

InfoNorth

The Gwich'in Traditional Caribou Skin Clothing Project: Repatriating Traditional Knowledge and Skills

by *Ingrid Kritsch and Karen Wright-Fraser*

I believe it is very important that the Gwich'in people, especially the younger children, see how the Gwich'in used to wear clothes a long time ago and also realize all the work involved in completing an outfit. Hopefully this would make them proud of who they are as Gwich'in. I would very much like to be able to help out with this very worthy project.

I have many years of experience in sewing with beads, [on items] such as baby belts, slippers, barrettes, change purses, [and] handbags, and beading on a loom. I have been sewing for the past 40 years for my family, making mukluks, parkas, and mitts. I also do embroidery work. I am able to commit to this project for four months and also look forward to the quillwork [part of the] project.

(Lillian Wright, Inuvik, 8 November 2000)

THE GWICH'IN are the most northerly of the Athapaskan peoples occupying parts of the Yukon River drainage in Alaska and the Yukon Territory, and the northern Mackenzie Basin of the Northwest Territories. The project described here was sponsored by the Gwich'in who reside in the Northwest Territories.

Traditionally their lands extended from the interior of the Yukon into the Mackenzie Basin and included the watersheds of the Peel, Mackenzie, and Arctic Red Rivers. Today, most NWT Gwich'in live in the four communities of Aklavik, Fort McPherson, Inuvik, and Tsiigehtchic (formerly called Arctic Red River). These communities all fall within the Gwich'in Settlement Area that was established by the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement signed in 1992 with the Government of Canada.

People in the Gwich'in Settlement Area are greatly interested in materials that were collected in earlier times and are now housed throughout the world in museums, archives, and private collections. These items represent a bygone era and have great historical, cultural, and sometimes spiritual meaning.

Of particular interest is traditional Gwich'in summer clothing made of white caribou hides, sewn with sinew, and decorated with porcupine quills, trade beads, silverberry seeds, fringes, and ochre. Distinctively styled and striking to look at, these garments are a testament to Gwich'in

women's great skill and artistic expression. This skill and artistry is particularly evident with men's clothing. As June Helm (1989:189) has noted for Aboriginal women of the Subarctic, the husband's clothing "served as a kind of traveling art gallery" advertising the wife's handiwork from afar. The same pride in fine handiwork exists today.

It has been well over 100 years since Gwich'in traditional caribou skin clothing was made, and there are no examples of this clothing in either the Gwich'in communities or the Northwest Territories today. It has been over 50 years since porcupine quillwork was used as the primary decorative motif on Gwich'in jackets, slippers, and gloves.

For the past two years, the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI) has worked in partnership with the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (PWNHC) to create five replicas of a multipiece 19th-century Gwich'in traditional summer outfit that is housed at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC). The project has given us an opportunity to document, understand, and appreciate how this clothing was manufactured and the extraordinary amount of time, knowledge, and skill that Gwich'in women needed to clothe their families and protect them from the elements. It has also helped to repatriate skills and knowledge no longer practiced in the Gwich'in Settlement Area.

THE GWICH'IN TRADITIONAL CARIBOU SKIN CLOTHING PROJECT

I've never seen [traditional clothing] back home, and I'm really happy to be here to see it.

(Rosie Stewart, Fort McPherson, 2000)

In February 2000, the Gwich'in Traditional Caribou Skin Clothing Project began. Background research had been carried out between 1994 and 1997 to determine where Gwich'in and other Athapaskan and Métis materials from the Northwest Territories were housed (Kritsch and Kreps, 1997). From this research, we know that there are Gwich'in materials in at least 30 heritage institutions across North America and Europe. Of these institutions,



Judy Thompson, Audrey Snowshoe, William George Firth, Elizabeth Colin, and Joanne Bird examining the original outfit on loan from the Canadian Museum of Civilization during the Yellowknife workshop. Photo credit: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI.

the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Smithsonian Institution hold some of the finest Gwich'in collections in North America. This factor, plus the long-term relationship between these organizations and the PWNHC, meant that their collections were more accessible to us than those in European institutions.

A project team composed of Gwich'in elders and seamstresses, GSCI staff, a filmmaker, and staff from the PWNHC examined Gwich'in clothing housed at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Smithsonian Institution with the expert assistance of Judy Thompson, Curator of Western Subarctic Ethnology at the CMC. For the elders, seeing the elegant clothing, carefully crafted by hand and colourfully decorated, opened a direct link to their ancestors and the opportunity to bring the past into the present. "I'm here to learn about the old traditional clothing, and maybe I could pass on whatever I learn to the younger people," said Renie Martin (Inuvik, 2000).

The elders were very pleased to see that the clothing and other Gwich'in items had been safely stored by the museums so that they could enjoy and learn from them today. They recognized that if these artifacts had not been collected and stored carefully, they would not have survived. Seeing the clothing and other cultural material items, some of which they had only heard about in stories from their grandparents, elicited a strong connection to and pride in the past. These items also spoke to the intimate knowledge that the Gwich'in have of the land and their close relationship with caribou. Caribou not only clothed and fed people, they also provided the raw materials for tools, weapons, shelter, transportation, games, and medicine. They are still very important to the Gwich'in today.

After examining the clothing at the CMC and Smithsonian, the project team decided to replicate four sets of clothing: summer caribou skin clothing for a man, woman, and young girl, and winter caribou fur clothing for a boy. The PWNHC had submitted a major funding proposal to the Museums Assistance Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage in November 1999, and we



Seamstress Rosie Firth practising sewing quills during the Yellowknife workshop. Photo credit: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI.

were awaiting a decision in order to begin the project.

By late October 2000, funding was secured through the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and a grant from the Museums Assistance Program, and the replication project began. A funding shortfall, however, meant modifying our original plans and replicating only one of the Gwich'in outfits that we had seen, a 19th-century man's summer caribou skin outfit housed at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Our goal was to produce five copies of this outfit—one for each of the four Gwich'in communities, and one for the PWNHC. This multipiece outfit comprises a hood, bipointed tunic, mitts, knife sheath, and pants with attached feet. The clothing is made from white caribou hides and sewn with sinew, using split bird quills on the seams. It is decorated with dyed porcupine quills, silverberry seeds (*Elaeagnus commutata*), and fringes.

The project is nearing completion. Below, we describe its development and status as of April 2002.

Selection of Seamstresses

Once funding for the project was in place, Karen Wright-Fraser was hired to work with Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI Research Director, and Joanne Bird, Curator of Collections at the PWNHC, to coordinate the project and assist with the



Shirley Stewart modeling the Inuvik outfit. Photo credit: Leslie McCartney, GSCI.

sewing. Karen grew up in Inuvik but has lived for many years in Yellowknife, where she has her own sewing business. Coincidentally, Karen had begun a replication project of a Gwich'in tunic from the CMC on her own in 1999. A call for seamstresses was then advertised in the Gwich'in communities, asking people to submit letters explaining their interest, experience, and ability to commit several months to this project.

A selection committee reviewed the 15 applications and decided on a core of eight seamstresses who represented a range of age and experience. Our goal was to have both elders and young people as part of the core group, who could then work with other seamstresses from their communities on specific piecework. The eight seamstresses chosen were Agnes Mitchell and Maureen Clark of Tsiigehtchic; Lillian Wright of Inuvik; Ida Stewart, Elizabeth Colin, Rosie Firth, and Mary Blake of Fort McPherson; and Audrey Snowshoe of Aklavik. This core of seamstresses changed somewhat throughout the project as other commitments for their time arose.

Traditional Materials Needed

White tanned caribou hides: One of the traditional materials, the white tanned caribou hides, was absolutely



Wrapping fringes on the Fort McPherson tunic with embroidery thread. Photo credit: Leslie McCartney, GSCI.

critical for the project, yet unexpectedly difficult to obtain. We estimated that we would need a total of 40 hides to make five copies of the outfit, with each outfit requiring from five to eight hides, depending upon the size and quality of the hides. Although we were able to buy prime green hides from Gwich'in hunters without any problems, we had great difficulty getting tanned hides.

After numerous phone calls throughout the North, we realized that we would have to purchase tanned hides from a number of sources. We purchased home-tanned hides from three sources: Bernadette Williah, who lives in the Dogrib community of Rae, a fur and hide shop in Edmonton, and a tannery in Whitehorse. The difficulty we had in obtaining home-tanned caribou hides is symptomatic of the widespread decline in home tanning that is occurring in the North today. In future, we intend to carry out projects that will revitalize this traditional skill before it is lost entirely.

Quills: Porcupine quills were an important decorative motif on the CMC outfit. A porcupine road kill between Yellowknife and Hay River provided a good quantity of quills to start off with. Additional quills were needed, however, and these were purchased from a leather and hide store in Edmonton. Later in the project, Rebecca Francis, an elder from Fort McPherson, kindly gave us more quills. We experimented with different natural dyes from the land (for example red willow, black lichen, and blueberries) but found the results too pale in appearance. In the end, we decided to use commercial dyes for the quills.

Silverberry seeds (*Elaeagnus commutata*): Silverberry seeds are used to decorate many of the fringes on the outfit. Indeed, over 300 were used on the original outfit. These seeds have been difficult to find. The silverberry seeds we used were picked in Yellowknife. The bushes are very fragrant when in flower, and the leaves are silvery-green. The brown, fluted seeds are found inside a round spongy fruit that grows in clusters on the bush. We are still searching in the Gwich'in area for silverberry patches and



Front and back views of the replicated inuvik outfit. Photo credit: Joanne Bird, PWNHC. Inset: detail of hood. Photo credit: Ingrid Kritsch, GSCI.

have been told by Elder Hyacinthe Andre of Tsiigehtchic that they can be found in the mountains. The late Sarah Simon told us that they are also called “grizzly berries” in Gwich’in, as they are a food source for grizzly bears.

Sewing Workshops in Yellowknife, Tl’oondih, and Aklavik

Although some sewing was carried out in the homes of the seamstresses during the course of the project, most of the sewing was accomplished during three week-long workshops.

In December 2000, the eight Gwich’in seamstresses came to Yellowknife for their first sewing workshop at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre. Judy Thompson also joined us to share her knowledge and expertise and to learn at the same time from the seamstresses. Arrangements had been made with the CMC prior to the workshop to have the original outfit on loan to the PWNHC, so the seamstresses would have the opportunity to examine the outfit while working on the first replica. This proved to be very helpful in understanding how the outfit was

constructed. Having the clothing at the museum also provided an opportunity for others in Yellowknife and visitors from other communities to see it.

During the December workshop, the seamstresses worked on the outfit that will ultimately be housed at the PWNHC. The caribou hides were cut using a pattern originally drawn by Dorothy Burnham and provided to us by Judy Thompson. Mrs. Burnham, a former curator at the Royal Ontario Museum and a renowned authority on textiles, worked with Judy Thompson and other curators at the CMC for many years producing detailed pattern drawings for Athapaskan and other Aboriginal clothing in their collections and those of other museums (see Thompson et al., 2001). The pattern was invaluable to the seamstresses, and they felt extremely fortunate to have these drawings to work from. Once the pieces of white hide were cut, the seamstresses started the task of hand stitching, and they finished sewing the entire outfit—tunic, trousers, mitts, hat, and knife sheath—in approximately three days. Several days were then spent learning how to sew the porcupine quills into decorative motifs on the clothing and attaching the silverberry seeds to the fringes. The seamstresses caught on quickly. They found it exciting to see the work unfold before them, although it went very slowly, and they were rather intimidated by the amount of porcupine quill sewing that needed to be done. They estimated that it was taking them approximately an hour to sew one inch of quills!

The last day of the workshop, the ladies cut out paper patterns to bring back to each of their communities and each was given a package of quills, seeds, and sinew to take home with her. A small amount of caribou hide was also provided to each, with the understanding that we would be sending them more hides when they became available. The seamstresses also received a reference manual we had compiled, with a variety of photos and information originally provided by the CMC to assist with the project. A series of close-up photos were included to assist the seamstresses if they ran into problems or had questions while sewing the outfits in their communities. PWNHC staff took additional photographs of the outfit during the workshop and forwarded them to the seamstresses.

In February 2001, a porcupine quill sewing workshop, lasting two days, was held in each of the Gwich’in communities in the hopes that people would become interested in using this knowledge to help make their community’s outfit. The biggest response to these workshops was in Inuvik. Most participants were students from Aurora College, but many elders and other interested community members also came. Overall, people found the quillwork very beautiful and interesting, and the workshops sparked several people’s interest in working on their community’s outfit.

Between February and August 2001, little progress was made because of our difficulties in getting the hides. Consequently, we decided to hold a second workshop during the 10-day Gwich’in Science Camp that GSCI runs annually for senior high school students in the fall. We

thought that this would be a great opportunity for the students to learn about their history and culture through their ancestors' traditional clothing.

The science camp and workshop were held at the Tl'oondih Camp, located 20 miles upriver from Fort McPherson on the Peel River. The seamstresses devoted a week to sewing, helping each other and coming to a consensus about how to decorate the outfits. For example, since the porcupine quillwork was taking much too long, they decided to use a combination of quills and beads. Instead of porcupine quill wrapping, they decided to use wool to wrap the straps that hold the knife sheath and mitts and embroidery thread to wrap the fringes. This accelerated the work immensely, and more work was accomplished in that week than in the previous six months. Furthermore, there were no distractions at the camp except for the beautiful sunrises and sunsets on the autumn-coloured landscape, and the delicious smell of fish roasting on the open fire.

It was encouraging to see all five outfits coming to life. Everyone was rejuvenated and motivated to continue working hard once they returned home. At home, however, the regular routine of life took precedence again, and it was difficult to keep the momentum going in all of the communities. A third workshop was considered necessary.

The third sewing workshop was held in Aklavik in March 2002. The seamstresses worked hard to complete all the outfits and consequently two of the five were completed, those from Inuvik and Fort McPherson. They are stunning! We estimate that we need one more workshop to finish the three remaining outfits. This workshop is planned for June 2002.

CONCLUSION

I see great possibilities with this technique [porcupine quillwork]. I think what I'd start off with is just putting it in tiny little places, like the collar or the pocket, before I start anything extravagant. I'd like to just keep things simple. Even in my fabric art, I think I see possibilities. It would make a pretty good rainbow or Northern Lights.

(Margaret Donovan, Tsiigehtchic, 2001)

This has been a very exciting and challenging project for us, with many different benefits. Through the replication of the clothing and a series of oral history interviews with the elders, we now have a better understanding and appreciation of the knowledge, skill, artistry, and time required to produce this clothing. We will be sharing this knowledge with a wider audience by exhibiting the outfits in public venues in the Gwich'in Settlement Area (for example schools and visitor centres). At the PWNHC, one of the galleries is currently being renovated and will include Gwich'in clothing in the new exhibit.

The project was documented on film, and a 30-minute documentary will be produced sometime in 2003.



Group photo of the seamstresses, PWNHC and GSCI staff, and visitors at the Yellowknife sewing workshop. Back: Audrey Snowshoe, Chief Charlie Furlong (Aklavik), Fred Carmichael (President, Gwich'in Tribal Council), Chief Peter Ross (Tsiigehtchic), Chief Abe Stewart (Fort McPherson). Middle: Agnes Mitchell, Mary Blake, Karen Wright-Fraser, Maureen Clark, Rita Carpenter, Ingrid Kritsch, Ida Stewart. Seated: Elizabeth Colin, Lillian Wright, Rosie Firth. Seated on the floor: Joanne Bird. Photo credit: Tom Andrews, PWNHC.

Exhibits, educational kits, and interpretive materials will also be developed for use by the schools, the PWNHC, and the GSCI. Gwich'in terms collected as the project progressed are now being included in the Gwich'in Dictionary that GSCI has been developing since 1996. Finally, this work has helped fulfill a provision in the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement that deals with repatriation by providing us with a means to repatriate skills and knowledge no longer practiced in the Gwich'in Settlement Area, thereby benefiting the Gwich'in and all other residents of the Northwest Territories.

We expect that all five outfits will be completed by the end of June. We will celebrate their completion with a fashion show and feast at the annual Gwich'in Tribal Council Assembly in the summer of 2002, at which time the five sets of clothing will be officially presented to the four communities and to the PWNHC. If all the outfits are completed in time, we may also present them at the bi-annual Gwich'in Gathering that will be held in Old Crow this summer, where Gwich'in from Alaska, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories come together.

We look forward to sharing these skills and artistry from the past. We hope that the clothing will inspire young Gwich'in to become aware and proud of their heritage. We also hope that this project will enhance current styles by incorporating aspects of the traditional clothing into the creation of new designs, thereby bringing the old skills and knowledge forward into the future. The words of Gwich'in seamstress and designer, Margaret Donovan, quoted above, give us encouragement that this will happen. The creative possibilities are indeed endless.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A project of this magnitude requires the assistance of many people. First we offer special thanks and recognition to the 33 seamstresses whose efforts and dedication from December 2000 to March 2002 have made this project a reality: **Aklavik:** Catherine Semple, Audrey Snowshoe, Bella Jean Stewart; **Fort McPherson:** Mary J. Blake, Jane Charlie Sr., Elizabeth Colin, Rosie Firth, Maureen Koe, Martina Norman, Ida Stewart, Shirley Stewart; **Inuvik:** Trina Nerysoo, Donna Firth, Billie Lennie, Gail Ann Raddi, Lillian Wright, Ruth Wright; **Tsiigehtchic:** Alice Andre, Joyce Andre, Lisa Andre, Virginia Benoit, Rita Carpenter, Maureen Clark, Mavis Clark, Rose Clark, Irene Kendo, Agnes Mitchell, Bella Norman, Donna Norman, Mary Andre-Stewart; **Yellowknife:** Lori Gresl, Cheryl Moore, Karen Wright-Fraser. Mahsi' choo!

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Judy Thompson has freely shared her knowledge and wealth of experience about Gwich'in clothing with us throughout this project. We are very pleased to have had the opportunity to work with her and to benefit from her 30-year study of Athapaskan clothing. We also would like to acknowledge the assistance of Stephen Loring when we examined the Gwich'in collections at the Smithsonian Institution.

Dennis Allen (a.k.a. Shahnoot'iee), a Gwich'in and Inuvialuit filmmaker, has recorded this project from its inception, and we thank him for his dedication to his art and his great sense of humour. It takes a special man to be able to travel with eight women, being unmercifully teased, and still keep his humour.

There are a hundred and one administrative, technical, and logistical details to take care of in a project such as this. Much of this work has rested on the shoulders of GSCI staff members Alestine Andre, Lisa Andre, Grace Blake, Rita Carpenter, Mavis Clark, and Leslie McCartney. We also acknowledge William George Firth, who assisted with documenting Gwich'in names for inclusion in our dictionary. Bertha Francis, Mary Kendi, and Sarah McLeod-

Firth, longtime board members of GSCI, assisted with selecting the original core of seamstresses. Special thanks to Alestine and Leslie for reviewing a draft of this paper.

Both authors' families helped out during this project in ways not already mentioned. Karen's children, Caitlyn, Peter, and Cheyanna Fraser, and Ingrid's husband Tom Andrews and daughter Erika Kritsch helped pick several large buckets of silverberry seeds—a total of at least 1500 seeds, enough for all five outfits. These seeds were then cleaned and strung by Grace Blake, Ruby Edwards, and Melba and Ben Mitchell's children, Miranda, Merissa, Phillip, Ryan, and Bradley Mitchell, and their cousin Corey Greenland.

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Ingrid Kritsch, an archaeologist and cultural anthropologist with 25 years of experience in the North, is currently research director for the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute in Yellowknife, of which she was the founding executive director. E-mail: Ingrid_Kritsch@learnnet.nt.ca

Karen Wright-Fraser is a Gwich'in fashion designer and seamstress in Yellowknife. She runs an Aboriginal arts and crafts business called Whispering Willows, which specializes in white hide garments for weddings and graduations. E-mail: kwrightfraser@hotmail.ca