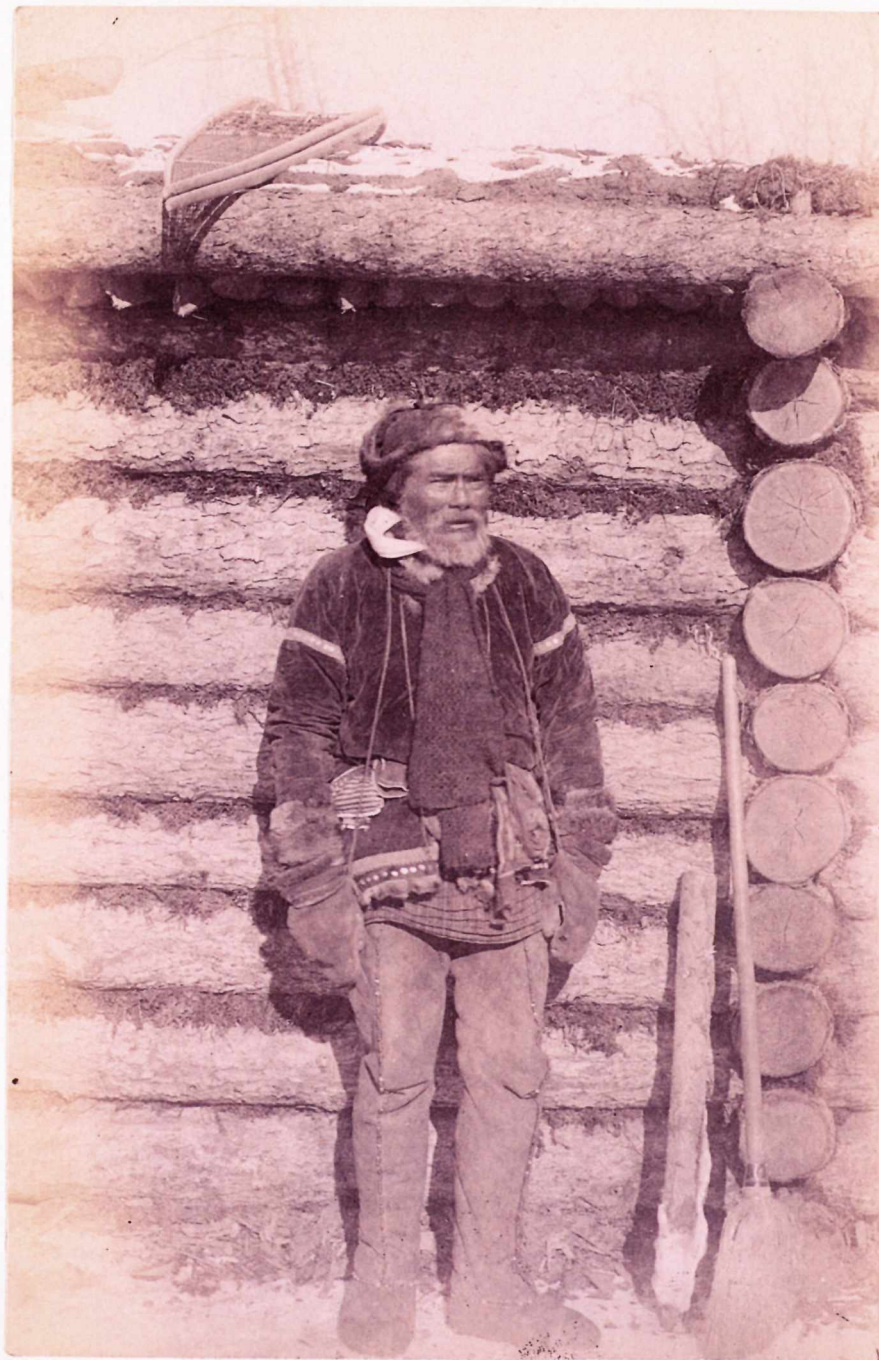


CHIEF CHARLEY'S VILLAGE

Eyewitness Accounts from a Han Athabascan
Settlement on the Yukon River, 1874–1914



National Park Service
Edited and Notes by Chris Allan

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National Park Service
Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve
2026

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Front Cover: "Chief Charley, Chief of the Charley Indians (Winter Dress)"—taken in 1891 by Willis V. Kingsbury, the surgeon and photographer for a U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey mission to locate the boundary between Alaska and the Yukon Territory. His camp on the Yukon River near the boundary line was called "Camp Davidson" for the renown geographer and surveyor George Davidson. Note the snowshoes on the roof, a broom, and an ice chopper for clearing the camp's water hole. University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library, George Davidson Pictorial Collection, Alaska Boundary Survey Album (1946.006).

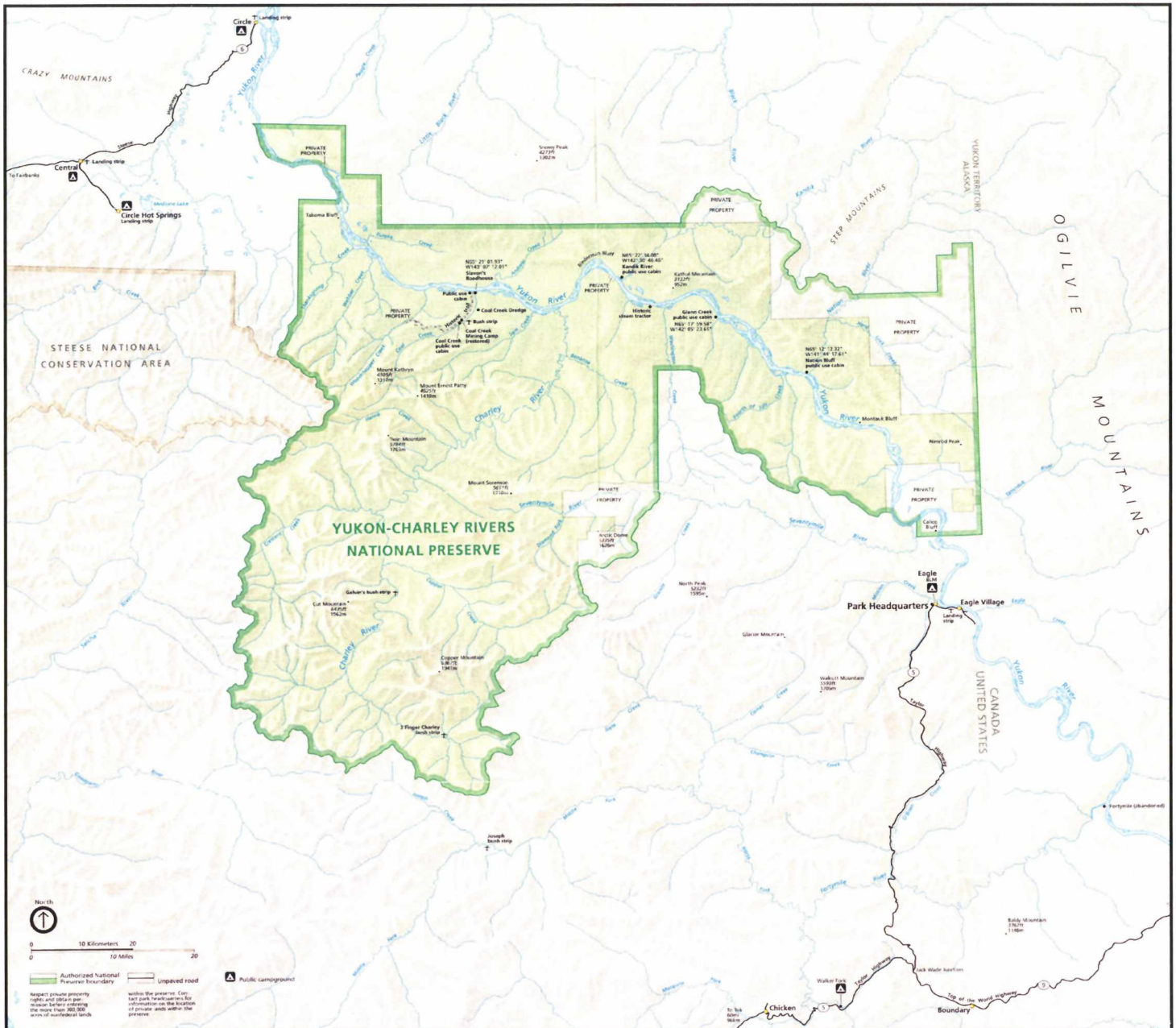
Title Page: Campers on the beach near Charley's Village, 2025. Photograph by Whitney McLaren, National Park Service.

Back Cover: An early morning near Charley's Village, 2025. Photograph by Chris Allan, National Park Service.

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Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve



Charley's Village was located on the banks of the Yukon in the heart of what is today Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. The park unit includes roughly 130 miles of the Yukon River and the entire watershed of the Charley River. During the era covered in this booklet, there were three Han Athabascan groups: Chief Charley's band, Chief David's band (at today's Eagle Village), and the Tr'ondek at the Klondike River on the Canadian side of the international boundary.

Introduction

Along a stretch of the Yukon River, between the towns of Eagle and Circle, the name “Charley” appears often. There is Charley River, Charley Creek (the local name for the Kandik River), and a river chart from the Klondike gold rush era showing Charlie Island near where the Charley River enters the Yukon. Some maps of the era also locate Charley’s Village nearby at the mouth of the Kandik River, where, for decades, travelers knew they could find food, shelter, and, perhaps, life-saving assistance. But, despite all of this, little is known about the leader known as Chief Charley and the Han Gwich’in, or Han Athabascan, village where he and his people lived.

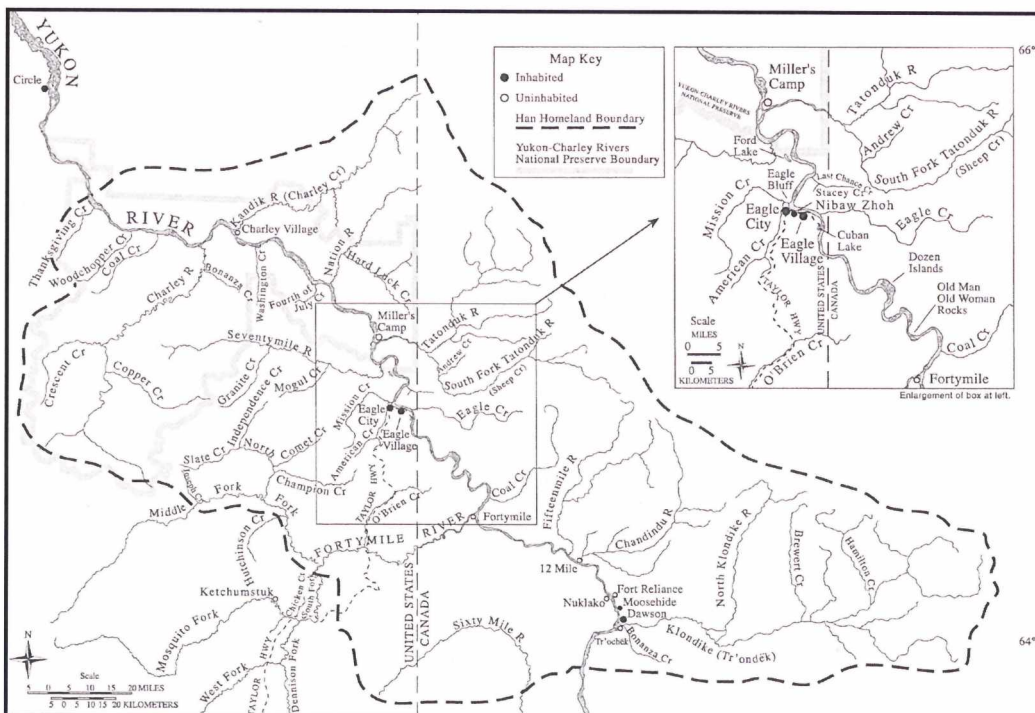
This booklet tries to fill this gap in our understanding by gathering eyewitness reports from visitors to the village and from people who spent time with Chief Charley, including some well-known figures like the Army explorer Frederick Schwatka, the fur trader Jack McQuesten, and the judge and politician James Wickersham. Other accounts come from ordinary folks, including gold miners, journalists, and government officials. To supplement these written sources there are also maps, photographs, and newspaper illustrations that offer glimpses of daily life along the mighty Yukon River.

The traditional territory of the Han Gwich’in extends along the Yukon River and across the border between Alaska and Canada (see map below). During the decades covered in this booklet—the 1870s to the early 1900s—the Han were essential to the local fur industry. They hunted, trapped, and processed fur-bearers and brought them to trading posts run by Jack McQuesten, Arthur Harper, and Al Mayo. During this era, the Han also encountered missionaries who sought to Christianize the local population and to provide education and some medical care.

Gold was also drawing outsiders to the region, with the first big discovery in 1886 on the Fortymile River followed by a stampede to Birch Creek in 1892, and, in 1896, the beginning of the Klondike gold rush that would change the region dramatically. The Klondike rush brought thousands of stampeders to both the Alaskan and Canadian sides of the border, and forced the Han and other indigenous groups to adapt to new economic and demographic realities. Han men took jobs piloting Yukon River steamboats, operating roadhouses, guiding travelers, and gold mining. Han villagers also caught and dried salmon or hunted caribou and moose to sell for cash. Through what amounted to a cultural invasion, the Han proved to be resilient when adapting to change in their homeland.

Piecing together the story of Chief Charley and of Charley’s Village is not easy. First, because the village was a place that many visited but few wrote about. And, second, because some of the available sources—written works and photographs—contradict each other or fail to answer persistent questions. For example, what did Chief Charley look like? Several photographs identify him in captions, but the faces don’t match—I used my best guess on the cover of this booklet. And, where was the village located? Written accounts and maps don’t always agree about which side of the river it was on, but recent archeological discoveries seem to solve that puzzle. Meanwhile, the search for clues continues.

A note about language: Some writers in this booklet used slurs and adopted condescending tones when describing Alaska’s indigenous people. This can be upsetting to read, but examples appear here because they provide insight into the attitudes and prejudices of the era.



The Han Athabascan homeland with Charley’s Village near the mouth of the Kandik River. Courtesy of Han: People of the River by Craig Mishler and William E. Simeone.



This 1897 map shows "Charlie's Village" along the Yukon River between Circle City and Kathul Mountain. It also indicates places relevant to the story of Charley's Village like Fort Yukon, Senati Camp, Belle Isle, 40 Mile Post, Fort Reliance, and Dawson City. Alaska and Polar Regions Collections & Archives, Century Atlas (M0442).

Missionaries and the Han

As Anglican missionaries, the brothers Robert and Kenneth McDonald spent years in northwestern Canada, proselytizing to the Gwich'in and other tribes. Robert rose in the ranks of the church to become Archdeacon of the newly created Mackenzie diocese. He married a Gwich'in woman and became known for creating a Gwich'in alphabet and translating the Bible and other religious texts for use in local communities. Early in their work on the Yukon River, the brothers encountered the Han Gwich'in (here written hun-kutchin) leader Charles Nootle or Notle—the same man who would be commonly known as Chief Charley. The name Nootle, they came to understand, meant “white man” perhaps because of half-Russian parentage. The following are examples of when the brothers wrote about Han parties arriving at the trading post called Rampart House on the Porcupine River:

July 27, 1871

Robert McDonald wrote, “Kindly welcomed by Nootle the chief, and the others.”

April 24, 1874

In a letter to Bishop William Bompas, Kenneth McDonald wrote,

“I saw Notle’s party who were encamped on the Black River beyond Goat Mountain. On my way out to them, I passed Red Leggings camp, on a branch of the Black River and spent two days with him. Thence I was three days in reaching the Gens des Fous [ref. to the Han]. There have been several deaths since you saw them in the summer, but when I was there all seemed in good health. I gave Notle and the boy what you sent for them, and they appeared grateful. Ketse, in fall, started to go up in the Yukon for the purpose of trading with the Chilcat [to the south] in Spring, so it is very likely he will visit Rampart House. Notle, however, will be there with all his followers. He does not intend going to the Yankees again.”

June 8, 1874

Robert McDonald wrote, “The majority of the hun-kutchin, and among them Nootle, arrived mid-day: the women and children have also come. A very warm day. Morning and evening prayers with the Indians. A short address on Romans V: 1.2. Taught a few hun-kutchin that are candidates for baptism. Rain this evening.”

June 9, 1874

Robert McDonald wrote, “At 9 A.M. David Anderson, chief of the Black River Indians with a few of his band, and also some hun-kutchin arrived. The rest of the Black River Indians are expected in a few days. Held morning and evening prayers with the Indians. Addresses on St. John.”

[This visit appears to have been a trade mission, and the parties stayed a two weeks before departing. The vunlet-kutchin, or Vuntut Gwich'in, are from the Porcupine River and are based today in the village of Old Crow. Robert continues . . .]

June 25, 1874

“The whole of the hun-kutchin and the majority of the vunlet-kutchin and some of the Black River Indians went off to-day. They have all learnt a little, some a good deal. And I trust that they will all endeavor to lead a Christian life. They seem to have an increasing fear of God. May they abide under His protection and be led into the paths of righteousness and peace.”

[Craig Mishler and William Simeone in Han: People of the River (2004) investigate the geneology of a Charlie Nootlah, who appears in the 1900 U.S. Census at Eagle Village and the Nootle who appears in the McDonalds' writings, and warn, “There is some reason to believe there were two different Chief Charleys living among the Han in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”]



The itinerant Anglican missionary Vincent C. Sim preaching at Fort Reliance, a fur trading post on the Canadian side of the international boundary, ca. 1885. Alaska State Library, Schieffelin Brothers Yukon River Album.

Jack McQuesten and Fort Reliance

In 1879, the fur trader and entrepreneur Leroy “Jack” McQuesten stopped at Charley’s Village on his way upriver to deliver a load of merchandise to the then-defunct trading post called Fort Reliance. At the village, McQuesten received a warning from the chief about theft and a poisoning incident at the post. According to a second source—the Gwich’in chief Senati—Chief Charley was not actually concerned about McQuesten’s safety but wanted the fur trader to open a store instead at Charley’s Village:

Recollections of Leroy N. McQuesten of Life in the Yukon, 1871-1885 (1952)

There was another Company [Hudson’s Bay Company] that came into the country in 1877 and they came as far as Tanana Station that year and they were paying such prices for furs there was not much to be made on percentages, so I concluded that I would try Fort Reliance again. Again I engaged Waniuk, a Russian Creole for Interpreter, [and] when we arrived at Charley Camp we were told that three women had died at Fort Reliance by eating poison. [Arthur] Mayo had some arsenic mixed with grease in the store for killing mice, the old women supposed it was flour and ate it. Charley Chief advised me not to go there as the Indians were all mad.

There was an Indian by the name of Shenerthy [Senati] came down to Charley Camp that belong to Fort Reliance—he told me to go on up and it would be all right as Charley Chief was talking for his own interest, as he wanted the station there at his place. I found out by Shenerthy how much goods the Indians had got from Mayo. I didn’t like to abandon the station as it would cost considerable money to build another post and I wished to go over to Sixty Mile and look after [the] prospect that Harper found. So I concluded to a head and if I could arrange matters so that I thought it would be safe I would land the goods, if not I would take the building down and move down to Charley Camp.

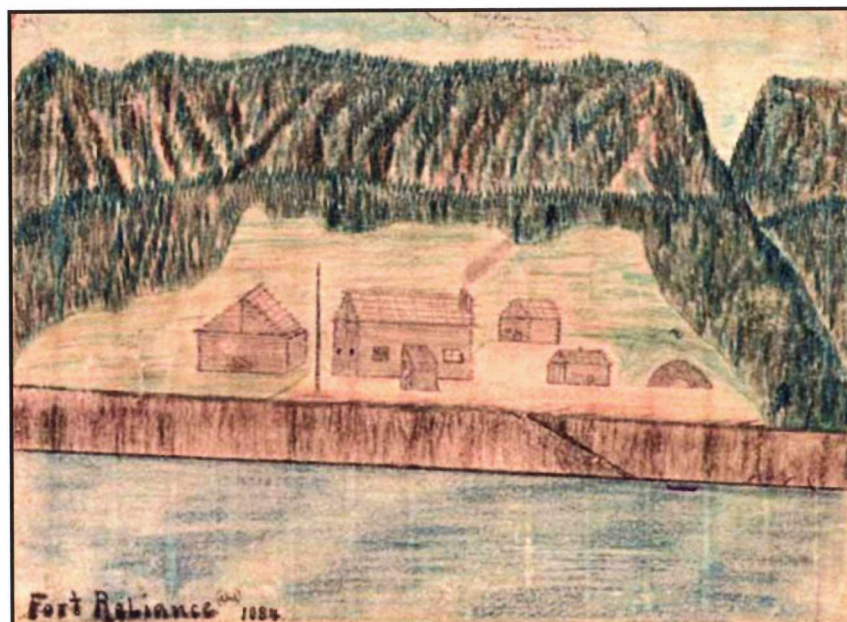
Talking with a reporter in 1880, Jack McQuesten explained the unit of exchange he used at Fort Reliance. He did business not in dollars and cents but in “skins.” A skin was based on a beaver pelt of medium size, but it could be a marten or a mink pelt (each valued at 1 skin), a wolverine (worth 3 to 5 skins), a moose (worth 2 to 3 skins), or a large black beaver (worth 4 skins). A red fox pelt was worth 1 skin, but a cross-fox was worth 4 skins and a black fox an astonishing 15 skins. It took 10 muskrat pelts to equal 1 skin. At the trading post, McQuesten displayed the price of his merchandise as follows:

Sixty-Five North

San Francisco Chronicle, July 31, 1881

½ pound gunpowder is worth	1 skin
1 pound lead for bullets	1 skin
1 pound Kentucky leaf tobacco	1 skin
2 yards calico	1 skin
2 yards ticking	1 skin
2 yards drilling	1 skin
1 cotton shirt	3 skins
1 woolen shirt	4 to 5 skins
1 pair overalls	3 skins
1 half-hatchet	3 skins
1 ax	6 skins
1 pair common trousers	6 skins
1 pair fine beaver cloth trousers	10 to 12 skins
1 three-point blanket	10 skins
1 four-point blanket	12 skins
1 single shotgun	20 skins
1 Hudson’s bay flintlock gun	20 skins
1 superior shotgun	80 skins

McQuesten also added, “The Indian hunter would rather buy a good gun for eighty skins than a poor one for twenty. The value of the standard beaver skin is estimated here at about 30 cents.”



Fort Reliance, a fur trading post downstream from the Klondike River, 1884. François Mercier and Jack McQuesten built the post in 1874 for the Alaska Commercial Company, and the Fortymile and Seventymile rivers were named for their distance from the post. UAF Archives, Willis E. Everette Collection (UAF-1976-91).

Frederick Schwatka Visits Han Villages

In 1883, when U.S. Army's Lt. Frederick Schwatka led a mapping expedition down the Yukon River, he paused at Eagle Bluff and described the Han village near the defunct Belle Isle trading station. The next day, he struggled to land his raft at Charley's Village until the villagers came out to help with their canoes. His descriptions of these two villages provide us with a portrait of life among the Han:

Along Alaska's Great River (1885)

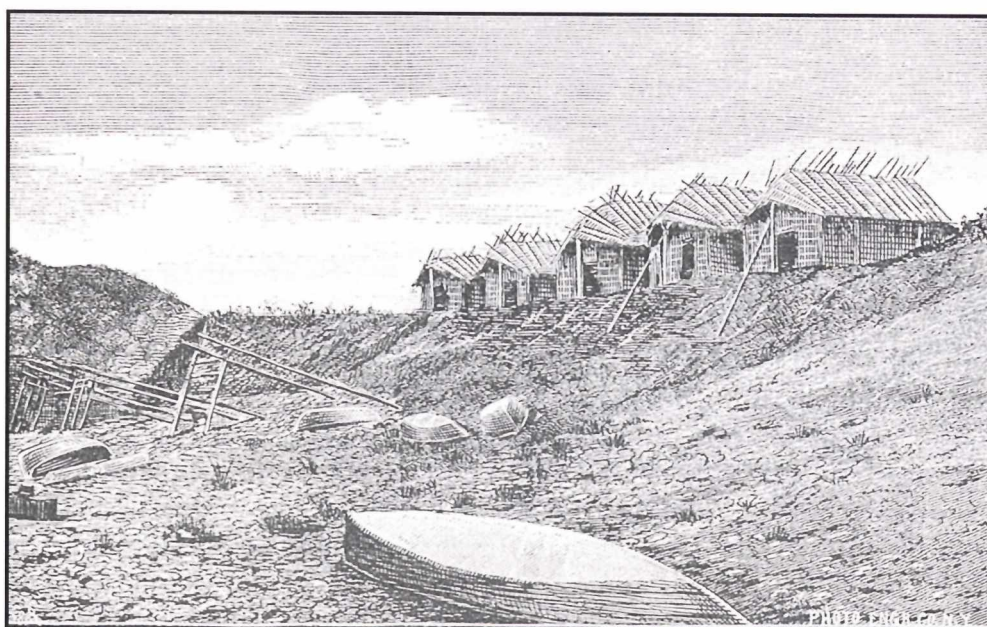
We got a late start on the 21st [of July, 1883], the wretched weather being good for late sleeping if for nothing else, the middle of the forenoon finding us just pulling out. At noon we passed a good-sized river coming from the east, but if it had been mapped we were unable to identify it. A few minutes afterward we swung around a sharp bend in the river and saw a confused mass of brush or logs that denoted an Indian village in the distance, a supposition confirmed by the number of canoes afloat in its front and by a motley crowd of natives on the bank, well mingled with the inevitable troop of dogs that to the eye of the experienced traveler is as sure a sign of an Indian village as both Indians and houses together.

This was the first Indian village we had encountered on the river deserving the name of permanent, and even here the logs of which the cabins, six in number, were built, seemed to be mere poles, and by no means as substantially built as it might have been with the material at hand. It was perched up on a high flat bank on the western side of the river, the gable ends of the house fronting the stream, and all of them very close together, there being only one or two places wide enough for a path to allow the inmates to pass. The fronts of the houses are nearly on the same line, and this row is so close to the scarp of the bank that the "street" in front is a very narrow path, where two persons can hardly pass unless one of them steps indoors or down the hill; and

when I visited the village the road was too monopolized by scratching dogs that I could hardly force my way through them. This street may have been much wider in times of yore—for it seemed to be quite an old village—and the encroachments of the eroding river during freshets may have reduced it to its present narrowness. If so, it will not be long before the present village must be abandoned or set back some distance.

Further up the river we saw a single pole house projecting over the bank about a fourth or a third of its length, and deserted by its occupants. The body of the houses is of a very inferior construction, in which ventilation seems to be the predominating idea (although even this is not developed to a sufficient degree, as judged by one's nose upon entering), and the large door in front is roughly closed by a well-riddled moose or caribou skin, or occasionally by a piece of canvas so dirty that at the distance of a few feet it might be taken for an animal's skin. The roofs are of skins battened down by spruce poles, which, projecting beyond the comb in irregular lengths, often six and eight feet, gave the whole village the most bristling appearance. A fire is built on the dirt-floor, in the center of the habitation, and the smoke left to get out the best way it can. As the occupants are generally sitting flat on the floor, or stretched out at full length on their backs or stomachs in the dirt, they are in a stratum of air comparatively clear; or, at least, endurable to Indian lungs. The ascending smoke finds ample airholes among the upper cracks of the walls, while that dense mass of it which is retained under the skins of the roof, making it almost impossible to stand upright, is utilized for smoking the salmon which are hung up in this space. The Indian name of the village is *Klat-ol-klin*, but it is generally known on the Middle River as Johnny's Village, after the chief's Americanized name. That dignitary was absent on a journey of several days down the river, at the time of our arrival.

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From Lt. Schwatka's photograph of Johnny's Village near today's Eagle, Alaska. Image from Along Alaska's Great River (1885).

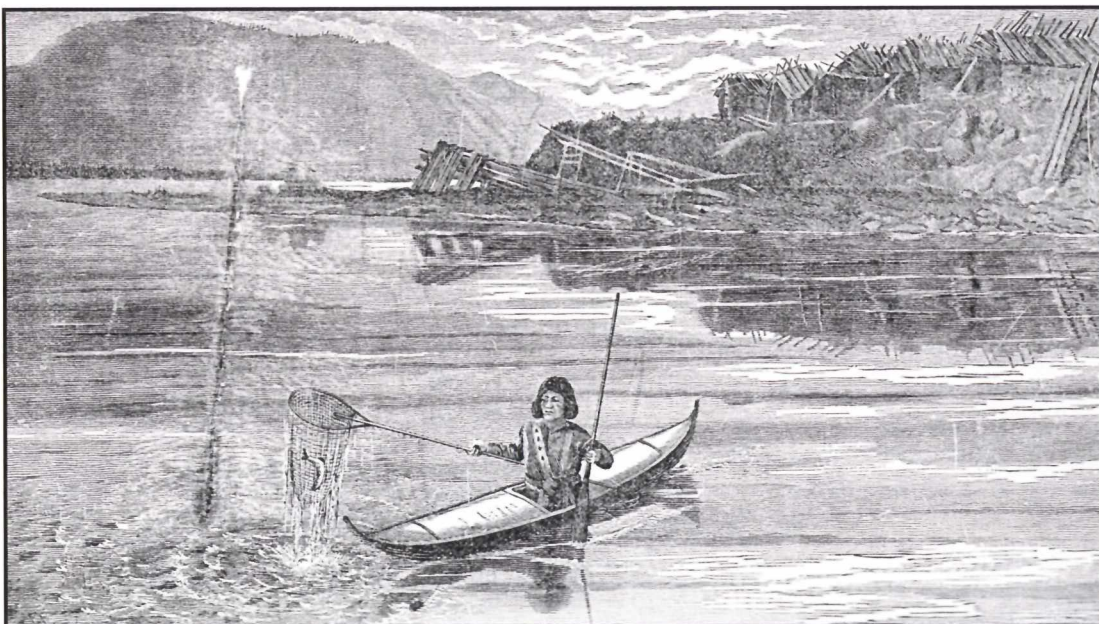
A number of long leaning poles, braced on their downhill ends by cross uprights, were noticed on the gravel beach in front of the village; these serve as scaffoldings upon which to dry salmon in the sun, and to keep them from the many dogs while undergoing this process. While taking a photograph of the town, two or three salmon fell from the poles; and in a twinkling fully sixty or seventy dogs were huddled together about them in a writhing mass, each one trying to get his share—and that of several others. The camera was sighted toward them, a hurried guess made as to the proper focus, and an instantaneous view attempted, but the negative looked more like a representation of an approaching thunder shower, and I never afterward printed from it. Occasionally in these rushes a row of scaffolding will be knocked down, and if it happens to be loaded with salmon the consequent feast will be of a more extensive nature. These dogs were of a smaller breed, and noticeably of a darker color, than the Eskimo dogs of the lower river. They are employed by these Indians for the same purposes, but to a more limited extent.

It was at this village that what to me was the most wonderful and striking performance given by any natives we encountered on the whole trip was displayed. I refer to their method of fishing for salmon. I have already spoken of the extreme muddiness of the Yukon below the mouth of the White River; and this spot, of course, is no exception. I believe I do not exaggerate in the least when I say, that, if an ordinary pint tin-cup were filled with it, nothing could be seen at the bottom until the sediment had settled. The water is about nine or ten feet deep on the fishing banks in front of the houses, where they fish with their nets; or at least that is about the length of the poles to which the nets are attached. The salmon I saw them take were caught about two hundred or two hundred and fifty yards directly out from the shore in front of the houses. Standing in front of this row of cabins, some person, generally an old man, squaw or child, possibly on duty for that purpose, would announce, in a loud voice, that a salmon was coming up the river, perhaps from a quarter or a third of a mile away.

This news would stir up some young man from the cabins, who from his elevated position in front of them would identify the salmon's position, and then run down to the beach, pick up his canoe, paddle and net, launch the former and start rapidly out into the river; the net laying on the canoe's birch deck in front of him, his movements being guided by his own sight and that of a half dozen others on the high bank, all shouting advice to him at the same time. Evidently, in the canoe he could not judge well of the fish's position, especially at a distance; for he seemed to rely on the advice from the shore to direct his movements until the fish was near him, when with two or three dexterous and powerful strokes with both hands, he shot the little canoe to a point near the position he wished to take up, regulating its finer movements by the paddle used as a sculling oar in his left hand, while with his right he grasped the net at the end of its handle and plunged it into the water the whole length of its pole to the bottom of the river (some nine or ten feet); often leaning far over and thrusting the arm deep into the water, so as to adjust the mouth of the net, covering about two square feet, directly over the course of the salmon so as to entrap him.

Of seven attempts, at intervals covering three hours, two were successful (and in two others salmon were caught but escaped while the nets were being raised), salmon being taken that weighed from fifteen to twenty pounds. How these Indians can see at this distance the coming of a single salmon along the bottom of a river eight or ten feet deep, and determine their course or position near enough to catch them in the narrow mouth of a small net, when immediately under the eye a vessel holding that number of inches of water from the muddy river completely obscures an object at its bottom, is a problem that I will not attempt to solve. Their success depends of course in some way on the motion of the fish. In vain they attempted to show members of my party the coming fish. I feel perfectly satisfied that none of the white men could see the slightest trace of the movements to which their attention was called. Upon the skin roofs of their log-cabins and on the scaffoldings upon the gravel beach were many hundred

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A Han fisherman in a birch-bark canoe pulls a salmon from the Yukon River. Image from Along Alaska's Great River (1885).

salmon that had been caught in this curious way. The only plausible theory which I could evolve within the limits of the non-marvelous, was, that the salmon came along near the top of the water, so as to show or indicate the dorsal fin, and that as it approached the canoe, the sight of it, or more likely some slight noise, made with this superficial swimming did not take place, but that the motion of the fish was communicated from the deep water to the surface, often when the fish was quite at the bottom.

... About a mile and a quarter below *Klat-ol-klin*, and on the same side of the river, is a fairly constructed white man's log cabin, which had once been used as a trading store, but was now deserted. We afterward learned that this trading station was called Belle Isle, and had only been built two years before [by Francois Mercier], having been abandoned the preceding year as not paying. The Indians evidently must have surmised that the trader would return, as they respected the condition in which he left the building, in a manner most creditable to their honesty, no one having entered or disturbed it since he left. They evidently care very little for beads as ornaments, for I saw none of them wearing that much coveted Indian ornament, while great quantities were scattered around by the trader's store, having been trampled into the ground. At no place on the river did I find such an eagerness for beads as characterizes the American Indians of milder climes, but nowhere did I see such total disregard for them as was shown here.

Near Belle Isle is a prominent hill called by the Indians *Ta-tot'-lee*, its conspicuousness heightened by the comparative flatness of the country which lies between two entering rivers and a great bend in the Yukon. As our survey showed it to be just within Alaska, bordering on the boundary between it and the British Northwest Territory, I gave it the additional name of Boundary Butte [now called Eagle Bluff]. ... The next day we made thirty-six miles, and as the whole day had been a most disagreeable one when at six o'clock we got drawn into an eddy, near which was a fair place to camp, I ordered the raft made fast and the tents pitched. ... The river rose ten inches that night—a fact easily accounted for by the protracted and often heavy rains. The forenoon of the 23rd was very gloomy, but shortly after noon the weather surprised us by clearing up. At 3:30 that day we came upon another Indian town called Charley's Village; but the current was so swift that we could not get the raft up to the bank so as to camp alongside, but we were successful in making a sand-bar about half a mile below.

Charley's Village was an exact counterpart of Johnny's, even as to the number of houses—six—and the side of the river—the western; and considering this and the trouble to reach it, I did not attempt to photograph it. When attempting to reach it with the raft, so anxious were the Indians for our success, that as many as could do so put the bows of their canoes on the outer log of the raft, and paddled forward with as much vehemence as if their very lives depended upon the result. In three or four minutes they had worked themselves into a streaming perspiration, and had probably shoved the huge raft as many inches toward the bank.

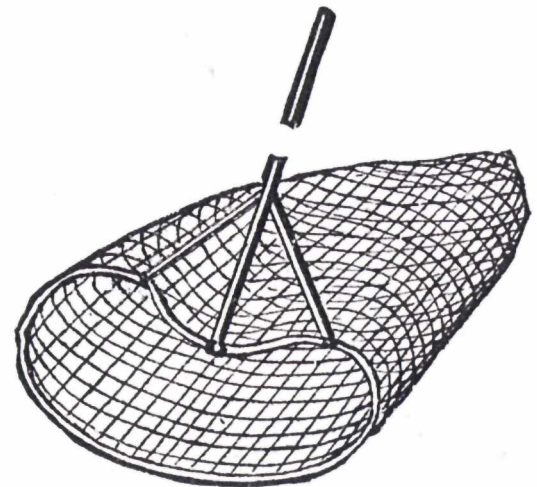
We found a Canadian voyageur among them of the name of Joseph Ladue, who, as a partner of one of the traders on the lower river, had drifted here in prospecting the stream for precious mineral. "Jo," as he is familiarly known, speaks of the natives of both these villages as Tadoosh, and says they are the best-natured Indians from here till the Eskimo are met with. Ladue had a fairly-made scow over twenty feet long, and half a dozen wide, and three deep, which he wanted to hire us, but as it would not hold all the party and effects we had to decline the tender, despite his emphatic assurances that we could not safely go much further with our raft. It was with Ladue that I first noticed particularly the pronunciation of the name of the great river, on whose waters we were drifting, a pronunciation which is universal among the few whites along its borders, and that sounded strangely at first; that is with the accent on the first syllable, and not on the second, as I had so usually heard it pronounced in the United States. That night, the 23rd, the mosquitoes were perfectly unbearable in their assaults, and if the weather had not turned bitterly cold toward morning I doubt if we could have obtained any sleep at all, for the mosquito-bars [bed nets] seemed to be no protection whatever.

—continued

Club and spruce-root net for catching salmon. Images from Along Alaska's Great River (1885).



SALMON-KILLING CLUB.



KLAT-OL-KLIN FISHING NETS.
Scale, 1-30.

**From Schwatka's chapter in:
*Compilation of Narratives of Exploration in Alaska (1900)***

Tadoosh or Charley's Indians: The village occupied by this band of Indians is known among the whites, who ascend the river to trade, as Charley's village, and is situated directly on the river, about 75 or 80 miles from the village previously spoken of as John's; it consists of only 5 or 6 houses, which are built after the general plan of all native houses on this portion of the river, of sticks and brush; and with just enough room to accommodate the various members of the family, including the dogs, which are by no means few in number. Had they any other domestic animals to provide for, doubtless an entirely different style of structure would be adopted.

The dog is to them what the horse and other beasts of burden are to the civilized races; and is not only used to pack on his back and draw sleds in winter, but is employed like the proverbial canal mule in drawing their canoes up stream, not, however, when a single member wishes to go on a journey, but when any number of the family moves, with the various household goods, etc. These Indians number in all from 40 to 50, and undoubtedly belong to the same tribe as those living at Belle Isle and Reliance, for they resemble them in almost every particular, and have separated doubtless on account of some difficulty which occurred years ago.

All the men are armed with the same kind of shotgun as the other Indians along this part of the river, and their ammunition is obtained from the same source, which is principally the steamboat, which makes the annual trips already spoken of. This point on the river is about 130 miles from Fort Yukon and is at the limit, as it were, of the hilly country; for only a few miles beyond the country flattens out, and the river divides up into almost countless channels, with island of various sizes between. Considerable game is found in this section, moose predominating in numbers, and furnishing to these Indians their main supply of food during the winter. In summer they live in their village on the river and devote themselves to catching salmon, which run in sufficient quantities to feed them at this time, but their means of catching them are too primitive to admit of their being caught in such quantities as to furnish them a winter's supply.



Charles Farciot came to Alaska in 1883 looking for gold, but he stayed behind when his partners went home. He photographed these three Han men around 1885, and the caption indicates the man in the middle is "Charlie, Chief of what is known as Charlie's Band, 1,600 miles up the Yukon River." Alaska State Library, Schieffelin Brothers Yukon River Album (p277-17-19).

In regard to the timber of this region, it is the same as that spoken of previously, the birch being the only wood used in the manufacture of any useful articles, principally in the construction of their canoes, which are very light, durable, and beautifully shaped. A frame-work is made of a light wood, generally birch, which is securely fastened together with moose-skin string or roots of the spruce, split. A covering is then made of birch bark, fastened, wherever joints occur, with stitches made by splitting small spruce roots, which are very flexible, and the cracks are then closed with pitch, put on with a firebrand, in the same way that solder is used. White men's clothes are universally worn by these people, who buy the cloth from traders; but should the supply be cut off, no great difficulty would be experienced in finding a substitute, as they can procure sufficient furs to answer every purpose of dress without very great exertion.

The head chief of this band is known among the traders as "Charley," and his feeling toward white men is friendly. His influence over the tribe is as a rule quite strong, but generally any bribe or reward which would improve the pecuniary condition of single members would be accepted without regard to the general welfare of the remainder of the tribe. They hold very friendly relations with the bands of Indians living above and below them on the river, and are particularly pleased to have white men come among them. At the time of our meeting them there was miner [Joseph Ladue] living at their village waiting for the arrival of the steamboat, and he spoke of having been very kindly received and hospitably entertained.

This as well as the other tribes of this section, have peculiar ideas of right and honor, for while apparently never hesitating for an instant about making away with anything which happens to please them, provided it be not stored away, yet if "cached," as it is called, away from the owner, they will not touch it, and are said to regard this with such respect as to almost starve before helping themselves to any food so cached. In a military sense these Indians are of little importance on account of their small numbers, and even should they join any neighboring tribes as allies, as is shown, would not swell their ranks very largely.

William Ogilvie and Ivan Petrof

Here the Canadian land surveyor William Ogilvie describes the indigenous population of the upper Yukon River as the river exits Canada and enters Alaska. He spent the winter of 1887-88 in a camp on the Canadian side of the border trying to map the region and settle a dispute about whether the gold mining portion of the Fortymile River, a Yukon River tributary, was in American or Canadian territory. Belle Isle is the name of an abandoned trading post near where Johnny's band/David's band lived and where Eagle and Eagle Village are today.

Information Respecting the Yukon District (1897)

At Belle Isle, fifteen miles below the boundary, David's band is located. It numbers 65 to 70 souls. About one hundred miles below the boundary Charley's band has its headquarters. It numbers about twelve families, in all about 66 souls. I came more in contact with the last two bands than with any of the others, as David's band was only twelve miles from my winter quarters for some months, and many of them were frequently in the house with me for a night or two on their way to and from Forty Mile River. A missionary sent over by the Right Reverend Bishop Bompas, who is in charge of the diocese of Mackenzie River for the Church Missionary Society of England, was stationed with David's band all winter.

Some years ago, when Archdeacon [Robert] McDonald, now in charge of the mission work at Fort McPherson, on Peel River, was stationed at Fort Yukon, and afterwards at Rampart House, Charley's band used to resort to those posts for their trade, and that gentleman taught them to read, and instructed them in the principles of the Christian religion. It is pleasant to be able to testify that they have profited by his instruction, and still retain a loving memory of those times. They hold every Sunday a service among themselves, reading from their books the prayers and lessons for the day, and singing in their own language to some old tune a simple hymn. They never go on a journey of any length without these books, and always read a portion before they go to sleep.

I do not pretend that these men are faultless, or that they do not need watching, but I do believe that most of them are sincere in their professions and strive to do what they have been taught is right. They are greedy and selfish in their transactions with whites, but I think much of that is because they have probably never had the sin of undue greed put forcibly before them by their pastor.

David's and Charley's bands manifested to me a much stronger sympathy for Canada than for the United States. Some of this feeling might be due to policy, for aught I know, but hitherto most of their dealings and all their education have been Canadian. The total number on the river is 482, of whom 136 are below the boundary, leaving 346 domiciled in Canada. It does not appear that any live permanently on the upper Pelly or Stewart [on the Canadian side].

For the 1880 U.S. Census, Ivan Petrof traveled widely in Alaska, though he was not able to reach the upper Yukon River. Instead he gathered what numbers he could from informants. The following is what he learned about the region upriver of Fort Yukon. Note that the trading post Fort Reliance was more than 75 miles on the Canadian side of the boundary, but in that era, the boundary meant little to indigenous people or fur traders:

Population and Resources of Alaska (1881)

On the Yukon River, above the fort of the same name, we know of the following people trading with Americans at Fort Reliance, who may be on British soil:

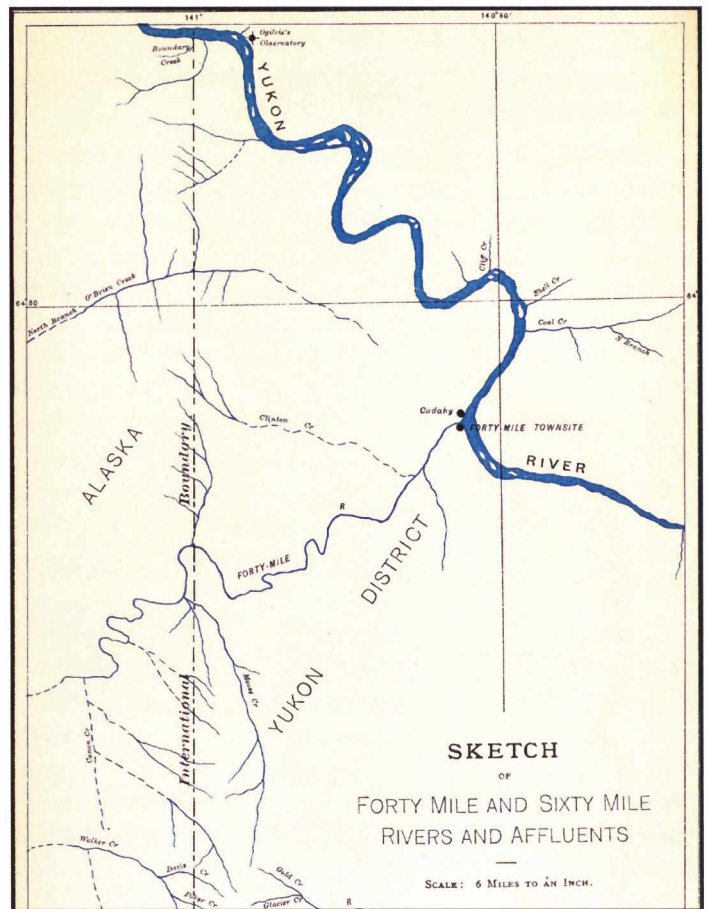
Charley's people: 48

Fatonlin or David's people: 106

Fort Reliance (one white): 82

Total: 236.

William Ogilvie's map from his 1887-88 work along the Yukon and Fortymile rivers. "Ogilvie's Observatory" was his camp near the international boundary.



E. Hazard Wells Reports

In 1889, the journalist and explorer E. Hazard Wells was traveling down the Yukon River as the leader of the Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper Expedition. His mission was to entertain readers with stories of Far North adventure. He encountered John McGrath and Dr. Willis Kingsbury with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, stopped at Johnny's Village, and camped for a time next to Charley's Village. When he mentions "the Bostons," he is echoing an Alaska Native term for Americans:

Charlie's Village

Cincinnati Post, December 21, 1889

Written at Fort Yukon, August 17, 1889—After a short chat with the surveyors, whom I had met in San Francisco last May, we arranged with Captain Peterson, commanding the *Yukon*, to call for us on his return trip next Monday at Charlie's Village, a few miles below, and took our departure. Captain Peterson said that the *St. Michael's* was still on her way up, and that on her return the *Yukon* would go down until the two boats met, then the *St. Michael's* would transfer her cargo to the *Yukon* for delivery farther up and would go back to St. Michael's [the island port in Norton Sound].

Thus we had the cheering assurance of transportation to the coast, and welcome news it was after roughing it over 900 miles from the 9th of June to the 17th of August. We parted from the *Yukon* in good spirits and quickly made our way to Charlie's Village. Arrived there, we camped under the open sky, about 100 yards from the town, but on the approach of rain one of the Indians kindly lent us a tent.

Charlie's Village consists of a row of five houses constructed in a very airy way. The sides and roofs are made of poles, hewn boards and strips of birch bark fastened together in a style of architecture not discovered in the reign of Queen Anne. Each of the houses contained a single room of good size, enclosed to the roof on the rear and on the two ends, but open in the front except for a sort of barricade, such as one sees at country fairs in front of the stalls of prize cattle. In the winter, when the mercury falls to 50 or 60 degrees below zero, I suppose the open space above these barricades is closed with skins and furs, and that the smoke in the cabins must make its exit through the numerous cracks in the roof, and not through the open front of the house. Such arrangements would hardly content a white man; but these Indians seem to be cranks on the subject of ventilation.

Charlie, the chief, is old, keen and black-eyed. He wears at present a pair of blue overalls, variegated with a huge square patch of blue-and-white bed ticking in the seat, and a patch of dirty white cloth on each knee. The rest of his costume consists of a loose blouse of striped calico, a black felt hat without a band, evidently intended to be worn with a Mother Hubbard suit [a loose-fitting, untailored garment], three soiled shirts and a pair of moccasins.

After a due exchange of hand-shaking courtesies, [the miner A.J.] Blanchard and I walked through the village, which we found to be swarming with women and children and a pack of lean, hungry dogs of various degrees of ugliness. The children were quite good looking, but among the old women a painter might have found some frightful studies in the hideous. The dress of the children is a skirt remarkable only for its shortness, and not at all likely to embarrass them in the free use of their lower limbs. The squaws were up with the advance of women's dress reform, wearing regular trousers of dirty white cloth, partially concealed by a short petticoat. Most of the men were clothed like poor white laborers. The village contains, perhaps, 25 people. Ten birch bark canoes are strewn along the river bank, and some of them are frequently in use, as this is the running season of the dog salmon.

To make a friend of the chief I bought from him for 50¢ half of a dried salmon which I had not the slightest intention of eating. After supper I confirmed the good understanding between us by presenting him with a finely ebonized caribou steak which Blanchard had bought at Johnny's Village. The chief was very happily impressed by my munificence, and thenceforth favored us frequently with his society. There was no fresh meat in the village, everybody being, apparently, too lazy to hunt for it.

Late in the evening I went down to the beach in front of the village and touched off a skyrocket and several triangles. The natives watched the display from their houses. They did not venture near me, but were not panic-stricken when the rocket rushed skyward and scattered its handful of stars. The truth is, they have ceased to be astonished at anything done by "the Bostons." Last year, however, a sensation was created among them when a miner brought a tame cat into the country. This strange creature excited universal astonishment, and one Indian is said to have offered \$30—probably his whole fortune—for the miner's cat.

That night the mosquitoes were ubiquitous and ghost-like, finding their way through all material obstructions, and getting there every time. They were thoroughly insatiable, stabbing for blood and not for glory. The dogs were nearly as bad. One of them got into our tent, and was in the act of carrying off the bucket of boiled reindeer from within a foot of my head, when he awkwardly banged the lid and I awoke. I shouted fiercely at him and the canine thief dropped his prize and ran like a burglar. No doubt he spent the next half-hour in snarling at his own awkwardness. The Indian dogs are acutely intelligent and cunning, and adepts at theft. They will lie for hours patiently waiting for a chance to steal, and if they fail at last they renew the practice of larceny with just so much additional experience to aid their next attempt. In time they arrive at a degree of dexterity against which few precautions avail.

—continued

Here Wells describes more about his visit to Charley's Village, his interactions with the chief, and life aboard a Yukon River steamboat. The photograph that Wells took of the village is not known to historians:

Sabbath on the Yukon

Cincinnati Post, December 23, 1889

Written at Fort Yukon, August 21, 1889—On Sunday, August 18, Blanchard and I remained in Camp at Charlie's Indian village. The Episcopalian missionary who was here last year had clearly made a deep impression on the natives, most of whom remained all day quietly at their houses, though a few visited our tent. At 6 o'clock in the evening divine service was held in the chief's house. An elderly Indian officiated in an impressive manner and with a clear, distinct voice. The Episcopal service was used, of course, the natives having prayer-books and hymns printed in their own language. The singing was good and the responses were heartily made. When the leader prayed all knelt down, some of the little boys prostrating themselves until their heads almost touched the ground. It was a striking and touching scene. Here were people far away from civilization, and only yesterday savages, sacredly observing the Lord's day in the wilderness where white men seem to take pride in disregarding all that is divine. Here in an Indian's hut I heard them praising God with melodies familiar to my ear in far off and far different scenes. I see no reason to doubt that the work of the missionary had done great good to these Indians.

All that Sunday night it rained lightly but steadily. All the mosquitoes out of doors took refuge in our tent, and the more we killed the more there were to kill. At length the morning dawned in a drizzle. When we were about to get up Chief Charlie appeared at the door, barefoot and ax in hand. Merely glancing at us he went on into the dripping woods, brought an armful of fuel to our tent, and soon kindled a blaze. It was a kindly courtesy, which we duly appreciated. During the day I secured a photograph of the village, but I could get no picture of Charlie until I offered him a substantial inducement. His son had a fine black fox's skin, well worth from \$50 to \$60 in any fur market, which he offered me, with \$10 gold dust to boot, for my Winchester. He pleaded for the weapon with great earnestness, insisting very truly that after I got on board the trading boat I should have no further use for it, and could get another at San Francisco.

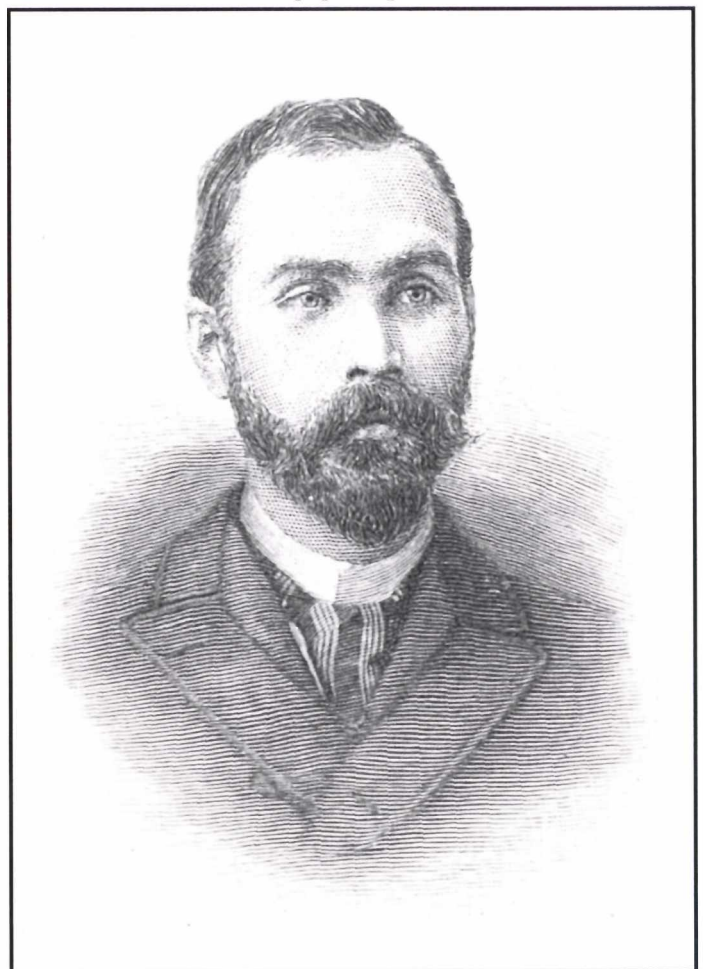
I was obliged nevertheless to refuse him, as the government expressly prohibits the sale of breech-loading arms to Alaskan Indians. The traders of the Alaska Commercial Company obey this law, but white miners frequently sell magazine rifles to the Indians and are never prosecuted for it. The law is virtually a dead letter. It is injurious to a few harmless Indians in the interior. It ought to be either enforced or repealed. At 5 p.m. the *Yukon* was heard whistling above us, and we hastened to break camp. We were soon aboard with our baggage, leaving our empty skiff on the beach. The *Yukon* remained a while to trade with Charlie's people, and then puffed away toward St. Michael's. . . .

At 8 a.m. next day we met the little trading steamboat *St. Michael's* tied up to the banks. Her two barges were laden with goods for Trader Harper [Arthur Harper], who is on the way to establish a new post at Pelly river. The *St. Michael's* had broken her aged and decrepit steam pump and the half-breed engineer had been vainly endeavoring to restore proper relations between it and the boiler. Like the *New Racket*, the barges of the *St. Michael's* were swarming with white men, Indians and dogs, with other things. Several of the passengers were miners . . .

We made a short run down stream that evening and then tied up for the night. A canvas awning was stretched over the barge, and our apartment was ready. Blanchard crept in and slept. I went to the roof of the steamboat, across which a brisk, cold wind was sweeping, and made my bed there, as much to the astonishment of the Indians as to my own satisfaction. The cold was uncomfortable, but the crawlers [fleas] were not about me. So I reposed until 3 o'clock in the morning, when I was roused by a shower of ashes and condensed steam from the smokestack. I made virtue of necessity and got up.

—E.H. Wells

E. Hazard Wells wrote for the Cincinnati Post and other newspapers about his travels in Alaska and the Yukon. Frank Leslie's Illustration Newspaper, April 12, 1890.



Chief Charley at Camp Davidson

In 1889, the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey sent two parties north to establish the position of the U.S.-Canada boundary. One group camped on the Porcupine River near the 141st meridian; the other, led by John E. McGrath, spent the winter on the Yukon River. The physician for McGrath's surveyors was Willis V. Kingsbury of St. Louis, Missouri, who also brought a camera:

Homeward Bound

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, August 31, 1891

[McGrath in a letter to a friend—] There is a circle of chosen spirits up there that I wish you could meet. Old Chief Charley, Shaman David, Slap-jack, Scar-faced Jimmy, Big Jimmy, One-eyed Simon and a few others who have just strained every nerve to make me enjoy myself. Old Charley is a great political character. He is the boss "tyme" of the Yukon from the Flats to Polly River [Pelly River], and for tone and style is a dandy.

You can't put him off with a sour johnny-cake or a "hand-out" of cold beans. If a man wants to stand well with him he must be ready to give him an occasional cent's worth of "chew-toback." These scoundrels put in about all their time trying to get goods "on tick," and just at present I have such a list of credits out that the camp is threatened with financial ruin. The ladies—God bless 'em—hardly ever visit us, and after what I saw of them passing here in the winter and at Forty Mile their continued neglect of us will be a favor that can hardly be estimated too high.

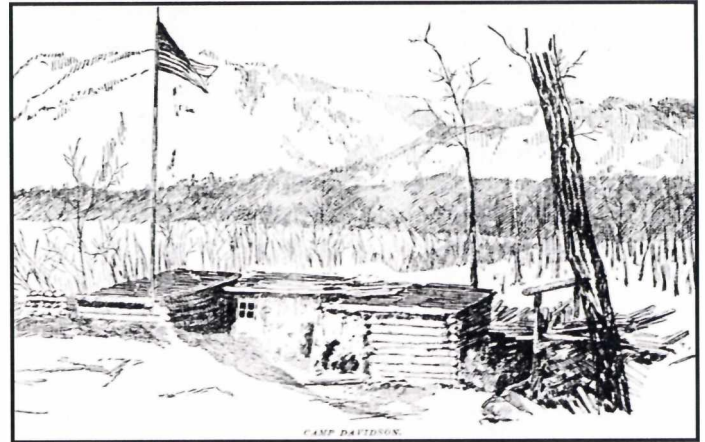
In Alaska

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 20, 1891

[Describing Kingsbury's photographs—] Another cut Dr. Kingsbury calls the "visit of old Chief Charley and his family to Camp Davidson, April 7, 1890." It shows the natives with their sledges loaded down with skin-tents, tent-poles, camp utensils, squaws, children, etc., and the gaunt Esquimaux or Hudson Bay dogs rolling in the snow just as the visitors halted on the ice-covered edge of the Yukon, when they reached McGrath's camp. They were the first visitors the party has seen since August, 1889, and Dr. Kingsbury states that the tribe to which they belong is known throughout all Alaska only as Charley's Tribe, but he is of opinion that they are, properly speaking, Mahlemute natives from the Behring Sea. The natives encountered in Alaska, Dr. Kingsbury explains, are either the Aleutes from the Aleutian Islands, Esquimaux or "Chinooks" from the Arctic Circle or Mahlmeutes.

A third cut represents "Old Chief Charley," himself in solitary grandeur, clad in his native toggery [clothing]. This old fellow is described by Mr. McGrath in a letter as the "boss tyme"—or chief—of Alaska, from the Flats to Polly River, a natural politician and the champion beggar of tobacco, beans and other delicacies in the whole district through which the Government party traveled. "Old Chief Charley" and his retainers were, however, of great use to the camp, which they kept supplied with fresh meat. Beginning with their visit in April, 1890, these

particular natives were so pleased with the two young St. Louisans [McGrath and Kingsbury] and their party that they stayed right with them for over a year, camping not far from the government hut. Old Charley is about 60 years old and is pre-eminent in his generation for dirt and mendacity. . . .



"Camp Davidson" (above) and "Old Chief Charley" during a visit to the U.S. Survey camp at the U.S.-Canada boundary—see booklet cover for the photograph original. *St. Louis Dispatch, September 20, 1891.*



In the following articles, Willis V. Kingsbury—serving as physician, photographer, and ethnographer at Camp Davidson—describes his work with one of Chief Charley's men to translate local vocabulary:

Arctic Curios

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 27, 1891

One day in the early part of last winter, "Arthur," one of old Chief Charley's men, came into the survey party's camp, and he and Dr. Kingsbury sat down to compile an Alaska-English dictionary. Kingsbury says that when a "Chinook" talks it sounds as if he was trying to spit all his teeth out at you. After several hours of such dental competitive conversation, Kingsbury's Alaskan vocabulary was considerably enlarged, and also, he states, every tooth in his head loosened. But he had the following to show for his suffering, and as a guide to pronunciation a foot-note to the effect that in "Chinook" the "a" is the German "a," "e" is broad "a," and "i" is the broad "e" of the English system.

Some 'Chinook' Terms

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, October 11, 1891

The following list is selected from the result of his winter afternoon's work at Camp Davidson:

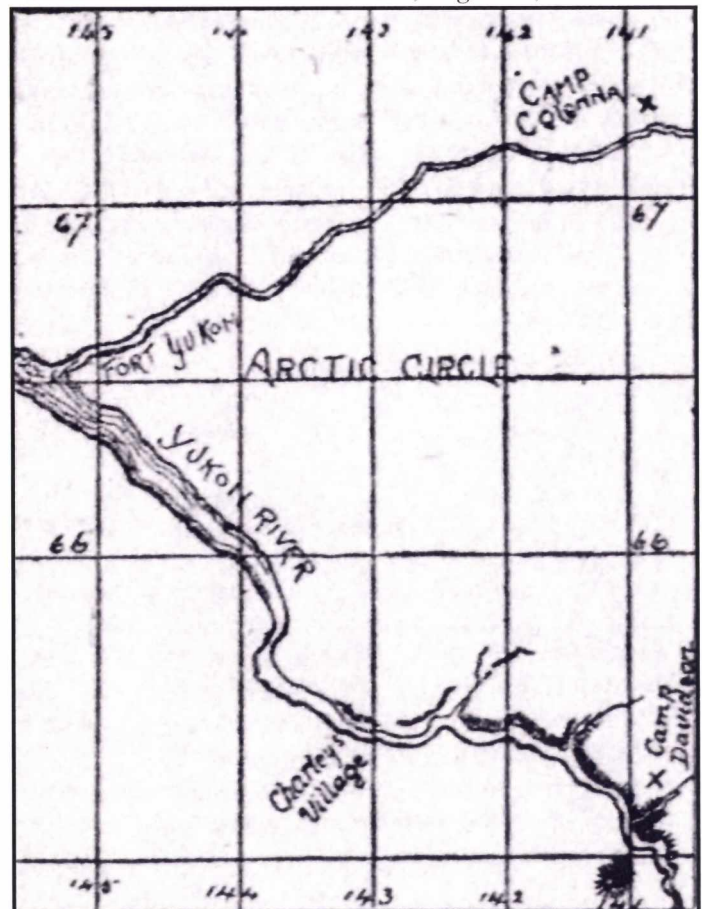
- Tu chun tya—Trunk or chest.
- Tike—Shotgun.
- Tyra tsul—Kettle.
- Thloog—Salmon.
- Choo Tya—Cup.
- Liti—Tea.
- Tse tet—Tobacco.
- Thiui—Dog.
- Kkon—Matches.
- Yikk—A shirt.
- Tsut—A blanket.
- Etunetli Choh—Big book.
- Gi Khyi—A minister.
- Charley Muh Kug—Charley's village.
- Tah nso tah Kim—White cloth.
- Liti tya—A tea kettle.
- Tike tshi—A bullet.
- Chi-Kya—A file.
- Etunette tui—A pencil-book.
- Tso Kui—Sugar.
- Thlych—Flour.
- Vi-kug-chit-ti-ni-thith—Paper.
- Tri nyin—A boy.
- Tin jih nitshi—A big man.
- Tin njo—A big woman
- Vut tzin thu—Caribou skin.
- Tin jik—A moose.
- Sah ci—My snowshoe.
- Tu chun vul—A toboggan.
- Tri tsill—A little canoe.
- Lisel—Salt.
- Tah ci—Ax.

- Chiling—Hymn or song.
- Ssih kooli—Plenty meat.
- Ssih thiye—Fresh meat.
- Ssih khal—Dried meat.
- Ve no tiet—White man.
- Tin jih zyoo—Indian man.
- Kivi vzi gi khye—Good talk.
- Tsi tet tahl—Tobacco pipe.
- Tin jik tha—Moose skin.
- Tet sin—A crow.

When this great work had been duly transcribed to paper, Kingsbury generously insisted upon his "Chinook" co-worker sharing the honors with him. "Sign your name here, Arthur," he said, "and also the year in which we did this." And Arthur, an unusually highly cultured Alaskan, thanks to the Russian mission, took a pen and made a scrawl at the one name "Arthur." Then he gravely placed under it the year "1887."

"God forgive him," says Kingsbury, smiling over the story of his work as a lexicographer with "Chinook Arthur." "I'm not surprised at his forgetting what year it was up there out of the world. I could have forgotten it myself and dropped back a century or two with nothing to remind me to the contrary."

Government survey camps Colonna, on the Porcupine River, and Davidson on the Yukon River. Charley's Village is also indicated. San Francisco Chronicle, August 23, 1891.



Finding Refuge at Charley's Village

In 1898, an Irishman named Michael MacGowan and two companions—Conal McGinley and David Allen—were traveling the Yukon River from Fort Yukon to Dawson in the hopes of striking it rich, but they were having a hard time. They stumbled into Charley's Village seeking shelter and help for Conal whose hands were frostbitten. Decades later, the account was translated from Irish Gaelic and published:

The Hard Road to Klondike (1962)

One night we were pushing ahead as usual when the snow started falling heavily again. The wind was so penetrating that it was taking us all the time to breathe, even. We knew that we couldn't go much further for, if we did, we wouldn't get very far before we'd have to give up and that would spell the end for us, surely. At the same time, we felt that we couldn't be too far from some kind of a place where people lived. We walked on a bit more and, right enough, we came by a place where coloured people lived. Indians they were, but by then we were so worn-out and fed up that we didn't give a damn if they were devils out of hell itself.

"We'll leave the sleds here," I said, "and move up and see what kind of place they have."

Up we went.

A couple of days before this, one of Conal's fingers had frozen in the biting cold; since then his hand had been useless and was giving him a good deal of pain; but he was the sort of man that would be at death's door before he'd give in. In we went to the Indians, at all events, and a fine long wide cabin they had, I may say. If there was an overwhelming smell of fish and dogs—and a few other stench as well—there, we weren't discommoded. They had a fire lighting the middle of the floor and that was the first time I ever saw a hearth or a fire in such a place. There was a huge fire there, and the place was filled with smoke and smuts that failed to find their way through the chimney hole in the roof.

Well, the Indians gave us a hearty welcome. They spoke a kind of pidgin English but when they spoke among themselves, sure a Greek wouldn't understand a word of what they were saying. They were very pleasant, though, and they were as civil to us as if we had been at home among our own neighbours. As soon as Conal saw the fire, nothing could persuade him to come away from it. But when I thought we had spent enough time there, I told the other two that we ought to be moving along.

"For God's sake," said Conal, "stay beside the fire for the night. You've no idea the difference the heat is making to these blasted fingers."

The other lad wasn't at all willing to wait back. "We have a long way before us yet," he said, "and if we keep delaying like this every second day with the cold getting continually worse, we'll never get there at all."

"Well," I said, "I'm sorry for him with his fingers frozen; and since he asked us in God's name, we'll wait for him if these people can give us any room."

I went and spoke to the Indian that had the most grasp of the English. I asked him what would he charge us to stay by the fire until morning. He made a price and mind you, the sum he asked wasn't all that much—about a shilling a man in that country's money.

"Well," I said, "we'll give you that and welcome."

They gave us little three-legged stools to sit on, but they were so low that we preferred to stretch our bones out on the floor. It was an earthen floor, and it was covered with little branches from the spruce-trees just like the old houses away at home were strewn with rushes. When we were warmed up and had come-to a bit, I looked the house up and down and saw that there was a fair-sized crowd of people (and a dog or two) under the roof. Some were lying down, others sitting, on rough sack beds or branches on the floor. Soon, they were all fast asleep and we had the house to ourselves. Between then and the middle of the night, we prepared some food for ourselves and we were then well fixed up until morning.

Next day, at the first sign of dawn, we started to move and get on our way but as we prepared to go outside the door, Conal said that his hand was still bad and that he was afraid he wouldn't be able to come with us. It seemed that the heat from the fire had done it more harm than good. We were in a right fix then. We didn't like to leave the poor fellow by himself among all these foreigners while at the same time we wanted to be moving ahead as soon as we could.

I went back to the man that had the English and told him our story. I asked him if he knew of anything that would cure the frozen finger. He said he did. He told us not to move until he returned to us. Off he went and, in a while, came back with an old woman that he brought out of a small room at the head of the house. The old woman wasn't more than four and a half feet high but she was as broad as she was long, not unlike the old women back home. She spoke kindly enough, but we couldn't understand a word out of her mouth. The young man acted as interpreter for us and we managed all right, however. He told us the old woman was his mother.

She looked at our friend's fingers and said that they weren't too bad and that it wouldn't be too hard at all to cure them. I couldn't mention now, for fear of telling you a lie, what were all the things she used in preparing the cure but I know she used snow and something that she took out of little box. But what amazed us all was that she chanted some words like a spell or charm. Before I had ever left home at all, I had seen the old women at this—they had a charm for the toothache, a charm for a sprain and many others—and as soon as I saw this happening for the frozen fingers, it took me immediately back home to the old women of my own district.

—continued

Well, this old woman said that we'd have to stay over until the next morning if we wanted to have the cure done properly. At that we didn't want to leave for, whatever our hurry, we didn't like to think our friend would lose his fingers. We said that we'd wait over and this gave a lot of pleasure to the old lady. The first poultice wasn't long on the fingers before she made another one and this time she put some class of an herb into it. She kept on with the cure all through the day and by the time night began to fall Conal was beginning to get some feeling back into his fingers. He sent the young man to tell the old woman and when she heard that there was some improvement she came back to us straight away. She started talking and laughing and we all had great fun, though it was impossible to know what she was saying at all.

We offered to pay her then but, if we were to have broken sticks across her, devil the penny she'd take. All that she was sorry about was how little she was able to do for us. We felt in great form for walking when we left the Indian's house. We had had a good long rest but the thing that pleased us most was that Conal's fingers were better again. We went along the trail before us as fast as we could but we had no idea of how well we were doing or, indeed, of how far we were from our journey's end. We had heard that there was a hotel along the trail where we would be within a day's walk or two from Dawson City. This would be at a place known as Forty-Mile. It was in Yukon territory, on the Canadian side of the border between Yukon and Alaska. It had been a great place for gold a couple of years beforehand but as soon as the news about Klondike broke, all the miners moved off down south.

On we ploughed for about three or four days and when we had finally given up any hope of seeing the town, one evening when we hadn't given any thought to it all day, we stumbled across it. We went into the hotel—a large wooden house—and I can tell you that we didn't feel at all lonely that night. There was a great difference between what we now had and what we had gone through. There were seventy of us gathered there altogether that night. Everyone that had gone that way from the beginning of winter was there before us. Like with ourselves, the boats hadn't managed to bring them all the way up the river. They told us that we'd be in Dawson City by the next day or so and that gave all of us great heart and encouragement. When we got something to eat, we moved around among the people who had got there before us, asking them where they came from and ferreting out information about the place we were making for.

Most of them knew as little about it as we did ourselves but there were a few who had been out there before and who had some knowledge of the going. We had no worries now that we were among company. Then the music and the dancing started—the men all danced together for there were very few women there—and that was the best night's entertainment I, for one, ever had in my life. There were people from every corner of the globe and there they were in a place where they were neither afraid nor ashamed of hearing their own language. I heard languages spoken that night that I never knew existed. There were plenty of Irishmen there and there was an Irish musician from some part of Connaught [a province on Ireland's west coast] that held his own with the best.



Chief Charlie of Fortymile, Chief Isaac of Dawson, and Chief Roderick of Circle, 1900. Although the residents of Charley's Village did move to Fortymile around 1900, this is clearly a different man than the one photographed decades earlier. Alaska State Library, Wickersham State Historic Site (p27704-95).

Judge Wickersham's First Case

In 1900, President McKinley appointed James Wickersham to head Alaska's Third Judicial District, which covered 300,000 square miles between the Alaska Range and the Brooks Range. Wickersham's office was in Eagle where he had a courthouse built and served as the highest ranking federal employee in the region. There the judge met with Chief Charley about a case of canine larceny committed by Eagle Jack, a resident of Eagle Village. Some quick action and friendly conversation prevented the dispute from descending into bloodshed. Wickersham refers to the Tena, or Dena, Indians, another name for the Athabascan people:

Old Yukon: Tales, Trials, Trails (1938)

Chief Charley, head of the Charley river band of Tena Indians, was the first litigant to appeal to the new court officials for justice. He came up the Yukon in a birch bark canoe which he had paddled a hundred miles against the current, escorted by a dozen other fighting men of his band, each with his own birch bark canoe, with determination to get justice if he had to get it by force. When this hostile fleet landed at Eagle some one directed him to the clerk of the court, who, having heard his story, sent him to interview the marshal. That officer after listening to his statement advised him to consult the prosecuting attorney and this official side-stepped by directing him to consult the judge. To each of these officials the old chief had told the same straight story, but none of them did anything about it. So the big Indian came striding up to my cabin and knocked on the door.

On being admitted and given a seat he looked me straight in the eyes with a level and steady gaze which betokened both honesty and courage and told me what he had come for. He introduced himself by saying, "Me Chief Charley from Charley river, You big chief here?" Yes, I told him, I was; whereupon he added; "Any odder chief big as you?" No, I modestly admitted. I was the biggest chief in Eagle, all the time wondering what important tribal matter he was bringing to me. He seemed anxious to have my status as the big chief settled, and later I learned that each of the other officials had at first admitted he was the biggest chief in Eagle, but failed to qualify when Charley stated his business. Looking me in the face again he repeated, "No odder bigger chief but you in Eagle?"

Upon my solemn assurance that there was none, he seemed satisfied on that particular point. All this time the old chief sat as straight as a ramrod on the edge of the chair in front of me, with both his feet resting flat on the floor, gazing squarely into my eyes. Having concluded that I was the big chief he was looking for, he then stated his business; "All light, you big chief, I tell you. Eagle Jack steal my dog at Nation river. He got my dog at Eagle village, one mile. You big chief you get my dog; bring him me. If you not get my dog I get my dog. Maybe some Indian get hurt. Maybe you get my dog?"

I had studied the old chief as carefully as he had studied me, and by this time I would have approved his bond for any reasonable amount, for his fearlessness, simple speech, and apparent honesty had won my confidence. There was no doubt in my mind of the truth of his statement and reaching for my hat I said, "Come with me, Charley." He walked uprightly by my side as one big chief should walk with another down to the Alaska Commercial Company store. "Wait here, Charley, and we will get your dog." He sat on the store step while search was made for a deputy marshal who knew just enough law to obey without question any order a superior officer might give him. Charley described the dog and the Indian who had stolen it, whereupon the deputy was instructed to carry a folded paper in his hand to the Eagle village, about a mile upstream from the town, find the dog and the thief, take the dog, bring him to the store and deliver him to the chief.

In the meantime I sat on the store step by the side of the Chief and talked with him about fishing and building a school house for Indian children. Within an hour the deputy brought in the dog and delivered it to the owner, who returned to his canoe leading the animal with the full assurance that he had found the biggest chief in Eagle. Whatever may be said about the want of regularity in this action it prevented an unhappy quarrel and probably a fight between the Eagle and the Charley river people, and possibly the death of Jack, for we learned that each Charley river Indian had his gun hidden in his canoe, and the old chief was in a fighting mood.

[Quoting his diary, Wickersham described a later journey down the Yukon River with a stop at Charley's Village. He refers to "Charley river," but he likely means Charley Creek, or Kandik River. Ben Downing was a well-known dog sledding mail carrier with a contract for the route between Dawson and Circle.]

February 13, 1901

It was 45° below zero this morning when we left Nation, but within an hour after it had gone down to 50. It was 35° below at noon on the river trail and 40° below when we came into the Charley river Indian roadhouse tonight. There was no sign of a trail during the forenoon and one of us had to go ahead of the dogs and snowshoe to get the team along—when we happily met the up-bound mail team at our noon camp. The forenoon trails made a good afternoon trail for each of us, and we traveled much faster in consequence. Traveled 34 miles today, according to Ben Downing's mail route distance table. Gave 14 little Indian children, less than ten years of age, ten cents each and made them happy. Chief Charley was glad to see me, for he remembered that I was the just judge who recovered his stolen dog.

Archeology at Charley's Village

In 1992, a crew of National Park Service archeologists visited an area near the mouth of the Kandik River rumored to be Charley's Village. Early on they found a few cabin logs that were notched with a chain saw—this was not what they were looking for. Richard Bland, the team member who later wrote about the trip, explained that he soon made an unexpected discovery:

In the process of the survey an unintentional slide down the Yukon River bank revealed to that surveyor [Bland] historic materials buried about 30 centimeters below the top of the bank. . . . After discovery and examination of this area it was found to contain artifacts of wood, metal, glass, ceramics, and bone. Thus, we are certain that we literally fell into Charley Village.

The historical material was emerging from a flat alluvial terrace about 15 feet high that the Yukon River was eroding over time. The cutbank also contained artifacts, as well as the beach below. For Bland and his colleagues, these included thin ceramic shards, caribou and moose bones, a large piece of slate, and metal items like one jaw of a steel trap, machine bolts, nails, a butter knife, and spent rifle cartridges.

Archeologists have returned to the site several times since, and each time, they find the terrain has changed. In winter, thick ice covers the river, and each spring, floodwaters and icebergs carve into the silty terrace and even topple trees at the river's edge. As a result, the place where Charley's Village sat is disappearing, and what remains today is a narrow strip of land that was the villagers' backyard. Even so, artifacts continue to reveal themselves and offer new clues to the lives of Charley's Village residents.

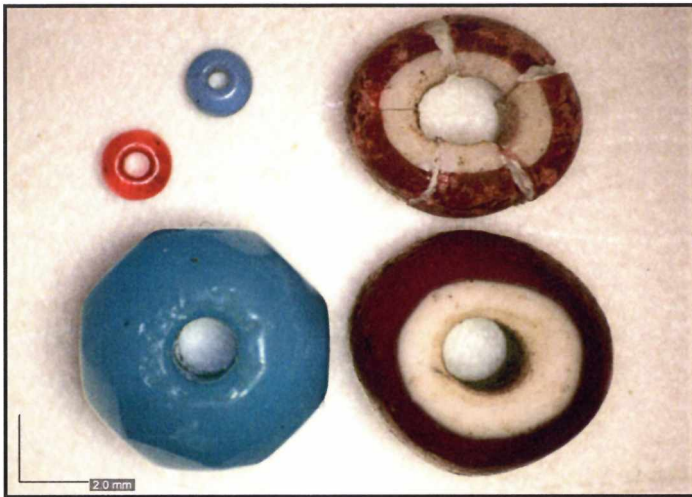
For example, archeologists found pieces of a pocket watch, a lead weight with a hole likely used on a fishing net, the head of a sledgehammer, a brace and bit (missing the bit) for drilling holes in wood, and a variety of food cans, broken glass, and large mammal bones, some of which were smashed to get at the marrow inside. Some of the more interesting discoveries included a worked caribou scapula that would have been used to scrape moose hides and a small number of trade beads that served the Han as decoration on clothing. These objects reveal a community adopting Western tools and commercial goods while also pursuing a traditional way of life.

In 1993, when Richard Bland presented his findings to the Alaska Anthropology Association, he made several observations. He noted the close relationship between families at Charley's Village and those at Eagle Village, three miles upstream from Eagle, Alaska. And, he pointed out that the Han had always been "relatively mobile" and relocated for hunting, trapping, and trade. "The point is," wrote Bland, "there is no inherent reason why Charley Village would necessarily occupy the same location over time. And, perhaps to the Han, Charley Village was the group of people who followed Chief Charley, and not a stationary collection of structures." This would help to explain conflicting accounts of the village's location, and it suggests that other settlement sites might be discovered in the future.



Pin flags on the beach at Charley's Village indicate where artifacts were found. The markers were later removed and the objects left in place. Whitney McLaren, NPS.

Artifacts Tell a Story



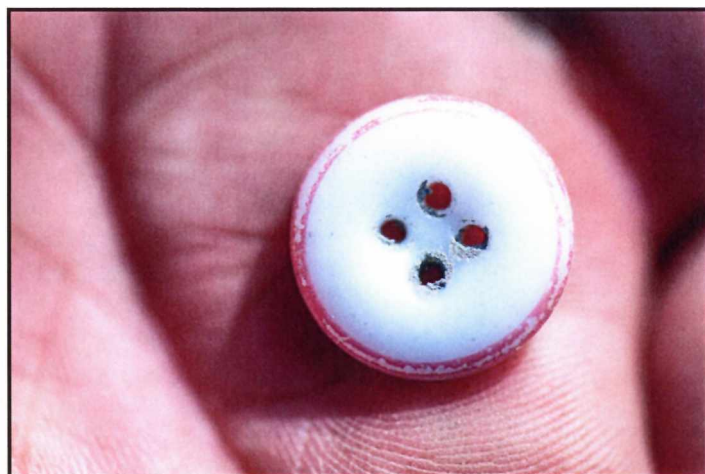
Glass trade beads and a rusty mill file.



The head of a claw hammer and a fragment of bottle glass.



A button with rose accent and a caribou mandible.



Conclusion

During its heyday, Charley's Village served as a home and a base camp from which to launch hunting parties or trading expeditions. Charley's band, and the Han people as a rule, were highly mobile, traveling seasonally, using the Yukon River as a highway, but also relocating when opportunities arose. This versatility was part of their survival strategy. Charley's people also had family connections in Eagle Village (what was known earlier as Johnny's Village and David's Village) and among the Tr'ondek near the Klondike River in Canada.

Around the turn of the century, Charley's band moved across the U.S.-Canada boundary to the Anglican mission at Fortymile established there in 1887 by Bishop William Bompas. An observer writing for Skagway's *Daily Morning Alaskan* on September 21, 1901, explained:

Several Indians from Eagle City, including the paramount chief, Charlie, have left American territory and have joined their brethren here at Buxton Mission, on the island, off north end of town [Fortymile]. They say they have better school and church privileges here so have immigrated.

It is not clear how many of Charley's people lived at Buxton Mission or for how long, but Fortymile would have been a lively place for trade and the mission was one of the only options for educating their children. At the mission, they would have mingled with other Han as well as Gwich'in, Tutchone, and Tagish people.

At least some members of Chief Charley's band returned to Charley's Village because a census taker visiting in 1909 interviewed 25 residents. At the top of the census form was a head-of-household named Charley (age 49), his wife Sarah (39), his son Adolphus (25), and Adolphus's wife Victoria (23). It seems likely that this Charley is Chief Charley's son and that he adopted the leadership role after his father died. Interviews with Eagle Village locals Elisha Lyman and Louise Paul, as well as Episcopal Church burial records, indicate that "Old Charley" died of tuberculosis on September 1, 1907, at age seventy-five.

In 1913, two representatives of the Indian Rights Association—Matthew Sniffen and Thomas Carrington—were boating down the Yukon River, stopping at towns and villages, fish camps and wood stations, gathering information about Alaska Natives and their relations with non-Natives. They reported that Charley's Village had recently been demolished during a particularly severe breakup:

Charlie's village was located about 90 miles below Eagle. When the ice broke up last spring the river rose higher than at any time on record and overflowed the high banks. Huge boulders of ice were swept in various directions and did a great amount of damage. The flood completely destroyed Charlie's village, where 40 Indians made their homes, and they have since scattered up and down the river.

With their village destroyed, most families would have gone to Eagle Village, where family ties were strongest, but others may have resettled in Circle or in the Han settlement of Moosehide near Klondike River.

The story of Charley's Village provides us with a lesson on the ephemeral past and the challenges of filling gaps in our understanding. Even though Chief Charley met with prominent visitors and traveled widely with his band, the record of those events is fragmentary and the visitors' accounts were scattered hither and yon. What Chief Charley looked like and even the location of the village were for many years unknown. But, by examining small pieces of evidence—the first-person accounts, newspaper articles, government reports, photographs, and artifacts—we are able to see more clearly what was hazy and appreciate what was once thought lost.



Wolf tracks on the beach at Charley's Village. There were also prints from black bear, moose, marten, and geese in the mud. Chris Allan, NPS.

Sources

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For the journals of Robert McDonald, see Archives of the Ecclesiastical Province of Rupert's Land (Alaska Microfilm 3848) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks's Elmer E. Rasmuson Library. The journals of Kenneth McDonald can be found in "Letters and Papers of the Church Missionary Society, London, 1874" with microfilm at Rupert's Land Provincial Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

For more about topics raised in this booklet or if you want to read eyewitness accounts, see:

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This booklet is part of a series highlighting historical topics related to Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve and its surroundings. The other titles are:

The American Side of the Line: Eagle City's Origins as an Alaskan Gold Rush Town as Seen in Newspapers and Letters, 1897-1899

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