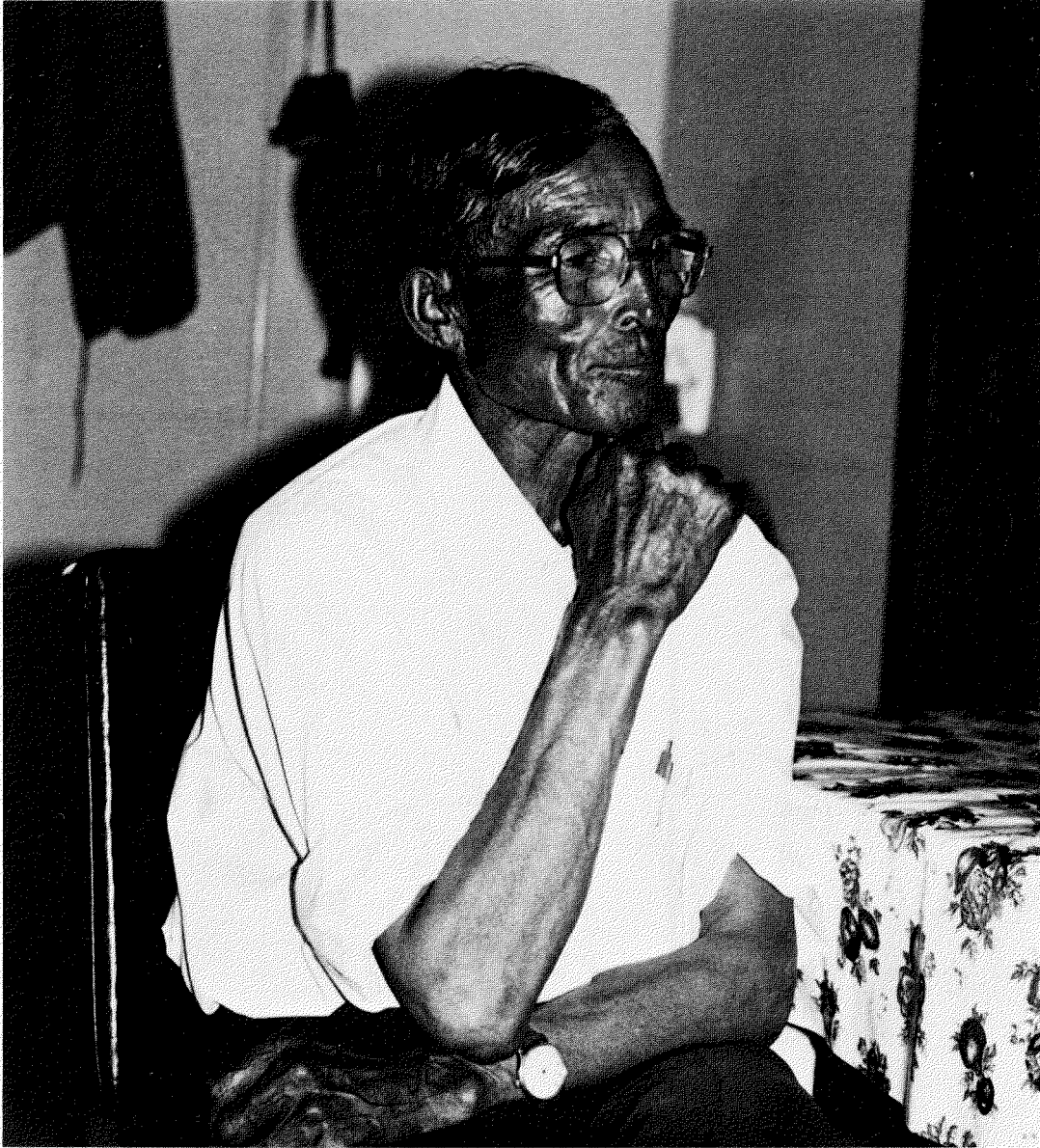


Johnny Neyelle



Johnny Neyelle is an outspoken individual, one whose self-confidence has enabled him to take action in situations where others remained quiet, and whose range of abilities and talents is very great. Yet the basic story of his livelihood and family relations is a familiar one to Dene people of his era. He lives now in Fort Franklin, a community of just over 500 people on Great Bear Lake, east of the Mackenzie River, and barely 150 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle. Short quotations in this story are from taped interviews done in 1986, using the words of the English interpretation. (The transcripts of these interviews are available in the library of the Boreal Institute for Northern Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton.)

In his seventies, Johnny still goes out on the land to hunt and trap, as he has done all his life. He goes by himself, which is

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rather unusual, although these days he carries a two-way radio with him. As times have changed, it is not always easy to find family members or partners to go on the land, and the common alternative is not to go.

Johnny was born in Fort Wrigley in 1915 of a mother from Wrigley and a Mountain Indian father from west of the great river. In the mid-1920s, he attended boarding school in Fort Providence for a few years. The school was run by French-speaking missionary nuns, so he "had no choice" but to learn some French. He also learned to write English, and understands it a little, an unusual linguistic ability in a Dene elder. He shares with many others of his generation, however, his ability to communicate in most of the Dene languages — Dogrib, Chipewyan, and North and South Slavey.

Before he was 20, he relocated to Fort Norman with his brother Boniface, where he married his first wife, Rosie, in 1941. The journey between Fort Wrigley and Fort Norman by dog team took about a week, if the trail was good, but according to Johnny, "The elders say when a man travels a long distance to find a wife, it's a good sign. It's a healthy sign." Johnny had sought the consent of Rosie's parents to the marriage, as well as travelling back to Wrigley to seek the consent of his own parents. However, Johnny was married only six or seven years when he lost his wife and four of his five children to tuberculosis.

It is part of the Dene way of life to leave a place where great loss has been suffered. With the only son left to him, then still a baby, he left for Fort Franklin, a journey of several days up the Bear River. There he soon married Jane Kenny, who was somewhere between 14 and 18 years of age at the time. She did not know Johnny and did not feel ready for marriage, but her father had agreed to it after meeting with Johnny in Fort Norman and insisted that she marry him. One of her greatest concerns was that she did not know how to do the work of cooking, preparing hides, sewing, etc., that would be expected of her, because she had lost her mother at an early age. As it turned out, however, Johnny was proficient in the necessary skills and taught her most of what she needed to know. He had learned both "women's" and "men's" work from his own parents, and also, according to Jane, "he had been married before" and therefore was presumed to know much about all these tasks.

Johnny and Jane had several children, all of whom attended the federal day school built in Franklin in 1950. It was explained to the parents that their children would have to live in the white man's world. It was Johnny's opinion that there was "a possibility of good effects from the education system," and so, at first, the children were sent voluntarily to the school. According to Johnny and his sons, however, there was a period when severe corporal punishment, including whipping with skidoo belts, was used to enforce the rules of the school. One day the two oldest boys came home crying after a whipping, and Johnny went to the school to see the principal. "Boy, did he give him a lecture. The teacher got so scared . . . he even took a rifle and threatened [Johnny]." Another day, Johnny went to the school and found all of the children lined up toward the office. One by one they were being strapped. On this occasion, Johnny took his children out of the school and went into the bush, cutting wood, where he remained with them for two months. The teacher came after him and attempted again to threaten him with a rifle, but he refused to return to Franklin. After a visit from the RCMP, he did return, but the family was cut two months' family allowance for the time that the children were away. With his own sense of honour, he did not report that the teacher had threatened him with a rifle, but challenged the teacher to tell the RCMP himself. However, as he puts it, "I am still waiting."

In those days, people were very cash poor, and the family allowance often went for basic necessities for hunting and

trapping, without which the family could not survive. In Johnny's opinion, "If it wasn't for the family allowance, there wouldn't be any kids going to school at all at that time." He thinks that the results of his action frightened other parents from protesting the treatment of their children.

Johnny Neyelle has a great many skills, besides the multiple skills of a person capable of living off the land by hunting and trapping in a harsh northern environment. He can drive a tractor and other heavy equipment. In the 1950s he operated the sawmill that Indian Affairs provided for the community to build houses for settlement. Johnny is known for his carving. After he carved a violin and bow using only a knife and file, the commissioner of the Northwest Territories presented him with a gift of carving tools. After that he made carvings in bone and wood of all kinds of animals and a dog team complete with toboggan and harness.

He also makes Dene drums. Since the 1950s, he has learned the Sahtudene (Bear Lake people) drum songs and is often requested to play and sing at drum dances. "The drum is sacred to Dene people. They have the drum to lift their spirits up. They have the drum to pray with, too, to ask the Creator to help them with everything." According to Johnny, before the priests came, many men and women had medicine power, but now these special gifts are disappearing. As a result, the Dene way of praying is disappearing too, and this is why people go to church, so they can be together and pray.

In addition to the drum, it seems that Johnny can play every instrument he has encountered. He taught himself to play the church organ in Fort Norman and often played for services. At fiddle dances, he can play the fiddle, the guitar and the mouth organ, and "all the instruments that he plays, he dances to every one of them!"

At present, Johnny still lives in the log house he built in the early fifties. Like other elders of the community, his cash income is primarily the old age pension, yet somehow there is always room for members of the extended family to be supported in the household.

In speaking with me, Johnny admonished the white community. He said, "A lot of times in the past white people, the government, they think what we say is false, that we're giving them false information. They don't seem to believe what the Dene are saying. That is not right . . . Maybe they'll start believing the way we used to live and the way they have changed our lives. Maybe they will finally take us seriously, that we've always been like this, the way we are."

Lynda Lange
The Boreal Institute of Northern Studies
The University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
T6G 2E1