

# CHIEF ISAAC

## MAIN MESSAGES

- Chief Isaac is the best-known chief of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. He led the Hän during a pivotal time in their history – the many changes that came with the Klondike gold rush.
- When newcomers moved onto the land at Tr'ochëk and displaced the Hän, Chief Isaac met with church and government officials and arranged to move his people to Moosehide, away from the disruptions of Dawson.
- Chief Isaac served as a bridge between the old ways and the new – he was a master of traditional technologies but fascinated by the new; he often led potlatch ceremonies in other communities but was baptized and a prominent member of the Anglican Church.
- A famous story tells of how Chief Isaac gave the gänhäk, an important cultural symbol, to Alaskan people for safekeeping. Today, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in are relearning their traditional songs and dances from the Alaskans.
- The strength, wisdom and spirit of Chief Isaac continue to inspire the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in.



*Tall, slender, sinewy and muscular, he was of superior physical proportions, and time also proved him as well endowed mentally. His friendliness to the whites, dating back to the days of the Russian occupation of the Yukon and Alaska, and his influence with other Indians, went far toward smoothing the way for prospectors, traders, trappers, missionaries and others who pioneered the Northland. Those who knew Chief Isaac well agree that, had he been a white man with opportunities for education, combined with his natural ability and personality, he would have proved to be an extraordinary figure in most any walk of life.*

– The Alaska Weekly, 15 April 1932

*Hän song and drum and the “gänhäk” all that are going to be messed up because there’s white people coming into Dawson like a mosquito there, just by the thousand. So I guess Chief really got a little nervous about all these stuff because he can’t control his people. So he took all that stuff over to, I think, Tanana people for safe keep.*

– Percy Henry, 1993



Chief Isaac in ceremonial garb for a Discovery Day celebration in Dawson, 15 Aug. 1924. YA 7283/Tidd Coll.



## THE STORY



The most influential leader of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in was Chief Isaac. He led the Hän people from some time before the gold rush until his death in 1932. In many ways, he was a bridge between the old ways and the new. He acted as a go-between between his people and the newcomers, and later between the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and the Canadian government. He was skilled in the traditions of his people, but was also very interested in the different ways and technologies introduced by the newcomers. It was with his consent and cooperation that the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in moved to Moosehide.

When that the first white missionaries and traders began visiting then settling within the traditional territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, the leaders of the Hän and neighbouring First Nations had to acquire new skills to understand and deal with these outsiders. Their abilities to bargain and trade stood them in good stead with the early traders. When they were faced with a great influx of outsiders setting up a new social order with a very different set of rules, they had to quickly learn about different concepts of owning and managing land and resources. Increasingly, the leaders of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in had to fight to protect the place of their peoples within this society. It has been suggested that one reason Chief Isaac was appointed at this critical time was because of his command of English and ability to negotiate with the newcomers.

Elders agree that he came from the "Alaska side" although there is no clear consensus of exactly where. Suggestions include the Upper Tanana area, Ketchumstock, Tanacross and Chena. He spent part of his young manhood in the Fortymile area until he married his wife Eliza and joined the people at the mouth of the Klondike River.

Isaac's wife, Eliza Harper, was a younger woman who survived him by nearly 30 years. She died in 1960 at the age of 87. The couple had 13 children, only four of whom survived to

adulthood. They were Patricia Lindgren, Angela Lopaschuck, Charlie Isaac and Fred Isaac.

About 1892, Chief Isaac met Bishop Bompas and was subsequently baptized. This was likely when he received his English name. Unfortunately, no record has been found of his original name. His two brothers, Jonathan Wood and Walter Benjamin, were also well-known leaders – Walter as a catechist and teacher in the Alaskan community of Eagle, while Jonathan taught and preached in various Yukon communities including Fortymile and Moosehide.

While the Anglican Church claimed Isaac as a Christian, he seemed to have walked a middle way between the gospel and the traditions of his ancestors. He attended church conferences, or synods, and occasionally participated in church services. In 1919, Reverend Totty of Moosehide wrote: "The chief sometimes says a few words at the close of the service, giving advice and counsel to his people."

He was also greatly respected by many other First Nations and was frequently called upon to play a leading role at potlatches in other communities. According to Percy Henry, traditionally, "the Chief of Dawson had to get things prepared like a potlatch and ceremony." When the Eagle Chief died early in the century, Chief Isaac was called upon to preside over the funeral potlatch and distribute gifts. He played a similar role at a 1904 potlatch in Fortymile when Peter succeeded his father David as hereditary chief of the community. In 1915, Chief Isaac delivered an eloquent eulogy at the funeral of Chief Jackson of the Selkirk First Nation.

Chief Isaac had a special relationship with both Bishop Bompas and his successor Bishop Isaac O. Stringer. In 1918, Chief Isaac was surprised and pleased to learn that Mrs. Bompas had bequeathed him the Bishop's watch. During an Anglican Synod ten years later, Chief Isaac presented Bishop Stringer with his grandfather's stone hunting knife.

In 1902, Chief Isaac travelled south by steamship with his brother, Walter Benjamin, to visit many of the coastal cities that the stampeders had originated from. During this trip, sponsored by the three major trading companies at Dawson, Chief Isaac visited San Francisco Seattle and other coastal cities. While Isaac was most interested in all that he saw, and very pleased to meet old Yukon friends such as Jack McQuesten, he was happy to return home to his people and land. In Seattle, he told a reporter: "Yes, I have seen so many strange and great things that I am tired and want to return to my people."

He was respected by Dawson residents who named him an honorary member of the Yukon Order of Pioneers. A skilled orator, he frequently spoke at Dawson celebrations such as Discovery Day and Victoria Day as well as at the festivities of his own people. Two themes recurred during these addresses. While Isaac welcomed the newcomers, he never failed to remind them that they prospered at the expense of the original inhabitants by driving away their game and taking over their land. He also had a very firm view of appropriate spheres of activity for both the newcomers and the First Nations people. One oft-repeated statement was that since the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in refrained from doing white men's jobs like mining; the white people should likewise refrain from activities such as hunting and fishing that deprived the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in of their livelihood.

First Nation elders and the chief were the keepers of culture. In their memories, they kept alive the stories, songs and dances of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. Chief Isaac foresaw that his people would lose much of their traditional culture as they came increasingly under the influence of the missionaries and non-native society. A famous story told by many Hän and Tanana elders tells of how Chief Isaac entrusted many of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in songs and dances to the Alaskan people for safekeeping. An important symbol of this traditional culture was the gänhäk or dancing stick. Today, as an important part of cultural renewal, members of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in are relearning

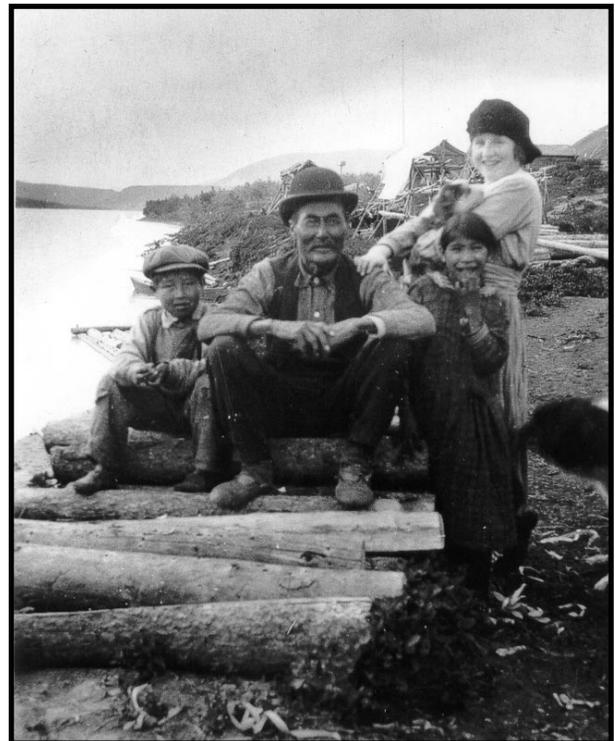
these songs and dances from their Alaskan neighbours.

Chief Isaac died of influenza on April 9th, 1932 at age 73. Two white horses pulled the wagon bearing his coffin over the river ice to Moosehide. The funeral service, conducted by Bishop A. H. Sovereign, Reverend Jenkins and Reverend Richard Martin, was attended by all the First Nations people in the area as well as many people from Dawson.



*My Dad [Chief Isaac] saw that they'd get civilized with that gold rush and was afraid that his people would learn bad habits from the white people, drinking and trouble like that. He wanted his people to be moved away from the city so he talked to government and got them moved three miles down to Moosehide.*

Patricia (Isaac) Lindgren, 1977



Chief Isaac, his son Charlie and two other children at Moosehide, c. 1920. DCM, Isaac Coll. PH990.77.7

 RELATED STORIES 

- Leadership
- Fortymile Mile Caribou Herd

 WAYS TO TELL THE STORY **Photos & Graphics**

- As well as being an important leader, Chief Isaac was a handsome man with a great natural dignity. These qualities attracted photographers and there are many wonderful images of the chief taken over nearly 35 years. These show him doing activities such as paddling a birch bark canoe or ice fishing on the Yukon River, as well as in more traditional formal poses.

**Stories**

- The stories about Chief Isaac and his life can be told in a number of ways: text with photos in a display, stories told by an interpreter, and recorded stories from oral history interviews.

*All Yukon belong to my papas. All Klondike belong my people. Country now all mine. Long time all mine. Hills all mine; caribou all mine; moose all mine; rabbits all mine; gold all mine.*

*White man come and take all my gold. Take millions, take more hundreds fifty millions, and blow 'em in Seattle. Now Moosehide Injun want Christmas. Game is gone. White man kills all moose and caribou near Dawson, which is owned by Moosehide. Injun everywhere have own hunting grounds. Moosehides hunt up Klondike, up Sixtymile, up Twentymile, but game is all gone. White man kill all.*

Chief Isaac quoted in *Dawson Daily News*, 15 Dec. 1911.

 FURTHER RESOURCES **Oral Histories**

- *Alaska Oral History Project, 1994.* Helen and Charlie David, Oscar Isaac interview transcripts.
- Cruikshank, Julie. YA ms. 82/220, location: MSS 044. Patricia Lindgren interview, December 1974 and January 1975. "History and Stories from Moosehide."
- Henry, Percy, April 1993. Interviewed by Bob Charlie as part of CYI, Elders Documentation Project. Transcript available at Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in office. Yukon College, Dawson Campus.
- *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, 1994 .

**Publications**Adney, Tappan

- 1900 "Moose Hunting with the Tro-Chu-Tin," in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. C, March 1900, No. DXCVIII. YA Pam 1900-11, c. 2

Anglican Church, Diocese of Yukon

- 1932 *Northern Lights*, May 1932 issue.

Dawson City Museum

Research file, Chief Isaac.

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.

McDiarmid, Joy

- 1977 "Pat Lindgren - Daughter of Chief Isaac," *Yukon Indian News*, 25 October 1977.

Osgood, Cornelius

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

## Photographs

- Chief Isaac's fish camp at the mouth of the Klondike River in 1896. Note the birchbark canoe in the foreground and fish drying rack in the background. Photo by Sether, from: Tappan Adney, *The Klondike Stampede*, p. 280.
- Chief Isaac and two other men posed for a group photograph along the riverbank near Dawson [1898]. C. H. Metcalf photographer. *Yukon Archives 4231/AHL Coll.*
- Three Hän men in two birchbark canoes on the Yukon River near Dawson. Chief Isaac is the stern paddler in the first canoe with his son in bow; Walter Benjamin is paddling the other canoe [1898]. C. H. Metcalf photographer. *Yukon Archives 4232/AHL Coll.*
- Synod of Anglican Church, held in Dawson. In front of St. Paul's Cathedral, 1920.
- Back row (l-r): 3 Natives, Miss Martin, John Black, Mrs. Stringer, Wm Maltby, Chief Isaac, Mr. Coldrick, Native (?), Mr. Osborn, Julius Kendi. Seated: Clergy - Bishop Stringer in middle, Mr. Totty of Moosehide on his right, Mr. Buck of Mayo on his left, priest from Indian School at Carcross far right. E. O. Ellingsen photo. *YA, Anglican Church, PHO 394, 3173c.*
- Group of men in their Sunday best beside the schoolhouse at Fort Selkirk. L-R: Chief Peter McGinty, Tom Edward, Chief Isaac (seated), Tommy Joe and Chief Big Jonathan. *Yukon Archives, Anglican Church Coll., PHO 381,1488.*
- Group of men dressed up for a potlatch at Eagle, 1907.
- Front kneeling: Edward Wood. Front row, L-R: Paul Chancy, Pat [Uncle], Henry [Hayes], Charlie Steve, Billy Silas, Ben Harper, David Taylor, David Roberts, Peter Thompson [Chief Jousse's brother]. Back row, L-R: Kenneth, Chief Alex, Joseph, Jonathan Johnson, Canadian Joe, Esau Harper, Andrew Silas, Chief Isaac and the gänhāk, the pole with the flags. *YA 5781/ Kates coll.*
- Chief Isaac fishing for grayling through the ice near Dawson, ca. 1900. *YA 3867 / MacBride Museum coll.*
- Chief Isaac in ceremonial garb for a Discovery Day celebration in Dawson, 15 August 1924. *Yukon Archives 7283/Tidd Coll.*



Chief Isaac's funeral, 1932. Dawson City Museum, Isaac Family Coll., PH990-77-26.



George P. Mackenzie, Commissioner of Yukon Territory; Chief Isaac and I.O. Stringer, Bishop of Yukon, pose at Moosehide, Aug. 3, 1923. Dawson City Museum, PH990-77-12.