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The Stone Fireplaces of Denendeh

“The era of the stone fireplaces is very deeply embedded into Tłı̨chǫ memory and history.”

— John B. Zoe

In various locations in the Northwest Territories—from Great Bear Lake to the east end of Great Slave Lake and west to the junction of the Liard and South Nahanni rivers—there are the remains of log houses, constructed of squared logs with dovetailed corners, with wooden plank floors, gable roofs, and stone fireplaces (figure 1).⁴⁸ These remains date from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The log houses and associated stone and clay fireboxes with wooden framed clay chimneys were built by the Dene, the Indigenous people of Denendeh.⁴⁹

The log house and fireplace designs were adapted by Dene craftsmen based on examples they encountered when engaging with Euro-Canadian traders and explorers (figure 2). The Indigenous houses and fireplaces were built during a period of transition in Dene culture, at a time when they began the process of integrating into a fur trade economy. The fireplaces and houses are elements of Euro-Canadian vernacular architecture adapted by

Indigenous people in the north. The Indigenous houses and fireplaces are an example of cultural diffusion, the process by which ideas are spread between cultures and, in some instances, they might have also been expressions of social status. In most cases, other than memories, all that is left today of these houses is a mounded outline representing the footprint of the structure and a pile of rubble that are the remains of the fireplace. Using primary and secondary sources of information this article will explore the cultural heritage of the stone fireplaces of Denendeh.



Figure 1
Tłı̨chǫ Chimney Project webpage. The webpage provides background on the stone chimneys as well as video documentation and a link to the “Tłı̨chǫ Chimney Project” report (Clarskon 2010). [Tłı̨chǫ Chimney Project | Tlı̨chǫ History](https://tlichohistory.ca/en/stories/tlichochimney-project) (<https://tlichohistory.ca/en/stories/tlichochimney-project>)

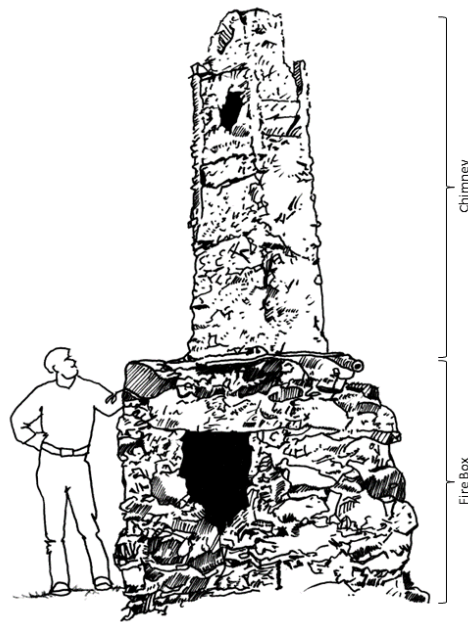


Figure 2
Drawing of Fort Reliance fireplace identifying the firebox and the chimney. P. Carroll.

A member of the Tłı̨chʔ (tee-cho) Nation and an advocate for the preservation of Tłı̨chʔ fireplaces, John B. Zoe wrote:

In the 1850s when the fur trade eventually reached the Tłı̨chʔ, trading posts and support buildings were built ... These buildings required heat, so local rocks and clay material were used to build fireplaces and chimneys. These were the technologies brought in from further south accompanying the pioneers who went into the hinterland to set up trading posts. When the Tłı̨chʔ first entered the trading posts, they observed the buildings and the fireplaces and eventually they replicated within their harvesting areas what

they saw for their own Trading Chiefs. (Clarkson 2010, 3)

I was familiar with John B. Zoe's writing about the Tłı̨chʔ fireplaces when, in 2021 I visited the Hudson's Bay Company's wintering post, Fort Reliance, also known as the site of Back's Chimneys, on the East Arm of Great Slave Lake.⁵⁰ Zoe's writing about the Tłı̨chʔ fireplaces and their association with Dene Trading Chiefs engaged my interest in the cultural heritage of these architectural features (Clarkson 2010; Zoe and Dunkin 2020). Visiting the fireplaces at Fort Reliance I was struck by their deteriorating condition. Zoe's writing also made me aware of the fragility and cultural value of the Tłı̨chʔ fireplaces and, furthermore, of the relevance of the fireplaces as a point of cultural connection between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this part of the north.

My curiosity was piqued. What was available to support and elucidate the relationship between the Euro-Canadian fireplaces and the Dene fireplaces? Who are these Indigenous Trading Chiefs and how did they function within Dene society? How did the fireplaces express social values and hierarchies? Do the fireplaces reflect a period of cultural change among the Tłı̨chʔ? Why did the Dene stop building stone fireplaces and log houses? What can the Tłı̨chʔ fireplaces tell us about other sites in the broader region where fireplaces have also been identified, specifically Chimney Point on the Liard River? Taking my lead from John B. Zoe's comments, I indulged in a search for answers to these questions, beginning with the memories of the Dene themselves.

Traditional Craftsmanship: Building a Chimney

From 1991 to 1993 Tłı̄ch̄o elders and community members worked with archaeologists from the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre to record traditional knowledge and document cultural sites associated with the İdaà Trail that runs between Great Bear and Great Slave lakes. Many of the memories of the Tłı̄ch̄o quoted in this article are taken from the three-volume archaeological permit report compiled by the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT 1999a, 1999b). The following description of a fireplace's use and construction was provided by an elderly Tłı̄ch̄o woman who recalled stone fireplaces being used when she was a child (c. 1910–1920) and her aunt's memories of the effort required to build them:

Yes, that's all they used to use at that time because there were not [iron] stoves back then ... my aunt took me in and raised me ... we came back to Hislop Lake. There were houses there, people were living there. But people didn't live in some of the houses. And at that time, there were mud fireplaces and chimneys. I was a bit older and I've seen fire burning inside these things. I have seen that ... and that's all they had there. There was a fire burning and smoke coming out of the chimney. That's what they used to cook their food with and for heat. That's all they used to use at that time. I have observed fire burning in those things ... My aunt used to tell me stories. And I would ask her what

they used to make these fireplaces and chimneys. I have not observed them making these things because they probably made them when I was still very small. And I ask her about it. She said they would backpack, haul all the mud, with rocks mixed in there. And they would mix it all with water. So, with the mixture of mud and rocks they would churn that. And as they build the fireplace up, it would dry. They place the rocks on top of each other and build it like that. They smear it with mud that's like water, they cover it with mud. So, when it dries, it hardens like that. And there are rock mixed with it, so that's how they were able to have fire burning in there. (GNWT 1999b, 73–74)

The speaker's memories belong to the end of the era of the stone fireplaces as she does not recall seeing any being made but she does note the transition to iron stoves. The following description draws on the memories of an elderly Dene who shared his knowledge of building fireplaces.

In 1974, archaeologist Robert Janes conducted excavations at the Northwest Company's post, Fort Alexander, which operated between the years 1817 and 1821 at the junction of the Willowlake and Mackenzie rivers in the Northwest Territories. Janes's excavations, supported by his crew of four assistants from the Mackenzie Region, included the remains of several stone fireplaces. The eighty-four-year-old brother of one of his Dene assistants "could recall constructing fireplaces in the early 1900s, very similar to the ones uncovered at Fort Alexander" (Janes 1974, 32). What

follows is an extended description of a fireplace's construction based on Indigenous knowledge as well as the archaeologist's observations:

The lower portion of the fireplace, approximately 4–5 feet in height, was constructed of river cobbles using river mud as a mortar. The mud would burn and crack and then more mud would be added. Eventually the exterior surface would become very smooth through this process. The fireplace was constructed upon large, flat rocks, as wooden flooring was not laid where the fireplace was to stand. The flat basal rocks were arranged in such a manner as to form a concave depression to allow the accumulation of ash. In this way constant ash removal was eliminated.

The chimneys of Fort Alexander fireplaces were constructed of wattle and daub. The wattle, or framework, was made of round sticks about 1–2 inches in diameter. Specific details concerning the manner in which they were fastened together to form the framework is lacking. Our informant stated that he used nails. Evidence for the use of nails in this manner is lacking at Fort Alexander, and it is possible that the sticks were woven together in wickerwork fashion to form the framework. River mud was then packed both inside and outside this wattle framework, forming the chimney. Constant upkeep was necessary, as the mud would dry out with repeated use of the fireplace, become brittle and break off. Renewing this mud, or daub, was a regular chore. The fire

hazard inherent in this type of chimney construction is obvious.

The chimney was joined to the stone fireplace by uprights which were situated in each corner of the fireplace. Apparently, these uprights could have been located outside of the fireplace proper or inserted in the stonework. More detailed information on this aspect of construction is not available. (32–34)

The previous quotations show that knowledge of stone fireplaces persists in Dene culture. As physical features, though, very few Indigenous or Euro-Canadian examples still exist. In 2010, the remains of several fireboxes were still standing at Faber Lake in the Tłı̨chǫ region south of Gameti, in the Northwest Territories (figure 3); in 2011, one chimney and the remains of a firebox were all that were still standing of the four fireplaces at Fort Confidence on Great Bear Lake (figure 4 and 5); and in 2021, the remains of two chimneys and two fireboxes were still in place at Fort Reliance National Historic Site on the East Arm of Great Slave Lake (figures 6, 7, and 8). These three sites represent the extent of known, relatively intact remains of stone fireplaces in the Northwest Territories of Canada. These three sites also represent a period of relatively intense cultural contact and cultural influence for the Dene during which they transitioned into a fur-trade economy and a system of colonial governance.



Figure 3
Remains of two stone fireplaces at Faber Lake in 2010. [Tlichō Chimney Project | Tlichō History](https://tlichohistory.ca/en/stories/tlichochimney-project) (<https://tlichohistory.ca/en/stories/tlichochimney-project>)

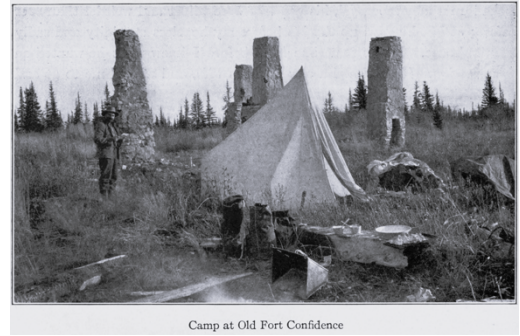


Figure 5
Fort Confidence in 1911. George Douglas from “Lands Forlorn: A Story of an Expedition to Hearne’s Coppermine River,” 1914. Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/landsforlornstor00douguoft/page/144/mode/2up>.



Figure 4
Remains of Fort Confidence chimneys in 2011. A. Bunker, “Bunk’s Outdoor Angle,” Aug. 16, 2011. <https://bunksoutdoorangle.com/awarded-the-arctic/>



Figure 6
Remains of one of four chimneys at Fort Reliance in 2021. Notice the wooden lattice framing the chimney. P. Carroll.



Figure 7
Chimneys at Fort Reliance in 1900. J.W. Tyrell, “The Barren Lands Collection.” University of Toronto. Photo reference no. barrenlands_P10083_0001. <https://discover-archives.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/joseph-burr-tyrrell-papers>.



Figure 8
Remains of one of four chimneys at Fort Reliance in 2021. P. Carroll.

The Incipient-Early Contact Period in the Upper Mackenzie Region

Throughout the time-period covered by this paper, Dene culture can be understood as being in a state of transition and adaptation to a way of life that accorded with the emergence of a fur-trade based economy. Changes in Dene society included increased sedentism and a social structure based around the fur trade.

The phrase “incipient-early contact” was proposed by ethnologist June Helm⁵¹ as a way of identifying periods of transition in Dene culture in the Upper Mackenzie

Region arising from contact with Euro-Canadians (Helm et al. 2000). The incipient-early contact stage is followed by the contact-traditional stage. The progression between the two stages is defined by increased direct engagement between Indigenous and White cultures and the degree to which the Indigenous groups become integrated into the fur trade. During the incipient-early contact period the Indigenous group has access to trade items either through Indigenous intermediaries or direct contact with Euro-Canadians. In this period, Indigenous groups are not dependent on these items and are therefore not fully committed to a dual economy and the subsequent social changes that more sustained contact will bring. The contact-traditional stage begins once a group has regular contact with a trading post resulting in changes in seasonal and social behaviour arising from involvement in the fur-trade economy. For a variety of reasons, the degree of contact and rate of cultural change occurred at different times for different groups. In general, the transition from incipient-early contact to contact-traditional in the Mackenzie Region occurred between 1800 and 1850.⁵² Key historic events to affect this transition include the amalgamation of the Northwest Company (NWC) and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1821 that created a fur trade monopoly for the HBC, and the transfer of Rupert's Land from the HBC to the Government of Canada in 1870. Amalgamation resulted in a more intensified effort by the HBC to expand the fur trade into the hinterlands of the north. The acquisition of Rupert's Land by the Canadian government initiated an influx of non-Indigenous pioneers and settlers and increased the rate and influence of contact on

Indigenous peoples who were already being impacted by Western culture through engagement with the fur trade and religion.

Dene society went through various stages of adaptation throughout this period of increasing contact. The role of Trading Chiefs was created by Euro-Canadian traders who sought to establish alliances with individual Indigenous groups. Indigenous groups, likewise, addressed the increasing value of trade by incorporating the role of intermediary, or Trading Chief, into their social structure. At first with responsibilities limited to representation of their social groups at trading posts, the role of intermediary became a more central part of a community's social structure, eventually becoming part of the characteristics required for successful leadership.

The Rise and Demise of *Donek'ami*

In his ethnography, "Moose-Deer Island House People," David M. Smith writes about traditional Dene leadership in the Fort Resolution area (Smith 1982, 33–37). According to Smith, a leader was ultimately the person that would best provide for his followers. Authority was exerted through kinship, strength, charisma, and ability to organize successful hunts resulting in the redistribution of food. Smith identifies two levels of leadership: the local and the regional. Local leadership was considered subservient to the regional leader, but both levels were fluid and dependent upon their successful ability to provide for their followers. While the Dene remained not dependent on the fur trade and utilized trade on their own terms to supplement their needs, traditional leadership roles persisted and the

Trading Chief remained a secondary figure whose authority did not extend beyond the trading post. As the Dene became more immersed in and dependent on the fur trade economy, the role of the trade intermediary appears to have been adopted by the existing leadership and became an expression of their social status as a provider (Smith 1982, 64–66). This rise in authority of the role of the trade intermediary corresponded with changes in traditional economies and in subsistence patterns resulting in the creation of settlements that included the building of log houses and stone chimneys.

Rather than using the phrase Trading Chief, Helm uses the Dene word *donek'avi*⁵³ which translates as 'people's trader' in reference to their role in representing their community group in trading at an HBC post. Helm states *donek'avi* was a "leader who operated as a Trading Chief by receiving supplies on credit from the [HBC] with which he aided his followers" (Helm et al 2000, 152). Over time, the role of intermediary at trading posts grew in social authority. This transition can be understood as the secondary role of Trading Chief becoming the more authoritative *donek'avi*.⁵⁴ From being only one of a variety of subsistence strategies in the earliest days of contact, trade with fur traders and consequently the role of *donek'avi* became central to Dene social organization until the position's dissolution with the arrival of free-traders in the mid-twentieth century and the collapse of the HBC's trade monopoly.

Zoe, while travelling on ancient Tłı̄chǫ trails in the mid-1990's, recalled:

We saw from the canoe making sites at Nı̄dzı̄ka Kògolaa on Semı̄ti (Faber Lake) that this was a traditional campsite. However, the presence of a stone chimney ... revealed that this camp continued to be used during the fur trade era. The stone chimney was once part of a log cabin belonging to K'aàwı̄daà, a well-known Tłı̄chǫ Trading Chief. Trading Chiefs often built cabins in central locations, filling them with goods they received on credit from the HBC or free traders. Over time, they exchanged the goods in their cabins for furs from hunters and trappers. When the cabin was full, the trading chief, along with a brigade, would travel to the post. (Zoe and Dunkin 2020, 5–6)

In the earliest contact period, the Trading Chief's value was primarily dependent upon his success in trading. His social authority very seldom extended beyond being an intermediary at the trading posts. Writing in the 1770s, the fur trader and explorer Samuel Hearne noted that "the authority of those great men, when absent from the Company's Factory, never extends beyond their own family; and the trifling respect shown them by their countrymen ... proceeds from motives of [self] interest" (qtd. in Helm et al. 2000, 173). Sir John Richardson wrote in 1851 that "a free expenditure by the chief of the presents that he receives from the traders, and even of his produce of furs, is the main bulwark of his authority" (qtd. in Helm et al. 2000, 185). The Trading Chief had a role to play, although, in the earliest period of contact it was a lesser role in Dene community structure because Indigenous groups remained aloof of the fur trade.

Joseph Naedzo spoke about the increased influence that the role of fur trade intermediary would acquire for the Dene as it transitioned from the secondary Trading Chief to *donek'avi*. June Helm described Naedzo as a highly respected Tłı̄chǫ elder and prophet when she interviewed him in the 1960s. Born in 1887, Naedzo's life spanned the many changes occurring through the contact-traditional period. Naedzo recalled, "We had a good time in the old days, because there was just the post manager and his [Metis] interpreter and the mission [priest]. These were the only three whites" (Helm et al. 2000, 164). According to Naedzo,

Everybody follows *donek'avi* in those days. Whatever *donek'avi* says, we do. Which way you're going to go to trap, to hunt, *donek'avi* knows the country. He knows where there are marten, fox, where you can find muskox. Groups of five or six trappers and their families would go different directions for fur. We used to get all kinds of fur in those days. *Donek'avi* used to bring all kinds of fur, many bales, to the trader. The more fur they bring, the more side pay *donek'avi* gets. In those days, it couldn't be better, everyone was so happy, everything was going fine. (164)

In Naedzo's example, the authority of *donek'avi* is based upon his knowledge of the land and his ability to organize his followers to successfully procure the resources the land provides. His leadership is based on traditional criteria as described previously by Smith for the Fort Resolution area, but he is also directing his followers' efforts toward the trapping of fur which he will take to trade on

behalf of his community. As described by Naedzo, the role of trade intermediary had become a key part of the *donek'avi*'s leadership role.

Among the three *donek'avi* that Naedzo identified for the Fort Rae trading post region was a man named K'aàwidaà. K'aàwidaà was repeatedly referenced as the *K'avi* in the oral histories from Tłı̄chǫ living near Fabre Lake, where there is a settlement with the remains of log houses and associated stone chimneys (GNWT 1999a).

In 1962, Vital Thomas, an Indigenous member of the Tłı̄chǫ Nation, provided Helm with a Tłı̄chǫ perspective on the role of *donek'avi*. According to Thomas:

There couldn't be any higher man; he was a great man. If strangers came, they asked for *donek'avi*'s tent. They shook hands with him before anyone else, and he had to feed them all. The Hudson's Bay Company used to give all kinds of supplies, clothing, and ammunition to *donek'avi*. (Helm et al. 2000, 185)

According to Thomas, the *donek'avi* was personally responsible for the welfare of his group, or followers:

Donek'avi and his helpers had to feed the whole band, so pretty near all of the Indians had to follow him to whatever place was a good hunting place, a good trapping place. Maybe there would be a hundred people following him and everybody got the same amount. He didn't charge anything. It did not matter if

a man was poor, lazy, or lame. *Ek'awi* had to help everyone. (186)

Anyone could follow any *donek'awi*. Leadership was based on the strength of the personality and personal ability of a leader to provide his followers with success in hunting, success in trapping, and success in trade. As contact and involvement in the fur trade grew, access to trade goods and the role of trade intermediary gained equal authority to the other qualities that defined leadership.

By the end of the nineteenth century, major social and economic changes came to the Mackenzie Region instigated by the transfer of Rupert's Land to the Government of Canada. Among these was the arrival of free traders. These were traders that operated independently of the HBC, consequently creating a more competitive and less-regulated fur trade. The authority of *donek'awi* was to be challenged by the vagaries of aggressive capitalism. According to Vital Thomas, "When Old Hislop [the first free trader] came, then there were two traders [the HBC and Hislop.] Everybody could [and did] go anyplace, wherever they wanted to. And that's how they cut out *donek'awi*" (186). In describing the end of the *donek'awi* period, Naedzo is much more succinct: "I told you that we had a good time and lots of fun, because there was just straight Indians, no whites. We didn't have to worry about anything ... And then almost all the old people died and all the *donek'awi* also died" (164).

Contact, spurred by a dramatic influx of Western institutions and settlers into the North, was manifest in the fur trade by a shift in control in favour of the trader. The Dene had completed the transition

to a fur-trade-based economy. Trade items were no longer acquired by Trading Chiefs on behalf of their community, rather Indigenous traders travelled to communities on behalf of trading companies; the difference is subtle, but it expresses the dissolution of this aspect of the Dene social structure and a diminishing of their cultural independence:

The [Indigenous] free trader was designated *naindidon*, "buy-and-sell man." Very shortly, in place of the *donek'awi* emerged the counterpart of the white free trader, the Indian *naindidon*, who operated as a kind of exchange conduit between a trader at the fort ... and the Indian trappers in the bush. (152)

Donek'awi were given 'side pay' or benefits from trader's for bringing in furs and maintaining their group's relationship with a specific post. They remained a respected member of their community and were understood to be working for the benefit of their followers. The *naindidon*, in contrast, was provided with a commission of free goods and seen as working for the trading post, that is, no longer solely representing the interests of the Indigenous community; "unlike *donek'awi*, the role of *naindidon* did not per se involve band leadership" (153).

Indigenous Fireplaces and Log Houses

Stone fireplaces co-exist with the log houses built to contain them. While not all log structures had fireplaces, the emergence of Indigenous crafted log houses and fireplaces occurred simultaneously. As Zoe stated, "When the Tlicho first entered the trading posts, they observed

the buildings and the fireplaces and eventually they replicated within their harvesting areas what they saw for their Trading Chiefs” (Clarkson 2010, 3). The building of log houses, therefore, is another indicator of the transition among the Dene into what Helm refers to as the contact-traditional period of their history. According to Helm:

The prime criterion that we have set for the advent of the contact-traditional horizon is the establishment of all-native communities made up of permanent dwellings ... we consider this physical evidence of significant decline in the nomadism and cultural independence of the aboriginal and early contact period. (Helm and Damas 1963, 10–11)

The Dene log houses that epitomize this period are intended for permanent or semi-permanent occupation. They are crafted pieces of architecture with squared logs, dovetail cornering, planked flooring, and gabled roofs. They closely resembled the design of the HBC structures. Less crafted and more utilitarian log cabins likely appeared around this same time, but archaeological records only associate stone fireplaces with the log houses previously described.

Log houses may have been built especially for the *donek’awi* of a given group, as suggested by Zoe, but this is not supported by the information provided in the interviews conducted among the Tłıchǫ in the early 1990s (GNWT 1999b). Instead, it seems that log houses were occupied by community members and expressed the prestige of the *donek’awi* because they were built under the direction of the *donek’awi* at

settlements from which the *donek’awi* retained primary access to nearby traders. These settlements were at established gathering places that provided a predictable food supply. Again, according to Helm, the contact-traditional period involves two main forms of social organization occurring simultaneously. One is the emergent permanent base community characterized by the building of log houses. The second she refers to as a “residual category that we term ‘camps’” (Helm and Damas 1963, 11). These are residual in the sense that they represent traditional seasonal movements and are not tied to residency in any single location; they are the continuation of traditional Dene culture in the face of changes being introduced by incipient contact.

Tłıchǫ elders recounted a dual culture of nomadism and sedentism based around seasonal gathering places. “Long ago things were scarce and they didn’t bother to build houses. Most of the time people lived in tents” (GNWT 1999b, 157). Another informant recalled that his grandfather built a house on an island where he lived “for many years with other people living nearby in tents. This was the place to live in those days” (24). Faber Lake was one of the larger Tłıchǫ settlements that became a permanent community:

long before treaty signing in 1921, our people have come here [Faber Lake]. There were houses there, some as old as seventy and eighty years old. Generation after generation of people came here. That area was very significant to the survival of our people. They would live here

all summer and winter, raising their children. (10)

Faber Lake was the site of an important fishery; “the houses were there because the people at the time who have always lived in the bush liked to live near a place where it is good for fish” (45). While in the very old days, seasonal gatherings at fisheries were part of a larger cycle of mobility, increased access to trade items created greater sedentism among some Dene, in part based on the leadership of *donek’awi*:

I remember when the houses were in good shape, and all that was based on how K’aàwidaà, wanted things, for he was a *Kawi*. He did not have a cabin built for him, but he helped them make their cabins, and there must have been at least twenty houses and some people lived there, now they are all gone. (46)

Log houses, fireplaces, and access to trade items provided a feeling of security in a life that could otherwise be seen as, as one informant said, a struggle. In a very practical sense, sedentism would not provide people with the resources required: not only the food required, but also the items of material culture. Settlement sites remained gathering places where Helm’s “permanent” and “residual” groups could continue to meet and exchange goods and information and, through *donek’awi*, engage in trade with non-Indigenous traders; “people congregated at this village and hardly went to trade” (157). *Donek’awi* was a bridge between his community and the trading post and, in this way, he was a key provider of necessary items; both food and material objects.

Access to and ready acquisition of Western goods and having acquired the knowledge and skills to emulate the fur traders’ log houses and fireplaces on their own terms and for their own purposes provided the Dene with a sense of pride. This was evident in several of the Tłı̨ch̨ı̨ interviews that stressed that these things were built by Dene. The following expresses the speaker’s pride in the adaptability and resourcefulness of her Dene ancestors:

When we arrived [at Faber Lake] by boat there were lots of houses. All those things there were not made by the white people. There was nothing there from the white people. Everything that was made there was done by our people. Tables were made, chairs were made and there were no nails. Wooden sticks were used as nails and that’s what was used to make these chairs. They make holes and make nails out of these wooden sticks. They used mud fireplace and chimneys. That’s what they all had. And there were no stoves. (73–74)

As both Joseph Naedzo and Vital Thomas said, life at this time was good.

As noted previously, the early twentieth century brought great changes to the North. Contact and the influences of outside cultures increased and further affected the daily life of Indigenous people. The introduction of two items of material culture are specific to this research: iron stoves and lumber. Both had the effect of subverting the traditional knowledge and skills required to build and maintain log houses and fireplaces. One informant recalled that when she arrived at Hislop Lake as a child, some of

the houses were empty (abandoned) and that, by the end of her time there some of the chimneys and fireboxes had collapsed. This suggests that the log houses were already old by the time she was living there. She goes on to describe the transition from hand hewn log houses to houses built from purchased materials:

Then Kwatizo bought some plywood/timber and brought them over there. And he made a house by those other houses. There's one house that's standing there with plywood roofing which you have probably seen, that's his house. That's the house he made. There's another house just next to it and that's the one he made the first time. That's the one that had the mud fireplace and chimney but it all fell down. It is still there just like that. (74)

Archaeologists from the Government of the Northwest Territories have documented a Tłı̨cẖ village by Red Willow Lake that is another example of the changes occurring by the mid-twentieth century (GNWT 1999a, 147–151). The village was abandoned shortly after the influenza epidemic of 1928. It contains the remains of seven houses and several associated features. All but one of the houses had a stone fireplace as evidenced by a rubble pile inside each of them. The village was constructed sometime after 1900. The one house that did not have evidence of a stone fireplace belonged to a man named Harry Black, the father of the last family to occupy the site. Nick Black, Harry's son, remembers living there as a young child in the early 1930s. There is no fireplace rubble inside the building, but a large pile of rocks is

located outside the northeast window. According to Nick Black, his father removed the fireplace when they obtained a metal stove for the house.

A Possible Answer to a Big Question: Chimney Point / Tache

Chimney Point is a place on the north side of the Liard River at the mouth of the South Nahanni River. In the past it was a small community of several log buildings with stone fireplaces. Except for its name, all trace of the community is now gone. The origins of the structures and the fireplaces remains a mystery.

Jack LaFlair, Bill Clarke, and Gus Kraus,⁵⁵ three non-Indigenous old-timers who prospected and trapped in the South Nahanni River area in the first half of the twentieth century, recalled visiting the remains of the chimneys and cabins at Chimney Point. Jack LaFlair arrived in the Nahanni area in 1914 and built his cabin on the banks of the Liard River. By the time he had arrived in 1914, the houses at Chimney Point had been burned to the ground and the chimneys had collapsed. According to Gus Kraus who homesteaded in the Nahanni between 1941 and 1971,

Nobody knows whose they were. Even Jack [LaFlair] didn't. And I asked the Indians and they said they didn't know. They were all burnt, but you can see everywhere where they [had built] houses ... where they banked it up with dirt and there's the solid squares. (Addison 1975, 150)

Bill Clark, interviewed in the 1970s, recalled the remains of the fireplaces and

that they had been abandoned a long time ago:

Those old chimneys sticking up there right on the Liard River ... There was three, at least three that I recall. That was all that was left [of] the chimneys ... This was old chimneys, of old, old Indians ... they were abandoned. The Indians spent, in those days and later on for quite a while, spent most of the time in the bush. (Addison and Anthony 1976, 78)

Wendel White was a teacher in Nahanni Butte. In 1984 he published an oral history of the Nahanni/Liard Valley. His research included the area known as Tache ('where the rivers meet') which is the Indigenous name for Chimney Point. Charle Yohin, an elder Dene living in Nahanni Butte, was born at Tache. He recounted his memories of growing up in Tache to White. According to White,

[Yohin] recalls at least nine families living at that camp. Paul Tesou lived at Tache as did his wife's mother and father. An old man from Simpson by the name of Etcha lived there as well. Some people lived in teepee structures and tents while others lived in pole log and full log homes. The larger log homes had chimneys made of clay and stone. An important man known as Nahania (Small Naha) carried on trade for the Bay with the people of the camp. He was of short build and well on in years and chose not to live with his people. However, there were occasions when some of his relatives would come to Tache to visit. The people were sad when Nahania died

and they drifted in search of other places that would provide the same peace as Tache. (White 1984, 64)

Based on Yohin's memories, Nahania therefore, was seen as working independently of the community. This suggests that he was a later period *naindidon* and not a *donek'awi*.

While Yohin recalled people living in log homes with clay and stone fireplaces, he did not know who had built them. White suggests that the log homes with fireplaces were from a forgotten past. He concludes by affirming that little is known of the original occupants of Tache "and the origin of the chimneys posed a big question [for Yohin]" (64). It is interesting that Yohin does not mention the houses and fireplaces being built by Nahania. Nahania was 'well on in years' when Yohin was a child (c. 1900–1910), so we can expect that Nahania's general knowledge of the area, and by extension the community's history, should have extended back into at least the mid-nineteenth century.

Gus Kraus mentioned there being several copper kettles associated with the remains of the log houses when Jack LaFlair was living there. According to Kraus, when interviewed in the 1970s,

they were in good shape. Some of them was real good. Even that tin inside yet, you know. They were all tinned, them copper kettles ... some real ... the old-shaped one. Narrow on the bottom and big heavy handle on 'em, old-fashioned kettle. So, there might be more in there, but Mary and I and the Indian Agent in Simpson one time, we went to look

there but it ... thick growth in there now and the windfalls. (Addison 1975, 150)

Charles Amsden conducted archaeological testing at the site in 1977 and partial excavation in 1978. His work at the site recovered numerous artifacts that are indicative of trade items including: beads, buttons, leather fragments, a candle mould, a possible gaming piece, nails, screws, strips of metal, sheets of tin, door lock fragments, and fragments of glass. Cartridge casings and a piece of iron stove marked “The Gurney Tilden Co.” were also found. These latter artifacts are of particular interest because they can be dated, giving us a more concrete idea of when the site was occupied. According to Amsden,

A maximum age for this occupation of the site is indicated by the four cartridge cases found at the site, one of which (the .45-70 caliber) was found in situ in a level which almost certainly is associated with the occupation of the structures. Both the .45-70 and .44-40 caliber cartridges were first introduced in 1873, and the .38-55 first appeared in 1884 ... It is unlikely, therefore, that the chimneyed structures predate 1874 or, more likely, a few years after that. (Amsden 1978, 106)

Based in Hamilton, Ontario, the Gurney, Tilden Co. manufactured cast iron stoves. The company began in 1845 as the Gurney and Carpenter Iron Foundry. After several manifestations, it became the Gurney, Tilden Company in the late 1880s until it was taken over in 1910 by the Hamilton Stove Heater Company. Therefore, the ‘Gurney Tilden Co.’

fragment can be dated to no earlier than the late 1880s.

Based on the artifacts that can be given a date of origin, the site was operating as a trading post from some point after 1874 and was burned before 1914. These dates would correspond with the time during which Nahania is noted as trading in this area. We might expect Charle Yohin to have had some knowledge of another trader working in that area if Nahania had taken over an existing trade. Instead, the origins of the log houses and fireplaces remain, even for Charle Yohin, a ‘big question.’

Research to date refutes any suggestion that the houses were built by Indigenous people. Alvin Paquette, the son of Jack LaFlair, stated that the houses “are not within [Indigenous] cultural context” (White 1984, 57). Amsden refuted Bill Clark’s suggestion that the houses were built by “old, old Indians,” saying this was “highly unlikely ... considering the nature of the features,” and the associated trade goods (1978, 106). Amsden asserts that the houses were not Indigenous, but rather were a separate occupation of the area by Euro-Canadian traders subsequent to an Indigenous occupation as evidenced by the presence of stone artifacts:

In any event there is less than a forty-year time frame during which the structures at Chimney Point could have been built [i.e. 1874–1914]. All the evidence encountered to date strongly suggests that the builders of these structures were not natives; however, the buildings might very well have served as a trading post or similar institution

closely associated with a resident native population. This would explain the chi-tho [stone hide working tool] on the beach. This type of implement is common in northern Athapaskan sites of the later prehistoric and early historic periods. It is also possible, of course, that the chi-tho represents a still earlier occupation of the Chimney Point site. (Amsden 1978, 106)

The chi-tho could also represent an Indigenous occupation of this site contemporaneous to the log houses if they had originally been built and occupied by a *denak'ami* and his followers. Researchers have been unable to consider that the structures might have been built by Indigenous people and could belong to a much earlier period, preceding its use by Nahania.

Charle Yohin grew up among the log houses and fireplaces when Nahania was operating his trading post. Yohin had a connection to the earlier history of the community and very readily supported the idea that the houses were built by 'old, old Indians,' and that they were likely built at a "point in time [when] the Dene people had been exposed to white men long enough to pick up some useful skills and thus the chimney construction could have been an adaptation" (White 1984, 64). For Charle Yohin, the fireplaces are an example of cultural diffusion.

A Shared Heritage

Stone fireplaces were central features in early Euro-Canadian trading posts. Prior to the advent of iron heating and cooking stoves, stone fireplaces were essential for cooking and for providing warmth in

buildings intended to be occupied throughout a northern winter. The earliest stone fireplaces in the north were built by NWC traders as they spread northward from Lake Athabasca in the late eighteenth century. The HBC's Fort Reliance (1833–1835) and Fort Confidence (1837–1839) are two locations in the Northwest Territories where original stone fireplaces built by Euro-Canadians are still standing. Elements of all four of the original fireplaces are still present at Fort Reliance.⁵⁶

The fireplaces at forts Reliance and Confidence represent the extant remains of what is the ur-type or prototype for Indigenous stone fireplaces in the Northwest Territories. As vernacular architecture, the fireplaces and associated log houses are a tangible expression of the early contact period between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. They are also an expression of a period of dramatic change for Dene culture as social structures adapted to a fur trade economy and the advent of southern interests in the North. John B. Zoe is an enthusiastic proponent for the preservation and heritage value of the Tłı̨ch̨ǫ fireplaces. His comments can be extended to include the fur trade sites:

Most of the trading posts' log buildings and fireplaces no longer exist except for the Tłı̨ch̨ǫ [fireboxes].⁵⁷ In other words the design has been kept alive by the Tłı̨ch̨ǫ, and these log buildings with the fireplaces still exist on Tłı̨ch̨ǫ lands ... these monuments are in danger of eventual collapse and vandalism. The Tłı̨ch̨ǫ landscape has preserved a living design that goes back at least

160 years ... the era of the stone fireplaces is very deeply embedded into Tłı̨chǫ memory and history. (Clarkson 2010, 3)

Indigenous and Euro-Canadian stone fireplaces have been documented in various locations across the Northwest Territories.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, most of the documented fireplaces and log houses are now not more than rubble and rotted timbers. The Tłı̨chǫ and forts Reliance and Confidence fireplaces are all that remain of these period structures. Together they are part of a common heritage of the earliest periods of cultural contact and change in the Northwest Territories. They are an expression of both the tangibles and intangibles of cultural diffusion. The trading post fireplaces represent the origins of colonial expansion into Canada's north. The Tłı̨chǫ fireplaces and houses are a testament to the resourcefulness and craftsmanship of Dene people and to their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The Indigenous and Euro-Canadian stone fireplaces of Denendeh are relics of our shared cultural heritage.

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⁴⁸ A fireplace is composed of two main components: firebox and chimney. Fireplace is used throughout this paper as a generic term to identify the architectural feature. Firebox is used when only the lower portion remains. Chimney refers to a fireplace where both the firebox and the chimney remain intact. Thus, Fort Reliance includes the remains of four fireplaces: two chimneys and two separate fireboxes.

⁴⁹ The following is from the Dene Nation webpage: “Today, many Athapaskan-speaking people, particularly those who live in Canada’s Northwest Territories, are known as ‘Dene’ which, means ‘people’ in their language. The Dene have always called their homeland ‘Denendeh’ which means the ‘Land of the People.’ Denendeh is located in the western part of the Northwest Territories in northern Canada ... Geographical conditions in Denendeh have created the groups of people who make up the Dene Nation — Denesoline (Chipewyan), Tlı̄chǫ (Dogrib), Deh Gah Got’ine (Slavey) K’ashot’ine (Hareskin) and Dinjii Zhuh (Gwich’in, once called Loucheux).” Dene Nation. “About Us.”

Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://denenation.com/about/>

⁵⁰ Admiral Sir George Back was a British Navy officer. The HBC built Fort Reliance for him to use as a wintering post to stage his expedition in search of John Ross and his subsequent mapping of the Thlewe-ee-choh (Great Fish River).

⁵¹ In 1959, the Tlı̄chǫ (Dogrib) people became the focus of Helm's fieldwork, which entailed ten trips to the Northwest Territories between 1959–1979. For more information on Helm’s work with the Tlı̄chǫ see: Live.Learn.Experience Tlı̄chǫ. “June Helm Ph.D.” Accessed May 15, 2024. <https://tlichohistory.ca/en/stories/june-helm-phd/>

⁵² June Helm states that the assigning of a time period for contact with “the Dogribs [Tlı̄chǫ] poses a problem ... They did not have a point-of-trade central to their own territory until the establishment of old Fort Rae in 1852 ... on the whole, the Dogribs stand out as an isolate in the generally easy trade contact afforded the

neighbouring peoples of the Upper Mackenzie drainage by 1820” (Helm et al 113).

⁵³ The words *ek’awi* and *k’awi* are also used in various documents. They are abbreviated versions of the term *donek’awi*. The outline of Dene social structure presented here is intended to solely provide a framework for considering the role of the Trading Chief, or *donek’awi*, and how it changed over time.

⁵⁴ The term *donek’awi* may have been used by the Dene since the beginning of trade. Trading Chief was the term first used in the fur trade records. The term *donek’awi* only enters the written record with Helm’s work in the 1960s. In order to create a frame of reference to discuss the changing role of trade intermediary in Dene culture, the term Trading Chief is used to represent the earliest stages of contact and trade, while the term *donek’awi* is presented as the more recent term to imply a change in the social authority of the individual based on what Smith reports for the Dene of the Fort Resolution area.

⁵⁵ Jack LaFlair arrived in the Nahanni in 1914 and operated a trading post near what is today Nahanni Butte. Bill Clark came to Canada from

Scotland in 1923 as a clerk with the Hudson’s Bay Company. He later trapped and prospected in the South Nahanni area. Gus Kraus arrived in the Nahanni region in 1934 and later homesteaded on the South Nahanni where he made a living as a trapper and prospector.

⁵⁶ Fort Reliance was designated a National Historic Site of Canada in 1953. In 1986 an in-depth research project was conducted on the history of the site. The work was conducted by the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre including conservation of the chimneys by Parks Canada masons.

⁵⁷ John B. Zoe uses the word “replicas” which has the connotation of being a copy or imitation. While the Indigenous chimneys were inspired by examples in traders’ posts, the Indigenous chimneys are unique and authentic elements of Dene vernacular architecture.

⁵⁸ The archaeological sites database for the Northwest Territories includes a variety of Indigenous and Euro-Canadian sites, as well as some that are not culturally identified, containing the rubble remains of stone chimneys.