

REMEMBERING OUR RELATIONS: DĒNESUĻINÉ ORAL HISTORIES OF WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation with Sabina Trimble
and Peter Fortna

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Dënesųtiné Oral Histories of Wood Buffalo National Park

REMEMBERING OUR RELATIONS



ATHABASCA CHIPEWYAN FIRST NATION
WITH SABINA TRIMBLE AND PETER FORTNA

**REMEMBERING
OUR RELATIONS**

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Dënesų́tiné Oral Histories of Wood Buffalo National Park

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WITH **SABINA TRIMBLE** AND **PETER FORTNA**

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Abbreviations

ACFN	Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation
AER	Alberta Energy Regulator
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CIRNAC	Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada
CFS	Children & Family Services
CMC	Committee for Cooperative Management [of Wood Buffalo National Park]
CPAWS	Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society
CRP	Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership
DIA	Department of Indian Affairs
DIAND	Department of Indian and Northern Affairs
ECCC	Environment & Climate Change Canada
HBC	Hudson's Bay Company
ILI	Indigenous Leadership Initiative
IPCA	Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas
ISC	Indigenous Services Canada
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
LARP	Lower Athabasca Regional Plan
MCFN	Mikisew Cree First Nation
NWC	North West Company
NWT	Northwest Territories
OUV	Outstanding Universal Value
PAA	Provincial Archives of Alberta
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police

RFMA	Registered Fur Management Area
TARR	Treaty and Aboriginal Rights Research
TLU	Traditional Land Use Study
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WBNP	Wood Buffalo National Park
WHC	World Heritage Committee
WSSS	Willow Springs Strategic Solutions
WWII	World War Two

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To everyone, mahsi cho.

Foreword

By Chief Allan Adam

I remember one of the first times my Granny Helene Piché (née Adam) told me about what the creation of Wood Buffalo National Park did to her and her family. My Granny was a strong woman, but she had buried that story and carried it inside so the family wouldn't have to carry it. It wasn't until much later that I learned the truth from her and from my father, the late Alec Bruno.

She told me the story when we were eating moose, a moose which I had hunted in the Park. When I told her where I got the moose, she just pushed her plate away and said she wouldn't eat it. My Granny then shared her story. She was a fluent Dënesųłíné speaker, and told the story mostly in Dene, so I only understood parts of it. What I did understand was that her family was from Birch River in the Park, and that at some point they were kicked out and she wasn't allowed back. I asked my father Alec Bruno later about what had happened. I said, "Dad, what is this about Granny being kicked out of the Park?" And then he told me everything.

I had always wondered why my family had been poor, and why my Granny had moved around so much. You see, she had grown up at Birch River, but when she was young she married a man and they moved to Fort Chipewyan. Several years later he died during one of the epidemics. When she tried to come home to grieve and get the support of her family, she was not allowed. The Park had taken over the land. My father elaborated; he told me that when Granny tried to go home with her kids, the Park wardens threatened her and said she had to leave. He said that Granny's house had been burned down by the wardens when she first left the Park with her new husband. Her home in the Park was gone.

After her attempt to return home was cruelly denied, she bounced around and relocated many times, trying to find a new home. But her true home was on the Birch River, and without it she was in a way homeless for the rest of

her life. When she married my grandfather, her second husband, they took care of each other, and things got a little better, but it was still hard, because her house still wasn't her home. The wardens' threats stayed with her and had consequences that lasted a long time. Of the seventeen children she had, just four survived because of the harsh life they were forced to live. This was the reason she couldn't eat the moose - it reminded her of the home the government took away.

My father and I have told this story in this book. It's a painful story that a lot of the families in our community share. The oral histories and the words of our grandparents and parents, of our relatives and ancestors, are being shared here so the world might know what happened. Wood Buffalo National Park was the heart of the Dene homelands, and when it was removed, Dene people suffered. Before it was taken away, people lived on the land and water. It provided everything they needed, with abundant wildlife. It's one of the richest places in the world in terms of wildlife, resources, land and water. My Granny, and so many others, lost all that, and were left homeless, with only memories of what used to be. The Park's rules meant that she could never go home, and so she kept that suffering inside, shielding her kids and grandkids from the pain. Yet, despite all her efforts, as well as those of her generation, the pain moved through generations.

The people today suffer the memories and trauma of this, a trauma that when combined with residential schools, hydrodams and oil sands pollution, casts a very long and dark shadow. For too long people have kept these traumas inside, not wanting to share them for fear of burdening others, but as we move down this road for future change we are learning that healing is only possible once we shed light and tell present and future generations what happened.

That's why ACFN has been doing this work and created this book. That's why we've been telling the stories and calling on the government to acknowledge what it did. My Granny sharing her story, and my Father passing it on and pressing for change, are part of why the work began. I'm thankful to the many people who agreed to share their stories. It is good and strong medicine that will heal our Nation. I think that is why my Granny shared her story with me, so that I can understand what happened; and so that we all can understand what happened and that we can grow and be a strong in our home once again.

As we learn and understand these stories, we can grow and reclaim ourselves and our Nation. We are the original stewards of this land from time immemorial. We are the proud Dënesų́hné; the K'ai Tailé Dene. We're sharing this story because it will help to heal us, and through healing we will be prepared to take back our rightful place in our home.

I hope that you'll hear these stories and listen. We are sharing it because the Dene people of ACFN want our relatives to be remembered and we believe that there can be a better future for all of us.

Preface

Elder Alice Rigney

I wasn't aware that my granny, Ester Piché, who was born in 1897, lived at House Lake (Birch River).¹ In fact I didn't know about this place at all. You see, I was raised in the Holy Angels Residential School in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, from the age of five. During those years I lost all contact with my family and history. I didn't ask [my family], as the topic of where my grandparents lived was never discussed. I couldn't talk to my parents in my Dene language, as this was taken away in the Mission.² I never asked about where, how, or who was my lineage.

It was my older brother Pat who awoke this awareness of my granny and the conditions in Wood Buffalo National Park. She was forced to leave her home and family, leaving everything behind. She was Dene and did not want to become a Cree member. She left with other families and relocated to the Delta.³

This move must have been difficult, but my granny was a strong Dene woman and hardships were not new to her. She endured, and I remember her as a strong, resilient woman. But my years knowing her were too short. What the Wood Buffalo National Park did was cruel and unforgiving, and this continued for more than one hundred years—I honour my brother Pat for bringing this issue to us. My brother's determination to undo this wrong is now in the open and I, along with ACFN, am forever grateful for him. He was a "force to be reckoned with." I am proud to call him my brother and opening the door to spaces where reconciliation can take place.

ACFN Elders' Declaration on Rights to Land Use (8 July 2010)

This is our Dēnesų́né territory, our Traditional Lands. We have occupied these lands for the last 10,000 years and maybe longer. Our traditions go on and we have the right to continue our traditional way of life. We agreed only to share our lands and we still consider these lands ours. Clearly, we have been here longer than anybody. Governments must recognize that we still have the right to use these lands.

Our Rights to use the lands and water on Traditional Lands have never been extinguished. The Traditional Lands, and our rights to use of the lands, are central to our Dene culture, identity, and well-being. They are essential to the well-being of our future generations and their ability to sustain our culture in a changing world.

The meaningful practice of our Treaty Rights depends on having sufficient lands and resources to exercise those rights. Sufficient refers to not only quantity but quality, including what is required to fulfill our cultural and spiritual needs.

Our parents and grandparents have told us that Treaty 8, signed by our Chief Laviolette in 1899, is an intergovernmental agreement that, in return for sharing our Traditional Lands, upholds our inherent Dene rights to land use and livelihood. In our experience, Alberta is not upholding their end of the treaty and is sacrificing our rights to industrial development. We have never been properly consulted and the federal and provincial governments have never accommodated our rights or compensated us for infringements.

ACFN has had enough with having our land destroyed, no one is dealing with it; neither at the federal nor the provincial Crown levels. Yet you come to us for approval of new projects. It is time for governments to stop cheating us of our rights to land use and livelihood, culture, and identity without proper consultation, mitigation, and compensation.

As the Elders of our community, we demand that our ability to practice our constitutionally protected Treaty Rights and traditional uses is sustained

within our Traditional Lands for future generations. We demand that our rights are protected in the LARP¹ and any other initiatives proposed by governments.

The lands from Firebag north, including Birch Mountain on the west side of river, must be protected. Richardson Backcountry is not to be given away—not to any government.

Everything we do here, we do to protect our rights to land use, livelihood, and culture.

Community Member Biographies



CHIEF ALLAN ADAM

Chief Adam was born in 1966 in Edmonton, Alberta. He has been in an ACFN leadership role since 2004 and was elected Chief in 2008. Chief Adam has testified in joint review panels for several industrial applications and at numerous federal standing committees and has provided strong leadership for his Nation during challenging times. The intergenerational impact of WBNP displacement has motivated Chief Adam's goal to correct historical injustices to Dēnesųhné members.



HORACE ADAM

Horace was born in High Channel, Saskatchewan in 1941. He attended the Gold Fields school in 1949 and then went to school in Uranium City, Saskatchewan from 1952 to 1957. Horace worked for the Department of Natural Resources in Forestry as a patrol man for eleven years in Uranium City. He drove a taxi for sixteen years and worked for Acden (an ACFN owned Corporation). Horace enjoys people and treating people well. He loves to smile and make people happy.



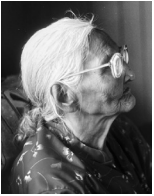
ALEC BRUNO

Alec was born along the shores of Jackfish Lake, Alberta on 8 March 1936. His mother, Helene Bruno, lived on the land that eventually became Wood Buffalo National Park. She was kicked out of her home when she was only twenty-two and lost everything. Alec attended residential school for sixteen years. He fished, trapped, and hunted around the Old Fort, Alberta area. He grew up in Old Fort and reluctantly relocated to Fort Chipewyan in 1966. He had two sons, Allan (Chief Adam) and James Adam.



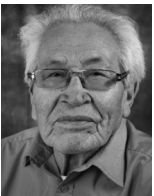
FRANCOIS BRUNO

Francois was born in Fort Chipewyan on 18 February 1909. Old Fort was his home primarily, but he, his family, and his extended family moved to fish, hunt, harvest, and trap. He and his wife Helene had sixteen children (some from his wife's previous marriage); four of the children grew up to be adults. The family moved to Fort Chipewyan in 1966. In 1975 they began to raise their grandchildren.



HELENE (PICHE) BRUNO

Helene Bruno was born in the House Lake settlement near the Birch River, Alberta on 14 August 1900. She married her first husband at fifteen or sixteen, and they were together until his death in 1929. After the buffalo park was expanded, she was told to leave her home at House Lake and that if she wanted to move back, she would have to join the Mikisew Cree First Nation. She married Francois Bruno in the 1930s. They lived in Big Point, Old Fort, and Jackfish Lake and moved to Fort Chipewyan in 1966. In 1975 they began to raise their grandchildren.



RENE BRUNO

Rene August Bruno was born in Jackfish, Alberta on 21 February 1934. Rene attended Holy Angels Residential School in Fort Chipewyan. He speaks fluent Dënesųłíné, Cree, and English. He was a Band Councillor from 1996 to 2003. Rene married Mary Mercredi and had seven children. He has many grandchildren and one great-great-granddaughter. Rene enjoys traditional food, living out on the land, boat rides, and teaching his grandchildren how to trap.



JIM DERANGER

Jim is the son of Isadore and Therese Deranger. He has a political science degree and worked for ACFN as a band administrator in 1980s. As a business contractor, he assisted the Dënesųłné, building their economic development plans in Northern Saskatchewan. Today Jim lives in Fort Chipewyan and is Co-chair of the ACFN Elders Council.



FREDOLINE DJESKELNI DERANGER

Fredoline is the son of Isadore and Therese Deranger. He has a civil engineering degree and worked most of his life on oilsands sites. Fred is passionate about reading and learning each and every day. Today Fred is researching old stories and the history of the Dënesųłné and brings forward the ancient teachings from the Elders.



DORA FLETT

Dora is one of the eldest daughters born to Isadore and Therese Deranger. She is knowledgeable in the Dënesųłné language, heritage, and practices. Dora lived off the land for many years and holds wisdom in the herbal medicines that are used for healing. She is the matriarch of five generations and is a proud ACFN member.



ELIZA MARIE FLETT

Eliza was born 31 December 1927 at the Birch River settlement in Wood Buffalo National Park. She married Raphael Flett in the 1930s. Eliza prepared moose hides and fish nets, beaded, and made clothing for her family. She lived a traditional life off the land until her family was removed from the Park. From there they moved to Old Fort, then to Jackfish Reserve, and finally to Fort Chipewyan in 1972. Eliza spoke only Dene and a bit of Cree, and she was able to in write in syllabics. She raised her family with tradition and love.



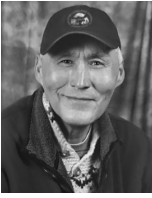
ELIZABETH FLETT

Elizabeth Flett (née Simpson) was born in 1922 at Peace Point. She was the daughter of Isidore Simpson and Corrone Benoit who were among the Dene families transferred to the Cree Band in 1944. After attending Holy Angels Residential School, Elizabeth married a non-Status man, Duncan Flett, in 1943. Under the *Indian Act*, she lost her Status and left the Park. After *Bill C-31* was passed in 1985, changing the *Indian Act* provision that stripped Indigenous women of their Status for marrying non-Status men, Elizabeth applied to regain her Status. Indian Affairs reinstated her as a member of Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation rather than to Mikisew Cree First Nation, of which both her parents and eleven siblings were now members. Because of this, Elizabeth and her thirteen ACFN children were refused access to her family home at Peace Point in Wood Buffalo National Park. Elizabeth was fluent in Dēnesųłné, Cree, French and English. It was amazing to listen to her switching from one language to another during conversations with different groups of people. She loved the bush life and was often referenced as Gramma Bush by her family.



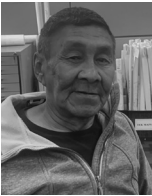
GARRY FLETT

Garry was born in Peace River, Alberta but grew up in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. He attended school in Fort Smith and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. Garry then entered an apprenticeship as a heavy-duty mechanic and did his training in Edmonton and Calgary. In 1979, he moved to Fort McMurray and started a career with Syncrude Canada Ltd. where he remained for thirty years prior to retirement. Garry was asked by the Chief and Council of ACFN to lead their business group in 2009 and continues as the Chief Executive Officer of Acden today. Garry enjoys fall hunting and getting out on the land as much as he can but mostly enjoys time with family and friends.



JOHN FLETT

John was born in 1960 at Fort McMurray and raised in Fort Chipewyan, Point Brule, and Poplar Point. John spent lots of time on the land at his family's cabins in Cluff lake, Douglas River, and at Sandy Lake in Saskatchewan N22. John is humble and still enjoys his time out on the land. He was a heavy equipment operator at Syncrude, and prior to that he was a labourer at the Cluff Lake mine. Currently, he's enjoying retirement and regularly visits the family cabin in the Delta.



LEONARD FLETT

Leonard is an ACFN Elder who speaks fluent Dēnesųhné and is an active land user. His parents are Liza and Raphael Flett. Leonard was born at Jackfish Lake and spent ten years in residential school. He is active in industry advisory committees where he raises concerns on the changes he has seen on our lands. Leonard is also a member of the Elders Advisory Council.



SCOTT FLETT

Scott was born and raised in Fort Chipewyan. He worked for the Alberta Environment field office in Fort Chipewyan collecting samples. Scott also served on the ACFN Council from 2011 to 2015. Today he spends most of his time at his cabin on the Fletcher Channel, at the southern end of Lake Athabasca. Scott enjoys traveling and spending time with his grandchildren and is an active member of the ACFN Elders Council and sits on various committees.



FRED "JUMBO" FRASER

Fredrick R. Fraser, better known as "Jumbo," was born and raised in Fort Chipewyan. Jumbo was a modest and kind man who was always willing to share his Traditional Knowledge of the land and wildlife with younger generations. Jumbo saw dramatic differences in the land, wildlife, and water level throughout his years. He witnessed the last migration of tens of thousands of caribou as they passed in front of his home—the migration lasted for two weeks. Jumbo also witnessed the

water level drop after the Bennett Dam was built, and the resulting shift in waterfowl migration routes away from Fort Chipewyan. Jumbo wasn't shy to voice his concerns to the government and industry. Jumbo, a champion dog musher, entrepreneur, Métis president, justice of the peace, marriage commissioner, volunteer fire fighter/fire chief, and storyteller, also worked for the Wood Buffalo National Park and in water management with Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Municipal Affairs. Jumbo remained active until his death in 2022.



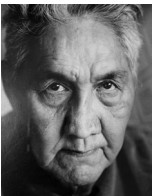
LESLIE LAVIOLETTE

Leslie is an ACFN Elder and an active land user. He is also an ACFN trapline holder. Leslie is very familiar with ACFN traditional lands and has seen changes over time. He is passionate about ACFN rights and culture and has testified in a number of hearings for ACFN and attends ongoing meetings regarding the protection of caribou. Leslie believes that all members need to be out on the land, especially our young people and Elders.



BIG JOHN MARCEL

Big John was born in Fort Chipewyan in 1943 and grew up in Jackfish. He attended Holy Angels Residential School for ten years. Big John worked as a bus driver for Bishop Piche School and Northland School for ten years. He moved to Fort McMurray in the 1970s and worked as a heavy equipment operator. He was a trapper when he was younger and used a dog team. Big John enjoys life even though it is tough to get around as he gets older.



FRANK MARCEL

Frank was an ACFN Elder and active land user. He was born at Jackfish Lake and attended residential school for several years. At the ACFN quarterly annual Elder meetings, Frank raised concerns on the changes he has seen on our lands. Frank enjoyed being out on the land and sharing his Traditional Knowledge with the youth.



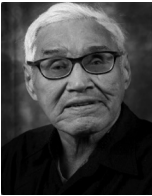
JOHN H. MARCEL

John is an ACFN Elder and active land user. John was born on ACFN traditional territory to Madeline and Ben Marcel. He spent several years in residential school. John enjoys the outdoors and being out on the land.



PAT MARCEL

Elder Pat Marcel, former ACFN Chief (1987–1990), was a respected leader and champion for upholding ACFN’s Treaty Rights. Pat taught us about our Treaty, how important it was, and that ACFN needed to have these Rights recognized and upheld. He was a youth mentor and the lead on numerous special projects and committees, sharing traditional science. Pat was also the former chair of the Dënesųłné Elders Committee.



CHARLIE MERCREDI

Charlie Mercredi was born and raised in Old Fort. He is one of twelve children born to Antoine and Victoria Mercredi. He spent most of his life living off the land to support his two children, Hazel and Charles, with his wife Georgina. Charlie taught his children to be humble, work hard, not be lazy, work during the day and relax at night, and never depend on anyone—if you want to do something just do it.



MARIE JOSEPHINE MERCREDI

Josephine was born in 1913 and lived a long life as a traditional Elder who raised her children on the land. She spoke Dënesųłné, French, and English and carried and shared the ancient stories passed down to her. She is featured in ACFN’s book, *Footprints on the Land*. Josephine gathered medicines and her Dene style beadwork was adored by all. She had an abundance of love that she shared with her sixteen children. Josephine is often remembered singing t’asunde wasika, a traditional Dené hymn.



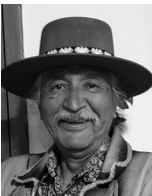
VICTORINE MERCREDI

Victorine was born in Old Fort in 1916. She was a traditional Elder who raised her children out on the land. She had twelve children, one being former Chief Tony Mercredi. Victorine served on the ACFN council for ten years. She spoke Dënesųłné and shared old stories, including the history of our Treaty and was instrumental in helping her people. She was well known for her traditional sewing and beadwork and her knowledge with our Traditional medicines. Victorine is most remembered practicing midwifery out on the land in Old Fort, Jackfish, Flour Bay, and throughout ACFN traditional territory.



ESTER PICHE NÉE ADAM

Ester was born in 1897 in Fond du Lac, Saskatchewan. Her first marriage was to Jonas Platcote and her second was to Louie Piche. Her children are Marie Madeline Marcel, Eliza Piche and Pierre Piche. She lived in the Peace-Athabasca Delta at House Lake and along Birch River. Esther was forced from her homeland when Wood Buffalo National Park was formed. She moved to Moose Point at the southeastern edge of Lake Athabasca, then to Poplar Point on the Athabasca River, and finally settled at Jackfish Reserve. She spoke Dënesųłné, told stories, and loved to cuddle her grandchildren. She was a tall, elegant lady and a perfectionist who trapped and maintained her home with her children. She lived traditionally on the lands until 1974.



ERNIE "JOE" RATFAT

Joe was born in the bush around Fort Chipewyan. He currently lives in British Columbia and enjoys traveling and spends his time working with feather fans, running Sweat Lodges, and conducting ceremonies. His goal is to help heal our young people. Joe has Traditional Knowledge, some of which he has passed down in this book. Joe is a Mikisew Cree First Nation member, but in his heart he is Dene. He speaks Dënesųłné and his parents are Dene.



ALICE RIGNEY

Alice was born in a tent by the Big Dock in Fort Chipewyan. She attended Holy Angels Residential School, Grandin College in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, and went to school in Edmonton. Alice worked as a social worker and in the community school teaching Dënesųłíné. Alice enjoys sharing her culture by teaching the Dënesųłíné language to community members. She loves gardening and living on the land.



DONNA MERCREDI SHORTMAN

Donna was born and raised in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. She has three children, thirteen grandchildren, and three great grandchildren. She is an active land-user and enjoys spending time at her cabin on the Athabasca River. Donna is currently working as the manager of the Kahkiyow Keykanow Elders Care Centre in Fort Chipewyan. She is blessed to raise her grandchildren and comes from a strong line of Dene women and men. Donna is a proud Dene and ACFN member.



LORI-ANN STEVENS

Lori-Ann is the daughter of John and Beverly Tourangeau. She received her Bachelor of Social Work degree from the University of Calgary and currently works as ACFN's social worker and development manager. When she is not working, Lori enjoys spending time with her five children, gardening, and taking her two dogs for walks.



BEVERLY TOURANGEAU

Beverly worked at Nunee Health in Fort Chipewyan as an Indian Residential School worker and at Paspew House, also in Fort Chipewyan, as a Director. Her pastime comforts are beading, sewing, and creating beautiful garments for her family and friends. You can always find Bev in her garden sharing her wisdom about growing food. She has three children and eleven grandchildren. Beverly resides in Fort Chipewyan.



EDOUARD TRIPPE DE ROCHE & KELTIE PAUL

Edouard and Keltie have been married for thirty-five years. Both lived in Fort McMurray, Alberta for over twenty years and now reside in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. Edouard has Traditional Knowledge and stories shared from past generations; Keltie is a long-time social science researcher and an anthropologist. Both Edouard and Keltie have provided key information to the development of this book. Edouard and Keltie are keen on seeing how the historical injustices against our Dene people could be corrected with reconciliation.



LESLIE WILTZEN

Leslie is an ACFN member and resides in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. He regularly visits his cabin in WBNP and is a strong advocate for ACFN members coming back to their traditional lands in the Park. Leslie is employed as the regional superintendent for the South Slave Department of Lands with the Government of Northwest Territories.

*Dedicated to the memory of
the late Elders Pat Marcel and Alec Bruno*

