



# Heritage Conversations

Stories of Yukoners connecting to their heritage

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Bobbi Rose Koe and Gestie Tees map out their path while sitting on a mountain overlooking the Wind River.

Photo by Jill Pangman



# Introduction

During his keynote address at the 2018 Yukon Heritage Awards celebration, Brent Slobodin (1957-2019) made a slip of the tongue.

Slobodin, who was the Yukon member of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, was talking about “heritage conservation”, but instead said “heritage conversation”.

It was an easy mistake to make. And one that could be quickly forgotten as the celebration continued.

But the words sparked an idea in the mind of Historic Sites unit staff member Rebecca Jansen. The phrase stayed in her head, and she began crafting the idea for this series of stories focusing on how people throughout the Yukon connect to their heritage.

Heritage is not one thing. It’s all around us in the Yukon, from Doug Davidge, who finds lost sites and objects, to the McDougalls, who mine on claims passed down from their parents, to Joella Hogan, who uses traditional knowledge as the foundation for her business.

We hope you enjoy these stories from people who work in, live in and celebrate Yukon’s heritage. •

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# Deep roots

Colleen James looks to the land for sustenance, guidance and solace

Her name is Wolf Mother, *Ghoóch Tlá* in Tlingit, and Colleen James in English.

When she looks at the mountains around Carcross she sees the place where she picked berries with her grandmother as a child; the place that shows her what the weather will bring; and the place that guides her decision making.

“My old people say that mountain will tell you what the weather is going to do,” she says, pointing to the peak they call Gopher Mountain. “They would watch the water and it would tell them; the birds would tell them; the fire would tell them. There was a universal language.

“So, my life story with that mountain has evolved as I grow, and I’m sure it’ll evolve more,” she says.

James grew up in Cowley, about half-way between Whitehorse and Carcross. Her mother was Tagish and Tlingit, and her father was British.

“Life was pretty good. My parents and grandparents took good care of me,” she says. “But my mother attended mission school, and so my path was a lot more challenging because of that.”

Colleen James on her Traditional Territory near Carcross in 2018.

Photo by Leighann Chalykoff

She had her first child at a young age. Having to care for her daughter helped to ground her and steer her away from risky behaviour, and then she found her culture.

“I’m very blessed that my grandmother didn’t go to residential school,” she says. “She was my rock and taught me everything she could about the culture, the language, and our ways of knowing and being on this land. She was at the tail-end of the really old people so I got to hear those stories that my old people say.”

James immersed herself in her culture by learning about the stories, the language, and the ceremonies.

“I remember my grandmother would take me on the yearly round, meaning that we followed the berries, followed the birds, followed the fish, followed the animals, followed the plants that were in season,” says James. “We are part of the land and part of the water, so our roots are embedded here and they grow out.”

Throughout her life, her traditional territory has been a place of solace and a place to go for guidance. When Carcross/Tagish First Nation (C/TFN) voted against its initial land-claim agreement, James went to the water for help.

“I was told to go to the river, the lake, and to cry in it. Let your tears go into it. It will work with you. So, on the day of voting, I went across the river to my



Conrad *Tséi Zhéle Sinwaa Éex'i Yé* is now a Yukon Historic Site.

Government of Yukon photo

old town site and I went down to the water and I prayed," she says. "I said: We're afraid, we're scared, we don't know what's coming and we're not sure it's the right deal. Help us. And the answer was no, so the vote was no."

Although the answer was no at that time, C/TFN did settle its Final and Self-Government Agreements, and the First Nation became self-governing in 2006.

This strong connection to the land runs in James' family. For example, her uncle was part of the delegation that brought "Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow" to Ottawa in 1973. It was the landmark document that would lay the foundation for Yukon First Nation land claim agreements.

"He told me that when they accepted the document, when it was going to go, the building just shook — it was a clap of thunder and lightning right above

them," she says. "He said every hair on his body stood up because he knew it was Yukon spirits of the land and the water acknowledging what those people were trying to do in Ottawa."

Today, James spends her time caring for her family, volunteering in the community, and working for her First Nation.

Among other roles, she works as a representative on the Steering Committee for Conrad Historic Site, located on the west side of Windy Arm, 16 kilometers from Carcross.

Conrad *Tséi Zhéle Sinwaa Éex'i Yé* was a traditional fishing, hunting and camping site used by the Tagish Kwan and Tlingit people. It also became a short-lived mining town in the early 1900s, and remnants of its mining history, such as buildings and equipment, can still be seen in the area today.

"I remember my grandmother would take me on the yearly round, meaning that we followed the berries, followed the birds, followed the fish, followed the animals, followed the plants that were in season."

Colleen James

C/TFN's Final Agreement states that Conrad be established as a historic site and be co-owned and co-managed by the First Nation and the Yukon government.

"Through involvement on the committee I've learned a lot more about the Conrad Historic Site, both its pre-contact history and its mining history," she says. "We want to see the co-management be successful and celebrate the history of both cultures that have used the site and will continue to use it into the future."

James is also involved in a C/TFN project to revitalize the Tlingit and Tagish languages by remembering and using Tlingit and Tagish place names.

"When we revitalize our language, we discover knowledge that's been there for a long time," she says.



Colleen James and Gisela Niedermeyer work on a moose hide during an on-the-land learning program in 2019.

Photo by Leighann Chalykoff

"Imagine a world where people feel like there's enough; that they're good enough, that they're smart enough, that they're beautiful enough," she says. "If we feel like we're part of the land and a part of the water we might treat nature more kindly." •

# Marking history

Teri McNaughton and the Watson Lake Historical Society are ensuring the town's history is recognized one site at a time

In the 1970s the Watson Lake Hotel was the place to be.

“Everybody would go there. It was like our living room,” says Teri McNaughton, who moved to Watson from Dawson City for a job at the hotel's restaurant. “We'd go there to play cards, people like Gillian Campbell would perform, and The Canucks had a canteen show during the summers in a tent nearby.”

At that time, Watson Lake's population was growing. The mines at Cantung and Cassiar were booming and two flights brought people and cargo in and out of the community each day.

It was a golden age for McNaughton and her friends.

When the Watson Lake Hotel closed in 2007, and then sat empty for years, McNaughton saw an opportunity to preserve those cherished memories. With permission from the owner, she went into the hotel and salvaged dozens of historical photographs that once hung on the walls.

As it turned out, she got there just in time as the building was destroyed by fire just a little while later.

McNaughton had rescued boxes of photographs showing the southern Yukon town in its heyday, and with that newly acquired collection the Watson Lake Historical Society was born.

Since 2010, the small-but-mighty society, made up of local volunteers interested in seeing significant places in and around Watson Lake recognized and preserved, has turned its attention to a number of different projects.

For example, it led the charge to have the Signpost Forest recognized as a Yukon Historic Site and achieved the designation in 2013.

The forest began in 1942, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were in the Yukon constructing the Alaska Highway. At that time, it was common for the army to put up directional signs that indicated the distance to a handful of major cities and nearby communities.

This signpost took on a new life when one U.S. Army soldier, who was homesick and missing his girlfriend, added a sign to honour his hometown of Danville, Illinois. Other soldiers soon followed suit, and now nearly 80 years later the forest contains more than 80,000 signs.

The Watson Lake Signpost Forest is a key visitor attraction on the Alaska Highway. It was designated a Yukon Historic Site in 2013.

Government of Yukon photo





RIGHT  
CP Air staff and visitors shown in front of the terminal building.

LEFT  
Teri (Millen) McNaughton , Jay Barry, Doreen Weedmark, Debbie Bush at the CP Air desk.

Photos courtesy of Teri McNaughton

It has become one of the most famous landmarks along the Alaska Highway, and its historic site status means that the forest holds a special distinction. It is eligible for funding to support its maintenance and preservation. The forest was designated as a site that lives and changes as time passes. That means new signs are put up and damaged signs are retired.

The designation was a big achievement for McNaughton and the society.

“It’s important to me that these places are recognized as important,” says McNaughton. “I grew up in Dawson City where the history is all around you

and I think Watson Lake deserves to have that attention to its history too.”

Recently the society has turned its attention to the Watson Lake Airport Terminal building.

The airport was built in the 1940s by the US military. It was used as part of the Northwest Staging Route, a series of refueling stops for American aircraft en route to Alaska during the Second World War.

After the war in the 1950s, the Royal Canadian Air Force took control of the airport, and then the Government of Canada. Currently, its owned and used



The Watson Lake Airport Terminal building was built in the 1940s as part of the Northwest Staging Route. It was designated as a Yukon Historic Site in 2019.

Libraries and Archives  
Canada photo

by the Government of Yukon.

The airport terminal building is close to McNaughton’s heart. In fact, she worked at Canadian Pacific Airlines at the Watson Lake Airport for 10 years in different stations, as a ticket agent, in cargo and in the weight and balance of aircraft.

“The pilots and crews all thought that Watson Lake was the best place to stop,” she says. “They would come off the planes and talk to us and sometimes would even join in on the community bonspiels.”

The terminal building was officially designated as a

historic site by the Government of Yukon in September 2019.

McNaughton hopes these designations along with the many other attractions in the community, will help put Watson Lake back on the map as a destination for tourism.

“There’s so much to see here, and I hope Yukoners come visit and see these sites that I have come to love,” she says.●



Bobbi Rose Koe and Gestie Tees map out their path while sitting on a mountain overlooking the Wind River.

Photo by Jill Pangman

# Protecting the Peel

Two women carry on the traditions of their ancestors by working to protect the land that sustained their families for generations

In the early 1900s, when she was a teenager, Bobbi Rose Koe's great-great-grandmother and her friend paddled a moose-skin boat through a dangerous stretch of fast-flowing high water at Peel Canyon.

In the Gwich'in language the rocky, high-cliffed canyon is known as *Tshuu tr'adaojiich'uu* or *Tshuu tr'idaodiich'uu*, which directly translates as "water-rough, hateful".

"When you're going through it you have to pay attention and work as a team," says Koe, who is Teetl'it Gwich'in from Fort McPherson. "There are huge eddies the size of a room, and if you get stuck in one, you'll get slammed against the cliffs. You could get pushed around and you won't make it out."

Usually, women and children would get out of the boats and walk around the canyon. Only the men would navigate the rough waters, but this time the two women needed to do it.

"When they made it through, they celebrated and they yelled," says Koe. "It's really amazing when I get to share that story and I know that my ancestors have been through that area and survived, and because of them I'm alive and still paddle there today."

More than 100 years later in 2015, Koe joined a group of five youth from First Nations in the Yukon and NWT on an 18-day, 500-kilometer leadership canoe trip that began on the Wind River and fin-

ished at Fort McPherson, NWT.

Along the way they also passed through the treacherous Peel Canyon. It was the first time Koe had paddled the area without her older, more experienced family members in the boat. Once they made it through, she thought about her fearless great-great-grandmother and she celebrated.

The 2015 journey was organized by the Yukon Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society to bring youth from Aklavik, Tsiigehtchic, Fort McPherson, Old Crow, and Mayo into the region. The goal was to teach leadership skills and to connect the youth to their ancestral lands.

Geri-Lee Buyck, from the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, also went on the 2015 trip after being convinced to go by elders in her home community of Mayo.

**"... I was able to awaken this strong connection and this eye-opening responsibility that we have as young people."**

Geri-Lee Buyck



Geri-Lee holding white fish caught in the Peel River near Road River Camp.

Photo by Dana Tizya-Tramm

She was unsure at first. Buyck didn't know whether she would be up to the challenge, but she pushed out of her comfort zone and she surprised herself by rising to the occasion. In the end she had a life-altering experience.

"It changed me in that I was able to awaken this strong connection and this eye-opening responsibility that we have as young people," says Buyck. "We began helping more and working with our elders and leadership in our community to fight this battle in a good way—to protect the Peel."

During the trip the group formed tight bonds, and afterward they came together to create Youth of the Peel. Moved by the experience of travelling through the river systems, they worked to ensure the pristine wilderness was protected and to bring other youth to the area. Once they could see the land and breathe the air, they could develop their own relationships with the plants, the crystal-clear water and the animals.

"We realized that we wanted to keep this group momentum going and still stay connected and work together too," says Buyck. "So other youth could experience what we experienced that was just so life-changing and impactful."

For the past few years, they have offered youth the opportunity to take the journey through the watershed where they hone their paddling skills, share knowledge and stories, and talk about the future.

"I didn't really want to get up in front of people and speak, but it was my grandfathers who nudged me and poked me and gave me the eye, and literally told me to get up and speak because I had a connection to the land and to the people and the animals that were there," says Koe. "I knew firsthand that was who I was speaking for and they didn't

**"It's a place of beauty and stories and our people, our heritage, our culture and everything. It's where our people all came from and where our people were living before colonization."**

Bobbi Rose Koe



Bobbi Rose and Geri-Lee on a 2020 paddling trip on the Beaver River.

Photo by Bobbi Rose Koe

have a voice, so I had to speak for the elders and for the young people who continue to travel the area."

Environmental groups and First Nations have been working to protect the Peel region for decades. There were many bumps along the way.

"There was a time when my grandfather called me and he was crying because the government was treating us like we weren't around," says Koe. "They were going to open it right up to development, it was like the end of the world for us because that area is home for us."

Both Koe's and Buyck's families have a long history in the Peel Watershed.

"It's like how when you're a kid, you want to go to Disney World. Well, my Disney World was the Peel Watershed. That's where I wanted to go because that's what my grandfather talked about," says Koe. "It's a place of beauty and stories and our people, our

heritage, our culture and everything. It's where our people all came from and where our people were living before colonization."

In August 2019, the Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan was signed by the Government of Yukon, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, the Tr'ondek Hwëch'in, the Vuntut Gwitchin Government, and the Gwich'in Tribal Council. The plan laid out how the area will be managed and protected in the future.

"It was mind-blowing to hear it was protected. I'm thankful and my grandparents are happy that most of it is protected, but I think there's still a lot of work yet to do, and I think it's going to take a while," says Koe. "But I know the sun will shine over it for the rest of our lives and the lives of my grandchildren, and my great-great-grandchildren too."

"The Peel Watershed is home, and it's a healing place."●

# Finding lost things

For more than 30 years Doug Davidge has helped solve the Yukon's historical mysteries

Over more than three decades in the Yukon, Doug Davidge has been known to find things that people know are missing—such as the A.J. Goddard, a steamboat that vanished in Lake Laberge in 1901—and things people may not have even realized are lost.

For example, a few years ago while hunting in southern Yukon he spotted a pair of teardrop-shaped stone tools called bifaces. These tools were designed to fit comfortably against the palm of a hand and used to scrape hides, cut bone or dig. They date from hundreds or even thousands of years ago. One biface was settled in the sand at his feet and the other was lying just about a meter away.

“They were completely exposed and visible, if you know what to look for,” says Davidge. “There is a rich cultural history in the Yukon and we see more and more of it every year.”

When he finds cultural artifacts, such as the bifaces, Davidge documents the site and reports it to ensure the Yukon and First Nation governments know where the objects are located. Then, those governments decide whether the objects are best retrieved or left where they were found.

“We remember the Klondike Gold Rush and the Second World War as big events here, but they cover such a short time frame that they really don't represent Yukon history,” says Davidge. “That's why

the cultural history, which can date back 8,000 to 10,000 years, is obviously so important.”

Davidge came to the Yukon from the Northwest Territories in the early 1980s and worked as an environmental specialist for decades with Environment Canada. The job required him to spend a lot of time working outdoors and took him to some of the more remote places in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Northern BC.

“I was always grateful to be able to do that kind of work because I got to experience so many places that many people never get to see,” says Davidge.

“I spent a lot of time in the field, and so I started keeping an eye out for things. Sometimes things are just lying on the ground. Yukon really doesn't accumulate a lot of dirt and dust to cover things up, so things can just sit in one spot for a thousand years,” he adds.

Other times, to find these remnants from the past you have to know where to look. Over the years, Davidge has identified his choice spots for chance discoveries.

“I look for places that have a good view of a valley, exposed hillsides, or ground that's been disturbed from wind erosion, water erosion, or even human activity,” he says. “Small disturbances will sometimes expose cultural artifacts that are thousands of years old.”

“There's no real monetary reward in this work for me, but to be able to share this find with the families, that's my reward.”

Doug Davidge

In the mid-1980s Davidge took his search from land to water and began assisting archaeologists on underwater dives to document hidden heritage sites.

Some of the first heritage-related dives he helped with were at the Venus Mine site, off the South Klondike Highway between Carcross and Log Cabin. Davidge and archaeologists explored the underwater base of the old mill, a wooden structure built in 1908, which runs down the side of Montana Mountain and into Tagish Lake.

“Generally, you'll find a lot of debris at those old mine sites like old bottles, plates and pieces of metal,” he says.

While gaining experience diving at mining sites and former settlements like Canyon City, the vivid stories of underwater shipwrecks in the Yukon's waterways sparked Davidge's imagination. He began searching for historical wrecks.

“It was the chance of discovering something new



Doug Davidge takes a selfie during one of his diving trips.

Photo courtesy of Doug Davidge



A stone knife, also known as a biface, found by Doug Davidge in 2017.

Photo courtesy of Doug Davidge

or different that drew me,” he says. “We could spend weeks or months diving and not see anything of interest, and then all of a sudden: ‘Oh, there’s half a sternwheeler hull just sitting there on the lake bottom.’”

One wreck that eluded Davidge and other divers for years was the *A.J. Goddard*, a Klondike Gold Rush-era sternwheeler that foundered during an early winter storm on Lake Laberge in October 1901.

At just 15-meters long by three-meters wide, the *A.J. Goddard* was small for a sternwheeler, and that made it easy to miss while surveying a large lake. But in the end, it was exactly where it should have been — about 200 meters from a small outcrop of land named Goddard Point.

“For 20 years we’d been going up one side of it and down the other side of it, and never actually pin-

pointing it,” says Davidge.

One day while working on Lake Laberge, Davidge and a team from the Yukon River Steamboat Survey saw a promising reading on the boat’s fish-finding sonar. He noted the GPS coordinates, and later returned to the site to confirm the find.

Finally, on July 5, 2008, Davidge dropped a video camera into the water, and spotted a metal structure. After drifting over the site a few more times, and Davidge realized that this was it: He’d found the missing ship. The *A.J. Goddard* was sitting upright on the lakebed, still full of tools, cooking utensils, and personal effects from the crew.

Over the next few years and hundreds of dives to the wreck site, artifacts were examined, and a cross-section of interesting objects were acquired



for the Government of Yukon archaeological collection. Other objects were examined and then returned where they were found.

The *A.J. Goddard* was designated a Yukon Historic Site in 2010. It is the only remaining sternwheeler of its kind.

“For me it was really interesting to be able to be a part of it,” says Davidge. “But of course, once you find something that’s viewed with that much importance by the archaeological community, it takes on its own life.”

In 2011, National Geographic produced a film on the *A.J. Goddard*, and within hours of it showing on American television, Davidge was receiving phone calls from relatives of the men who were on that boat. In fact, two families came to the Yukon to see Lake Laberge and the items salvaged from the wreckage.

In one case, an ancestor had died in the wreck.

“You could tell the story of the *A.J. Goddard* had been passed down in their family for generations,” says Davidge.

“There’s no real monetary reward in this work for me, but to be able to share this find with the families, that’s my reward.” •

Doug Davidge diving at the site of the *A.J. Goddard*. The sunken sternwheeler was designated a Yukon Historic Site in 2010.

Don Reid/Institute of Nautical Archeology



Mike McDougall stands in front of a piece of heavy machinery used for modern mining.

Photo courtesy of the McDougall family

# Mammoths and miners

## The McDougall family placer operation on Sixtymile is surrounded by history

Mike and Kim McDougall have been gold mining in the Sixtymile region in the Klondike for nearly 40 years. Throughout the decades they've made their own history in the area, and they've also been surrounded by the remnants of those that came before them, both the mammoths and the miners.

"There are not too many places left in the world like Sixtymile," says Mike. "There is enormous history there. It's a gift, and we feel like we're preserving a legacy."

"Sometimes I feel like we're a teabag in a teapot: We're steeped in that history."

The area they mine and the area mined by their parents—each of their families also ran placer mines in the area—is known for its caches of Ice Age mammal bones. Things like mammoth, muskox, saiga antelope and camel.

"We had an incredible amount of bones. I call them treasures greater than gold," says Mike. "Dick Harrington used to come out from the national museum every second year and his eyes were always as big as dinner plates because of the range and the quality of bones that we found."

"By the time he left Sixtymile the back of his truck was always full, and he'd have this very worried look on his face, because his budgets weren't big, and he was trying to figure how the heck he was going to get the bones back to Ottawa without breaking his budget."

The first miners reached Sixtymile in 1892, and since then there has been continuous activity in the area. They left behind more modern treasures for the McDougalls to discover.

"We've found all kinds of things that had been abandoned for any number of reasons—shovels, buckets, wheels, wrenches, tram cars, kitchen tools, butter boxes, flour sacks, and old miner's clothing," says Mike.

When gold was found on Rabbit Creek, closer to Dawson, in 1896. The miners dropped their tools and started walking toward the major gold find to see if they could grab a piece.

"Off to Dawson they all went and some of them made some money and some of them didn't," he says. "Around 1906 or 1907, they started coming back out this way, but what is interesting is that they brought

**"There are not too many places left in the world like Sixtymile. There is enormous history there. It's a gift, and we feel like we're preserving a legacy."**

Mike McDougall



Kim McDougall has found the “good life” on her family mining claim at Sixtymile.

Photo courtesy of the McDougall family

different mining tools with them. They had equipment to steam thaw the ground rather than having to use fires.”

That’s when everything changed. The tools became more efficient and the miners got better at mining, so they didn’t leave as much gold behind. Now when the McDougalls come across a piece of land that has already been steam thawed, they expect to find old pieces of equipment, but not much gold.

Kim first came north to the Klondike to work at her father’s placer gold mine, she had no idea it would become her life’s work.

“I can remember travelling on the Top of the World Highway and dad kept commenting on the beautiful scenery. I was a teenager, and it didn’t mean much to me then,” says Kim. “Of course, I thought I would be up there for a summer to make some money and move on, but I fell in love with the place and here I

am 39 years later still making the trek out to camp.”

Her father knew Mike’s father. They had been friends. In the fall of 1983, Mike’s father asked him to come up and help with the operation, and that’s how he met Kim.

“That was a real bonus for me,” says Mike.

They married in their early 20s, and then started mining on their own.

“I worked for my dad, Mike worked for his dad, and then we started mining on our own with our own equipment, and our own ideas of how we wanted to do it,” says Kim. “We started out very rustic and we did everything together.”

As the years went by, their operation expanded. They had two children; they hired a crew, and they bought larger and more efficient pieces of equipment.

A seasoned miner named Jim Lynch owned a cabin nearby and had been working in the area since the 1930s. He was a good friend to the family. He gave Kim and Mike advice and told them stories. Since he passed away, the McDougalls keep his cabin the way that it was when he lived in it.

“There are other buildings on our property, but that one is the most precious to me,” says Kim. “All of his cups, and the little radio he used to listen to, and even his pen and paper are still on the table. All of those things bring back memories of him.

“It’s all just sentimental value to me, and people love to go in there when they visit.”

But with days full of work to keep the mining operation going, the McDougalls don’t have a lot of time for visitors.

On a regular day, when the mine is in full production during the summer Mike gets up at 4 a.m. to



The McDougalls’ home at Glacier Creek.

Photo courtesy of the McDougall family

prepare for the crew that comes in at 7 a.m. He “walks the pit” and takes a look at the area they’re working on, and then he leaves the crew—usually seven or eight people—to get to work.

Then, he comes back to the house to have a cup of coffee with Kim and they plan what they need to get done during the day be it moving equipment, maintenance or repairs, or going into Dawson for supplies. The day wraps up around 7 p.m. with dinner for everyone in the cook house.

“In the same way that people are entrepreneurs, we were seeking to make a living for our family,” says Mike.

The work environment has changed a lot since the McDougalls started their operation nearly 40 years ago.

“In those days Dawson felt like it was a long way from anywhere,” says Mike. “It just seemed to be a magical place and a little unreal.”

There was also a lot more mining happening in the area. When they started there were two large operations, 15 other operations, and 150 people working on Sixtymile. Currently, there are four working mines, and roughly 20 people live there during the summer months.

“It’s awfully hard work, and the days are awfully long, but it was fun to discover the artifacts, and the artifacts and the history were always important to us,” says Mike.

“It’s been a good life for us. There are years where it’s been really financially beneficial and there’s been years where it hasn’t been,” says Kim. “We just love doing the work. We like being there. It’s not just a job for us, it’s our life.”●

# As Elsa moves towards an uncertain future, a former resident reflects on its past



Mike Mancini divides his time between Keno and Mayo.

Photo by Evan Rensch

The Hamlet of Elsa, a collection of homes and industrial buildings nestled into the Silver Trail at kilometer 97, transformed from a booming mining town in the 1960s to a ghost town in the 1990s, and now faces an uncertain future. But to Mike Mancini, it was the first home he knew as a child. It was where he rode his first bike and learned to ice skate.

“We really had a great time growing up there,” says Mancini. “There were a lot of kids around and it was like one big family. It was comfortable living and the mining company really tried to keep the families happy. There was a recreation hall, a movie theatre, a skating rink and a ski hill.”

As is the story of many communities formed to service a mine site, Elsa’s prospects rose and fell with the price of minerals. Its population swelled to 700 in the 1940s, drawing people from all over the world to work on the site. And by 1953, United Keno Hill had become Canada’s second largest silver operation.

Mancini was born in Southern Italy and was three years old when his parents moved to Canada and settled in the Yukon, first at a transfer station at No Cash, then at Calumet, and then at Elsa a few years later. By that time Mancini was six.

“What I remember the most is Christmas time: we would have plays at the rec hall and Santa Claus would come and bring us all toys,” he says. “And each year there was a Spring carnival that lasted a couple days called the Mad Miners Muck Up.”

The story of Elsa begins long before Mancini was born. The area was prospected as early as the 1880, and large deposits of silver lead ore were discovered in the region in the 1910s.

The name came in 1924, when Charlie Brefault, also known as the “Lucky Swede,” staked a claim on Galena Hill and named it for his sister, Elsa. It’s said

“I lost my parents when they were quite young, and the days growing up in Elsa were great memories for me—those were some of the best times of my life.”

Mike Mancini

he could pick up pieces of ore “like potatoes” from the claim.

When Brefault’s luck ran out, Treadwell Yukon purchased the Elsa claim, and a community that took on its name grew around the entrance to the mine to support it and other mines in the area.

Operations at Elsa expanded in the 1930s, when a mill was moved to the growing community to process ore. From the ‘30s to the ‘60s, many tonnes of ore from the Silver Trail region was shipped to the south and the region became a mainstay of the Yukon’s economy.

By the time Mancini’s family arrived in the mid-1960s, the community was at its peak. When he turned 16 he started working odd jobs for the mining company, like painting fences, over the summer.

After high school he worked at the mine for a few months before he went away to university, and then he would come back each year to work in a variety of jobs over the summers. He worked in the

mill, the mechanical shop, carpentry shop, and in the blacksmith shop.

“If you were interested in any of the trades, they would train you,” he says. “I saw working at the mine as a great way to make money, but when I was growing up, I always wanted to leave Elsa and see

the rest of the world.”

And he did leave. After nearly a decade of low silver prices and steady losses, United Keno Hill shuttered its operations in 1989, and the once-booming community of Elsa emptied as workers moved elsewhere to find jobs.



View of Elsa town site.

Yukon Archives, Executive Council Office, Public Affairs Branch 94/64 f3 19



Aerial view of Elsa, circa 1980.

Photo courtesy of Mike Mancini

“Families were raised there and when it shut down everyone was in shock,” says Mancini. “It was our home.”

After the mine shut down, Mancini spent years in southern BC, but was drawn back to the Yukon in the 1990s, when he inherited some cabins from a friend. He returned to live in Keno and to start over.

He helped renovate and expand the Keno City Mining Museum, which tells the stories of the people who mined in the Silver Trail region.

“We really tried hard to keep the memories and the history alive in the area. It’s vital now more than ever to try and save as many buildings as possible,”

he says. “I lost my parents when they were quite young, and the days growing up in Elsa were great memories for me—those were some of the best times of my life.”

Today, Mancini owns two snack bars and divides his time between Keno and Mayo. On the way back and forth between the two places he drives by the shuttered remains of Elsa.

“I have mixed feelings. I’ve slowly watched it deteriorate and I have watched them bulldoze some of the old buildings that I grew up with and I was familiar with,” he says. “I am seeing the end of what was a big part of my life.” •



# Park ranger keeps Inuvialuit stories alive on Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island

When Richard Gordon was young, he worked on an oil rig in the Beaufort Sea. Often, he would find himself looking across the water to a special place he had visited as a child.

“I’d look out and think about all the times my parents brought me down there, and the stories that I’d heard from the elders as a kid,” says Gordon. “The island holds so many stories and those stories are very dear to my heart.”

The Inuvialuit know it as *Qikiqtaruk*, which translates to “big island,” and when European explorer Sir John Franklin spotted it in 1826, he named it Herschel Island, to honour a family of British scientists—astronomers Sir William Herschel, his sister Caroline, and his son John.

Today the two names have been combined into Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island Territorial Park, and the 116-square-kilometer landmass off of the Yukon’s northern coast is protected as a special conservation area for wildlife and traditional uses.

In 1996, after leaving the oil industry, Gordon took a job as a park ranger on Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island. And for more than 20 years, he has been one of the people who ensures that the history of this unique place is understood by visitors and protected.

“Working on Qikiqtaruk has really brought me back to who I am as an Inuvialuit, and has made me proud,” says Gordon. “I feel like I’m giving back to my people by telling visitors from around the world about who we are and why it’s so important to

LEFT

Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island, 2012.

Government of Yukon photo

RIGHT

Richard Gordon (right) leading a tour of Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island.

Photo by Cameron Eckert

make sure the land is protected for generations to come.”

For thousands of years, Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island was a gathering place for Inuvialuit who harvested on the land.

In the 1800s, the Beaufort Sea became a final refuge for the over-harvested bowhead whale. At that time, whalers used the island as a base to overwinter so they could be ready to go out as soon as the arctic ice broke up in spring.



“Each wave that hits the shore can take away one of our stories if we’re not careful.”

Richard Gordon

Over the years, missionaries, traders, and the RCMP also used Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island. They all left their marks in the form of historic stores, warehouses, and graveyards that can still be visited on the island.

“From what I understand, the Inuvialuit didn’t have much say over what was happening on the land,” says Gordon. “They saw people come in from the outside and take what they want. They were taking artifacts from the graves and human remains from the graves—these were the bones of peoples’ ancestors.”

It wasn’t until the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA) was signed in 1984, that the people who had used that land for generations had any certainty about their role in its future.

Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island became the Yukon’s first territorial park in 1987. And today, tenets outlined in the IFA ensure families continue to use the area for traditional activities, such as harvesting for subsistence.

Hiring Inuvialuit like Gordon to work on the island, also ensures that the Indigenous history of the area continues to be heard.

“We as park rangers of Inuvialuit-descent ensure

that we tell our stories as the people who used the island from the beginning of time,” he says. “My parents were the last generation of people who had to go out on the land to get food, so my parents had to take us with them to get fish to make dry fish, harvest caribou to make dry meat, harvest the beluga whale to make maktaaq and oil, and harvest berries—that was their livelihood.”

After spending decades on the island, Gordon knows its seasonal rhythms well. Usually, he takes the first trip of the year in the first week of April when the land is still covered in a blanket of snow and polar bears frequent the area.

By May, the warmth of the sun starts to melt the tops of the hills. Over the years, Gordon has seen the changing climate impact the rate of melting on the island: it used to be a slow slip into spring, but now the snow melts quickly.

As the green moss starts to appear, so do the snow buntings, arctic birds that spends summers nested in rocky areas. The land comes back to life.

“As the elders would say, once you hear the snow buntings that means spring is coming,” he says. “If you listen, you’ll hear the birds arriving, and the trickle of water under the snowbanks. You’ll see the caribou start to appear, and you’ll see the muskox.”

“When you reflect back on to that, you’ll understand why it’s so important for us to protect Herschel Island for the next generation—you have to be there to hear it, to feel it, and to touch it.”

Once the thaw comes, Gordon likes to grab a history book and hike to the north shore of the island to sit and read. As the tundra warms and melts, he can hear the sounds of ice breaking up and the bowhead and beluga whales coming close to the shore.

“I am in my own world and I am so touched by the

spirit of the land. I feel blessed to be there and to see it. I feel part of history,” he says.

Currently, 400 to 500 people visit the island each season between April and September. Over the past few years, cruise ship traffic has supplanted air travel.

With a highway now connecting Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk that number may rise in the coming years as more visitors may be able to make their way to

the island on chartered boats.

It’s something the island has to prepare for, as each visitor—even a well-meaning visitor—can leave their own mark on the island as their footsteps can pack down vegetation.

“Our elders used the land for survival. They hunted and fished there, and we have to protect that land for the next generation,” says Gordon. “Each wave that hits the shore can take away one of our stories if we’re not careful.” •

Anglican Mission on Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island, 2012.

Government of Yukon photo



# Sharing Northern Tutchone culture and heritage, one bar at a time

Sometimes when Joella Hogan comes home after a long day, she'll find a bag of fresh rose petals on her doorstep. And once in a while, neighbourhood kids will knock on her door with fists full of wild flowers and plants.

"People always want to help me; they see this little business and they see that I am working hard," says Hogan. "It really means a lot to me that people are thinking about ways that they can contribute."

Hogan's "little" business is the Yukon Soaps Company, known for its small-batch, handmade artisanal soaps and oils. She sells these products in the Yukon through local craft fairs and markets, in retail shops and also through online sales from her home community of Mayo, a village of nearly 500 in central Yukon and home to the Northern Tutchone First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun.

"It's really about sharing what I make; I don't want it to be just Joella's business; I really see this as the community of Mayo's business," she says. "It was

never about me working all the time and churning soap in my basement."

Hogan incorporates her community values in each stage of her business, from harvesting the plants to selling the products.

"For Northern Tutchone people, we talk about our four core values, which are caring, sharing, respect, and teaching. I really try and use those in all aspects of my business," she says. "When I am harvesting, I am giving thanks and I am respectful to the land and to the creator, and I share the profits that I have gained back in the community."

Hogan is striving to create products that contribute back to the economy and to the environment.

"It's not just being good to the earth, but actually giving back to the earth," she says. "It's not just taking and using; it's creating a product that's good for the water and for your body."

All of Hogan's soaps are vegetable-oil based. She adds Yukon plants that she grows in her own garden or harvests from northern forests—things like fireweed, rose petals, rosehips, Labrador tea, yarrow, juniper berries, and spruce tips.

Hogan started making soap in 2011. She purchased the business, formerly named The Essential Soap Bar, from two women who had been

Joella Hogan won the National Indigenous Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2021.

Photo by Alistair Maitland



running it for years.

“Those women built the business and they put their love and creativity into it,” says Hogan. “I had been using the products, so I saw that as an opportunity to use my knowledge of science and plants to continue the business.”

She still makes the essential soap bar recipes and over the years she has developed her own products, which reflect her culture and her community.

“I started the Indigenous Artisan Line because I wanted to highlight other artists in my community and the handicrafts that come from Mayo,” she says. Each soap has an image of beadwork made by

a Northern Tutchone woman and comes with a card that shares the story of the artist. For example, one soap bears a picture of a bumblebee on a flower. It’s from a beaded baby belt that was made by Irene Johnny for a woman who worked to protect the Peel Watershed. Another piece was beaded by Hogan herself on a bag she made as a gift to her mother.

Hogan grew up in Whitehorse. She left the Yukon for school and to travel, but she always knew she would come back. And when she did, she wanted to connect to her homeland in central Yukon. She moved to Mayo in 2003, and now cannot imagine living anywhere else.



This bar of soap from the Indigenous Artist Line features images from a beaded baby belt made by Irene Johnny.

Photo by Cathie Archbould

“You’re surrounded by the boreal forest and at the confluence of two rivers; it’s so easy to access the forest and nature,” she says. “That was important, and I didn’t realize how important until I left.”

Over her years in Mayo, Hogan has also been active in ensuring that her community has a voice when decisions are made about their land and water.

“I want people to know about the deep respect people of the North have for the land,” she says. “How we harvest the ingredients and how we try to live in a sustainable way is important, but also we have major industry around us.

“There has been mining happening in our area for more than 100 years, and there are hydro projects that provide energy to the entire Yukon,” she says. “By spending time on the land, we can be better decision-makers on all of those projects; we cannot do that without a connection to the land and the stories, our culture, and our Elders.”

When she visits other countries with her products, she is sharing more than soap. She is sharing her story, her heritage, and her culture.

“I want people to know that the First Nations people in the Yukon and in Mayo are alive and strong and healthy and modern. We are contributing to the economy and to our community. It’s not just a static culture and it’s not just the old ways.” •



Joella Hogan harvests many of the plants she uses in her soaps from the Yukon’s boreal forests.

Photo by Robin Smarch

# Historian builds online community to share Yukon history

When it reached 500 people, Murray Lundberg was satisfied.

Then out of the blue it jumped to 2,500; then 5,000, and now the “Yukon History and Abandoned Places” Facebook group Lundberg administrates has more than 16,000 users (at time of printing). And it steadily gains 50 new ones each week.

“All of a sudden it went nuts and I have no idea why it happened. Just boom—I was getting 1,000 new members a week,” says Lundberg. “If I could reproduce that I could make a million dollars.”

Far from a million, in fact, administrating a monster group like that comes with no paycheque at all, but Lundberg treats it like a full-time job. On average he pours 30 hours each week into the conversations and connections he’s built online. For Lundberg, it’s a labour of love.

“Being able to make connections—that’s what gives me the warm fuzzies,” he says. “For example, I was able to add another name to the Pioneer Cemetery’s lost grave database because a woman saw the Facebook group and got in touch with the name and photograph of her cousin’s daughter’s grave.

“Facebook is not just for posting pictures of your cat and nasty political memes, it can actually produce some great stuff,” says Lundberg with a laugh.

The group is described as open to “anyone with an

interest in any aspect of Yukon history and/or a fascination with abandoned places of all sorts.” Users are invited to post stories or photos or ask questions.

“It’s a pretty cool collective memory we have going on. If one person says something wrong there are 10 people who say: no, that’s not how it happened,” he says. “And the really cool part is that it is a conversation—a two-way dialogue, or in this case an 11,000-way dialogue.”

Lundberg’s passion for history runs in the family. His father had a bug for history, and Lundberg caught it when he was just 8 years old in 1958. Using his grandfather’s old large format camera, he started taking photographs of the Cariboo Mining district in south-central BC.

“More than 60 years later I am still doing the same thing, I just have better equipment,” he says.

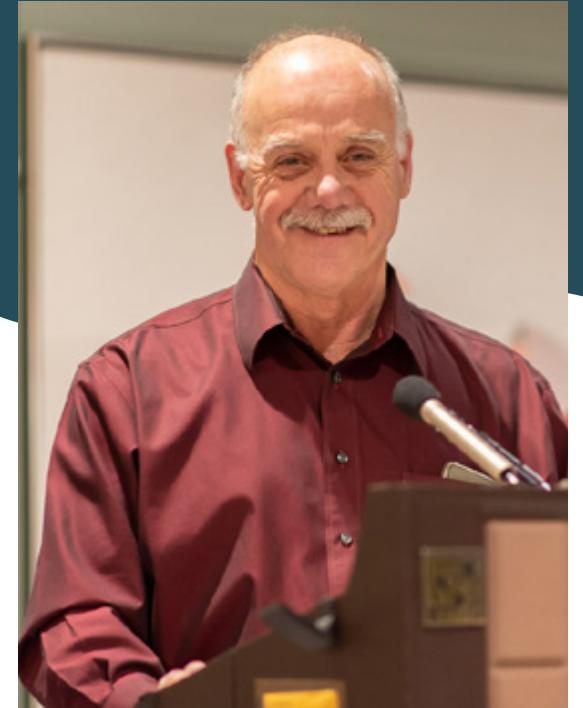
He found himself drawn to the Yukon, so in 1985, with his own plane and private pilot’s license, he decided to come up and have a look. He flew all the way to Tuktoyaktuk; then across to Fort Yukon and Fairbanks and then back down south to Vancouver, stopping in a lot of spots on the way.

“I had always been fascinated by the Yukon, and that flight hooked me,” he says. “It was so incredible—the land, the people and the history.

“The original plan was to write a book about that trip

“Most people never find where they really belong, never mind what they should be doing. This is clearly what I should be doing. It affects a lot of people in positive ways and I love doing it.”

Murray Lundberg



called Rowdy Bars of the North, but it turned out that most of my memories were too fuzzy to actually write down—it was that kind of trip. It was such a hoot.”

A few years later he saw a listing in the Vancouver newspaper advertising for tour-bus drivers in Whitehorse. He started driving 10- to 20-day tours of the Yukon and Alaska. On these tours, he was expected to be the expert on the places they visited.

“All at once I was both a student and a teacher of Yukon history,” he says. “I had a couple of pretty intense years of just cramming and cramming and cramming—I would be driving along with index cards with information tucked under my hip.”

He stayed with the job for 23 years because he loved it.

“It got me to some amazing places, and I got to meet a lot of incredible people,” he says. “It was a constant

Murray Lundberg was presented with a Yukon Heritage Award for his work in 2018.

Photo courtesy of Tony Gonda

learning experience. Each time it would be different. I’ve driven up the Dempster Highway and had a white wolf running beside the bus.”

Though he officially retired in 2008, he still leads one special tour group each year during the Yukon



Murray Lundberg with his dogs on the Wolf Creek Trails, 2018.

Photo by Karla Scott

#### Quest International Dog Sled Race.

In 1996, Lundberg wrote his first book *Fractured Veins and Broken Dreams: Montana Mountain and the Windy Arm Stampede*. It was an account of the silver mines near Carcross, where he was living at the time.

“It started off when I came across the stone houses on Montana Mountain and no one really knew why they were there—I thought, I have to find out.”

A year later, he started his website, *Yukon and Alaska History*, which expanded into his *ExploreNorth* site still online today.

“In those days there was no good Yukon history online, so I thought I would do it,” he says. “I look back on the screenshots now and it was pretty basic, but it did what it needed to do.”

Over the years, he’s also collected his own archive of Yukon history books and documents. He has 107 books on the Alaska Highway alone.

Currently, Lundberg is working on a second edition of his first book, *Fractured Veins and Broken Dreams*. And he’s continuing to build his online group one post and one conversation at a time.

“Most people never find where they really belong, never mind what they should be doing,” says Lundberg. “This is clearly what I should be doing. It affects a lot of people in positive ways and I love doing it.” •

Murray Lundberg in 1989 while photographing in the Chilliwack Valley.

Photo courtesy of Murray Lundberg





# Revitalizing the routes that connect the people of North Yukon

When Stanley Grafton Njootli travels on the land in Gwich'in traditional territory, he sees the footsteps of the people who came before him.

"You can see markings on the trees and sometimes the remnants of old traps and places where people camped," he says.

North Yukon is honeycombed with routes. It's an intricate network of trails and waterways that the Gwich'in people have used to move through the area for thousands of years.

These routes linked people to each other—to camps and settlements—and they linked people to resources like areas with fish and game.

"They would have been used by all Gwich'in long ago when we followed the caribou, for things like travel, hunting, trapping, and berry picking," says Njootli. "They're part of our heritage and using the land."

To prevent further loss of the routes and the knowledge and stories associated with them, the Vuntut Gwitchin Government's Heritage Branch has been working to document and revitalize those trails through the Van Tat Gwich'in Navigation System Project, which began in 2011.

Gwich'in based in North Yukon call themselves the Van Tat Gwich'in, which means "people who live among the lakes".

Njootli has been part of the winter trail-finding journeys over the years. Along with a team of trail-breakers, he would travel the routes for two to three weeks, breaking trail with chainsaws when necessary.

Van Tat Gwich'in trail breakers being welcomed to Arctic Village.

Photo by Robert Sam

"They would have been used by all Gwich'in long ago when we followed the caribou, for things like travel, hunting, trapping, and berry picking. They're part of our heritage and using the land."

Stanley Grafton Njootli

"In the past, people had certain areas where they would stay for maybe a time period, but people moved quite a bit," says Vuntut Gwitchin Heritage Manager Megan Williams. "When there were lots of resources, say a fish trap that was pretty productive or a place where caribou gathered, then people would get into large groups and then they would often split off into smaller family groups and travel that way.

"It was very fluid. There was a lot of moving around, and using these routes to go to different parts of the traditional territory."

Currently, roughly 60 of the routes have been mapped, and the heritage department is working on ground truthing—sending groups out on the land to collect information—one or two each year.

"They're ancient routes," says Williams. "You can see many of them from a helicopter because they were used so much, they're actually worn into the ground."

Observing the routes from above is one thing but being on the ground scouting whether a route is still



Gwich'in trail breakers on the trail between Old Crow and Arctic Village.

Photo by Robert Sam

passable is quite different.

“There are definitely a lot of changes on the land that the Elders have noticed,” says Williams. “They see some of their regular access routes from 40 to 50 years ago are no longer viable.”

Changes to the northern landscape including shrubification—an increase in ground-covering woody plants in regions of the arctic—means that some of the trails have become impassable and others must be rerouted.

“A younger elder will lead people on one of the routes, and they’ll find that the vegetation has grown up shoulder high, and it’s no longer a viable access route because of climate change,” says Williams. “There are places where you could spend two weeks cutting through the willows to try and use

that access route.”

Documenting and revitalizing these trails connects people in the community to the land and to its heritage.

“Anything that comes out of the oral history of the Elders is considered heritage,” says Williams. “A route, a place name, a landscape, a place where a story took place, all of these are primarily what we are working with in First Nations heritage.”

Historically, they travelled by foot, dog sled, and watercraft. As technologies changed and the Gwich'in people of the Yukon settled in the community of Old Crow, the need to use these routes decreased. And the people who lived on the land and remember these routes as vital lifelines for the community are getting older.

“The Elders giving us the information are 70 to 80 now, and we also have information from Elders who were born in the late 1800s and early 1900s, who spent their adult life out on the land,” says Williams. “When the trail is lost, the knowledge is lost.”

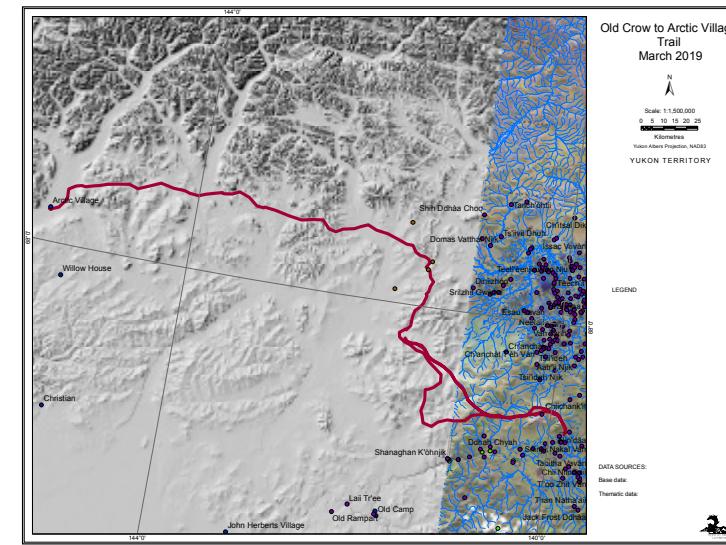
As more routes are mapped and re-established through Gwich'in territory, it's hoped they will be used by community members to learn about their heritage and spend time on the land.

For example, a historic trail between Old Crow and Arctic Village in Alaska has been mapped. It hasn't been used in more than 60 years, but it's hoped the communities will start using this trail again to connect to their family members across the border.

“There's a major focus on using the trails and making sure that the knowledge is there,” says Williams. “A picture of a trail and a signpost showing where it used to go is nice, but it really leaves out a huge part of the knowledge, which is learning how to travel on the land.”

For Njootli, it's important that the next generation of Gwich'in learn skills to help them in the future, no matter what it brings.

“Both climate change and food security are a big deal for us these days,” he says. “The world is changing, and we don't know what's going to happen next. We need for our people to know our lands, to know the fishing holes and where caribou and moose hang out.” •



Map of the overland trail routes connecting Old Crow to Arctic Village. This map was created in spring 2019.

Map courtesy of Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation

# Artist documents the vintage, the eclectic, and the historical houses of Whitehorse and Dawson

Erin Dixon is interested in how other people live.

“I have been interested in other people’s houses since I was a little kid,” she says. “Trick-or-treating was always my favourite because you got to go to other people’s houses and peek inside.”

“Now, I love it when you drive down a dark street and everyone has their lights on, and you can see into the windows.”

The homes she finds most interesting are not the fanciest or most expensive, they’re the vintage, the eclectic, and the historical houses of Whitehorse and Dawson City.

It all started when Dixon visited a family friend who lives in a downtown historical home that was originally built for a White Pass employee in the early 1900s. The home had been fully restored with wood from the sternwheelers that used to run the nearby Yukon River and special details such as a river stone fireplace. Dixon found it inspiring.

“It’s gorgeous on the inside. I looked around and I just wanted to paint it,” she says. “It opened up a can of worms.”

From then on she was hooked, and she started

drawing and painting the cozy, the quirky, and the historical houses in Whitehorse and Dawson.

In 2018, Dixon challenged herself to create 30 drawings in 30 days. She draws the bones of the houses as they are—walls, roofs windows, and staircases—so they would be recognizable. But then she took some artistic license with the colours, transforming one house that was a faded yellow into a vibrant daffodil hue, for example.

“A lot of the houses I paint are run down and abandoned, and I wanted to make them look like they were still lived in,” she says. “It’s a feeling I got from the houses. Sometimes when I was drawing them I knew what colour I was going to paint them.”

When Dixon paints, she likes to use every colour in the box. Some homes, which are brown in real life, end up bright orange or fuchsia on her paper. Others end up chequered or striped.

“I don’t think enough people paint stripes on their houses,” she says with a laugh.

She had a show of the 30 images in the Community Gallery at the Yukon Arts Center in 2018, and has shared them on social media, which has started



TOP

Erin Dixon taking part in an art battle in downtown Whitehorse in 2016.

BOTTOM

Erin Dixon’s House and Home show installed in the Community Gallery at the Yukon Art Centre in October 2018.

Photos courtesy of Erin Dixon



countless conversations with delighted homeowners and people who remember the evolution of the houses.

“It was nice to be able to share that. Just to know that there is a history here,” she says. “I don’t have a lot of family and I grew up away from my grandparents, so it’s nice for me to hear other people’s stories.”

“The Yukon has such a cool history and it’s amazing to hear about it from the people who remember it.”

Dixon moved to Whitehorse with her family in 1982, when she was just six years old. They drove up the Alaska Highway from Regina on what was then a rough road.

“Coming up that highway was one of the defining memories from my childhood—I was terrified,” she says. “I remember going through Steamboat and Pink Mountain, where there are cliffs up one side and down the other side and the road was mostly gravel.”

“It’s a lot better now than it used to be, and we ended up driving that road lots when I was a kid, but I remember that first trip was just so scary.”

In 2017, she answered a call for artists and won the commission for the 75th anniversary of the Alaska Highway tourism banner. She ended up painting her memory of the highway.

“It’s how I remember what it was like travelling and what the mountains looked like to me when I was little.”

Now, having completed her historical homes series, Dixon is back to painting historical routes, such as the Alaska Highway and the Haines Highway.

She’s planning to create a body of work of historical roads and put together a show of her large-scale

acrylic paintings in the future.

Dixon has also illustrated a couple of Yukon-themed colouring books—one features drawings of 30 unique houses that people can colour themselves. She wants to help keep the historical legacy alive for the next generation.

“I wanted to capture a moment in time and maybe some of these places that I captured are not going to be there in 15 or 20 years,” she says. “I am happy that there are upgrades here—there are more opportunities for my kids than there were when I was a kid and that has to do with a bigger population, but the old-timely, small-town feeling is going away.”

“I hope that that’s what people feel and remember when they look at my paintings.” •



#### LEFT

Dixon’s series documents the unique homes in Whitehorse and Dawson.

Photo by Leighann Chalykoff

#### RIGHT

Illustration of Captain Martin House on Wood Street in downtown Whitehorse, featuring imagined hot pink trim.

Illustration courtesy of Erin Dixon



# Back to the land

## Remembering traditional practices brings Northern Tutchone people back to their culture

On an evening in early November, Teri-Lee Isaac and her family butchered a caribou that was given to them by family in Fort McPherson.

While the practice gives the family a freezer full of wild meat for the upcoming winter, it also connects them to the land, and to Northern Tutchone cultural practices that have been passed down through the generations.

“We have our family’s cabin and fish camp that we use to take our kids out hunting. They’ve seen us harvest a caribou this season and cut it up,” says Isaac. “So, I live the traditional lifestyle and whatever I promote at work, I promote at home too.”

For five years, Isaac has been working as the heritage manager for Selkirk First Nation. Before that, she managed Big Jonathan House, the First Nation’s cultural centre in Pelly Crossing. The building is a replica of Chief Big Jonathan’s house that was once the main gathering place in Fort Selkirk in the early 1900s.

While growing up, Isaac was raised by her grandmother. She stayed in Fort Selkirk for a few years while her grandmother was working as a cook for the restoration crew at the site.

“Fort Selkirk has always been a second home to me,” she says. “We played in those old historic buildings, we pretended we were teachers and students in the

old school and ran around in the bushes.”

Fort Selkirk, located on the Yukon River near the mouth of the Pelly River, has been an important site to the Northern Tutchone people for thousands of years. It was home to many before the Hudson Bay Company established a trading post there in 1852, and a community developed there in the early 1890s.

Fort Selkirk was abandoned in the 1950s. It is now a Yukon Historic Site that is co-managed by the Selkirk First Nation and the Government of Yukon.

“I learned a lot about Fort Selkirk as a child, I always knew it was a trading place. As I got older, we found out more, as people started to talk more about their culture,” says Isaac. “When people started to talk more about their experiences in residential school, people started opening up about their culture and remembering.”

Isaac and others in her community think of it as their ancestral home along with another site close to her heart called Ta’tlamän Lake, located about 40

Ice fishing on Ta’tlamän Lake.

Photo provided by Teri-Lee Isaac



kilometers southeast of Pelly Crossing.

“Ta’tlamän Lake is the other place where my ancestors actually originated from—that’s where my grandparents came from and my people came from before we were called Selkirk First Nation people,” she says. “Back then we were just people of the land, we didn’t have a specific name. So when people came from Ta’tlamän Lake, they were called the Ta’tlamän people.”

No one lives at the lake now, but it remains an important site for the First Nation’s culture camps. For Isaac it’s a special place.

“Oh, I feel a deep connection. I mean it’s very spiritual there,” she says. “I just feel like that’s home. Knowing it is where my third grandpa and grandma lived and thrived off of the land and walked those trails that we now travel on.”

When the highway came into common use, everything changed for the Northern Tutchone people living at Fort Selkirk as well as Ta’tlamän Lake. Many moved to be closer to the highway to access transportation and services, and that’s how Pelly Crossing was established.

“I think the highway really impacted our people because they lived off of the land and that’s all they knew. They trapped and they traded. Their diet consisted of wild meat, berries



Teri-Lee Isaac cutting salmon at fish camp.

Photo provided by Teri-Lee Isaac

from the land, and traditional plants,” says Isaac. “When the highway came through people started establishing their livelihood near the highways, and little did they know it was going to be a health hazard to them.”

Moving away from the traditional lifestyle meant that many people lost the skills they needed to survive on the land.

Now as heritage manager, Isaac is working to bring

those skills back to her community.

Isaac’s work life often intersects with her home life. She has three kids, and she sees the work she is doing as benefiting them and future generations of people in her community.

“Our traditions are so important to pass on to the next generation,” says Isaac, “so that they will never forget who they are and where they come from.” •

Fort Selkirk.

Government of Yukon photo



# In the footsteps of her great-grandfather

Ione Christensen reflects on her 21 hikes over the Chilkoot Trail, the people who came before her, and what they left behind

In 1898, Ione Christensen's great-grandfather and his four sons hiked the Chilkoot Trail on their way to find fortune in the Klondike Gold Fields.

Over her lifetime, Christensen has spent a lot of time on the historic trail herself. In fact, between 1980 and 2000, she hiked the 53-kilometer route 21 times. During some foggy days on the trail, she thought she could almost catch a glimpse of her ancestors walking before her.

"I've never seen a ghost, but there is a special aura about the trail," she says. "I think of all the people that walked over it, long before Europeans came it was a trading route between coastal and inland First Nations. I don't think you can have a place used by so many people for so many years without something being left behind."

The Chilkoot Trail connects the coastal mountains at Dyea, Alaska to the inland lakes and river systems at Bennett, British Columbia. It is now co-managed by the US National Parks Service and Parks Canada.

In 1896, a large amount of gold was found on Rabbit Creek in the Klondike and started the Klondike Gold Rush. Over the following few years, more than 30,000 gold seekers and would-be-millionaires trav-

elled to the northern gold fields, and Christensen's family was among that number. The trip to the then-remote region was long, difficult and expensive.

In fact, while on their journey, her family had to stop to earn money along the way. They spent three months at the pass while running a little business towing supplies up a particularly steep and treacherous part of the trail called the golden staircase. They used a tow rope and toboggan attached to a small engine.

"That engine is still up there on the trail sitting near the rocks, if you know where to look," says Christensen.

Her great-grandfather's journey was the beginning of her family's connection to the Yukon. After following the Chilkoot Trail, they continued on to the Klondike region and mined a claim off of Hunker Creek.

"They worked it all winter, digging the muck, bringing it up to the surface, and stockpiling it until the spring when they could wash it out to find the gold," says Christensen. "They made quite good money that first year but figured they could make a lot



(L to R) Joan Berriman, Phil, Ione and Paul Christensen on their first hike over the Chilkoot Trail in 1980.

Photo courtesy of Ione Christensen

more if they had a steam boiler to melt the permafrost and make it easier to dig."

They ordered a boiler from Saint John, New Brunswick, and brought it across the country by train. Then up the coast and over the White Pass and Yukon Route Railway in 1900.

While picking up the boiler, Christensen's grandfather also accomplished a much more important task.

"He was betrothed to my grandmother, an Irish lass from Belfast who had been working as a housekeeper in Boston where they met," says Christensen. "He wrote her a letter that said, 'I'm up in the Klondike and I'm coming back out in the summer of 1900. If you still want to marry me, meet me in Halifax and then you're going to the Yukon.' And she did, she came across the country and that was the last time she ever saw her family in Ireland."

The pair settled in Dawson City, had children, including Christensen's mother, Martha (Ballentine) Cameron, and made a life for themselves.

The marriage worked even though the boiler did not.

"They ended up going broke," says Christensen. "And the boiler is still up there somewhere in the bush."

Two generations and more than 80 years later in 1980, Christensen and her two sons, Paul and Phil, hiked the trail for the first time together to follow the footsteps of their ancestors. From the first step, Ione was hooked.

"That first trip we were not prepared at all, but we still would have had much better supplies than my grandfather would have had," she says with a laugh.

After 13 hikes, her husband Art had enough. He said he'd seen everything there is to see on the trail,



Work crew at the Sourdough Pancake tent at Bennett Lake, 1989.

Photo courtesy of Ione Christensen

but Ione kept going, once or twice each summer for nearly 20 years.

“I’ve always loved the trail,” she says.

She knows the rhythms of the path well. How it starts low in damp boreal forest, then climbs gradually and gets very steep through the mountain pass. The climb can be difficult, especially if rain or snow makes the rocks wet and slippery, but it’s Christensen’s favourite part.

“If there’s a strong south wind with rain or sleet driving at your back it’s miserable,” she says. “You’re on slippery rocks and working your way up, but then you get to the top of the pass and into the Yukon where it’s protected from the coastal weather. It’s a

whole new environment.

“At the top of the pass you sort of step through a curtain and then, ahhhhhh, there’s a lovely sunny valley in front of you,” she says.

Today, Christensen still uses the same batch of sourdough starter that her ancestors carried over the pass more than 120 years ago.

And, although she has many credits to her name—she was a Justice of the Peace, Mayor of Whitehorse, Commissioner of the Yukon, and Yukon’s Senator—that historic sourdough starter has been her claim to fame over the past few years.

She’s been interviewed for a number of stories about the starter, and even cooked sourdough pan-

cakes with Martha Stewart.

Back in the summer of 1998, on the hundredth anniversary of the Klondike Gold Rush, Christensen was looking for a fun way to mark the occasion.

She and two friends raised money and set up a cook tent at the end of the trail at Bennett Lake where they served sourdough hotcakes with butter and syrup, tea and hot chocolate to hikers as they passed by on the trail.

“The tent was bear-proof, clean and perfect,” says Christensen. “Parks Canada put an electric fence around it too. The fence never worked, but the bears didn’t know that.”

The trio would get up early, cook all morning, and yes, they used Christensen’s grandfather’s sourdough starter to make the hotcakes.

“My sourdough was never happier than when it was down there on the Chilkoot Trail,” she says. “It must have found some friends because it never tasted so good.” •



TOP

Chilkoot Trail

Government of Yukon photo



LEFT

Judy Dabbs, Ione Christensen, and Pat McKenna offering sourdough pancakes from their cook tent on Bennett Lake, 1989.

Photo courtesy of Ione Christensen

# Telling the Yukon's untold stories

The Hidden Histories Society shines light on the overlooked people and events that contributed to building the Yukon

When Paul Gowdie first learned about the hundreds of Black soldiers who worked on constructing the Alaska Highway in the 1940s, he was surprised.

"I'm in a mostly white town, in a mostly white territory, and I attend this presentation and find out that 30 percent of the soldiers who built the highway were Black," he says. "I thought: OK, I am not the first—there were others before me and that was encouraging."

He felt connected to the place he chose to call home, and that felt good. But it also made him wonder why he hadn't heard about that part of the Yukon's history before.

Gowdie wanted to find out more and that brought him to the Yukon's Hidden Histories group in 2009.

Hidden Histories had formed almost a decade earlier in 2000 to fill a gap—to find and share the untold stories of Black history in the Yukon.

Charlotte Hrenchuk is one of the group's founding members. She has three adopted children from Sierra Leone, and she knew they didn't see themselves reflected in the history being taught in schools at the time.

"I wanted them to be proud and I wanted them to have figures they could look up to," she says. "We hear the horrible stories about slavery, but we don't hear enough about all the amazing contributions that Black people have made to society."

"Those positive stories need to be woven into the historical tapestry as well."

**"We hear the horrible stories about slavery, but we don't hear about all the amazing contributions that Black people have made to society. Those positive stories need to be woven into the historical tapestry as well."**

Charlotte Hrenchuk



Charlotte Hrenchuk and Paul Gowdie of the Hidden Histories Society.

Photo by Leighann Chalykoff

So, Hrenchuk and the group set out to help create that tapestry themselves, each story a thread. And, once they started following those threads, they became wrapped up in the work.

"The more we did, the more we wanted to do," says Hrenchuk.

With new members joining, the group broadened its

focus to include the untold stories of Asian people in the Yukon. They brought attention to stories that colonial accounts of history tend to skip over: people doing everyday things, living good lives and enduring.

"When you say the word 'history' people kind of glaze over, but the personal stories touch peoples'

**“As I get older, I am more curious about my cultural and racial identity. I am fully into it now that I have a daughter. I want her to have a better experience than I did.”**

Paul Gowdie

hearts,” says Hrenchuk. “These stories are part of the mainstream history; they’ve just been overlooked, but they should be integrated and available.”

To bring those stories forward, the group used the resources they had available and sometimes simple grassroots tactics.

“At the beginning, we would go into the library and pull books off the shelves and ask the librarians to display them for Black and Asian history months,” says Hrenchuk. “After a while, the librarians started doing it themselves, and that’s when we feel like our work is bearing fruit—when someone else picks up the story and starts telling it.”

Since they began this work the volunteer group has been supported by a secret weapon: archival researcher Peggy D’Orsay.

“She has the most brilliant ideas and she’s on all the time; always sending us the most obscure and interesting things,” says Hrenchuk.

Often, the hunt for those lost stories begins with a single photograph. Then, the group works together to dig deeper and find more connections through documents, such as birth records and newspaper articles. They bring these pieces together to form a picture of the person’s life.

Over the years the group has become a repository for those overlooked stories.

“There were many marginalized ethno-cultural individuals who tried to make a go of it as well that you just don’t hear about because they don’t fit the key points in the historical narrative,” says Gowdie. “They didn’t strike it rich or they weren’t outrageous enough.”

Lucille Hunter is a prime example. Pregnant at just 19 years old, Hunter travelled the Stikine Route to the Klondike in 1897. Over her long life in the Yukon, she owned gold and silver claims in Dawson and Mayo, and she ran her own laundry business in Whitehorse.

The Hunter family’s story, and many others like it, had been stored in the archives until it was uncovered by the Hidden Histories group. Ensuring stories like that are remembered is important to Hrenchuk and Gowdie. It’s what makes them continue the volunteer work.

“As I get older, I am more curious about my cultural and racial identity,” says Gowdie. “I am fully into it now that I have a daughter. I want her to have better experiences than I did.”

Find out more at [hhsy.org](http://hhsy.org). •



LEFT

Roughly one-third of the 11,000 U.S. soldiers who worked on the construction of the Alaska Highway were Black. Most were from the southern United States.

Yukon Archives, R.G. Gabriel fonds 2005/10 #18

BELOW

Lucille Hunter pictured at her home in Whitehorse in 1960.

Yukon Archives, Richard Harrington fonds, 79/29 #277



# Finding connections to their northern roots

Lured by adventure, these francophones came to the Yukon to find pieces of their history that were here all along

Yann Herry is drawn to true stories of daring. Ask him about his favourite characters in the Yukon's francophone history, and he'll tell you about the people who took chances, cut their own trails, and lived their dreams.

"It's the French-Canadian spirit going back to the voyageurs," he says. "We've always been pulled toward big adventure."

Back in the 1970s, Herry became an adventurer himself. He left his hometown in Quebec and came to the Yukon, following the mini migration of young people moving to western Canada from the east.

Herry landed in Elsa in 1979, to work at the United Keno Hill mine. While at work, he made friends with older miners who had come from all over North America and many were francophone.

"They had interesting stories about their lives and the way they saw Canada," says Herry. "For the first time, I discovered there were francophones living all over Canada and they were a part of the history of Canada, so I was intrigued by the stories."

In 1981, the mine closed, and Herry and his colleagues found themselves out of work.

"We were waiting around for the mine to reopen, but there wasn't much work in Whitehorse," says Herry.

Fueled by his newly inspired interest in francophone history, Herry hit the books. He started haunting the public library and discovered there was a rich francophone history in the Yukon, but no one was talking about it.

He wanted to help bring those stories into the light, and so began his lifelong project.

"We started by having meetings and supporting the work done by other francophones in the community, and we established Association franco-yukonnaise," says Herry. "It was a huge step forward."

While Association franco-yukonnaise (AFY) looked to the future, Herry realized it was important to talk about the past and the stories that rooted francophones in the Yukon since 1838.

His work got noticed, and Herry started fielding research requests from all over the world.

"There were a lot of francophones in the Yukon during Klondike Gold Rush times, and lots of their relatives have questions about what happened to these people," he says. "It was time consuming, but I



Yann Herry in front of the historical portrait gallery at AFY. He is holding the book, *La Francophonie, Northern Portraits*, written in collaboration with Ruth Armson.

Photo by H el ene Saint Onge

did my best to answer them."

Herry logged countless volunteer hours, and eventually parlayed his passion into a master's degree in Education in 2002. For his final project he created a book of the Yukon's francophone history and a gallery show, featuring 20 portraits of francophones who had a role in the Yukon history and society.

Over the past few decades, French language representation in the Yukon has grown with the addition of dedicated Radio-Canada reporters stationed in Whitehorse, and French immersion schools.

**"To me, it's important that we can all live side by side, whether we're francophone, anglophone, Indigenous or from another cultural background."**

Yann Herry

A St. Jean Baptiste Society picnic at Dawson, June 24, 1903.

British Columbia Archives  
C-05092



In April 2021, Herry and a group of like-minded history lovers incorporated a new society called Société d'histoire francophone du Yukon as a group that could collect those stories and make them available for people to learn from.

"It's important to me to share the language and the culture," says Sylvie Binette, another founding member of the society. "I have a passion for the Yukon's natural and cultural heritage and I want to share it with others."

Like Herry, adventure also lured Binette to the Yukon from Quebec. She came in 1985 to become a French language teacher's assistant with the national language program, now called Odyssey.

Binette has always been interested in history, but that interest really hit home for her in the early 2000s, while she was walking through the AFY

community centre. On the wall of the staircase hung a portrait of a man who looked a lot like her great-grandfather, Aldéric Binette.

After some genealogical research, she discovered that the man in the photograph was named Joseph Eugène Binet, called Gene Binet in Mayo. And she was related to him. In fact, their ancestors were brothers.

By all accounts, Binet had a big heart, and he was involved in the community of Mayo. Over the years, he owned a sawmill, hotel and general store, and now the Binet House museum is located in his former home.

Once Binette found the stories of her distant relative, she felt like she better understood her call to the Yukon.

"For me, it was anchoring, and I felt a connection because no one else in my family moved far away from home," says Binette. "I now know that I have some roots here."

In 2017, she was able to deepen that connection by working on interpretative text for a redesign of the Binet House exhibits.

That same year she also participated in a larger l'AFY history project, "De fil en histoires; Les personnages

d'un territoire" where she handmade a doll version of her ancestor Joseph Eugène Binet for display.

For both Herry and Binette, it's important to keep the language, culture and stories alive in the Yukon for their children and for future generations.

"To me, it's important that we can all live side by side, whether we're francophone, anglophone, Indigenous or from another cultural background," says Herry. •



TOP: Sylvie Binette's handmade doll of her ancestor Joseph Eugène Binet.

Photo courtesy of AFY



RIGHT: Binette, in collaboration with AFY, donated a copy of her family tree research to the Binet House in 2003.

Photo courtesy of Sylvie Binette





Writing and design by Leighann Chalykoff.

Thank you to all of the people who shared their stories and photographs in this publication.

  
**Yukon**