

WOMEN & CHILDREN

MAIN MESSAGES

- Women were expected to master many skills. They snared small animals, butchered game, stored and prepared food, processed hides, crafted clothing and many types of implements, packed and set up camp, and raised children.
- Children had many teachers: their parents, aunts, uncles and elders passed on the knowledge they needed to live on the land.
- Children began helping their parents at an early age. Even games developed their strength and abilities as hunters and fishers.
- After settling at Moosehide, women and children adapted to new ways but kept many of their traditional practices.



In old days women did a lot of beadwork. Used Hudson's Bay beads, porcupine quills, dyes from plants like blueberries, cranberries.

They helped build birch canoes. Men make the inside and outside frame and the cross stick down front, and cover the point at the front. Women sew up with spruce root. Sew around frame. Use spruce pitch seal. Women can do it fast. Can sew up in no time. To soften bark for birch vessels, heat. To soften for canoes, soak and then sometimes heat. Spruce tree roots can be split in three. Use outside ones only for sewing. Throw away the inside section. Spruce roots are used to sew bark.

In the old days women snare animals, make skins, tan hides.

- Mary McLeod, 1974

In spring all women go to the creek. Make big fire and do washing. They do housecleaning then. It's a long way to pack water.

Cleaning day was big day too. They used to make like potlatch. All women bring their own food. Best food they can make. Us girls make cake, pie. Our mothers make bannock, dry fish. Then everybody clean graveyard.

- Patricia (Isaac) Lindgren, 1974

Klondike First Nations family, ca. 1898.
YA, 81/9, 123, Tappan Adney Coll., Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Libraries.

I used to scrape skin too when I was a kid. When I growing up, I work like heck, help my mother all the time, she working like heck all the time. . . I get her all the wood anyways, that she want, water. All the chores there for me, it's no wonder I run around all over the darn bush, everytime I go in the bush I just like it. Go anywhere when I was young, any place I want to go, I just go.

- Edward Roberts, 1999

I didn't have to go away to school. Stayed and learned from my parents. Learned all kinds of things - cooking, sewing, hunting, trapping. People who went to school all have to use book to do anything.

- Vicky Johnson, 1974





Women

In many ways, the skilled hands of women stitched First Nations society together. While men were the trackers, hunters and fishers, it was the women who butchered, preserved and cooked the catch. The hunters determined where people should move on the land; women followed carrying small children and transporting the group's belongings, then set up camp and erected shelters.

Women were midwives helping one another through labour and delivery. Women were fabricators, making everything from boots to cooking containers to snares. They worked with men to make snowshoes and canoes. Women webbed babiche onto the wooden snowshoe frames; and after men made the canoe form, women stitched on and calked the birch bark. Women were also tailors, making every item of clothing needed to live and travel comfortably in an often harsh climate. To do this, women skinned the animals, tanned the hides – a laborious process that took place in several stages – (see the *Caribou* story) then cut the tanned hide and sewed it into clothing. Women were also artists. Clothing and footgear were often beautifully decorated with quill or beadwork. As in most societies, women were the main caregivers – tending small children, nursing the sick and assisting the elderly.

Women helped provide the food for the group. While men hunted for large mammals such as sheep, moose and caribou; women set snares for smaller animals such as squirrels, marten and rabbits. In late summer, they spent hours picking a variety of berries – cranberries, mossberries, blueberries, stoneberries (kinnick kinnick? chk*), raspberries, rosehips and soapberries. Women were botanical experts, knowledgeable about the places to go for edible and medicinal plants.

Women cooked most food by either roasting or boiling. They made stews and soups by carefully

dropping hot stones into a container of water and bringing it to a boil.

One of their most important jobs was processing and preserving food for the trail and for the hungry months of winter. Meat and salmon were cut up, smoked and dried. When sewn into birch bark containers and buried, summer berries kept fresh for months. A type of pemmican was made from stoneberries, fat and powdered meat. Women cleaned the animal stomachs and bladders used to carry food and water, and made a variety of containers for storage and cooking from bark, woven spruce root and hide.

Although traditionally men and women did certain jobs, the division of roles wasn't always straightforward and both could do each other's tasks. People in subsistence societies had to be versatile. First Nations society was matrilineal; descent was traced through the mothers. The children also followed the mother's moiety; that is, if the mother was of the Crow or Wolf clan, so were her children. Traditionally, older women as well as male elders advised the chief or headman about important matters.

When newcomers came into the country, women were quick to adopt the things that would make their lives easier – items like metal pots and canvas tents.

Children

As infants, children travelled on the backs of their mothers. Newborns were wrapped in soft skins and their baby carriers were lined with moss and other dried material that could be easily discarded when soiled – a completely biodegradable disposable diaper! Mothers also kept their infants safe in swings or hammocks made from hide or babiche. After their mother's milk, babies drank meat broth, then soft foods which were often pre-chewed by their mother.

Like kids everywhere, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in

children loved to play outdoors doing everything from sledding on their fathers' snowshoes to leaping barefoot between the great hulks in the sternwheeler graveyard. Children played on simple swings made by tying a long rope between two trees. Boys played games that encouraged their endurance and accuracy as hunters. In an early game, a willow hoop was rolled in front of a row of boys. Each boy tried to throw a spear stick through the hoop. Every time he succeeded, this counted as a caribou killed. In winter, they played "snow-snake" hitting a three-foot long spruce pole out of a snowbank with a club like a baseball bat with a flat end.

Archie Roberts recalled a couple of ball games people used to play. Boys played a type of shinny, or hockey without skates, using a skin ball and sticks or clubs. In another game, a skin ball was stuffed with moose hair and had a tail hanging from it. With this, they played a type of volleyball – the purpose being to keep the ball from touching the ground.

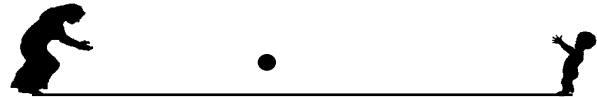
Children began helping their parents with chores at an early age. They were responsible for minding younger siblings. Girls began to cook and sew while boys cut wood and carried water. Many of their toys were miniatures versions of the items their parents used such as little bows and arrows, pretend stoves, etc.

Children had many teachers. Fathers, uncles and grandfathers taught young boys the skills they needed to be good trackers and hunters. Mothers and aunts taught girls how to prepare and preserve food, sew and help make the many things needed to travel and live on the land. Children were expected to learn by carefully watching then trying to do things on their own.

Elders also taught children everything from how to set snares to the best berry picking patches. Often children did chores for elders in return for stories. From these stories, they learned about First Nations legends, history and lessons of how to live. Children were encouraged to learn and eventually retell these stories themselves.

Life changed for both women and children after the Klondike gold rush and the move to Moosehide. Children began attending the church run day school when they stayed in the community. Women now did their housekeeping in cabins instead of temporary shelters. But an important part of life still followed traditional ways. Families ensured their children still learned how to make a living on the land.

During the era of residential schools, children were taken from their parents for years at a time. Many of these lost their language, the opportunity to learn skills needed to live on the land, and the ability to pass First Nation traditions on to their children. In recent decades, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in have worked with their elders to document and relearn their culture and pass it on to the latest generation of children.



Ellen Silas holding Anne Jonas at Moosehide, approx, 1940. YA, Walter Jonas Coll., 82/453, 2.



RELATED STORIES



- Fish Camp Stories
- Mary McLeod
- Nothing Wasted: Traditional Uses of Caribou



WAYS TO TELL THE STORY



Albums

- Prepare displays or albums showing photos of women and children. Only a few images are listed below, try to find more.

Talks

- Talk about the different activities of women and children during different seasons and how these might have changed over time.

Show and Tell/Props

- Try to find out what kind of moss and dried materials were used for babies – show visitors the original disposable diapers.
- Invite people to practice some of the games children used to play. Get a hula hoop and some willow spears.
- Show a typical load a woman would have to carry when travelling on the land. Or at least get a list of items and figure the weight.



FURTHER RESOURCES



Oral Histories

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in

Council of Yukon Indians, Elders Documentation Project

- Archie Roberts, recorded by Ann-Marie Miller, June 1993.
- *Life on the River Oral History Project*: Edward Roberts, recorded July 1999 by Georgette McLeod.

Yukon Archives, Julie Cruikshank Coll. Acc. No. /220;

Location: MSS 044

1974 Transcripts of interviews conducted by Julie Cruikshank with female elders including Mary McLeod, Patricia Lindgren and Vicki Johnson.

Yukon College, Dawson Campus.

1994 *Moosehide (Édhä Dädhëchan K ek'èt) An Oral History*. Prepared by the Developmental Studies students of the Dawson Campus (Tr'odek Hatr'unotan Zho) of Yukon College.

Photographs

- First Nations woman standing by a fish wheel holding part of her catch in her hand. n.d. YA 2156/Vcr. *Public Library Coll.*
- Three First Nations women in front of a tent with an elevated log cache in the background. Young child also visible in the entrance of the tent [ca. 1900]. YA 3872/ *MacBride Museum Coll.*
- Two elderly ladies having tea and making birch bark baskets in Moosehide. Ellen Silas (tsä àn tlik) on left and Ellen Woods (tsò gé), n.d. YA 5773 / *Kates Coll.*
- Mrs. Magdeline (Woods) Roberts carrying Sarah Roberts, and Archie Roberts at Moosehide, 1932. YA 5788 / *Kates Coll.*
- Young women and dogs at fish drying racks, Moosehide village. YA, *Tappan Adney Coll.*, 81/9, PHO 260 R, 45.
- "Elsie, Dorothy and Johnnie Baker canoeing to school. Dawson 1924." YA, *Mary Davis Moody Coll.*, 78/3, PHO 83, 49.
- "Martha Totty and Mrs. Totty, Moosehide, Dawson, 1924." YA, *Mary Davis Moody Coll.*, 78/3, PHO 83, 51.
- First Nations girl with doll. YA, *Mary Davis Moody Coll.*, 78/3, PHO 83, 116.
- "Spring Laundry at Moosehide." ca. 1912. *Dawson City Museum, Isaac Coll.* PH990-54-12.
- Chief Isaac all dressed up and holding a small homemade doll. *Dawson City Museum, Vena Bleakley Coll.*, PH984R.32.1.16.
- Child running in front of a row of log houses at Moosehide. *Dawson City Museum, D.H. Ferry Coll.*, PH993.67.1.123.
- Woman carrying a great bundle of firewood. *Dawson City Museum, Napoleon Baker Coll.*, PH990.54.12.
- Two girls and an Indian woman sewing sitting in from of their Moosehide cabin [ca. 1900], Cantwell photog. *UAA-Bunnell Coll, no. 58-1026-1549.*

- Non native man sitting near woman doing washing in front of a tent. *Wash. State Hist. Society*, Asahel Curtis photo #46139.
- Five women working on birchbark canoe at Moosehide. *Wash. State Hist. Society*, Asahel Curtis photo #46141.
- Woman and boy in front of tent (same scene as 46139). *Wash. State Hist. Society*, Asahel Curtis photo #46142.

Osgood, Cornelius

1971 *The Hän Indians: A Compilation of Ethnographic and Historical Data on the Alaska-Yukon Boundary Area*. New Haven, Yale University.

Schmitter, Ferdinand

1910 "Upper Yukon Native Customs and Folklore," *Smithsonian*, Vol. 56, no. 4, May 1910. (Reprinted by Eagle Historical Society, ca. 1985.)

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in

Transcripts from various oral history interviews.

Yukon College, Dawson Campus

1994 *Moosehide (Édhä Dădhëchan K ek'èt) An Oral History*. Prepared by the Developmental Studies students of the Dawson Campus (Tr'odek Hatr'unotan Zho) of Yukon College.

Publications & Reports

Dobrowolsky, Helene

- 2001 *Hammerstones: A History of Tr'ochëk, Moosehide and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in*. Draft ms. prepared for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Parks Canada.
- 2000 *Tr'ochëk / Klondike City Bibliography*. (a compilation of sources relating to the Tr'ochëk / Lousetown / Klondike City settlements and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, most available from Yukon Archives). Prepared for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Parks Canada.

McClellan, Catherine et al

1987 *Part of the Land, Part of the Water Vancouver*, Douglas & McIntyre.



Sacred fire at Moosehide Gathering, 2002. *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Collection*



Three First Nations women in front of a tent with an elevated log cache in the background. c. 1900.
YA 3872/MacBride Museum Coll.