

III HISTORICAL EVENTS IN THE STIKINE RIVER AREA

Introduction

In order to reconstruct traditional or prehistoric subsistence and settlement patterns it is considered essential in the present study to understand the extent and manner in which the traditional patterns have been influenced and changed by European contact. To this end, library and archival research has been conducted in order to outline the historical events in the Stikine area and the kinds of influences these events have had on the traditional

way of life of the Tahltan people.

While the sequence of historic events on the Stikine River was similar to that occurring in other areas of British Columbia, the influence of direct European contact on traditional Tahltan culture was felt much later than in most areas. Throughout the historic period, Tahltans have maintained strong ties to their land and to those aspects of their traditional culture related to a subsistence economy.

Discovery and the Fur Trade Era

European discovery of the Stikine River is attributed to early fur trading ships on the coast. The Russian sea based fur trade was stimulated by Bering's discovery in 1741 that the northwest coast of America was rich in furs, particularly sea otter (Galbraith 1957:114). Although the many shoals and channels of the Stikine estuary were mapped by Captain Vancouver in 1793, the explorer did not recognize the existence of a large river. Ship journals indicate that Captain Cleveland in the sloop "Dragon" and Captain Rowan in the sloop "Eliza" both visited the Stikine delta in 1799 (Dawson 1888:61B). The Russian American Company, created in 1799, was granted a monopoly on the fur trade on the Pacific coast north of 55° latitude, which it held until 1839.

The Tlingit became famous as middlemen in the fur trade with the Russians. The traditional trading patterns between the coastal Tlingit and the Tahltan were intensified during this period. The Stikine chief, Shakes, held a monopoly on trade up the Stikine River similar to that of the Tsimshian chief, Legaic, on the Skeena River (Fisher 1977:32). Chief Shakes brought Russian goods, including very desirable metals, up the river to a trading camp in

the vicinity of the Tahltan-Stikine confluence, where they were exchanged for large quantities of interior furs. The Tahltan in turn acted as middlemen, exchanging goods obtained from the Tlingit for furs from the Kaska and other interior groups.

After the amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay Company with the Northwest Company in 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company began expanding its operations to the western slope of the Rocky Mountains. The explorations of Samuel Black in the northern interior during the summer of 1824 made the company aware of the trading patterns established between the interior Indians and the coastal tribes (Fisher 1977:31, Rich 1959:597). In an attempt to reach the Stikine fur trade from the interior, John McLeod set out from Fort Halkett on the Liard River in 1834, discovered Dease Lake and followed aboriginal trails across to the Stikine River. However, this and other attempts to make contact with the "trading Nahannies", as they were known at that time, were unsuccessful due to the fear of reported hostilities on the part of the Indians.

It was not until 1838 that Robert Campbell made his way from Fort Halkett

to the Stikine River and crossed "terror bridge" over the Tuya, to become the first white man to make contact with the Tahltan tribe. Although his encounter with the Tahltans and their chieftainness appeared peaceful enough, his life was in danger since Chief Shakes was among them on a trading expedition. Chief Shakes had so impressed upon the Tahltans that white traders from the interior were enemies and should be killed, that Campbell was discouraged from staying in their camp (Campbell 1958: July 23, 1838).

Campbell spent the winter of 1838-39 at Dease Lake. Although the Tahltans on occasion brought him a fresh supply of provisions, they threatened him severely, saying that their country was defiled by his presence. They demanded high prices for their furs, as well as payment for occupying their land. They resented the disruption of established trading patterns and indicated that if Campbell would not trade in the manner of the Russians then he should clear out (Wilson 1970:37-38). Campbell had great difficulty in surviving that winter. The Indians he had brought with him were unfamiliar with the area and as a result were unsuccessful in procuring meat locally. Other groups could not be persuaded to bring him supplies, fearing for their lives if the Tahltans found out about their cooperation with the Whites. Campbell's small group suffered so severely from starvation that winter that they were forced to retreat to Fort Halkett before spring (Campbell 1958: Feb./Mar. 1839).

At the same time the Hudson's Bay Company was attempting to intercept the Stikine fur trade from the coast. A ship named the "Dryad" was outfitted in 1834 for the purpose of establishing a post and colony at the mouth of the Stikine River. This attempt was thwarted by the Russians who built Fort Dionysius on Wrangell Island. After several years of negotiations with the Russian American Company an agreement was finally reached in 1839 by which the Hudson's Bay Company was allowed to lease the coastal territories for an annual rent of 2,000 land otter skins and a condition of supplying Russian colonies with provisions (Galbraith

1957:154, Rich 1959:665). The British took over the fort on Wrangell Island in 1840 which was renamed Fort Stikine, and built another near the mouth of the Taku River. The Stikine Tlingit, however, were not to be denied their monopoly on the interior fur trade and set about harassing Hudson's Bay Company operations. Fort Stikine was attacked several times (Dawson 1888:61B) until the company was forced to suspend attempts to occupy the interior and restrict trading operations to the coast (Rich 1959:637).

Intensified trading activities between the Tlingit and Tahltan brought about increased intermarriage between the two groups, the use of Tlingit as the language of trade, and the adoption of many aspects of Tlingit social customs and organization including displays of wealth and status. The introduction of metals replaced the traditional use of obsidian, bone, and antler in the manufacture of tools with cutting and chopping functions, providing increased efficiency in tool use. The demand for furs intensified an existing traditional activity without affecting the basic subsistence and settlement patterns of the Tahltan. The trapping of fur bearing animals continued to be an activity which all members of the extended family could engage in at winter camps. The fur trade may have stimulated a period of territorial expansion on the part of the Tahltan. Increased conflicts between them and their neighbours on the Taku and upper Nass Rivers during the middle of the nineteenth century may have developed out of the need to defend newly acquired territories.

Another effect of the fur trade on the Tahltans, was a drastic reduction in population due to the spread of smallpox from Tlingit traders. They experienced several epidemics, although the first, which came between 1832 and 1838 (Thorman n.d.), was especially devastating. It came during the late summer while people were still congregated at the fishing villages. The storage of dried salmon in the pits had not yet been completed when all activities came to a halt. Being gathered together in villages, almost all the people were subject to the disease within a short time.

Messengers carried both the bad news and the disease to other villages along the Tahltan and Sheslay Rivers. Over half the population died either from the smallpox itself or from starvation the following winter. The second epidemic arrived in a year between 1847 and 1849. The Tahltan people estimated their original population at between 1000 and 1500 (Thorman n.d.). After the second epidemic their population

was not more than 300 - 325. The rapid decline in population meant that there was not enough manpower to maintain the more elaborate fishing operations at fishing villages in the Stikine canyon, so that at least two of these fell into disuse. Many of the respected clan leaders and oral historians died during this period, resulting in a weakening of such traditional institutions as the clan story tellers guild.

The Gold Rush Period

In 1861 two miners named Choquette and Carpenter discovered placer gold in the gravel bars on the Stikine River. The announcement of this discovery created some excitement in Victoria the following winter and several parties outfitted themselves the next spring. They were brought up the Stikine from Wrangell by Captain William Moore in a small steamboat. The Indians camped at Shakes Creek were quite hostile when the steamboat landed there. Their fear that the hiss and clatter of this devilish machine would scare away the salmon and game was only appeased after much argument and gifts of Hudson's Bay blankets. The gold deposits on the Stikine were not very extensive and most of the miners returned south in the fall. This brief flurry however caused the Stikine territory to be defined in 1862 and put under the direction of Governor Douglas. Choquette continued to prospect and operate a small trading post on the lower Stikine for several years (Andrews 1937:32-34).

Explorations for the Western Union or Collins Overland Telegraph Company were extended northwards to the Stikine River by Pope in 1866. At that time the line had been completed in British Columbia from New Westminster as far as Fort Stager, 15 miles north of Hazelton. In 1866 the Steamer "Mumford" arrived at Shakesville with provisions and supplies for the construction of the line north from the Stikine. Thomas Elwyn wintered at Shakesville and carried out exploration on the Stikine that winter. It was at this

time that Telegraph Creek was named for the intended crossing of the telegraph line. However, further work on the line was abandoned in 1867 when word came that a transatlantic cable had been laid and was operating successfully. When British Columbia became a province of Canada in 1871, the Dominion Government took over the lease of the telegraph system and maintained it as far as Quesnel while the rest was left to fall into ruin (Mackay 1946:209-214).

The discovery of gold on Thibert Creek, close to Dease Lake, by Thibert and McCullough in 1873, created the Cassiar Gold Rush of 1874. A second wave of miners ascended the Stikine by riverboat as far as Glenora and headed overland to Dease Lake. The Hudson's Bay Company and John C. Calbraith set up trading stores at Glenora in that year. Captain Moore obtained a contract from the Provincial Government to build a road from Glenora to Dease Lake along the aboriginal trail which Campbell had followed 36 years before.

While the prospecting activities on the lower Stikine during the 1860's did not threaten the aboriginal way of life to any extent, the 1874 gold rush brought a sudden influx of miners passing through traditional Tahltan territories. The introduction of large quantities of liquor and infectious diseases, such as measles, resulted in conflicts between Whites and Indians and a further reduction in Tahltan population. In an effort to maintain their identity the various clans gathered together to build a communal village close to the

confluence of the Tahltan River with the Stikine, which brought them closer to the trading stores at Glenora. The establishment of these stores shattered the monopoly which the Tlingit had held on interior fur trade and broke down traditional trading patterns between the Tlingit and Tahltan, although the Tlingit continued to ascend the river to fish in summer until the turn of the century.

The Klondyke Gold Rush saw yet another wave of gold seekers pass up the Stikine River, the first leg of the favourite "All Canadian" route to the gold fields in the Yukon. During the winter of 1897 - 1898, between 3,000 and 3,500 men camped at Glenora; the largest and briefest occupation the Stikine has ever seen (Buri 1978:27). Twelve miles upstream, Telegraph Creek became an important centre as the head of navigation on the Stikine. In 1897 the Telegraph Trail north from Telegraph Creek to Atlin was cleared and used as a major transportation route to the Yukon. In 1899 the Dominion Government agreed to connect the existing Yukon telegraph line with the British Columbia system which ended at Quesnel. The line followed closely the route laid out by the Collins Overland Explorations and was completed in 1901 (see Figure 3).

A wide range of new goods and foodstuffs became available to the Tahltan people. The absolute dependency on subsistence hunting for survival was dispelled when furs could be exchanged for other foodstuffs. New methods of preserving and storing native foods such as salting of fish and use of raised log caches were introduced. While the trapping of furs continued to be a major economic activity for the Tahltans, many young men were also employed as packers and hunters by the trading stores. In an effort to increase their population, Tahltan marriage regulations were relaxed and the turn of the century saw several Tahltan women marrying Whites who had come during the 1898 rush and stayed to settle in the area. And, of course, the 1898 Gold Rush brought missionaries to the Tahltan people.

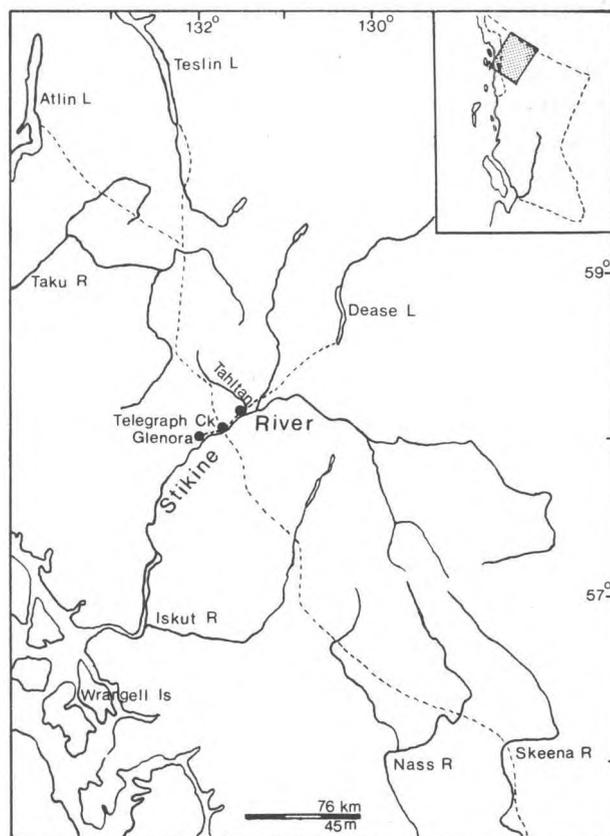


Figure 3. Historic settlements and routes in the Stikine area 1900

Missionary Influences

Bishop Ridley, of the Anglican diocese of Caledonia, came up the Stikine River with the first miners on their way to the Klondyke in 1896. Upon his return to Metlakatla, he made an appeal for someone to carry out missionary work among the miners and the Tahltan Indians. Reverend F.M.T. Palgrave took up the call in 1897 and established a mission at Tahltan village. Ridley was pleased with his efforts to convert the Tahltans to Christianity, and protect them from the debaucheries of the miners (Kreuger *et al.* 1971:52-57). During his five year stay among them, Palgrave did much to record Tahltan language and grammar. He also made a detailed census of the Tahltans living in the village, listing them by name, who at that time numbered about 225.

In 1901 Palgrave was replaced by T.P.W. Thorman who arrived with his wife and five children. He began immediately to build a mission house and a church which still stand in the village today. Before the end of 1903, 50 Tahltans had been baptised and traditional methods of cremating the dead were replaced by inhumation. However, due to lack of funds the mission was forced to close and the Thormans returned to England. In 1903 the Presbyterian Church sent a medical missionary, Rev. Dr. F. Inglis, to Telegraph Creek, and a government elementary school was opened there (Kreuger *et al.* 1971:60). Both the medical services and the school were directed mainly towards the White population as very few Tahltans were living in Telegraph Creek at that time.

Interest in the Tahltan mission was renewed through a campaign for funds to support it. The Thormans returned to Tahltan village in 1910. Supported by a grant from the Federal Government, Thorman opened a day school at the village and was pleased to have 15 children in attendance that first summer (Kreuger *et al.* 1971:62). However, his son Fred, who took charge of the mission in 1912, disparaged the fact that the Tahltan people were still involved

in their traditional seasonal subsistence round to the point that he did not have enough students in the school to obtain the government grant to keep it running.

It was during this period that the Tahltans heard rumours that the British Columbia Government claimed as crown property all land outside of Federal Reserves, and they joined other tribes in British Columbia in the Indian Rights Movement. In October 1910 a formal "Declaration of the Tahltan Tribe" was signed by Chief Nanok and eighty other members of the tribe. The Tahltans claimed their rights over their traditional territories which they had defended with wars, still depended on for their livelihood, and did not intend to give up without adequate compensation. James Teit, noted ethnographer of several interior tribes, who was living at Spences Bridge with his Thompson Indian wife, helped form the "Friends of the Indians" and acted as an agent for the Allied Tribes of the province. Teit, had visited Tahltan country several times and carried out ethnographic work among them. He provided a liason between the Tahltan and the southern interior groups and helped draft the Declaration of 1910, as well as those originating at Spences Bridge about the same time. The Thormans remarked several times during this period that the concern for native land claims was hindering their missionary work among the Tahltans (Kreuger *et al.* 1971:63-64).

Relying solely on donations, the Tahltan mission was maintained by two of the Thorman sons until 1952 when it was closed. Although the Thormans were genuinely concerned about the welfare of the Tahltan people and dedicated many years of missionary work among them, their conversion of the Tahltans to Christianity was only superficial. Underlying the Christian rituals and environment in which they lived at the Tahltan village, the basic elements of Tahltan culture and beliefs persisted and remained strong.

Recent Developments - Opening of the North

After the flurry of the Klondyke Gold Rush in 1898, Telegraph Creek, located at the head of navigation on the Stikine River, continued to be an important supply centre for isolated settlements in the northern interior for many years. Regular river boat service during the summer months brought supplies to Telegraph Creek from where they were transported by vehicle over the road to Dease Lake, or by pack train to other outposts. Trapping continued to be a major economic activity for the Tahltans along with subsistence hunting and fishing, although some families settled in Telegraph Creek and depended on employment with the trading stores or as guides for big game hunters.

However, the most recent period in the history of the Stikine River has seen Telegraph Creek slowly fade in importance. After the construction of the Alaska highway during the Second World War, there was a slow exodus of young Tahltans away from the heart of their traditional territories and way of life to take up jobs in other small towns and villages springing up in the north. This increased communication with the outside world also brought changes to those who remained tied to their homeland and traditions. Government legislation forced permanent settlement of Tahltan families in Telegraph Creek and regular attendance of their children in school. Outlying villages and camps were abandoned except in the summer for fishing or by men who continued trapping alone. The Stikine River became the focus for fishing activities with nets used instead of weirs or traps. New methods of preserving native foods such as canning became popular.

Formal survey and mapping of the north were accompanied by mining exploration in the 1950s. The subsequent opening of the Cassiar asbestos mine and construction of the gravel highway connecting it with Stewart on the coast, 300 miles to the south, provided temporary as well as some permanent employment for Tahltans. As the road became more and more practical for the transportation of goods the Stikine saw

its last days as a transportation route to the interior. Since river boats stopped running on the Stikine in 1972, goods destined for Telegraph Creek have been brought in by road on a weekly basis summer and winter, ending the long isolation of winter.

The introduction of modern technology and communications over the past few years has suddenly plunged the Tahltan communities of Telegraph Creek and Iskut into the twentieth century. The introduction of electricity to the villages in 1975 created an unexpected revolution. Refrigeration and freezing units provide an easy and efficient means of preserving native foods, both fish and meat. Other appliances such as electric kettles, radios, and stereos have become popular Christmas gifts and common household items over the past few years. Television via satellite was introduced to the communities late in 1979, and 1980 saw telephones installed in many Tahltan houses, so that families can communicate with relatives living hundreds of miles outside of the valley.

But with this rapid introduction of modern technology also comes fear of being invaded from the south. Mining exploration is increasing at a rapid rate, and B.C. Hydro has started feasibility studies for dams on the Stikine River. Suddenly, the changes are happening too quickly to comprehend, to control and to cope with, and are being accompanied by serious social impacts such as increased alcoholism. While the combination of hunting, fishing and trapping continues to be a viable and preferred means of subsistence for many Tahltans, it is becoming more difficult to maintain this way of life due to increased government enforcement of hunting and fishing regulations on native people. Band politicians are now examining the viability of alternative, locally based, economic enterprises to develop. These include a commercial fishery on the Stikine River and guided wilderness adventures. Land claims has again become an important issue for many Tahltans who cherish their aboriginal heritage and homeland. There is an urgency

felt now to record as well as renew a traditional heritage which seems to be quickly fading away as the elders of the community pass on.

Research conducted in the Telegraph Creek area by the author has concentrated on observing and recording traditional activities which are still carried out by local Tahltans. Salmon is still a major economic resource of the Tahltan people. While other methods of preservation are now available, quantities of salmon are still dried in traditional style smokehouses for winter storage as they have been for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years.

The hunting of wild game continues to provide a major portion of the native diet. The process and many of the tools used in tanning hides today for making mittens, moccasins, and babiche, have remained unchanged since prehistoric times. Observations on such activities provide the archaeologist with an understanding of activities and processes occurring in the past which resulted in the formation of archaeological sites; an understanding which becomes essential for interpreting the significance of various activities within the overall patterns of subsistence strategies utilized in the past.

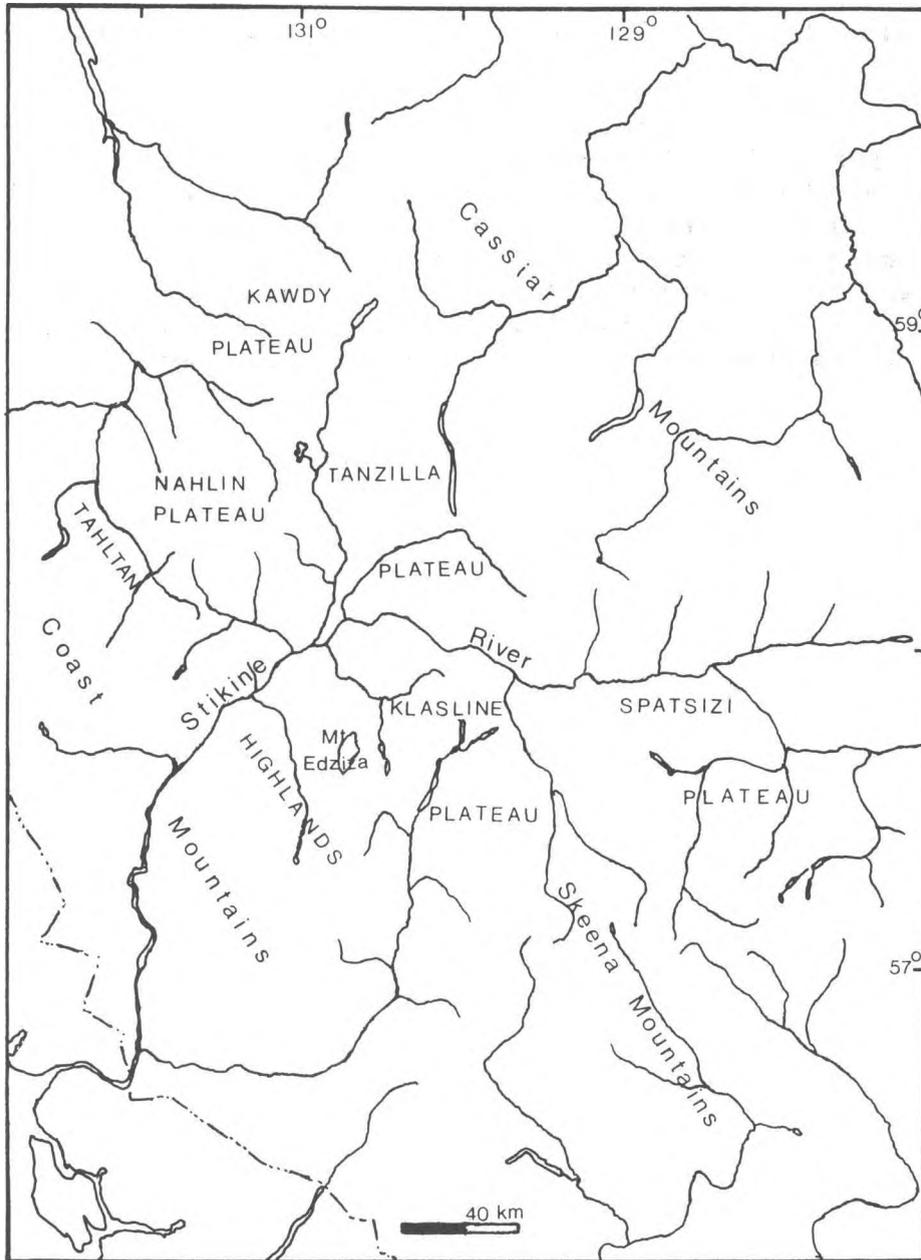


Figure 4. Physiographic areas in northwestern British Columbia