The Van Taf Gwich'in Oral History Collection is a treasure. The stories it contains are from four or more generations of Van Taf Gwich'in who were born in the century from the 1800s to the 1900s. The fascinating histories they relate are from the own experiences or stories of their elders and give the 'gitch' and 'zab' ancestors. The special words indicate the 'hag or maw' events that help us understand our family traditions and our history.

—Frank Hill Jr., 1947-73, from the introduction
PEOPLE OF THE LAKES

Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich’in Elders/
Googwandak Nakhwach’anjoo Van Tat Gwich’in
PEOPLE OF THE LAKES

Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich’in Elders/
Googwandak Nakhwach’anjoo Van Tat Gwich’in

VUNTUT GWITCHIN FIRST NATION & SHIRLEEN SMITH
CONTENTS

Foreword VII
Joseph Linklater, Chief, Vuntut Gwitchin

Preface XI
A Note on the Structure of the Research and Book

Acknowledgements XXI

Introduction XXV
Van Tat Gwich’in Oral History

1 | Long-ago Stories 1
Yenoo d’il’ googwandak

2 | The First Generation 59
The 19th Century

3 | The Second Generation 157
Early 20th Century

4 | The Oral History of Today 265
Van Tat Gwich’in Commentary on the Past, Present, and Future

Notes 313

Glossary 325
Gwich’in to English 326
English to Gwich’in 339

Bibliography 355

Index 365
FOREWORD

“TRY”—This word has been a part of my vocabulary for as long as I can remember.

I have never before been asked to do a foreword for a book, much less done one, but I consider it a great honour. I began by reading the draft manuscript, still quite nervous about doing something new. And there in the early pages appeared that word, “...the mandate from the Elders was to try.” If anyone were to ask me to describe in one word the best advice I’ve ever received from my parents and Elders it would be: “try.”

That simple three-letter verb, when spoken by the generations of Elders who have contributed to this wonderful body of work, is said with a deep quiet passion. It speaks to me; it says, “Don’t ever give up!” “Don’t be afraid.” “No matter how difficult life seems, do what is right.” “Look after your family.” “Look after yourself good.” Most important, it is spoken by the generations that know the very essence of the word: those who have lived epic lives in this harsh and at times unforgiving land; those who have travelled the lands of this Gwich’in Nation and beyond by dog team, not riding on the back of a sled but out front breaking trail with snowshoes for their dogs; those who have chased down caribou while wearing snowshoes and shot them from a standing position, shooting as fast as they could reload, a feat that would put any Olympic athlete to shame (no special gear, no special rifle, just conditioning and skill); those who have lost almost every member of their family and yet had to get up every day and work hard in order to survive, men and women equally, because the land has no prejudices.

It’s interesting to read in these pages so many stories I have heard over my lifetime and not get the same feeling I have when hearing the spoken
word, although as a Gwich’in person I am able to make the connections and put the words into context. It may be difficult at times for those reading this book to relate to some of the stories if you haven’t heard them first-hand in the oral storytelling tradition of our people, but those connections to our day-to-day lives are definitely there. I have read books about our people written by researchers in various fields of study, and I have been able to transcend their written words and hear the voices of our people, in many cases getting more out of it than simply what was written on the page. In this book, the words are quoted directly from our Elders and the connection is that much closer and therefore so much more special in every sense. I believe that is what our Elders are expecting, that our inherent knowledge as Gwich’in will breathe life into these pages and provide the foundation and context for the stories of our people. This body of work, like so many other things in our lives, is done by the Elders for the grandchildren, first and foremost. If others are able to get something positive out of this book, so much the better.

I recall a story Charlie Peter Charlie told me about him and my father trapping in the Ogilvie Mountains/Eagle Plains area. They were running low on food, so my father went to hunt caribou and Charlie Peter continued trapping. They agreed to meet at a certain spot in exactly one week and on that precise day, they both arrived there. They shared everything equally, the work and the reward. It was a business arrangement that was never written or spoken about. All my life I’ve heard Gwich’in refer to each other as “partner”; only in the last ten years or so, I’ve come to realize the significance of that word by that generation. I can honestly say that I’ve never heard any Gwich’in speak badly of their “partner.” It seems to me to be one of the highest compliments one can pay to another.

This story made me understand why it is so important to our Elders that we not just talk about doing something, but we actually do it or at least try. “Don’t just talk about it, do it,” my father used to say. He was always emphatic on that point. To our Elders, survival could hinge on the commitments they made and therefore it is important that we follow through on our commitments. Today, when we fail to honour some of our promises the consequences may not be very dire, but to our Elders’ trained minds, this is a dangerous sign. Being prepared for hard times means more than having the right equipment and good skills but also understanding the importance of following through on commitments and working as a team in order to survive on the land. These traits are still strong in our people when they are on the land, but they have to be understood and carried on by future generations. It is our Elders who understand first-hand why it is so important.

In the ten years I have had the honour of serving my people as the chief, I have also had the great fortune to be counselled and guided by these
amazing Elders, some of whom are no longer with us today except in spirit. They told incredible stories of strength of body, mind, and spirit; stories of triumph and heartbreaking loss; stories of love and laughter—all with the ease and grace of true storytellers. They weren’t bragging, which is bad form; they were passing along information in the way it has always been passed on by Gwich’in. The incredible hardships and toughness of the people was simply a backdrop to the lessons or information they were sharing. It still overwhelms me to think of how tough these Elders I see today must have been in their prime. Their instincts for survival are still honed and sharp, but now it is the survival of our culture and history that must be carried on by future generations. Our Elders saw what needed to be done, spoke about it, and then did it. They had our oral history put into writing so that it could be passed to future generations, so we will never forget who we are and where we came from.

This single piece of work will not ensure our cultural survival, but it is our Elders’ contribution toward that survival. We must all do our part to honour this gift from them.

To honour our Elders, we have to try.

JOSEPH LINKLATER
Chief, Vuntut Gwitchin
February 2009
A Note on the Structure of the Research and Book

Well, [this story] is from old people, early days people. They tell that story to us. They carry the story out here and there and then like newspaper, just like newspapers. They carry this story from one generation to the other. That’s how they know.

(Moses Tizya, August 20, 1979, VG2000-8-22:112-114, Gwich'in and English)

Lots of times, elders, their grandfathers told stories in front of them. They told those same stories again. Me, too, my grandfather Peter Moses, he told lots of stories in front of me. I remember some of his stories really well. Whatever I don’t really remember, I could never talk about. Maybe I would tell my friends, but if I don’t remember good, I wouldn’t tell stories out loud to anybody. This was put in my ears. Not long ago the elders, when they were gathering their stories, maybe two or three times it was translated. One was William Nerysoo; he said this when they gathered his stories: “My grandfather and my uncles told stories in front of me. ‘Where did you get these stories?’ I asked them. ‘Long ago our grandfathers gave us these stories. That’s what we talk about. They are carried on and will not be changed. If we change them, then they will all be mixed up.’” This is why when elders talk with us we are to keep their stories good. We try to keep it that way.

(Roy Moses, November 15, 1998, VG2003-3-7:012-025, Gwich’in)
Van Tat Gwich’in Oral History Research

In January 1999, at a community meeting in Old Crow, Yukon, on an evening that was -50°C, Van Tat Gwich’in elders, community members, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (VGFN) Heritage Manager Megan Williams, and anthropologists Shirleen Smith and Murielle Nagy came together to plan a project to gather and document Van Tat Gwich’in oral history. Those who attended the meeting were passionately determined that the work be done promptly and well. They set out their priorities: they wanted to document their history on all of their traditional lands, not just part (for example, the area that was to become Vuntut National Park or the Dempster Highway area). They wanted the considerable body of interviews recorded in the past by a variety of researchers and held at a number of archives brought back to Old Crow. The group also agreed that current elders needed to be interviewed as soon as possible.

The overriding concern of the people in Old Crow was to pass the history and knowledge of the elders, across the barriers of language and changing lifestyles, to the youth and future generations. Everyone recognized the risk that the history and knowledge of the elders, the last generation to have spent their entire working lives on the land, would be lost before it could be passed on to the youth. The elders emphasized that their experience and knowledge could also be vitally important to the younger generation: life can be difficult, and they firmly believe that hard times are coming again, and that the next generations must be prepared. As this oral history illustrates, the framework the elders used to structure their knowledge was predominantly historical: where they or their elders went during their lifetime to make a living, what they did there, who lived where, what happened in the past.

What I know, what I heard, I’ll tell you about that. You want to learn everything, that’s why you’re taking the elders around here. It’s really good that’s being done. It’s for our children and our grandchildren in the future. They will hear this and they’ll use it. That’s why when you tell me to come to places like this, I obey you. People would not come around here.

That story is long. Then, who would know? Around Old Crow, not one person knows. Andrew Tizya was raised around here, Johnny Ross, too. Even they don’t know this kind of big story about this area. But me, Peter Moses told me stories about how people lived around here. That’s why I come here now and that’s what I talk about. I never saw it, that’s what I mean.

(Alfred Charlie, Black Fox Creek, June 24, 2001, VG2001-2-44:006-012, 060-065, Gwich’in)
The Van Tat Gwich’in have had considerable experience with researchers over the years, and at the meeting they expressed their views about the conduct of this research. As a result, the Van Tat Gwich’in Oral History Project was structured according to the following mandate from the elders and the community. They stressed the importance of doing interviews in context: on the land and in the language with which the speaker is most comfortable (Gwich’in approximately 90 per cent of the time). As much as possible, all phases of the research—from planning to interviewing, filming, and transcribing—should be done by Van Tat Gwich’in so that the people would themselves guide and own the project, as well as grow with it. Finally, the project and the information should first and foremost benefit Van Tat Gwich’in and not be directed toward fulfilling outsiders’ research goals.

As well as passing their knowledge and stories to their youth, Van Tat Gwich’in have a tradition of sharing their stories, culture, and history with non-Gwich’in. Old Crow is perhaps unique as a First Nations community whose voice has been widely heard, particularly through Edith Josie’s column, Here Are the News. Josie was the Old Crow correspondent to the Whitehorse Star for 31 years beginning in 1962, and her column was reprinted in the Edmonton Journal and the Toronto Telegram, translated into German, Italian, and Spanish, and it attracted readership from as far away as New Zealand, Texas, Florida, and the Philippines. The column represents one of a number of Van Tat Gwich’in public expressions of their history and culture. Another, and perhaps the most significant recent example of Van Tat Gwich’in public commentary is their highly publicized worldwide lobby to protect the Porcupine caribou herd from oil drilling in their calving grounds in the American Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

With the guidance of the heritage committee, the Van Tat Gwich’in Oral History Project was conducted by community members from Old Crow from 1999 to 2004, followed by the Van Tat Gwich’in Cultural Geography Project (2004–2007), which centred on toponyms (place names) and associated information, as well as developing educational materials. While the interviews for these projects were being conducted and previously recorded interviews assembled, a number of themes and foci became apparent. The elders were extremely serious in their objectives to have their knowledge of Gwich’in oral traditions and history recorded for the future. They welcomed tape recorders and video cameras and were enthusiastic to travel on the land, often specifying where the research team needed to go to conduct specific interviews.

So, tomorrow, at Tanch’ohHii mountain, when you fly there with me, I will talk about the first time the Van Tat Gwich’in people came on this land, stories from that time. How they lived off the caribou fences—all
I have heard, I will talk about it. Crow Flats, too, how they lived off the small animals in the summer. In the small streams they made fish traps and they fished there. Tomorrow on that mountain across there, if they land there with me I’ll talk about all that.

(Alfred Charlie, Black Fox Creek, June 24, 2001, VG2001-2-44:180-195, Gwich’in)

The elders were careful to describe their sources—who originally passed stories on to them, for example—and how they came to know what they knew. They made it clear whether they heard something from someone else or witnessed it themselves through repeated expressions translated as “this I remember” or “this happened in front of me,” meaning “in my presence” or “I experienced (or witnessed) this.” Some elders also described the process of passing on stories so that they remain accurate. Others emphasized the limits of their knowledge, beyond which they would not attempt to speculate.

Now, my friends, for the Vuntut Gwitchin Nation, I came here to tell stories. This is all I know about long-ago caribou fences. What they did, I know…. My grandmother told me stories, I remember, when I was a child. That way, I know this much. This is about all I know, that I can tell you about.

(Charlie Thomas, Old Domas’s Caribou Fence [Thomas Creek Caribou Fence], July 27, 2000, VG2000-4-3:035-45, Gwich’in)

The elders were interested in accurate history. Telling the stories properly, refusing to go beyond what they knew either from their own experience or a qualified witness (who they named) were important factors that contributed to their accuracy. They also distinguished between stories that were historical and stories that were not primarily about history, such as some elements of yemoo dai’ googwandak (long-ago stories) that are more akin to legends and myths:

Long-ago stories, some of them are not true. Even so, what is said is storytelling, that’s why it’s told. Some of it I don’t remember too well, but I will talk about it. Two old women were living at the fish trap in the summertime….

(Sarah Abel, April 19, 1980, VG2000-8-32:003-004, Gwich’in)

Thus, Van Tat Gwich’in elders took care that both the historical and non-historical stories were told by the elders best qualified to do so. The history
presented in this book represents their sincere efforts, priorities, and values about passing on their history and other stories to the future. This collection of oral history is intended to highlight the Gwich’ in perspective on the importance and role of their oral history and to fill the gap in the body of writing and information about Van Tat Gwich’in.

Structure of the Research and Structure of the Book
There are many ways to approach researching and compiling oral history. As a primary source of information, oral history interviews and transcripts form the foundation for research for myriad purposes. For example, the Yukon Native Language Centre and Alaska Native Language Center have used oral history as an important source for preserving and furthering Aboriginal languages and have produced verbatim transcriptions in a number of Indigenous languages. Other researchers looked at the performance element of oral history and suggested mechanisms, such as “the treatment of oral narratives as dramatic poetry” and “sensitivity to verbal art as performed ‘event’ rather than as fixed ‘object’ on the page,” to bring a dramatist’s perspective to oral narratives (Tedlock 1983:54–55). Scholars William Schneider (1995, 2002) and Ruth Finnegan (1970, 1992) emphasized that much is lost by removing oral history from its original spoken context by working with recordings and transcripts. A number of others examined the nature of the speech event or communication, differences in the ways speech is used by men and women in different speech communities, the speech conventions in different cultural settings and roles, and how speech contributes to constructing identity, ideology, and cultural ideals and norms (Bauman and Sherzer 1989; Hensel 1996).

Looking at oral history in various cultures, past and present, researchers identified the use of devices, such as repetition, emphasis, alliteration, and rhyme, to aid the speaker–performer’s memory (Ong 1982; Vansina 1961, 1985). Others, such as Peter Nabokov (2002), explored the myriad ways history is collected, expressed, transmitted, maintained, celebrated, integrated into American Indian societies, and even projected into the future. Still other researchers examined oral history for its ability to preserve historical accuracy through time in an oral medium (Cruikshank 1990, 1996, 1998; Helm and Gillespie 1981). They identified means, such as authorizing particular individuals (or groups, such as castes like griots, professional praise-singers, and tellers of accounts in West Africa), to hold and transmit history, and how oral historians routinely identify their sources (Vansina 1985:37). Other mechanisms, such as the use of physical objects to represent ideas or group decisions, were identified as a conservative force in oral history.
that promoted historical accuracy: for example, the use of wampum belts to represent the terms of agreements made by the Iroquois confederacy (Morgan 1963[1877]:142).

Taken together, these and numerous other studies have drawn upon oral traditions as a rich source of history, along with other elements that are not specifically historical (such as oral traditions related to beliefs, rituals, philosophy or world view, humour or entertainment) but that hold important contextual information for understanding history. As with previous oral history research, the Van Tat Gwich’in oral history projects were directed toward clear goals, in this case determined by the community (Old Crow) and its research needs. The primary objectives set out by the heritage committee for a clear, easily readable, accurate oral history guided the structure of the manuscript. All the interviews (both from archival sources and newly recorded) were indexed, translated into English, and transcribed by current Van Tat Gwich’in translators Mary Jane Moses, Brenda Kay, and Florence Netro under the direction of Jane Montgomery, a Van Tat Gwich’in language expert trained in the modern Gwich’in orthography. As well, translators were fortunate to be able to verify the various dialects and usages of the language with living elders, whose first, and continuing, language is Gwich’in. From these translated transcripts, the heritage committee desired that the words of the elders and others be represented in correct, standard English usage (rather that colloquially or in the local Old Crow dialect), which would best represent the fluency of Gwich’in speakers in their own language and render their ideas—the content—as clearly and accessibly as possible.

Translation is an exacting and highly skilled task and the Van Tat Gwich’in were fortunate to have sufficient skilled personnel to take on the massive task of translating (or re-translating) over 400 taped interviews. In a few instances, written transcripts of interviews from previous research projects were all that was available at the time this manuscript was being prepared (e.g., the LaPierre House Oral History Project). In such cases, the translations were done in the past in accordance with different objectives than more recent projects. The older transcripts were summaries of the statements of the speakers rather than verbatim translations and don’t represent the original speakers’ words or manner of speaking. Nonetheless, these translations are valuable sources of information.

Following translation and transcription, the interviews were grouped by generation and then by theme or topic. Highlighting the generation of the speakers brought to light similarities in vision and experiences within generations and interesting differences between generations. Also, the references by speakers to their elders and contemporaries was clarified once
the generation of the speakers was shown. In excerpting passages from the interviews and grouping these according to themes, some lengthy excerpts set the tone and provided background to a topic, while other briefer segments supplied details or additional points of view. The main reason for organizing the material this way was practical. Many interviews were encyclopedic in their scope, covering a wide range of topics and providing thoughtful commentary. Others were fragments of longer stories or assumed a fair familiarity with the topic at hand on the part of the listener. In both cases, collecting similar thematic material from many interviews made it considerably easier to appreciate and remember the words of the elders.

Each step in the process of translation, transcription, excerpting, and grouping transcripts by generation and theme is an editorial reworking of the voice of the original speaker and a step away from the original context of the interview. However, the speakers’ distinct identities still emerge in reading the excerpted transcripts. Furthermore, rendering their words as appreciable as possible was our approach to respecting the original intent of the speakers: that their words be understood and go forth into the future for the generations to come.

Structurally, at its heart, this book is about the history and culture of Van Tat Gwich’in in their own words. There is also significant use of non-Gwich’in sources, which often served to introduce or contextualize the Van Tat Gwich’in texts. The objective was to introduce the Van Tat Gwich’in and their oral history in context so the oral history was as accessible as possible. The non-Gwich’in references and brief introductions to the Van Tat Gwich’in passages endeavour to supply context, fill in gaps, and essentially provide sufficient stitching to draw together the patchwork of interviews, in as unobtrusive and respectful a manner as possible.

Much is lost in putting oral history on paper: the nuances of meaning, physical expression, gesture, speech, the interaction between speaker and audience, and the cultural knowledge shared by the community. Likewise for Van Tat Gwich’in oral history, the written version of the elders’ words pales in comparison with hearing them speak, especially on the land where they and their stories are truly at home. However, the elders fear what will be lost if their words are not put into print. They are aware that the unbroken chain of transmission from generation to generation from far, far back in their history is more fragile now than it has ever been. They worry that young people who do not speak Gwich’in are not hearing the words of their elders and will not know their history. So, imperfect though the medium of writing may be for adequately expressing all there is in oral history, the mandate from the elders was to try. This book is the result.
This tape we’re talking into, hopefully some day the young people will listen to it and they may look after the land better.


Right now what I talk about, a lot of older men told me stories. That’s how I know the stories. So now I’m an Elder, all this comes back to me; that’s what I talk to you about. If you don’t do this, how are the stories going to be passed on? No way. Right now down there, our children, even when they’re a bit older, they won’t talk about this stuff. They don’t know about it. They never see the elders. How are they going to know? You’re really doing a good job [the Oral History Project]. Right now, what you’re doing, it’s for our children’s future.


Conventions Used in the Book

References and Quotations
Central to this book are the quotations from elders, other Gwich’in, and published sources. The quotation style for published works follows common conventions, with the author’s name, date of publication and page number following the quotation, and the full reference in the bibliography. The oral history interviews are referenced slightly differently. The speaker’s name is followed by information about the interview: the location (if known and other than Old Crow), date, catalogue number (for example, VG2000–4–8:315–326 indicates the tape is part of the Van Tat Gwich’in collection, added in 2000, series #4 that year, the eighth tape in the series, and at 315–326 on the tape), and language of the interview (usually Gwich’in or English). The reference can be relevant to the information in the interview, such as when the speaker refers to the context of the land where the interview took place. As well, interviews in English are quoted essentially directly, while those in Gwich’in have been translated into standard English and edited for comprehension and to represent the speaker’s fluency in Gwich’in. Consequently, an individual quoted in both English and Gwich’in may appear to have a different “speaking voice” depending on their fluency in each language, many elders being much more comfortable and expressive in Gwich’in. Occasionally we lacked the original interview and only had a transcript where the translator described what was being said usually in the third person (for example, “She said her father raised her”) rather than translating word for word, a system often used when an immediate translation is needed. These cases are also noted in the reference.
Within the quotations from oral history interviews or translations of interviews, words enclosed in square brackets [ ] are not part of the original quotation. Instead, they are usually words added by the translator or editor to provide further information or clarification. Parentheses ( ) indicate digressions, explanations, or ancillary information spoken in the interview by the original speaker. Ellipses … indicate words or sounds in the original interview that have been omitted. Em-dashes — are used to indicate the speaker made a longer break than what is normally represented by a comma, or that the speaker made a parenthetical comment of greater emphasis than indicated by enclosing it in parentheses, such as an exclamation in the middle of a sentence. In the modified example below, the items in square brackets were not spoken by Mary Thomas but added later to clarify her comments. The sentence in parentheses was spoken by her as background information to her main story. The ellipsis at the end indicates that she continued her narrative but it is not included here:

We got down to John’s [John Thomas, her husband]. Only he had a motor and he came all the way up Potato Creek with a canvas boat and gas. Coming down [the Crow River] he picked up all the canvas boats and brought them to Old Crow. (He had a boat like what we have today [wooden scow] and he brought all the people down from Van Tat with it.)...

(MARY THOMAS, February 20, 1980, VC2000-B-16:054-230, Gwich’in)

**Orthography—Spelling**

While we have striven for accuracy, consistency, and simplicity, we employ a number of different names and spellings for Van Tat Gwich’in in this book. For the most part, the reasons are historical. Until relatively recently, Gwich’in was not a written language. The first major written representation of Van Tat or Dagoo Gwich’in was by the missionary and later Archdeacon Robert McDonald, who produced a written Gwich’in version of the Bible, a hymn book, and other religious material in about 1898. McDonald used English as his model for representing Gwich’in, while at the same time, other missionaries were translating the Bible into languages such as northern Slavey (É. Petitot in Fort Good Hope, NT) based on French. However, neither English nor French are consistent in their rendering of sounds: for example, in English “ot” and “ought” are used to spell the same sound, as in “cot” and “bought,” and three different spellings are used in “their,” “there,” and “they’re” for the same sound. Fluent speakers learn to read the different spellings—and understand the meanings—through practice, and similarly many fluent Gwich’in learned to read written Gwich’in based on the