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Abstract An Indigenous Place Names Handbook

Sharing the Gwich'in Experience in Canada

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An Indigenous Place Names Handbook

Sharing the Gwich'in Experience in Canada

Preface

This collaboration between Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) and the Gwich'in Tribal Council (GTC) was initiated to document and publish best practices on the repatriation of Indigenous place names to assist other communities undertaking similar work. The content of this handbook is a product of the place names research experience of the GTC Department of Culture and Heritage and the traditional knowledge of the Elders in the Gwich'in Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories and Yukon.



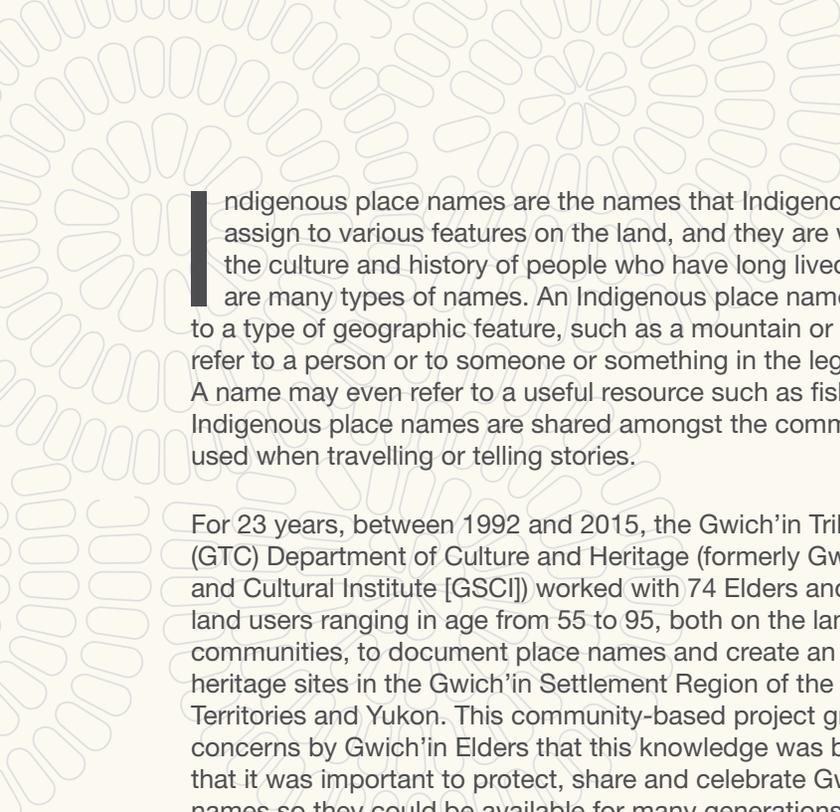
Dinjii Zhuh kat nan kak nijin gugweech'in' oozrii gwi'ts'an gi'tsaih, aii nan nits'òo gugwideech'in gwinjik tr'oozrii ts'at jii oozrii k'iighè' niinzhit dàì' ezhiik gwich'in kat nits'òo gugwiindài' tr'igwinah'inh. Uuzrii nihfi'ejuk leii goonlih. Nits'òo nan gugwideech'in, duuleh ddhah gòo han ezhiik goo'aii k'iighè' Dinjii Zhuh vuuzri' gi'tsaih. Duuleh ih'ee gòo niinzhit dàì' gugwindak gwinjik tr'oozrii. Jidii t'atr'ijahch'uu, tuk gòo vadzaih jii gwinjik chan duuleh tr'oozrii. Dinjii Zhuh kat nits'òo nan guuzrii kaiik'it gwizhit nihkhah gahgidandaih, nan kak nagahdinjik ts'at gwandak nihkhah gugwaandak dàì' jii uuzrii t'agijahch'uh.

Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage (gwichih Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute gwitr'ahnuu) 1992 ts'at 2015 nagwidadhat 23 gahshuk anjoo 74 agwahleii aii ts'at juudin gwatit gòo kaiik'it gwizhit gwich'in kat guughaii 55 – 95 goonlii jii Northwest Territories ts'at Yukon Gwich'in nành kak nits'òo tr'oozrii ts'at nits'òo gugwehdineet'oo gik'itr'ahaandal geenjit guuvah gwitr'it gwiltsaii. Gwich'in anjoo kat nits'òo nan tr'oozrii yeendoo tthak gahgwiheedandaii gwijiinchii goonlii giiniindhan k'iighè' jii geenjit gwitr'it gwiltsaii. Jii gwitr'it chil'ee gwichiilagoo'ee t'ee nan uuzrii 900 agwahleii anjoo kat hàh gwidinithit'oo ts'at nits'òo aii nan kak tagwijuudhat chan gwidinithit'oh. Jii gwitr'it k'iighè' nan gwik'it tagwiltsi' map gwitr'ahnuu tr'iltsaii (nan gwik'it tagwiltsi' 22 agwahleii) aii gwakak NWT ts'at Yukon gwa'an nan uuzri' goo'aii, aii gehghee nan k'it tagwiltsi' gwi'dineht'ee nichii zeh gwikhyyu gwihee'aa chan tr'iltsaii. Geomatics ts'at Cartographic Research Centre, Carleton University danh goo'aii guuvah gwitr'it gugwiltsaii k'iighè' jii kat tthak internet kak goo'aii. Aii gehghee jii gwitr'it k'iighè' National Historic Site (Nagwichoonjik NHS) gwitr'ahnuu tr'igwiltsaii, jii t'at niinzhit dàì' nan kak tr'igwiindài' geenjit diiyah tr'igwaandak ts'at loohah gwijiinchii goo'aii tr'igwiltsaii aii gehghee Territorial Historic Sites nihk'ii daan tr'igwiltsaii, kaiik'it gwi'dineht'ee leii gi'tsaii, guugwitr'it gugwindak gi'tsaii ts'at Gwich'in nànhkak nits'òo tr'oozrii nihlinehch'i' 500 agwahleii gugwidinuut'oo ts'at Northwest Territories ts'at Yukon geenjit k'adagwidaadhat kat ts'at Geographical Names Board of Canada aii nànhkak nits'òo tr'oozrii loohah gwijiinchii gidiiinù' ts'at Canada gwizhit nan k'it tagwiltsi' gwi'dineht'ee kak chan jii uuzrii gwidinithit'oh.

Jii gwitr'it loohah nizii k'iighè' Governor General's History Award 2020 dàì' nihkwits'an tr'iltsaii ts'at Canada gwizhit kaiik'it goo'aii gwi'dineht'ee haatsaa Natural Resources Canada geenjit nihkwiguujahkat. Jii k'iighè' jii kaiik'it gwi'dineht'ee dhàatsaih. Jii dineht'eh gwizhit Dinjii Zhuh Kat nits'òo guunànhkak niinzhit dàì' tr'oozrii natr'iguuheendal geenjit guuvah tr'igwaandak: niinzhit dàì' nan tr'oozrii nits'òo geenjit gik'igahaandal, nan uuzrii loohah vuuzri' diininch'uu ts'at nits'oo gugwehdineet'oo geenjit gik'igahaandal ts'at jii uuzrii nan k'it tagwiltsi' gwi'dineht'ee kak nits'òo gugwehdineet'oo chan diiyah tr'igwaandak. Nagwidadhat leii jii gwi'dineht'ee geenjit Gwich'in nànhkak gwizhit gwitr'it gwiltsaii Gwichan anjoo kat ts'at juudin gwatit tr'igwiindài' kat guuvah jii gwitr'it gwiltsaii. Nits'òo nihkhah gwitr'it tr'igwahaatsaa, nits'òo gwitr'it gisriindè'tr'ijahlii ts'at nits'òo gwitr'it gwi'tseedhoo atr'igwahah'aa jii tthak jii dineht'eh gwizhit goo'aii. Jidii t'atr'ahdahch'aa, nits'òo geenjit diits'at tr'igiheekhyaa, nits'òo nan k'it tagwiltsi' gwi'dineht'ee kak uuzrii gugwehdineet'oo ts'at gwitr'it tthak ndòo nyaa'ài' t'ee dagwiheedyaa'aa jii tthak geenjit jii dineht'eh zhit goo'aii.

Nan nits'òo tr'oozrii gugwitr'it k'iighè' Dinjii Zhuh kat guunànhkak geenjit gahgwiheedandaii loohah gwijiinchii goo'aii diiyah tr'igwaandak geenjit nizih. Jii geenjit gik'itr'aanjii k'iighè' Dinjii Zhuh kat guukaiik'it gwizhit t'agahdahch'aa ts'at k'eejit kat guunànhkak geenjit gik'igahaandal chan geenjit t'agahdahch'ah.

Dinjii Zhuh kaiik'it gwa'an jii dineht'eh t'agahdahch'aa geenjit diinjiiidizhit ts'at yeendoo Canada gwizhit nan k'it tagwiltsi' gwi'dineht'ee kak Dinjii Zhuh ginjik zhit nan uuzrii gugwehdineet'oo k'iighè' niinzhit dàì' nits'oo tr'igwiindài' gahgwiheedandaii, diinjijik gik'itr'ahaandal ts'at niinzhit dàì' gwik'it gwiinli' natr'igooheendal geenjit chan diinjiiidizhit.



Indigenous place names are the names that Indigenous people assign to various features on the land, and they are windows into the culture and history of people who have long lived there. There are many types of names. An Indigenous place name may refer to a type of geographic feature, such as a mountain or river. It may refer to a person or to someone or something in the legendary realm. A name may even refer to a useful resource such as fish or caribou. Indigenous place names are shared amongst the community and are used when travelling or telling stories.

For 23 years, between 1992 and 2015, the Gwich'in Tribal Council (GTC) Department of Culture and Heritage (formerly Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute [GSCI]) worked with 74 Elders and traditional land users ranging in age from 55 to 95, both on the land and in our communities, to document place names and create an inventory of heritage sites in the Gwich'in Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories and Yukon. This community-based project grew out of concerns by Gwich'in Elders that this knowledge was being lost, and that it was important to protect, share and celebrate Gwich'in place names so they could be available for many generations to come.

At the end of this impressive project, more than 900 place names were recorded with Elders, along with their oral history. A complete set of 1:50,000 National Topographic System maps (22 maps) with place names for Gwich'in traditional lands in the Northwest Territories and Yukon was created and is available for printing and travelling on the land. Plus, a large wall map with a subset of the names was made. These are all available on an online [atlas](#) we created in partnership with the Geomatics and Cartographic Research Centre at Carleton University. Other outcomes of the research include the designation of a National Historic Site (Nagwichoonjik NHS) and 8 new Territorial Historic Sites, community-based publications, reports, and over 500 Gwich'in names officially recognized by the governments of the Northwest Territories and Yukon and the Geographical Names Board of Canada – significantly decolonizing the maps of northwestern Canada.

Because of the success of this project, which won the Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Community Programming in the fall of 2020, the department was approached by Natural Resources Canada to write a handbook for other communities across Canada that may be interested in this work. This handbook is the result. It provides generous information to help other Indigenous communities to repatriate their own place names: how to carry out Indigenous place names research, how to verify and correct the spelling of their names, and how to have the names replace colonial names on official maps. The information and best practices identified in this handbook are based on over two decades of place names research carried out in the Gwich'in Settlement Region under the direction of Gwich'in Elders and traditional land users. To that end, this handbook includes sections on building research relationships, planning a project, and finding funding. It also includes what equipment will be needed, how best to conduct interviews and map place names, and all the work that comes after the names are recorded.

Place names studies can be a wonderful way for an Indigenous organization to record important, timely, and vital information. These studies can also allow Indigenous organizations to give back to their own communities, by having these names recorded for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

We hope that this handbook will be useful to many Indigenous communities and organizations and that the future maps of Canada are filled with many more thousands of Indigenous names, repatriating knowledge, languages, and traditions to where they belong.

Acknowledgements

Hai' Choo – a special thank-you – to the more than 70 Elders and land-users in the Northwest Territories who shared their knowledge of Gwich'in place names, stories, legends, and traditional knowledge over the many years we have worked with them. The place names and maps that were created, and this handbook as well, are a special tribute to the people who have occupied and used Gwich'in lands with great respect:

Abe Stewart Sr., Fort McPherson

Agnes Mitchell, Tsiigehtchic

Alan Koe, Aklavik

Albert Ross, Tsiigehtchic

Alfred Semple, Aklavik

Alice Snowshoe, Fort McPherson

Amos Francis, Fort McPherson

Annie B. Gordon, Aklavik

Annie Benoit, Aklavik

Annie Jane Modeste, Fort McPherson

Annie Norbert, Tsiigehtchic

Annie Vanetlsi, Fort McPherson

Antoine (Tony) Andre, Tsiigehtchic

Barney Natsie, Tsiigehtchic

Bella (Norman) Modeste, Tsiigehtchic

Bertha Francis, Fort McPherson

Billy Wilson, Fort McPherson

Bob Norman, Tsiigehtchic

Caroline Andre, Tsiigehtchic

Caroline Kay, Fort McPherson

Catherine Semple, Aklavik

Cecil Andre, Tsiigehtchic

Dan Andre, Tsiigehtchic

Dolly McLeod, Aklavik

Doris Itsi, Fort McPherson

Edward Coyen, Tsiigehtchic

Eileen Cardinal, Tsiigehtchic

Eli Norbert, Tsiigehtchic

Eliza Kunnizzi, Fort McPherson

Eunice Mitchell, Fort McPherson

Fanny Greenland, Aklavik

Fred John, Aklavik

Fred W. Koe, Fort McPherson

Gabe Andre, Tsiigehtchic

George Edwards, Aklavik

George Niditchie Sr., Tsiigehtchic

Grace Blake, Tsiigehtchic

Hannah Alexie, Fort McPherson

Hyacinthe Andre, Tsiigehtchic

James B. Firth, Inuvik

James Simon, Tsiigehtchic

Joan Nazon, Tsiigehtchic

Joanne Snowshoe, Fort McPherson

John Norbert, Tsiigehtchic

John P. Kendo, Tsiigehtchic

Joseph Kay, Fort McPherson

Julia Edwards, Aklavik

Lucy Greenland, Aklavik

Marka Bullock, Inuvik

Mary Kendi, Aklavik

Mary M. Firth, Fort McPherson

Mary Teya, Fort McPherson

Mary Vittrekwa, Fort McPherson

Mildred Edwards, Aklavik

Nap Norbert, Tsiigehtchic

Neil Colin, Fort McPherson

Neil Snowshoe, Fort McPherson

Noel Andre, Tsiigehtchic

Percy Henry, Dawson City

Peter Kay Sr., Fort McPherson

Peter Ross, Tsiigehtchic

Pierre Benoit, Tsiigehtchic

Pierre Norman, Fort McPherson

Richard Ross, Aklavik

Robert Alexie Sr., Fort McPherson

Sarah Jerome, Inuvik

Sarah Simon, Fort McPherson

Stephen Charlie, Fort McPherson

Therese Remy Sawyer, Tsiigehtchic

Tommy Wright, Inuvik

Walter Alexie, Fort McPherson

William Teya, Fort McPherson

William Modeste (Willie Simon), Inuvik

We would also like to acknowledge the numerous project collaborators (community members, Indigenous partners, co-management, non-governmental and government organizations) who helped us to record and share these important place names.



Elder biographies



Elder Eunice Mitchell

Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Eunice Mitchell making bannock at Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu (Peel Canyon). Eunice was passionate about her language and culture and had a youthful soul. Even at the age of 76 she was like a young woman in her 20s climbing banks and walking into named places we stopped at during our travels along the Peel River. She was raised on the land and later in life, she and her husband Simon had a camp at Nataiinlaii, where she worked hard and raised her family. Eunice was known for her love of dancing and playing harmonica. She was always one of the best-dressed women in the room! Teet'it Gwich'in Place Names Project 1996.



Elder George Niditchie

Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder George Niditchie on Gurii Choo (trans: Bald hill-big), a prominent hill near the mountains, up the Arctic Red River. The hill is flat and treeless and stands out from its surroundings, providing a panoramic view of the surrounding country. George spent all of his life living on the land up the Arctic Red River. His grandfather, Paul Niditchie, was the first chief in Arctic Red River and signed Treaty 11 in 1921. George loves to spend time on the land and was involved in many of our projects with Tsiigehtchic. Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names Project in 1993.



Elder Annie Norbert

Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Annie Norbert in the Mackenzie Delta. Annie was well-known for her fluency in Gwich'in, and traditional knowledge and skills and was a mid-wife, raising many children in her lifetime. She and her husband Nap took part in many of our Tsiigehtchic projects. Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names Project 1994.



Elder Tony Andre

Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names Project
1994

Elder Tony Andre in Tsiigehtchic. Tony was a great storyteller, often having us “bust a gut” with his stories. He was known for his snowshoe-making skills and was assisted by his wife Caroline whose expertise was lacing the snowshoes. They both loved to spend time making dry fish in the summer at their fish camp near Tsiigehtchic. Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names Project 1994.



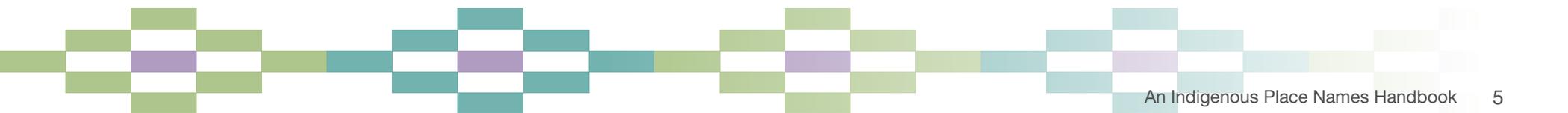
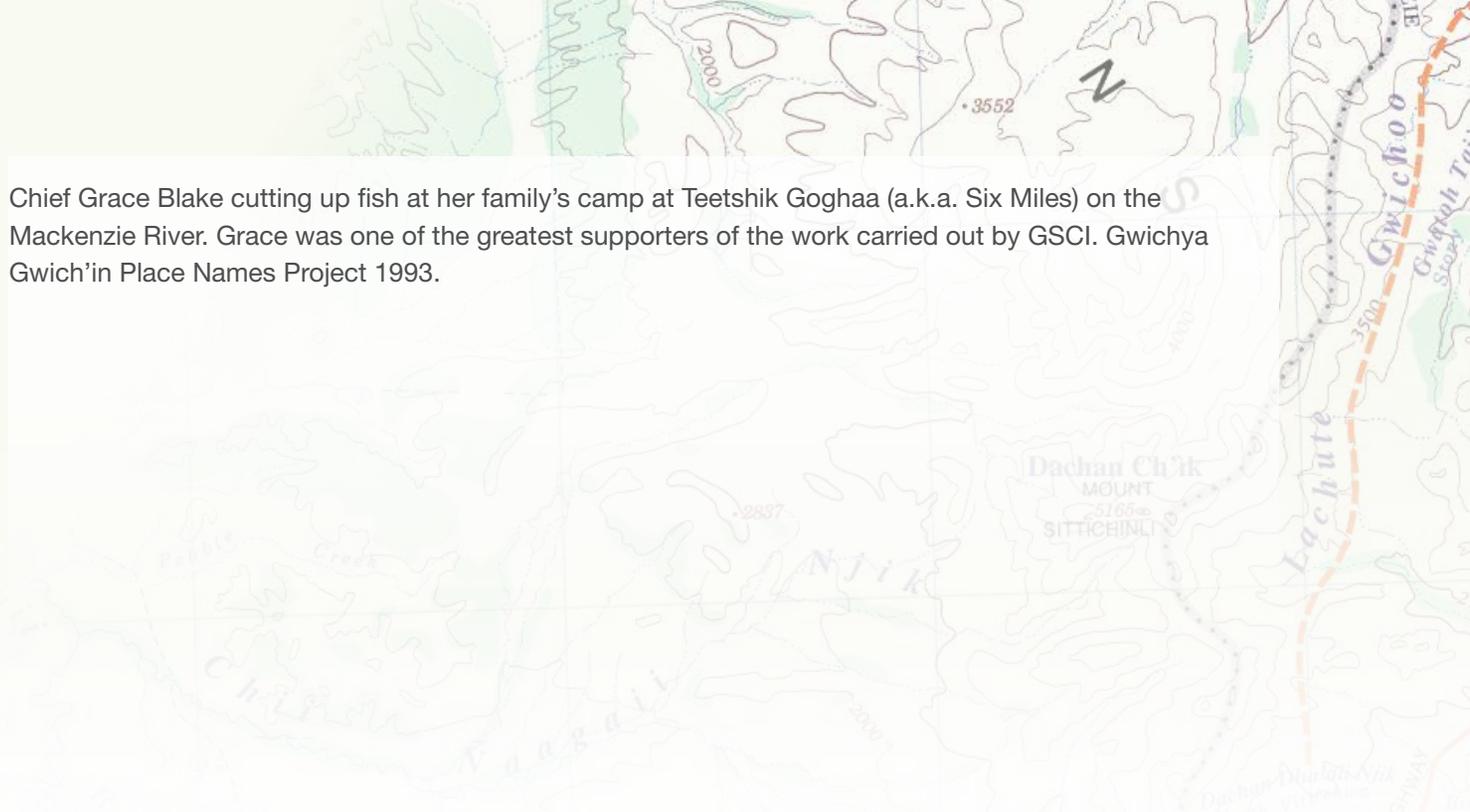
Chief Grace Blake
Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Chief Grace Blake cutting up fish at her family's camp at Teetshik Goghaa (a.k.a. Six Miles) on the Mackenzie River. Grace was one of the greatest supporters of the work carried out by GSCI. Gwich'ya Gwich'in Place Names Project 1993.



Elder Mary Kendi
Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Mary Kendi at the Knut Lang Camp, outside of Aklavik. Mary was one of the founding board members of GSCI and took part in many of GSCI's projects, sharing her knowledge and great sense of humour. Gwich'in Science Camp 1997.





Elder Mary Teya

Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Mary Teya in Fort McPherson. Mary took part in all of our Teet'it Gwich'in projects and provided much support and wise advice over the years. Teet'it Gwich'in Googwandak meeting, 2015.



Elder Bertha Francis

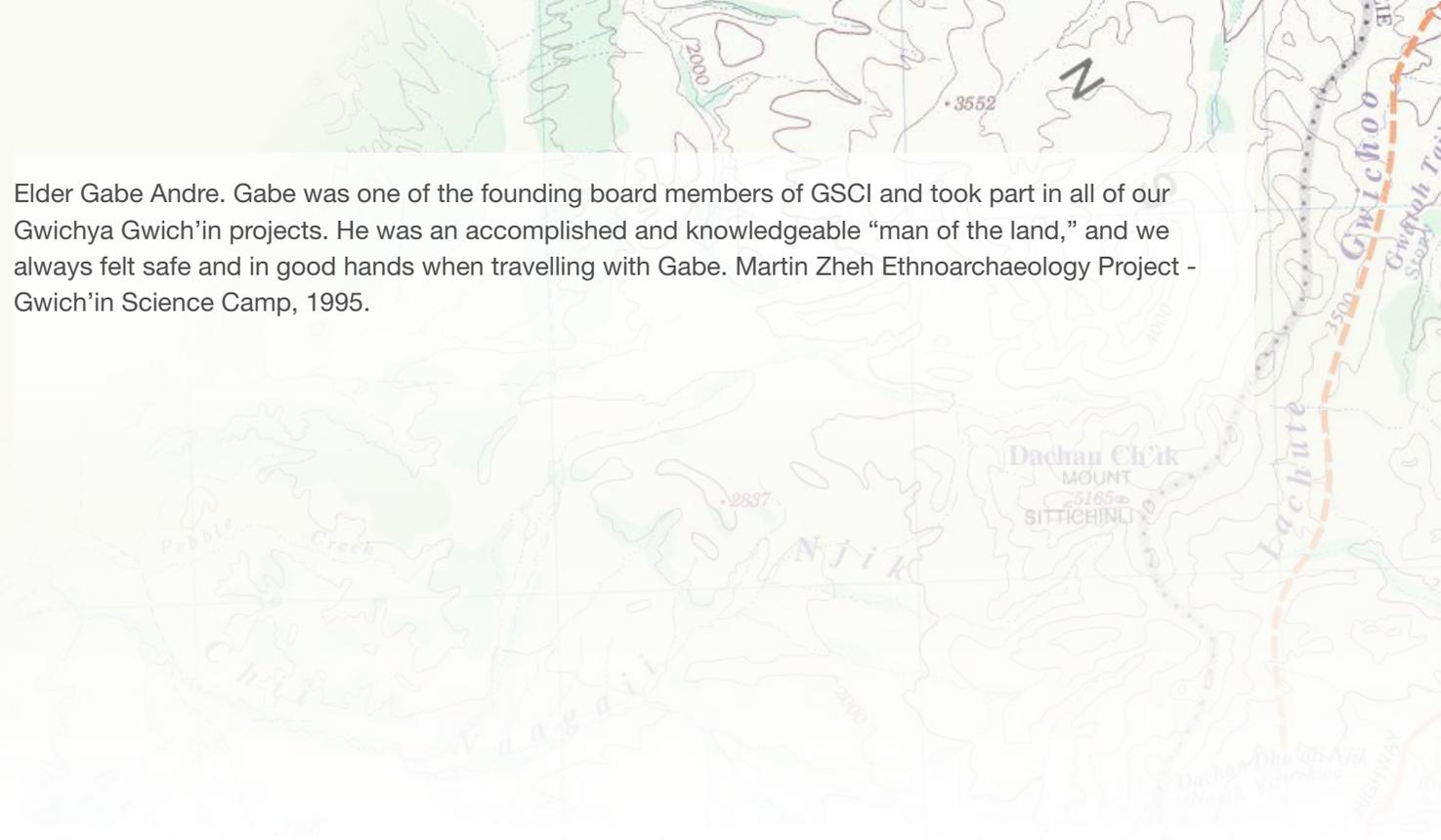
Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Bertha Francis in Fort McPherson. Bertha was a long time GSCI board member and because of her fluency in Gwich'in and English was often called upon to provide translation. She was critical to the success of much of our work. Teet'it Gwich'in Googwandak meeting, 2015.



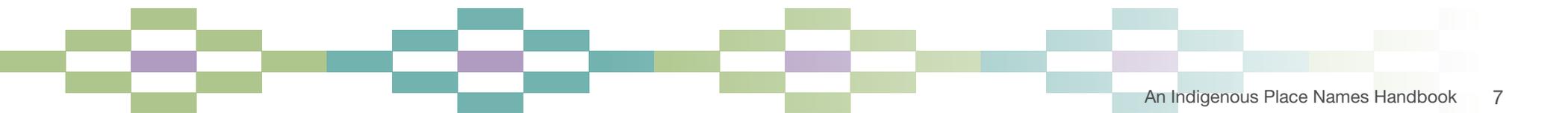
Elder Gabe Andre
Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Gabe Andre. Gabe was one of the founding board members of GSCI and took part in all of our Gwichya Gwich'in projects. He was an accomplished and knowledgeable “man of the land,” and we always felt safe and in good hands when travelling with Gabe. Martin Zheh Ethnoarchaeology Project - Gwich'in Science Camp, 1995.



Elder Joanne Snowshoe
Photo: Arlyn Charlie, GSCI-GTC

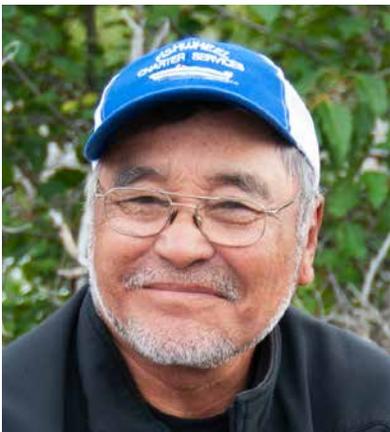
Elder Joanne Snowshoe at Nataiinlaii (a.k.a. Eight Miles) pointing out burial places in the area. Joanne's fluency in Gwich'in and English means she is often called upon to assist us with translation and clarify information provided.





Elder Noel Andre
Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Noel Andre. Noel took part in many of our projects in Tsiigehtchic and his fluency in the Gwichya Gwich'in dialect and English meant he was often called upon to assist with translation. He was the eldest son of Hyacinthe and Eliza (Sam) Andre and spent his early years on the land. Although he had full-time jobs for most of his adult years, he continued to trap on weekends and during the summer. He, his wife Alice, and their family fished from their fish camp on the flats in front of the community of Tsiigehtchic. Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names Project 1993.



Elder Walter Alexie
Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Walter Alexie. Walter was one of GSCI's longest serving board members and was often called upon to share his knowledge about Gwich'in culture, heritage, language, and life on the land. He took part in all of our Fort McPherson projects and was always ready to travel and share his vast knowledge. You always knew you were in safe hands when travelling on the land with Walter. Peel Heritage Inventory Project 2008.



Elder Hyacinthe Andre
Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Hyacinthe Andre. Hyacinthe was the oldest Elder we worked with in Tsiigehtchic and was involved in all of our projects with the community. He spent much of his life on the land and only moved into Tsiigehtchic fulltime when his dear wife and partner Eliza passed away in the late 1970s. Hyacinthe was one of the longest Chiefs in the Gwich'in area, serving for almost 40 years. He was born in 1910 and saw many changes in his 95 years. He always had a twinkle in his eyes! Tsiigehnjik Ethnoarchaeology Project 1994.



Elder Sarah Simon
Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elder Sarah Simon. Mrs. Simon was one of the oldest Elders we worked with in Fort McPherson. She was well known for her knowledge of Gwich'in family history, culture, and language and was often called upon to translate. She was also well known as a midwife and delivered 86 babies in the community and the bush. She and her husband James Simon, who became an ordained minister in 1959, worked for the Anglican Church for over 50 years. Born in 1901, Mrs. Simon saw many changes in her 100 years of life. Teet'it Gwich'in Place Names Project 1996.



Elders Robert Alexie Sr., Percy Henry, Walter Alexie, and Alfred Semple

Photo: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI-GTC

Elders Robert Alexie Sr., Percy Henry, Walter Alexie, and Alfred Semple. Robert and Walter Alexie are brothers and worked with us on all our Fort McPherson projects. Both were greatly experienced and knowledgeable about their culture, history, and language and enjoyed spending time out on the land – in summer and winter. Their camp up the Peel River in the Tr’atr’aataii Tshik (a.k.a. Trail River) area was often open to us during our projects. They were both wonderful cooks, and we always came away well fed from fish and other bush foods. Alfred Semple’s parents were originally from Fort McPherson, but he was born in Mayo, Yukon, and travelled extensively with them in the Peel watershed in his early years and in the Dawson area. He spent much of his adult years in the Aklavik area with his wife Catherine (Vittrekwa). He was a great storyteller and loved to share his knowledge about the Peel watershed and Dawson areas. Percy Henry is a member of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, a neighbouring Indigenous group to the Gwich’in and is one of the last fluent speakers of the Han language. His parents Joe and Annie Henry were Gwich’in and raised their son Percy and other children in the Peel River watershed, hence his great knowledge of this overlap area. Percy and his family resided in Dawson. Tombstone Oral History Project 2003.

