

GWICHYA GWICH'IN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Ingrid Kritsch, Alestine Andre, Bart Kreps

ABSTRACT

The Gwichya Gwich'in Oral History Project concentrated its efforts in gathering traditional knowledge—place names, trail systems, and stories associated with both of these—held by Gwichya Gwich'in Elders. This information was found to be rich in colour and texture, but rapidly fading with the passing of individual Elders. The data will be used in a number of ways to increase an awareness of and an appreciation for the cultural heritage of the Gwichya Gwich'in by archaeologists, anthropologists, local communities and the Gwich'in Tribal Council.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Gwichya Gwich'in Oral History Project entreprit la cueillette, auprès des aînés Gwichya Gwich'in, de connaissances sur la vie traditionnelle, à savoir les toponymes, les réseaux de sentiers et les histoires qui leurs sont associées. L'enthousiasme que l'on peut éprouver devant la richesse de ces données, doit être tempéré en regard de l'âge avancé des informateurs; ce qui explique de façon alarmante, la disparition rapide de ces connaissances traditionnelles. Ces données serviront à hausser la visibilité et l'appréciation du patrimoine culturel des Gwichya Gwich'in auprès des archéologues, des anthropologues, des communautés locales et du Conseil tribal Gwich'in.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an overview of the oral history work carried out in 1992 and 1993 with Gwichya Gwich'in Elders living in Tsiigehtchic (Arctic Red River), Northwest Territories.

Tsiigehtchic, which means "the mouth of iron river", is the name of the present day home of the Gwichya Gwich'in. Traditionally, this location was only one of many Gwichya Gwich'in summer fish camps along the Mackenzie River (see Nolin and Pilon, this volume). Today, it is a permanent settlement with a population of about 125 people. It is one of four communities in the Gwich'in Settlement Area; the others are Fort MacPherson, Aklavik and Inuvik.

In 1992, we were approached by the Canadian Museum of Civilization's NOGAP Archaeology Project to carry out a traditional knowledge study with Elders in the community of Tsiigehtchic, concerning the traditional use of the Travaillant Lake area situated northeast of the settlement. Such a study would enhance the ability of archaeologists working in the area, to understand the archaeological remains discovered over the past few years.

METHODOLOGY AND PROJECT DESCRIPTION

During the six week project in 1992, we interviewed 21 Elders and 1 young adult living in Tsiigehtchic and Inuvik. They described and drew the numerous routes that they travelled by dog team and by boat from Arctic Red River to the Travaillant Lake area. There proved to be an extensive trail system with at least six major routes to the area: one from the Mackenzie Delta and five from Arctic Red River. Some of these trails were so old and well-travelled that they were said to be literally ground into the earth leaving a road that was four feet wide and one and a half feet deep.

Along these trails, the Elders identified 130 Gwich'in and English place names, and located camp sites, cabin sites, moss houses (*neekanh*), fish traps (*k'adh*), giant "creatures", and resources used in the area.

When all of the interviews were completed, an Elder's meeting was held to verify the information that we had collected on each of the place names and to ensure that all of the place names were transcribed using the standardized Gwich'in orthography (editor's note—diacritics used in transcribing Gwich'in could not

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be used in the present text, due to limitations of the word processing software employed here) in use in the Northwest Territories. We did this with the aid of a Gwich'in linguist from the Gwich'in Language Centre in Fort McPherson during an intensive five hour meeting with six elders.

Besides the mapped information, we also asked a number of more general questions that would provide further insight into the archaeological record of the area. In many cases, the questions were posed in reference to information that the Elders were told by their parents or grandparents. These questions were related to the following topics:

- 1- the treatment and disposal of bones and hair from moose, caribou, fish, beaver, muskrats and waterfowl.
- 2- trade and relations with neighbours such as the Inuvialuit, Slavey and white traders.
- 3- information and locations of ochre, flint, caribou fences, and boiling rocks.

4- information and the location of different kinds of houses used traditionally.

Since most of the map work was carried out with men, we decided that we also needed to document the women's side of bush life to complement the male picture of life in the Travaillant Lake area. With this in mind, we asked questions about marriage, about women's work while the men were on trails or traplines, and what rules, if any, pertained to women's behaviour regarding men's hunting equipment and the animals they killed.

Another subject that we asked about was the use of plants for medicinal purposes and any rules associated with their collection.

Family trees were also recorded so that we would have a better understanding of camp composition and Gwichya Gwich'in social organisation.

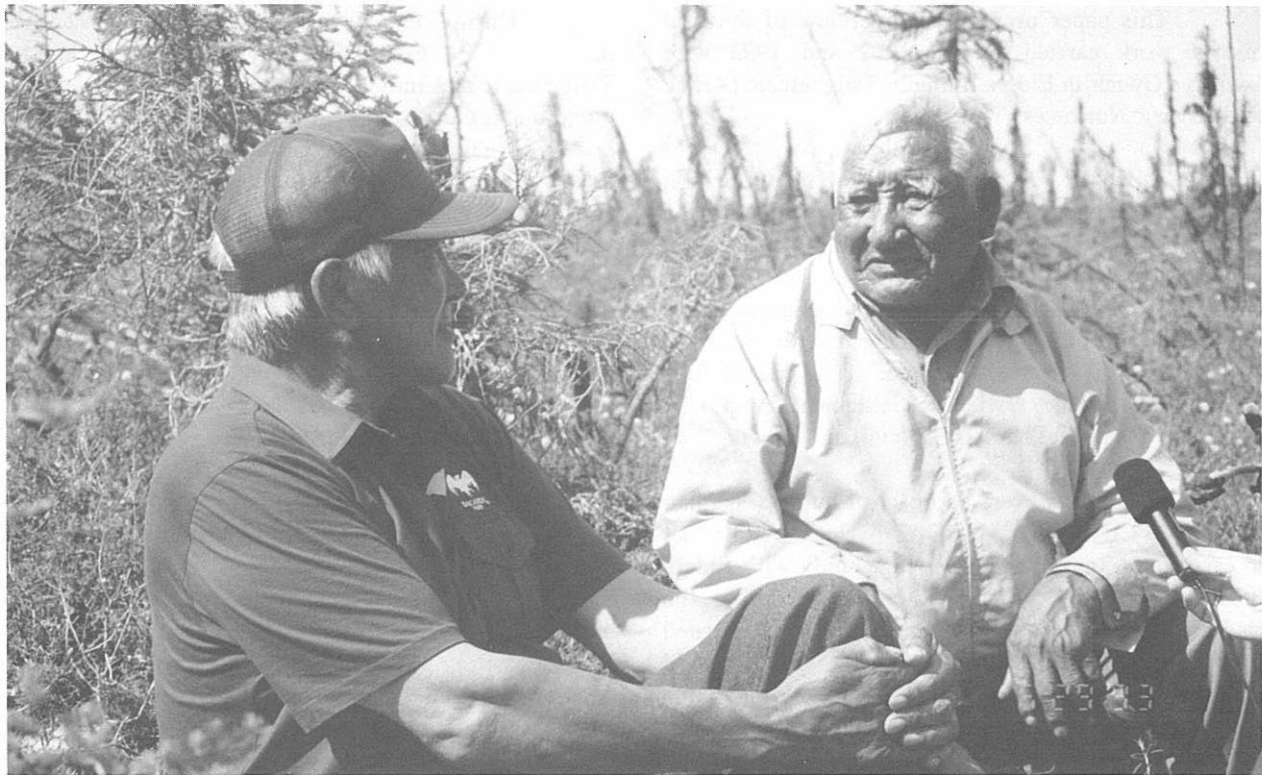


Figure 1 George Niditchie (*left*) and Hyacinthe Andre (*right*) discussing traditional life at *Nihtavan Diniinlee* .

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Several stories were recorded. Some of these were related to the place names while others were told to us so that they would not be lost.

The amount of information that we collected by way of colour coded map overlays and taped conversations with the Elders was overwhelming. The 54 audio cassettes have just recently been transcribed. As Pilon has stated, "I expect that future generations will find this information of the highest value, since there exists no significant, accessible body of traditional knowledge for this community" (pers. comm. April 13, 1993).

During the course of our interviewing, it also became clear that the Travaillant Lake area was only one of the areas traditionally used by the Gwichya Gwich'in. Until approximately 30 years ago, the Gwichya Gwich'in lived and travelled in an area which extended north of the Mackenzie River from the present-day settlement of Arctic River, into the Delta and east as far as the Thunder River (Travaillant Lake area-southwest Anderson Plain). It also stretched south of the Mackenzie River, up the Arctic Red River and Cranswick River and the neighbouring watershed of the Snake River into the Mackenzie Mountains, and east to and south of the Thunder River (Tree River area).

With this in mind, we wrote funding proposals during the winter and spring of 1993, to carry out a similar project up the Arctic Red River, and south of the Mackenzie River into the Tree River area. We felt that there was some urgency to continue this research because of the age of some of the Elders and the fact that many of these names and the knowledge associated with the trails and names are not being passed on. This, combined with the fact that the Gwich'in Land Claim signed in April 1992 makes reference to the possibility of recognizing traditional Gwich'in place names within the Settlement Area and the recognition of the Arctic Red River (*Tsiigehtchic*) as a Canadian Heritage River, made this type of research timely.

We approached the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the Arctic Red River Settlement/Band Council, the NOGAP Archaeology Project (CMC), the Canadian Parks Service in Yellowknife, the Department of Economic Development and Tourism (GNWT) in Yellowknife and the Department of Education, Culture

and Employment (Geographic Names Program-GNWT) in Yellowknife. Most of the funding for the project was committed by the end of May 1993, so the project began in early June. The funding and administration of the project was then turned over to the Gwich'in Tribal Council.

The objective of the 1993 oral history project was similar to that of the 1992 project, namely, documenting the traditional knowledge of the Elders in terms of land use and occupancy in their homeland. It differed in that more emphasis was placed on recording place names and related information and travelling with Elders to as many of these locations as possible by boat and by helicopter. It also differed in that two students from the community apprenticed with us learning first-hand the methodology and stages of work involved in this type of research.

In 1993, the Gwichya Gwich'in Elders in Tsiigehtchic recounted 88 Gwich'in and English place names, plus old time trails, traditional camp sites, historic cabin sites and resources. Their traditional land use area extended into the Yukon, so several place names were also recorded in the Yukon.

The remainder of this paper will focus on the place names from the 1993 study because the maps from the 1992 study were not readily accessible at the time of writing.

DISCUSSION OF PLACE NAMES

The land remains an important part of Gwich'in life and culture. The place names that have been documented thus far, are an important part of Gwich'in oral tradition and as such offer an insight into Gwich'in culture and knowledge, and the people's relationship to the land.

In reviewing papers written by John Ritter (1974, 1976) in the mid-1970's about Gwich'in place names, we find that we have classified the place names in a very similar manner. The place names can be grouped according to their meaning, into the following six categories:

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Figure 2 *Liidlai* or The Forks where the Arctic Red River meets the Cranswick River.

1. Names associated with particular individuals (either Gwich'in or white trappers and/or traders)

A number of creeks and lakes were named after people who lived at these places. One of the names, *Tsit davan*, refers to an individual who lived in *ts'ii deii* days (ca. 500 years ago). Other names refer to individuals who lived within the last one hundred years. (*Daaghal tye' van*, *Daaghal tye' tshik* and *Kheeqin'*). *Kheeqin'* refers to a lake in the Tree River area. It is interesting in that it appears to indicate an overlap of land use between the Gwichya Gwich'in and the Slavey. The name refers to a Slavey boy who was born on the lake. The boy's family (Ceasar) came from the Fort Good Hope area.

Some places in this category are locally known and referred to by two names, one in English and one in Gwich'in. The English names for two such places refer to two well-known Gwich'in trappers, Ernest Kendo and Joe Bernard, from the Arctic Red River area (Ernest's Cabin and Bernard Creek). The Gwich'in names for these same places (*Leth jithakaii van* and *Hehnjuu deet'yah tshik*) describe the physical characteristics of the respective areas. For example, *Leth jithakaii van* refers to "mud sliding into a lake". The English names are becoming more commonly used than the Gwich'in names.

Some names in this category refer to a white trapper and/or trader in English, and a place or

resource in Gwich'in. For example, *Chugwich'yaa tshik* translates as "ragged looking creek". It is also called Smith's Cabin in English. *Jah vehlei' tshik* can only be partly translated. The part that can be translated, refers to cranes.

Another example of names in this category, are names that only refer to white trappers and/or traders. These trappers/traders had cabins in the area. The information that we have indicates that they likely came into the Arctic Red River area in the 1920's. They appear to have only lived along the major waterways and not inland. Very little was known about these men. Of all the trappers/traders, we have the most information about Jim Nagle and Jimmy (*Jim Nagle viteetshik*/ Jim Nagle Creek, and Jimmy's Cabin). This may be so because Jim Nagle married a local woman and later remarried another local woman when his first wife died. Jimmy on the other hand was likely remembered because he died on a well-known mission boat called the Saint Anne.

2. Names which describe a resource or resource use

Most of the names in this category were called after specific resources found locally, such as fish, birds, mammals and plants. For example, *Sruh chihvyah k'it* refers to a bay on the Mackenzie River which is well-known for its cony (inconnu). It translates as "cony net place".

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A handful of names indicate the use of traditional methods and technology for capturing resources. For example, *Nanaa'ih k'adh* refers to a fishtrap. We were told that whenever a place name has "k'adh" in it, it means that a fishtrap was located here. The names of two lakes in the Tree River area, *Tatthal nii'ee choo* and *Tatthal nii'ee tsal* imply that a caribou fence ran between these two lakes a long time ago.

3. Names which refer to the description of a place

By far, most of the names collected fit into this category. These names describe the major physical characteristics of these locations. For example, *Chii ghoh* refers to the shape of a hill alongside the Arctic Red River. It is round in shape. *Juuk'an* refers to a spot on the side of a high hill which is burning. *Liidlaii* (Figure 2) translates as "where two rivers come together". It is also known as The Forks. There is one up the Arctic Red River and another up the Tree River.

4. *Ts'ii dei* names where the meaning has been lost

Some names are so old, they have lost their entire meaning or part of their meaning over time. The Elders indicated that these names are about 500 years old.

5. Names associated with legendary events

Only two of the place names we collected have legends attached to them. We have called them legends rather than stories because we were told that they happened many millennia ago, involved giant creatures and they each describe how a specific place was formed.

The legend about *Gyuu dazhoo njik* ("hairy worm/snake river") describes how the Snake River was formed. We were told that this is a story that happened before *ts'ii dei* days. A giant hairy worm (snake) came out of the ocean and travelled up the Mackenzie River and into the Peel River. It wanted to go up into the mountains so it swallowed big boulders as it went along, thus creating the Snake river. There are two versions to the ending of this story. One version describes the snake going inside a lake beside the river. The other version describes it as going into the

mountain near the headwaters, where it remains to this day.

The legend about *Nehtruh tshi'* ("wolverine inside a rock") also called *Chijuudiee* ("monster that lives in the water"), describes how this unique land formation up the Arctic Red River near Martin House was formed. The Elders told us that a giant wolverine came out of a nearby lake and burrowed underneath the ground, breaking up the hill in this area as it went into the Arctic Red River. Elders who know of this place are still cautious around here because this giant creature is considered wicked and will kill any person it encounters. If people hear a noise coming from this place while travelling on the river, they avoid stopping here. On the other hand, if the area is quiet, they may stop.

6. Names associated with historical events

This category refers to events that occurred in the past. The name *Theetoh aaghadh* refers to a portage through a series of lakes up the Arctic Red River. It translates as "(someone) staggered over a portage". It appears based on a starvation story. We were told that people were starving in the mountains and that one person left the group and headed down to the Mackenzie River. He was in such a hurry that he made a short cut through this area which was easier to walk through than the river. He staggered because he was weak from hunger.

In 1992, we documented another place name *Treedaaaghaa* ([a woman] crying while clubbing fish with a stick) that was based on a story about starvation. In this case, a woman was crying while she was clubbing fish in a creek with a stick because she was so sad that many of her people had starved that previous winter. When the fish started in the creek in early May, there were so many fish that you could literally grab them. She was crying because she was wondering where all these fish were when her people needed them. The fish run had started too late that year to feed her people.

Also in 1992, we documented several names that referred to contact with the Inuvialuit. For example, *Guudee diitr'inizhit chi'*, which translates as "being chased down the hill", refers to a large hill on

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the Mackenzie River where the Inuvialuit chased a Gwich'in over the hill. *Tr'iinjoo kat gigaataii* means the "women's road". The story behind this place name is that the Gwich'in were always expecting an attack from the Inuvialuit. As a result, the men and women could travel along separate trails down to the Mackenzie River.

IMPORTANCE OF PROJECT TO ELDERS

Throughout the project, the Elders were extremely willing to share their life experiences and knowledge of the land with us. They indicated on several occasions that they were concerned that this knowledge was being lost. One Elder told us, "all that stuff is in me. I want before I die I give it to one of you and you'll become like me" (Antoine Andre, Tape 5, July 27, 1992).

Part of the urgency that we felt when working with the Elders stems from the fact that there are very few Elders with this knowledge left in Arctic Red River and indeed in the other Gwich'in communities. Many times we were told, that this kind of work should have begun 20 or 30 years ago when specific Elders were still alive. There was also a great sadness expressed by several Elders that many children in the community knew little about life in the bush. There was even a sense that the land has been abandoned. One Elder who recounted a happy, action-packed account of life in the Travaillant Lake area in the early 1940's, ended her story by expressing great sadness upon seeing the abandoned camps and unused trails when she revisited them in the early 1980's with her husband. Her story of the winter of 1940 made the land come alive with people from neighbouring camps visiting back and forth along a network of dogteam trails with as many as seventeen dogteams travelling from Travaillant Lake to the Mackenzie River and then on to Arctic Red River for Christmas.

Seventeen teams from Travaillant Lake! Where is all those people? And then, when was that? Nineteen what? Nineteen seventy-nine or eighty, I went, the last time I went up with, I went as far as Odizen with him. That's the time I said, when we hit Odizen we cross that Odizen, we

got to that old tent place that we used to have good times in there. Play cards and all that. That tent frame was made with big green logs, huh! It's high, that high too. Don't know how many logs. That was Chaalee, their place. When I got there 1982 I think, I got there, I went there with him, right in the middle of the floor was big willows growing! Long ones. Look how long. And those logs" I lift them up, they're just rotten! They're just breaking up like this. And lots of sign around there. Lots of old tent place and dogs place and old cuts. Oohh, make me feel bad! Still want to stay there. I just took off again. Then coming down, all kinds of mark. Every tree I think through that trail. All the boys their initials and writing, all those in the trail. Tent pole some places, wherever they camp, tent poles. Aaah, was no good for me" I told my husband, "Look at all these sign. How many, how many people went through this, this trail since 19 what, I wonder?" I told him, "Today, it's only two of us we're going through again," I told him. It's just like it's only two of us was alive around there! Aaah, really make me feel bad. We came back to Jackfish Lake too. There too, old peoples place there, their tentframe is still up and they're both gone. After I came back I said "I'm not, I'm the only one alive from there. I'm not going to go through that trail again!" I said. And I never did! (long pause) (Joanne Nazon, Tape 36, 1992).

The Elders are particularly interested in seeing this type of information documented so that their grandchildren and future generations will continue to appreciate and know about their land. One way in which they would like this information used, is to incorporate it into the school curricula in the Gwich'in Settlement Area.

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As a result, a third traditional knowledge study with Gwichya Gwich'in Elders is planned for the summer of 1994. This study will record Gwichya Gwich'in place names and other land use and occupancy information from Arctic Red River into the Mackenzie Delta. This project will complete the documentation of Gwichya Gwich'in place names for their traditional land use area. The next step will be to compile this information into a number of publications for use in schools and for the general public. Such publications will present Gwichya Gwich'in land use as seen through the eyes of the Gwich'in, using place names, trails, stories and other traditional knowledge and historical information recorded from the Elders.

CURRENT USES OF THIS INFORMATION BY THE GWICH'IN TRIBAL COUNCIL

This project has had a unique evolution in that what started off as a solitary project has been integrated into part of a larger and more comprehensive plan to preserve, promote and manage Gwich'in heritage.

The project was initiated in 1992 under the Northern Oil and Gas Action Program, continued in 1993 under the auspices of the Gwich'in Tribal Council, and will be continued in 1994 under the direction of the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI).

The Gwich'in Tribal Council took over the administration of the project in 1993 because it believed that this work would help to meet their objective of actively preserving and promoting Gwich'in heritage. This objective is now being actively pursued through the newly created Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, a non-profit corporation, which was formed by the Gwich'in at their Annual Assembly held in Fort McPherson during August of 1992. At this time, the Gwich'in expressed great concern about the breakdown of the family and community. The Institute was formed to develop and promote change that will strengthen the family and community.

One of the ways that this objective is being met, is to continue to document the traditional knowledge of the Elders, involving Gwich'in of all ages in this process. It is hoped that the lines of communication will be opened up between the youth

and the Elders, and that a new appreciation of Gwich'in traditional knowledge will develop and be incorporated into contemporary life, both within the Gwich'in Settlement Area and outside it.

One of the outgrowths of the 1993 project is that the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute has developed a community-based ethnoarchaeology project up *Tsiigehnjik* (the Arctic Red River) for the summer of 1994. This project will be filmed by GNWT Television and Radio Services which is part of the Television Northern Canada (TVNC) network, for the programme "The Tube". Gwich'in Elders and youth will be directly involved in documenting and visually recording their heritage resources. This video will present the river's human history as seen through the eyes of Gwich'in youth. It will also serve to increase the Gwich'in public's understanding of the region's archaeology, and to begin development of a culturally appropriate heritage management plan for the entire Gwich'in Settlement Area.

An outgrowth of the 1992 project is that in the winter of 1994, people from Arctic Red River may make an overland trip to Travaillant Lake using old-time trails recorded in 1992. This overland journey would begin in early September and take approximately four months to complete. The objective will be to reopen and mark some of the old traditional trails, and to experience both traditional and western teaching on the land.

The Gwich'in Tribal Council, through its subsidiary Gwich'in Geographics Ltd., is now integrating some of this information into audio-visual databases. For example, the Gwichya Gwich'in place names are being recorded into a database which incorporates the proper Gwich'in orthography, a literal English translation, the story behind the name, and an audible pronunciation of the name recorded by a Gwich'in speaker.

Gwich'in Geographics is now completing a reference map of Gwich'in-owned lands recognized in the recently signed land claim agreement. Since features such as rivers and lakes form natural boundaries to many of the parcels, the printed reference maps will incorporate Gwich'in-language place names. The digital maps stored in computers will also have the

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ability to pronounce the Gwich'in names for the user at the click of a button. As more Gwich'in place names become officially recognized, user-friendly computer demonstrations may be very helpful in teaching people how to pronounce the names. The "talking maps" are designed for maximum ease of use, so that they can be used in settings as various as elementary schools, tourism information centres, and museums.

The NOGAP Archaeology Project and Gwich'in Geographics are jointly developing an interactive computer display highlighting archaeological findings. Selected images from the NOGAP photographic archives will be transferred to KODAK Photo-CD format, and Gwich'in Geographics will then link the photos to maps, text, and spoken words. While this project may increase interest in archaeology among museum-goers, the Gwich'in Tribal council has also welcomed the opportunity to bring NOGAP findings back to the Gwich'in in an easily-accessible form.

The GIS databases being developed by Gwich'in Geographics will also be invaluable for land use planning, environmental assessment and review purposes, and renaming requests concerning geographic names within the Gwich'in Settlement Area.

Although there is much work to be done in the Gwich'in Settlement Area in terms of heritage, the research on Gwichya Gwich'in place names over the last two years in Arctic Red River has raised the community's awareness and appreciation of their traditional place names. On July 12, 1993, the community of Arctic Red River showed this renewed pride by passing a Band Council Resolution to officially change it's name to Tsiigehtchic. The name change was approved by the GNWT Executive on November 4, 1993 and becomes official April 1, 1994.

**Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute
Tsiigehtchic, N.W.T.
X0E 0B0**

**Department of Anthropology
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia
V8W 2Y2**

**Gwich'in Geographics Ltd.
Inuvik, N.W.T.
X0E 0T0**

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One of the critical aspects of place names information is their proper transcription and translation. In this, we were ably assisted by William George Firth and Eleanor Mitchell of the Fort McPherson Language Centre.

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