

SAHTÚ GODÉ DÁHK'É

Joseph Ayha, 1858-1940
Dene Spiritual Leader (Prophet) in the Deline community as well as other communities



Elizabeth Beyonnie



John Neyelle



where the water flows

Deline is a very special community, perched on the largest freshwater lake entirely within the borders of Canada – Sahtú, Great Bear Lake, the lake that gave our region its name.

The name Deline means “flowing water,” referring to the nearby Great Bear River that pours from Sahtú to the Mackenzie. This is a place thriving with fish and wildlife, ideal for people who

subsist on the bounty of the land.

At one time, Deline was named after the explorer Sir John Franklin, who built a fort there and used it as winter quarters during his second expedition in 1825-27. The remains of the old fort were excavated in 1987.

Franklin’s adventures and eventual disappearance are well documented. But there is >>>

In 1990, the Deline Band Council launched a campaign to establish parks at Saoyúé (Grizzly Bear Mountain) and ?ehdacho (Scented Grass Hills). These two prominent landmarks on Sahtú are both the subject of many legends. A year later, Parks Canada sponsored a field trip to Saoyúé and Nôqre?é (Deerpass Bay) in order to collect stories of the land and water. Four hours of stories were recorded and transcribed in English by the late John Tetso. Tetso envisioned that the stories would be published for use in the school.

In 1998, Saoyúé and ?ehdacho were designated as a single National Historic Site. Stronger protection is still being sought for these areas.

George Kodakin served for many years as Chief of Deline. He was also a hunter and trapper, and lived and worked in Port Radium for over twenty years with his family. He passed away in 1992 at the age of 64. Permission to reprint this story was obtained from the storyteller’s daughter, Irene Betsidea.



HOW GORABE CAME ABOUT

By George Kodakin

I don’t know the time this story took place, but the story has been passed on by our ancestors for many generations. A long time ago there used to be tipis all along the shoreline, from the mouth of Great Bear River, which is near Deline, all the way to the point which is called Kwewe?qhdá in Slavey. If my grandfather was telling the truth you can imagine there must have been about two to three thousand tipis along the shoreline. In the springtime, just after the ice was gone from the lake, people came from all over to meet their families and friends.

My grandfather told me that in order to keep warm, they had to keep a fire going constantly during the cold winter weather. He also told me that on the calm cold days there was so much smoke in the air that sometimes ravens flying over would fall dead to the ground because of smoke inhalation.

In those days, only birch bark canoes were used for transportation, for fishing and hunting. When people organised a hunting trip, or went to a bush camp somewhere on the lake, they would often travel along the south shore of Sahtú and head towards Saoyúé. There were some places on the lake which were very mysterious to them. Places where they believed giant mother animals kept guard over the land. One such place was about forty miles from Deline. It is known today as Gorabe (Manitou Island). Before the people became aware of this place, many canoes were lost in a large whirlpool in that vicinity of the lake.

One time the people from Deline organised a caribou hunt which would take them past this area. Among the people that were travelling was one old man and his grandson, each using one canoe. The grandson was raised by his grandparents because he was an orphan. The grandson knew his grandfather was going with the hunting party, so he asked his grandmother if he could go along.

His grandmother told him “You are our only grandchild and we love you. Who will take care of us if something happens to you?” But the grandson insisted, so finally his grandmother told him he could go as long as he stayed with his grandfather. So he got his gear ready and followed his grandfather.

After travelling a while, they arrived at the place near where the whirlpool was located, but they landed on shore a safe distance away from it. It was a place called Whaláweli, which was used as a place of overland portaging. Most of the people had already begun portaging their gear overland when the old man and his grandson arrived.

As the old man began to prepare his gear for portaging, his grandson told him “I’m not going to make the portage. Instead I’m going to try to go through the whirlpool.” His grandfather reminded him of the danger he would face when he got to the place where the whirlpool started. But the grandson insisted on going through with his idea. His grandfather thought to himself, “If he is that sure of himself then he must possess some very strong medicine.” So finally he told his grandson he could go through with the idea if he would be very careful.

The grandson told him he wouldn’t have to make the portage either, but to watch his canoe as it approached the whirlpool. If nothing happened, he would signal his grandfather for him to follow. The grandfather was afraid. But sensing his grandson’s power, he agreed to the idea. Some of the other people were unaware of the boy’s idea, so the old man told everyone about it and they waited to see what would happen. >>>

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another, much more ancient history of that area that is not so well known.

This month's *Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é* focuses on the voices of elders, some of whom are now passed away. Like their ancestors, these elders have not needed books and newspapers to preserve the stories that have been passed on through the generations.

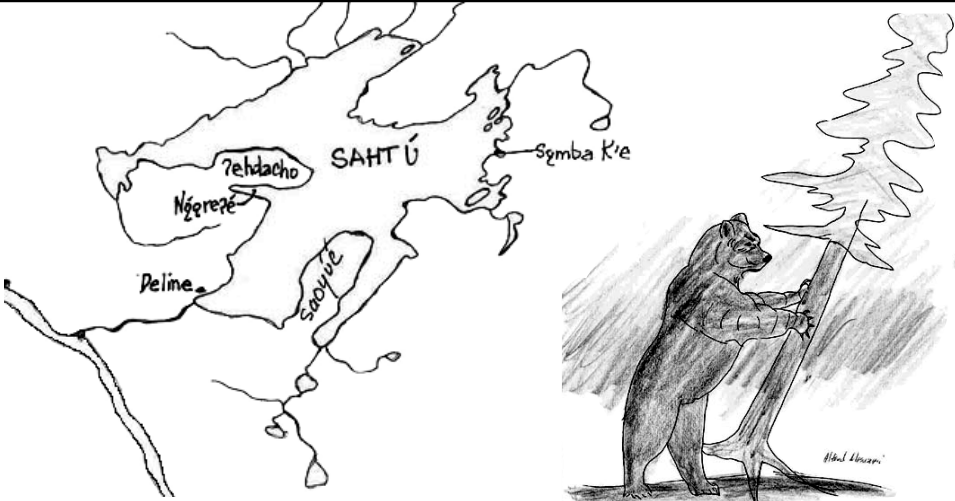
Some have argued that it is riskier to pass on stories in writing, since they then become accessible to people who don't know the land. An oral narrative

involves a select audience with a knowledge of the place and people acquired since childhood. Each individual story is a thread in a tapestry of stories that weaves through the community. Floating around as disembodied text, the story becomes a mere fragment, and its meaning may be misunderstood.

Despite the risks, many elders have decided to ensure that their stories are preserved in written form. We are grateful to them and to their children for their willingness to share these treasures.

Three of the stories below are rooted in the Saoyúé (Grizzly Bear Mountain) area and Sqmba K'e (Port Radium). These are just two of the eight heritage sites and places within the Deline District that were identified by the Sahtu Heritage Places and Sites Joint Working Group in their 1999 report entitled *Rakekée Gok'é Godi: Places We Take Care Of*. The story of Sqmba K'e is relatively recent, but it bears retelling since it so dramatically affected the Deline community.

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illustrations by Alfred Masuzumi

The wind was calm and the water like glass as the grandson started off with his small canoe towards the area where the whirlpool started. As the boy arrived at the area where the whirlpool usually started, the old man and the other hunters watched closely to see what would happen. As they watched, they heard the boy singing his medicine song. The anxious people on shore could see him slowly turn his canoe to signal them as he passed through the danger zone.

As soon as he saw him signal, the old man got in his canoe and told the others to follow. Everyone was still afraid but they got into their canoes and started to follow. They were all very nervous as they paddled along, but nothing happened. They knew that if the whirlpool started at any time, there would be no way out of it. Finally they passed through the danger zone and decided to set up camp on the other side of the portage to wait for the other hunters. When the other hunters arrived they were amazed to see them already waiting there. The place where they camped is called Kwítúriht'ea.

From that time on the people started to show great respect for the grandson, and the people obeyed him all through the hunting trip.

Following that trip, people started to travel through that area without ever making the portage, and no problems ever occurred. But apparently the animal guarding this area was annoyed with all this increased travel. This animal had created the whirlpool in order to have a good supply of fish and humans to feed on. He probably got very hungry, and decided to move someplace else where there was more food. But he failed in this attempt, and turned into a stone.

At the beginning of the story, I said that people gathered in the spring to meet their families and friends. There were so many people in the area that tipis extended as far as the little lake about a mile behind Kw'átaratq. One calm morning when everybody was asleep, a woman who was sewing heard something in the water in the direction of Saoyúé. She went outside to see what it was and saw a big animal going into the water where the whirlpool used to be. But just as soon as she saw it, the animal turned into a large rock.

This animal, which was a giant mother wolf, turned into the island that is called Gorabe. Today you can clearly see the outline of a wolf when you are a distance away from that island, as well as the cave where the wolf once lived.

That is why our elders before us taught us to show respect by making an offering when we are in the area. Our elders also taught us that if you are curious as to how long you will live, you can test that out by entering the cave and by running from the end of the cave to the opening without falling down.

George Kodakin told the following story from his own experience. It happened this way: Francis Baton, Moise Bayha, Jimmy Tutcho Sr, Arídághqné, and I went into the cave to see what it looked like. When we went inside we could see everything, because the opening was big and let in a lot of light. The floor of the cave was covered with nice smooth moss



PLACE OF STORIES

and in the far corner we saw the outline of things that looked like bones and waste.

After exploring the cave, we decided to test out what our elders had taught us about how long we will live. So we began running out of the cave one after another. It wasn't long before Jimmy Tutcho Sr fell to the ground, even though there was nothing to trip on. Close to the opening, Arídághqné also tripped and fell down.

Today, I am an elder, and so are the others I mentioned. But my friend Jimmy Tutcho Sr died shortly after the incident, and my friend Arídághqné passed away just recently. Based on my experience, I feel our elders long before our time were always telling the truth.

Before I end my story, I would like to point out some of the danger the island still has. In the springtime, it is not wise to be near what we believe to be the two pointed wolf ears because it will give a person snow-blindness. It also is not wise to pass the island right in front of the nose of the wolf, because we believe the nose is guarded by unseen powers. These last words of warning are for the younger people and for future generations.

HOW SAOYÚÉ GOT ITS NAME by Peter Baton *This story is published here by permission of Peter Baton.*

A long time ago, a talking grizzly bear used to live on what is today called Saoyúé (Grizzly Bear Mountain). One spring morning a man called Náka (his name means "a spring force behind a bent stick") was hunting along the shoreline. He came across two grizzly bear cubs that were feeding along the shore, but he didn't see their mother feeding behind a ridge close to the cubs, although he knew she was close by.

Náka decided to kill the two cubs for his lunch, so he aimed his bow and arrow and shot them both. The baby cubs screamed in agony. Náka, knowing the mother was close by, quickly ran and grabbed both the cubs and threw them into his canoe and paddled a safe distance from the shoreline.

While this was happening, the mother bear heard the commotion and ran to the shoreline, but she was too late. The man in the canoe was all she saw - her cubs were missing. She yelled to Náka, "What did you do to my children with their pretty little paws?"

Náka told her he killed them both for his lunch, but he didn't make them suffer. This news made the grizzly so mad she started to rip and tear up the ground. (To this day, grizzly bears often claw up the ground or rip up the ground for their prey.) As Náka paddled away to cook the cubs on an island, the mother grizzly yelled to him, "As long as you live, don't ever camp out alone!" Náka must have been quite young at this time.)

As time went by, Náka never spent the night by himself in the bush. One time, when he was much older and slower, he was with some other men hunting for caribou. Toward nightfall all the hunters got separated, so he had to spend the night by himself. He was still aware of the bear's warning, but he had no choice but to camp overnight by himself.

After fixing his camp, he went to sleep in his caribou skin blanket. During the night as he was sleeping, he felt something pushing on his side. Somehow he knew it must be the bear. He opened his eyes, and sure enough that big old grizzly was standing above him, pinning him to the ground. The big bear was standing on all four corners of the caribou skin blanket making it impossible for [him to stand up].

In the olden days, many of the people had strong medicine. Náka also had medicine; he had the power of force. As the big grizzly opened her mouth to crush Náka's head, Náka used his power to keep the grizzly's mouth from closing. This power forced the bear's mouth open wider and wider. Náka yelled to him, "You are supposed to kill me, but instead you are just struggling with your mouth. Go ahead and kill me." By this time, the bear's upper and lower jaws were ripped open and he died instantly.

To this day, Dene people will not kill any big bears on Saoyúé, although sometimes they will kill small, bothersome bears.

According to George Kodakin, this story took place at the tip of Saoyúé, at a place called ?ehdaredele.

Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é continues on next page >>>

Deline is special in other ways. The community gave birth to one of the most revered prophets of the Sahtu Region, known as Ehtseo Ayha, (Grandfather) Joseph Ayha, who lived from 1858-1940. His picture adorns many walls in Deline.

Deline has also stood out in more recent history. In March 1978, the historic decision was made to change the name of “The Indian Brotherhood” to the “Dene Nation” in Deline. Deline was likely the first community of the Sahtu where for a period of time, school classes were held in the first language of the Dene people. And Deline is leading the way for the Sahtu com-

munities in negotiating terms for self-government.

Albertine Ayha and Sean Lynch provided support and assistance in Deline. Thanks again to Robert Kershaw for doing layout. Thanks also to Alfred Masuzumi for helping to gather the stories, and for donating his illustrations. Alfred has recently returned to Fort Good Hope after living for two years in Deline with his late wife Sarah, who was born in that community.

This month's Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é is dedicated to Sarah Masuzumi.

SAHTÚ GODÉ DÁHK'É WRITING CONTEST
deadline November 17 - PRIZES!

Official entry forms available at
your local school, or contact the
MacKenzie Valley Viewer at 587-2818.

SAHTÚ AND THE ATOMIC BOMB

In 1930, prospectors found pitch blend radium and uranium at Great Bear Lake. At first, the main interest was in the radium used for medical purposes. But when the lethal use of uranium was discovered, the Sqmba K'e (Port Radium) mine was secretly transferred to the Canadian government.

The uranium ore from Great Bear Lake was refined at Port Hope, Ontario, and from there went directly to the Manhattan Project to make an atomic bomb. After the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, every ounce of Great Bear Lake uranium ore was sent to the United States for the construction of more bombs. An estimated 1.7 million tonnes of radioactive tailings were left behind at the mine site when the mine closed down.

Many people from the community were employed by the mine as ore carriers. The ore had to be transported in 100-pound bags down the Great Bear River by barge, then portaged by truck at the rapids, and loaded onto another boat. At every stop, the bags had to be loaded and unloaded on the backs of the ore carriers. And every time it was handled, the powdery ore would leak from the bags.

George Blondin lived in front of the mine for 15 years. The family subsisted in large part on fish from a net set right in front of the mine. He says, “I thought it was gold, they were going to make rings or something.” Since that time, cancer has claimed three of his brothers, as well as his wife and four of his seven children. He believes that his family is just one of many that were impacted by the mine.

In an effort to make amends, a delegation of Dene people attended the peace ceremonies at Hiroshima in 1998 on the anniversary of the bombing there. The first ore carriers of the uranium that went into the bomb met with the first people on whom the atomic bomb was dropped. As Bella Modeste put it, “We Dene people are a good people... We hope that blame won't be put on us because we had no knowledge about all that happened in the war.”

The Deline Uranium committee has been conducting research on the social and environmental impacts of the mine. Negotiations with the federal government for cleanup of the Sqmba K'e mine site are taking place concurrently with self-government negotiations.

The documentary film Village of Widows (1999) on which this article is largely based may be obtained from Lindum Films in Toronto, phone 461-2305.

letter - barrenlands hunt (september)

Dear Editor,

The fall community hunt at Arakə Túé started in 1994. That year, we took out nine young boys. When we got out there, we started shooting lots of caribou, and piled it all in one place. We didn't work on the meat, so all the meat spoiled.

The next year, we decided to take families. We took three families, just husbands and wives and all the young boys. When we did this, all the women were working on the meat.

On the third year, we took all the small kids, as well as single mothers and families. That's when all the older women started teaching the young women how to work on meat.

After that, we started applying for funding for this caribou hunt on the barrenlands every year before March 31st. We always schedule our hunt for August.

This year it was good, because the K'ahsho Got'ine [from Fort Good Hope] joined up with the Duhla Got'ine [from Colville Lake]. It's like two clans met up with each other.

It's good to see people so happy, and spending time with their families. It would be good if Fort Good Hope would join us each year. I was especially happy to see their Chief [Dolly Pierrot] out there, supporting her people.

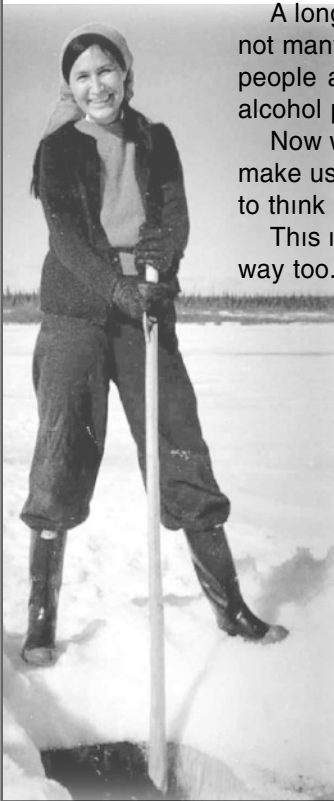
Chief Richard Kochon (interview, translation and transcription by Rose McNeely)

dora gully

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A long time ago there were not any white people around our country then and not many problems so we didn't worry about our children. But now all the older people are worried very much about their children. Because there are many alcohol problems, and we don't know what is going to happen to our children.

Now we hear about pipeline and highway and Bear River dam – these things make us more worried than before. Of course they are on our land so we have to think hard and talk about it. This makes us feel bad.

This is the way I feel about this. Maybe the other people they think the same way too.

Translation of the syllabics written by the late Dora Gully of Deline, from Denendeh: A Dene Celebration (Dene Nation, 1984). Permission to reprint this text is given by the author's sister, Jean Kelly.

Many elders throughout the Sahtu Region have expressed their wish for Dene language materials to be published in the syllabics script that they were taught to read and write in the old days. They are not able to read the new Roman orthography for the language that is taught in the schools. In order to encourage the involvement of elders in the Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é project, we will be printing written materials by our elders in syllabics whenever possible, with translations if the authors so wish.

At our request, a hardy team of volunteers has just begun to develop a North Slavey syllabics font for computer use. These volunteers include: Jim Stauffer, who developed the Dene fonts in Roman orthography; Betty Harnum, who has been working and volunteering with the Yellowknives Dene First Nation on a syllabics project since last winter; and Jeff Klassen, who over the past five years has created a large font “library” containing all of the currently used Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics.

**SAHTÚ
GODÉ DÁHKÉ
PLACE OF
STORIES**

WANTED WRITING • PHOTOGRAPHY • ART

Send your submissions to Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é, PO Box 239, Fort Good Hope, NT X0E 0H0. email: sahtu_gode@hotmail.com

Writing may be in Dene (Syllabics or Roman orthography), French or English languages. All submissions must include the name and contact information for the author. If you wish your work to be returned, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Please also send letters to the editor with your comments and feedback!