

The Beginnings of a Tradition: The Adoption of the Log House  
by the Chipewyan of the Northwest Territories, Canada

Judith Jacob

Long before European colonists ever set foot in the New World, native people had established sets of traditions and ways of life adapted to their aboriginal land. As native people adopted aspects of European technology, cultures that had evolved more or less slowly for thousands of years began to change. In the Northwest Territories of Canada, Euro-Canadian traders introduced European cultural forms to the Athapaskan, or Dene, people (1). This paper presents a case study of European influence on the shelters of a band of Chipewyan. In addition, the issue of the preservation of structures that were meant to be temporary, built by people who place no value on material objects, will be addressed.

The Chipewyan inhabit the transitional zone of boreal forest and adjacent barrenlands of the Subarctic (2). Before Euro-Canadian contact, the economy of the Chipewyan centered almost exclusively on the harvesting of caribou. People traveled in small family groups in an area defined by a larger community, or band, meeting at sites known for their profitable hunting. These sites were the locations where houses were first built.

vedaghecho Tûe, which translates to mean "The Big Crossing," was for generations such a temporary camp for several Chipewyan families whose descendants now live in the settlement of Snowdrift. The site, used predominantly in the spring and fall during the caribou migrations, is situated on a small lake west of the narrows at the southern end of Artillery Lake on the edge of the barrenlands. Six log houses and various other structures comprise the center of the site; nine foundations and three houses are located within a five mile radius.

The houses that remain at vedaghecho Tûe represent the beginnings of log construction by Snowdrift Chipewyan. They also represent a specific era of Dene and Northern history. This era, the contact-traditional era, is characterized by the continuation of the traditional Dene culture as well as the growing Dene involvement in the fur trade (3).

The degree to which trade with the Europeans affected the culture of the Dene cannot be overstated. As they began to include the harvesting of furs into their economy, the time devoted to hunting caribou decreased. Log building was adopted by the Dene in the first decades of the twentieth century as the direct result of Euro-Canadian contact and trade commodities (4).

The traditional form of shelter used by the Dene was the conical tent (photo 1). This form was well suited to a nomadic way of life in that it was easily transported and could be used in both the bush and the barrenlands. Chipewyan tipis, economical in their use of natural resources, were fairly squat, constructed of poles planted in a circle, lashed together at the top, and covered with caribou hides. An opening at the top provided an escape for smoke. A

thick layer of spruce boughs covered the floor and surrounded a fireplace defined by a circle of stones. Brush shelters were similar to tipis, but were covered with spruce or willow branches instead of hides and were used both for outpost camps and emergency dwellings. The first significant change after initial European contact in the nineteenth century was the introduction of canvas, by the traders, which provided a new covering for tipis. Canvas was easier to prepare, unappetizing to dogs, and translucent during the day. Caribou hide continued to be used at the apex of the tipi as it was less prone to burning by sparks. Tipis are still used today for smoke houses and on occasion, for shelter as well.

In 1717, the Hudson's Bay Company established a fur trading post in Churchill where the Chipewyan were introduced to trade goods. The first expedition into Chipewyan country was successfully completed in 1772 by Samuel Hearne. Hearne traveled to the Coppermine River to assess the potential for the expansion of the Hudson's Bay Company and his findings, of a land rich in fur, spurred the growth of the fur industry. Peter Pond was the first trader to settle in Chipewyan territory; the post he established in 1778, near Lake Athabasca, marked the beginning of a permanent Euro-Canadian presence west of the Hudson's Bay. Eight years later, the Northwest Company established a post on Great Slave Lake; the Hudson's Bay Company absorbed this post in 1792 and moved to the present site of Fort Resolution. In 1926, the Hudson's Bay Company expanded its operations to present-day Snowdrift (5). Families who hunted at *pedaghecho* Tûe traded both in Fort Resolution and in Snowdrift.

The Hudson's Bay Company buildings in Fort Resolution followed a pattern used for all trading posts built by the Company and reflected northern European and French vernacular traditions of construction. The Hudson's Bay Company buildings are distinct with their squared logs, pieces-sur-pieces (piece-on-piece) construction, white-washed exteriors, shingle roofs, glazed windows, and manufactured doors (photo 2). Surrounding the trading post was a complex of smaller log houses belonging to the growing Metis population: families of Euro-Canadian traders and Dene women.

The first two decades of the twentieth century saw a sudden increase in the fur trade as a result the extension of the railroad to Edmonton and the introduction of steamboats on the Athabasca River. Independent traders increased in number, operating both from set locations and from boats in which they traveled to Dene camps. The small log houses that they built out on the land provided other patterns for the Dene to imitate. During this time the first log houses were built by the Snowdrift Chipewyan.

The availability and quality of European-made tools played an important role in the adoption of log construction. In addition, the examples of log construction provided by Euro-Canadians were paramount in the Dene considering the new building technology. The most important tool supplied by the traders for the working of wood was the axe, replacing the traditional tools made of stone, bone, wood, and native copper. The introduction of cast iron stoves in the 1910s facilitated the adoption of houses. Stoves were desirable as they burned less wood than the open fires used in tipis; they contained the fire and vented the smoke with a pipe, rendering the traditional conical structure, open at the top, obsolete. Thus, the use of the stove allowed the basic shape of shelter to change.

Scant information remains concerning other structures which can be considered as transitional in the shift of shelter type. Wall tents can be viewed as part of the transition, as well as a dwelling described by two elders of Snowdrift. Canvas wall tents began to be traded at the same time that stoves were introduced. These tents used stoves, had four walls, and were easily transported. A house was built in the Snowdrift area that could have been one of the first non-conical log structures built by the Snowdrift Chipewyan. This house had a triangular plan; one side, with the entrance, was short and higher than the other two which sloped back to the apex. If there was a lingering precedent, it was only that the triangular shape used was that of a tipi in cross section.

Weakened by new diseases and yearning for the goods that facilitated everyday life, the Dene increasingly engaged in the new trade economy. The construction of houses by the Dene in part reflected their adaptation to this economy, but not to the European cultures from which these houses originated. These cultures were in general stable, based on an agrarian way of life where dwellings were lived in year-round and year-out. These same dwellings built by the Dene did not share the same connotations of "home" that those built by Europeans did, and therefore, were not built to be permanent. Travelling was still a way of life and the possession of a house did not change this; indeed, families often had several houses in different locations while continuing to use tents as well. Houses were constructed as a means of creating shelter utilizing natural resources and stoves. Houses that were no longer used as dwellings, or that had been partially destroyed by bears while vacant, were used for firewood or salvaged and reused in a new house. In some instances, when a house was no longer needed, it was burned in totality in a symbolic gesture to return the materials to the land. ʔedaghecho Túe had been a gathering place for families long before the first Euro-Canadian contact; the building of houses there was simply a change in the form of shelter, not a change in settlement pattern. Ultimately, the Dene would congregate in the settlements and towns of today. This change, however, was the result of the fur trade and Euro-Canadian dominance, not just the building of houses.

The European-derived house form did not alter earlier domestic patterns. Log house construction was well suited to the Canadian North in that all necessary materials came from the land, sharing the same economic use of natural resources that had developed the tipi. The spatial use of the log house also facilitated its adoption: the use of the interior was in actuality no different from that of a tipi where all activities were carried out on the floor around the central hearth or stove. Window openings were situated low on the wall to bring light to this level. The floor area of a house was also similar to that of a tipi. The length of the walls were dictated by the length and width of trees available; in the North, fourteen feet was the average log length with diameters ranging from eight to twelve inches. Houses built by the Snowdrift Chipewyan share the uniformity of log houses built in the North, they also show stylistic and technical developments which are evident at ʔedaghecho Túe.

Two houses remain standing in the vicinity of the ʔedaghecho Túe site which are of an earlier date of construction than the others, probably built in the 1910s or 1920s (photo 3). A reconstruction of the appearance of the early houses can be derived from these two and from descriptions given by elders from Snowdrift. These houses were characterized by low walls, few window

openings close to the ground, flat or barely sloping roofs, unpeeled logs, hand hewn door and window surrounds, wooden pegs, and spruce boughs covering a dirt floor. The logs were almost always joined with saddle notches. Windows were covered with scraped caribou hide and occasionally with fish skins sewn together. Doorways were first covered with hide in the same way as a tipi opening; later plank doors were made. Roofs were covered with sod, and moss was used to fill the chinks between the logs.

The houses standing in the center of the ʔedaghecho Túe site, built in the 1930s and early 1940s, are generally larger and exhibit more advanced building techniques than their predecessors (photo 4). Most noticeable are the gable roofs, dovetail corners, and wire nails. The gables themselves are most commonly constructed in a variation of the piece-on-piece technique used by the traders; those roofs that remain intact are covered with sod. Windows are manufactured of milled slats and sheets of plastic. Floors are made of hewn boards and living space is delineated by built-in beds and tables in the corners. As families grew, additions were built on to existing houses and were frequently constructed of logs recycled from other structures. Though the interior became more delineated, and with additions, more segregated, the use of space remained the same as it had in the beginning. The center of domesticity remained in the main portion of the house by the stove while the additions were used for sleeping and storage and were of secondary importance.

Logs and poles were also used for other structures. The most common form of storage facility was the cache: a raised platform that kept meat high off the ground, away from predators and sled dogs. Log warehouses, constructed in much the same way as houses, were another form of storage. The two warehouses still standing at ʔedaghecho Túe can be recognized by their windowless facades, low height, flat roofs, and logs of a smaller diameter than those used for houses. Small conical structures fabricated from poles and spruce branches were used both for smoke houses and as shelters for raising dogs.

The houses at ʔedaghecho Túe were abandoned in the winter of 1944-45. An outbreak of influenza had claimed many lives including a man considered a leader by his people. With his death, people no longer found reason to live at ʔedaghecho Túe and the families there relocated to Snowdrift.

Other factors also influenced the move to Snowdrift by the inhabitants of ʔedaghecho Túe. Following the Second World War, the demand for furs decreased and the Dene found themselves adrift in an economy that no longer sustained a steady livelihood. During this time the Government of Canada began expanding its welfare and social service programs which provided the necessary aid to augment the low trapping income. These services were used to induce people to settle in permanent locations.

Today, log houses continue to be built out on the land near trap lines. Log house construction, now considered a tradition, continues in Snowdrift as well. In recent years, modern building materials (milled lumber, plywood, and fiberglass insulation) and mechanical tools (chain saws) have contributed to new stylistic and structural developments. Houses are larger, often of two stories, and roofs are well insulated. Two-by-four splines have replaced tenons in a variation of piece-on-piece construction.

The vedaghecho Tûe site has historical and architectural significance, and thus the issue of its preservation is raised. Though the houses have remained virtually untouched since the site was abandoned, deterioration is now at an advanced stage and will, in time, eradicate these structures altogether. Active intervention, blocking or prolonging natural deterioration, is not an appropriate solution to this issue. On one level, the logistics of providing a means of preservation treatments, as well as periodic maintenance, is out of the question due to the inaccessibility of the site. On a more theoretical level, these houses were built for a temporary use and it is their fitting end to gradually return to the land, from which they came. In this case, the documentation of the site with photographs, written descriptions, and oral histories is the most meaningful method of preservation as it has created a record for future generations of Snowdrift Chipewyan of the beginnings of a building tradition, without intervening in the natural process of decay.

Saving material objects for posterity is a Western notion. The land has symbolic meaning for the Chipewyan and specific sites have additional meanings attached, but structures, beyond the initial curiosity evoked by them, are meaningless. Abandoned structures are not valued as material culture, but instead, are valued for their potential use as firewood or building material. The Dene view of preservation is directed toward the land. Places of significance are preserved through memory and an oral tradition; places are, in essence, the embodiment of past, present, and future. The land also continues to provide much of the Dene livelihood and therefore, saving the land from the exploitation of natural resources, as well as from tourism, is of primary importance. Land claim negotiations are currently in progress and the Dene are fighting for more jurisdiction over the land that is their traditional domain. To acknowledge the Dene right to the land, and to respect their non-material values, these houses should be left to nature and the people who created them.

(1) The native people of the western Canadian Subarctic speaking one of the various dialects of the Athapaskan language family are called Athapaskans. The Athapaskan word meaning "man" or "person" is "Dene" and this is the term that the native people of the Northwest Territories prefer. The Chipewyan are part of the Athapaskan family.

(2) James G.E. Smith, "Chipewyan," in Handbook of North American Indians, ed. June Helm, Vol. 6: Subarctic (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1981).

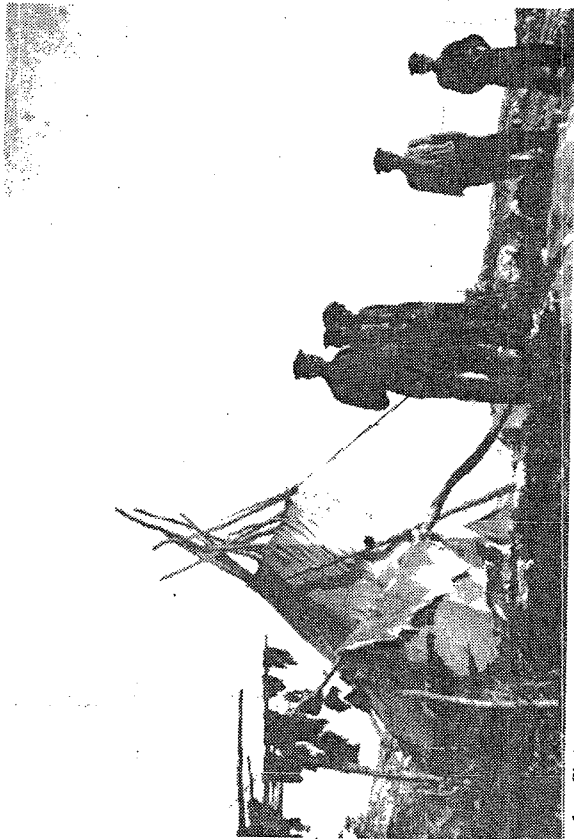
(3) June Helm et al., "The Contact History of the Subarctic Athapaskans: An Overview," Proceedings of the Athabaskan Conference, 1971 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975).

(4) The Roman Catholic Missions played no insignificant role in the changing culture of the Dene, but this role was secondary to the fur trade.

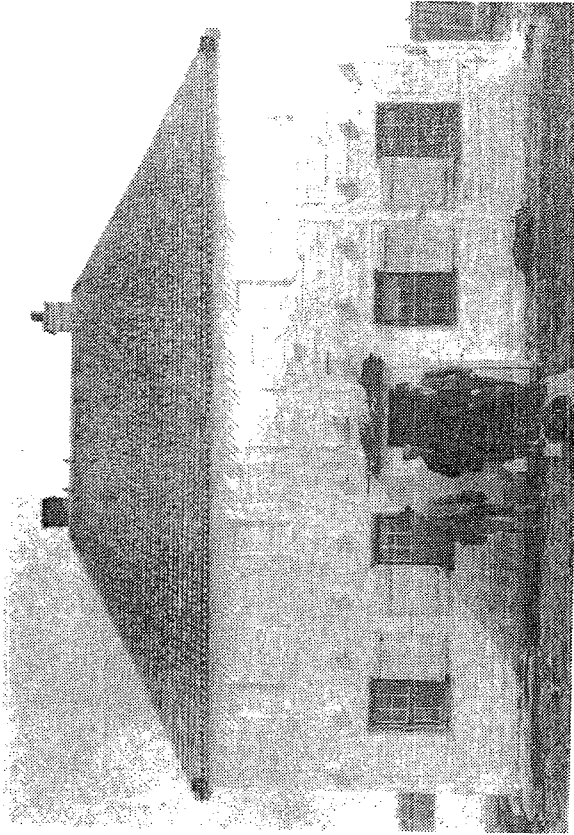
(5) June Helm, Edward S. Rogers, and James G.E. Smith, "Inter-cultural Relations and Cultural Change in the Shield and Mackenzie Borderlands," in Handbook of North American Indians, ed. June Helm, Vol. 6: Subarctic (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1981).

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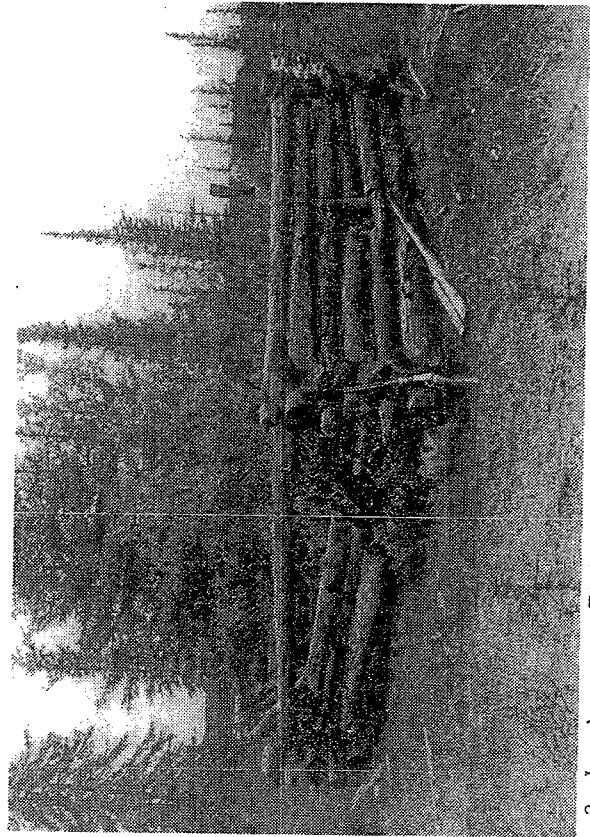
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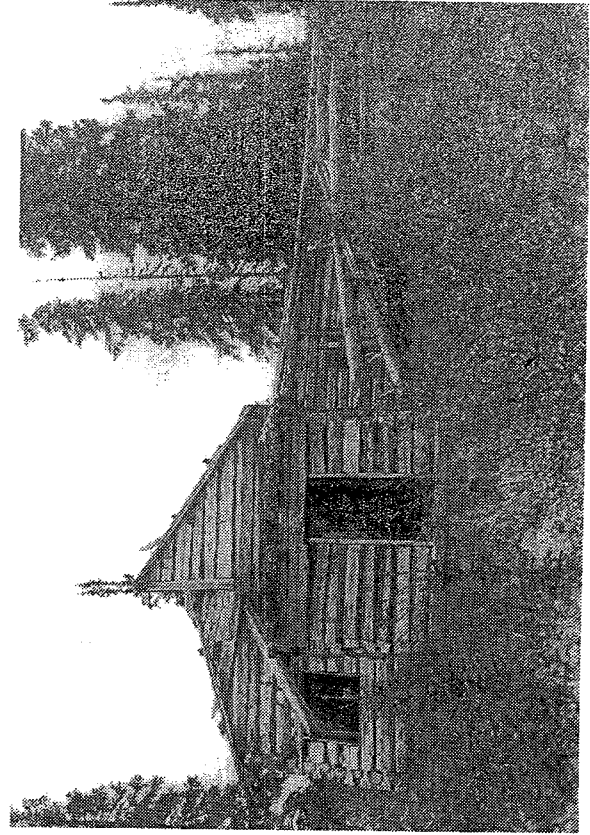
1. Chipewyan tipi, Artillery Lake, NWT, 1924  
Public Archives Canada/PA-19698



2. Hudson's Bay Company dwelling, Fort Resolution, NWT, 1900  
Public Archives Canada/PA-19541



3. Log house on Timber Bay, Artillery Lake, NWT



4. Log house in center of edaghecho Tue site, NWT

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The expansion of the fur trade into the northern interior of Canada had an enormous impact on the native people, influencing both their material culture and their way of life. The adoption of the log house was a direct result of the native people's growing involvement in the changing economy, the introduction of new material goods, and the examples of log construction provided by the Euro-Canadian traders.

When trade goods became readily available, especially those necessary for the working of wood, log houses that imitated those at the trading settlements began to be constructed near traditional hunting grounds. One of these sites was called wedaghecho T'ue; the houses that remain represent the beginnings of log construction by the Chipewyan who now live in Snowdrift, in the Northwest Territories. Six log houses, used on a seasonal basis, comprise the center of the site. The first houses were built by the Snowdrift Chipewyan in the 1910s and 1920s. The houses standing in the center of the wedaghecho T'ue site were built in the 1930s and early 1940s.

Log construction is now considered as part of the heritage of the native people of the Northwest Territories. The preservation of buildings as part of a cultural legacy is important; equally important is respecting the values and traditions of that culture. In this case, the documentation of the site serves as the means of preservation, existing for future generations of Snowdrift Chipewyan. These houses were built as temporary structures, and their gradual return to the land, from which they came, respects the non-material values of the Chipewyan.

Judith Jacob conducted a survey of the wedaghecho T'ue site in 1984-1985 with a grant from the Canada Council and assistance from the Snowdrift Band Council. She is employed by the National Park Service, North Atlantic Historic Preservation Center in New York City.



Les Origines d'une Tradition: l'Adoption de la Cabane en Bois  
par les Chipewyan du Territoires Nord-Ouest du Canada

Judith Jacob

Ce fut l'expansion du commerce à l'intérieur du Canada du nord qui influença la culture matérielle ainsi que le mode de vie des indigènes. L'économie croissante, leur nouveau rôle au temps que fournisseurs, et les exemples de construction en bois fournis par les commerçants de fourrures euro-canadiens, contribuèrent à leur adoption de la cabane en bois comme refuge.

Avec l'impetus du commerce, surtout en ce qui concerne les outils pour travailler le bois--l'axe par exemple--les Indiens commencèrent à bâtir des cabanes en bois, près de leurs terrains de chasse. ʔedaghecho Tûe est un de ces lieux. Les cabanes qui s'y trouvent, représentent le début de ce genre de construction par la tribu chipewyan qui réside à présent à Snowdrift, dans les Territoires Nord-Ouest. Les six cabanes qui occupent le centre du terrain n'étaient occupées que quelques mois par an. Les premières constructions de la tribu chipewyan furent bâties vers les années 1910-20, mais les cabanes en bois qui occupent le centre de cet emplacement particulier furent bâties à peu près 20 ans plus tard.

À présent ces indigènes considèrent cette forme de construction, comme une partie intégrale de leur héritage. Pourtant, il est aussi important de préserver cet héritage que de respecter les valeurs et les traditions de ces tribus indiennes. En ce qui concerne ce cas particulier il suffit de documenter les constructions, ce qui servira comme mémoire collective de cet héritage. Il n'est pas nécessaire de conserver les édifices actuels, comme ils furent construits comme abris éphémères et pas comme monuments permanents--ceci respecte les valeurs non-matérielles des indigènes qui les ont mises au monde.

Judith Jacob a étudié le site d'ʔedaghecho Tûe en 1984-1985, grâce à une subvention du Canada Council et à l'aide du Snowdrift Band Council. Elle est employée du National Park Service, North Atlantic Historic Preservation Center à New York City.