). An old canvas canoe was found cached near the start of the Needlerock Creek trail.

Ta'rá Point

Ta'rá Point (also called Tezrá Point) lies about 5 miles from the village, on the north side of Tatl'á Mān. Behind this camp is a very steep rock hill where people used to hunt caribou and sheep in the fall time. Off the point, there were always lots of ducks, swans and geese. Edward Simon used to set net there off the point. Little

Plate 10—View from the end of the village site on the south side, down lake to the rock island where people had their cache. The steep rock hill where people hunted sheep and caribou from Ta'rá Point can be seen in the background.

Sam had a cabin here, near where the trapping cabin is now. His daughter, Kitty, and her husband Stanley Jonathan took it over later. Only a few logs from this cabin can be seen there now. On the opposite side of the point, there is an old brush camp.

The Narrows at Tatl'á Män

The narrows at Tatl'á Män is about two miles from the village. This was a traditional winter fishing site, where people would set nets below the ice for whitefish. When people camped here, they stayed mostly on the north side of the narrows. Usually, they camped at the village and travelled up to the narrows every day to check their nets. An old, homemade dog sled was found here, which was probably used to pack fish back to the village.

Plate 11—Tatl'á Män Narrows—view to the east.

At the small end of Tatl'á Män, there are actually a number of narrows and points which were used for net fishing. Old camps were seen here too. At one, there was an old barrel stove and a small wooden toboggan.

Tatl'á Män Village

The traces of the old camps at the village can be seen in the remains of brush camps, tent frames, caches, barrel stoves, axe-cut stumps, and old tin cans, On the north side of the village, the outlines of cabins and a barn, built by Billy Atkinson and Ira Van Bibber, can be seen among the poplars that now cover the site. Edward Simon and his wife, Margaret, had a cabin here too.

Plate 12—View down the lake from the village site. The south side of the village, where archaeological excavations were made, is on the right side.

Two old fence graves, burned by the fire which came through this end of the lake in 1919, are on top of a high ridge along the lake shore, just east of the village. This is where George Simon and Little Sam's baby were buried. Old Isaac's brother is said to be buried here as well. A second graveyard is on a little ridge by the creek, behind the village. This has now all grown over with poplar too. The people who died in a war between Coast Indians and Tatl'á Mān people a very long time ago, are said to be buried here.

On the island in front of the village, there a high cache that was built by Jimmy Silverfox, about 1960. Mrs. Jessie Suzé explained that this island was always used by people for caching their fish.

Plate 13—An old winter brush camp at the village, on the south side.

The end of the lake is the only place where the water does not freeze in the winter; all there is is a little snow on top. Mrs. Jessie Alfred told the story about the cannibals a long time ago who were trying to cross the end of the lake here. When they got out into the water, they turned into rocks right there. Those rocks are still in the lake; maybe that's why it doesn't freeze.

There is almost always a strong wind blowing at Tatl'á Män. John Alfred recalled that one time, it blew two men into the water. When the wind was too much, some people went to Taghwát Män, where they had another village, because it wasn't so windy there.

Plate 14—View north across the lake from the south side of the village site. The bald spot on the hill is the location of the two graves. The large rock in the water is one of the cannibal rocks described by Mrs. Jessie Alfred.

Making a Living at Tatl'á Män

People fished at Tatl'á Män through fall, winter and spring. The best time was from the end of October to about Christmas time, when ta'rá are running at the end of the lake and in Mica Creek. These are broad whitefish, which have a big body a small head. They are so fat that you don't have to put grease in the pan to fry them; they just fry in their own grease. Other kinds of fish were lake whitefish (£yok degay); round whitefish (shaankay); trout (mbyaat), greyling (t'a) and jackfish (tátli).

When ta'rá were running, the shallow water at the end of the lake almost boiled with fish, that's how many there were. People would take them with drag nets, by just walking through the water. Rachel Tom Tom tells of fishing with her husband this way and catching about 500 ta'rá with one pull. Three hours later, the caught about the same amount again.

Stanley Jonathan described people using a kind of fish rake, made of two spruce trees tied together. You'd have to be pretty strong to do this, but you could just sweep the fish out of the water.

People set fish traps in Mica Creek for ta'rá, too. These were long basket traps, about 10 feet long or more, made of straight willow or spruce saplings. Two or three baskets would be set in a shallow place in the creek with a fence on the sides to guide the fish into the traps. Little Sam was the last one to set a trap in the creek.

Before the white man, people used willow bark nets or nets made from sinew. Because it was a lot of work to make these nets, they were shorter than the store-bought ones, many four or five feet. The old-time nets were coloured red with alder bark.

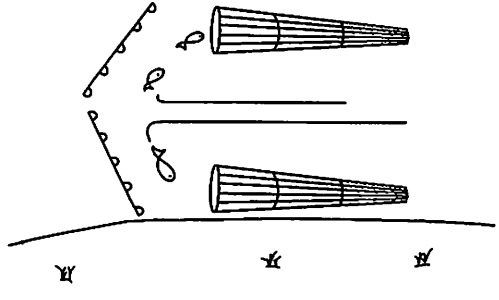


Figure 5.
Sketch of Fish Traps

In falltime, people travelled to from Tatl'á Mān to Ptarmigan Mountain (Ta'rá Ddhäw) for hunting sheep, caribou and moose. Lots of gopher were on the mountain too. This is where they made dry meat. In winter they trapped and fished all around the lake, with nets through the ice for whitefish, or with hooks, for trout. Sometimes they used a lure, carved like a fish, and speared fish through ice holes.

In springtime, they hunted beaver and muskrat, and set nets for greyling and whitefish when they started to run in the creeks. Everyone went to Łutzo Mān too, when it was hard to get moose. You could always get jackfish at that

Plate 15—Dan Van Bibber and Eugene Alfred building a bridge across Taghwát Tagé at the end of the lake. This is where people probably put their fish traps in the past. The shallows here is also where people fished for tá'ra with drag nets.

lake. The mouth of Mica Creek on the Pelly River was an important greyling and ta'rá fishing site too. Spring was also the time that the Coast Indians used to come to Tatl'á Mān to trade with people.

In summertime, people went to Fort Selkirk or the Pelly River for salmon fishing. In early fall, they went to Minto for dog salmon by the trail along Legha Mān. Jessie Alfred remembers picking berries all along the trail from Tatl'á Mān to Minto.

Plate 16—Eugene Alfred and Martina Johathan excavating the archaeological site at the old village, on the south side.

A FINAL WORD

Selkirk people still fish at Tatl'á Mān every fall, and now cabins are being built again on the lake. A great deal of Selkirk people's history is on this lake. Their ancestors have been fishing and hunting at Tatl'á Mān since the end of the last Ice Age, 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. People have been making their camps at the end of the lake for ta'rá fishing for at least 4,000 years. Not only Selkirk people came here, but people from all around, from Champagne and Tatchun too. More than a hundred years ago, Coast Indians came to the lake to trade. And after them, white men joined Selkirk people in fishing for ta'rá.

With the stories of the elders and the archaeology that has been done on the lake, the we are just starting to write the history of Tatl'á Mān.

Plate 17 (opposite page)—Excavating the archaeological site at the old village. Dan Van Bibber is looking on. Students in the photo are Jerlene Joe and Cindy McGinty; Eugene Alfred is behind them.

Plate 18—Jerlene Joe and Cindy McGinty screening soils from the excavation at the old village to find small artefacts and bones that might have been missed during digging.

Plate 19—Dan Van Bibber inspecting a stone tool found by David Grennan in the excavation at the old village.