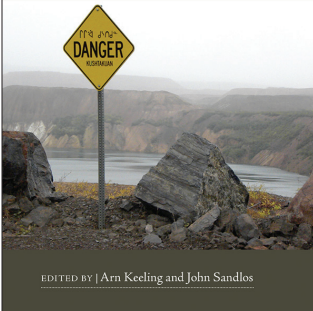




## Mining and Communities in Northern Canada

*History, Politics, and Memory*



EDITED BY | Arn Keeling and John Sandlos

## MINING AND COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN CANADA: HISTORY, POLITICS, AND MEMORY

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## “It’s Just Natural”: First Nation Family History and the Keno Hill Silver Mine

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*Alexandra Winton and Joella Hogan*

For Yukon First Nation people, family history is intertwined with the history of the land. As the late Yukon First Nation elder Kitty Smith once told anthropologist Julie Cruikshank, “I belong to Yukon. I’m born here. I branch here. My grandpa’s country, here. My grandma’s. That’s why I stay here . . . My roots grow in jackpine roots.”<sup>1</sup> This sentiment holds true for the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, or Big River People,<sup>2</sup> of the central Yukon, even though their relationships to the land and to each other have been transformed by over one hundred years of silver mining within their traditional territory.

In this chapter, we share the story of Herman Melancon, a member of the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun and an underground miner. Using indigenous methodologies, historical research, and oral history generously shared by Herman, we parallel Herman’s personal and family history with that of the Keno Hill mine, offering an intimate view into the

complexity of relationships between northern First Nation peoples and industrial development.

Herman's family connection with the mine dates back to before he was born, to the mine's origins in the early twentieth century. At the heart of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun traditional territory is the McQuesten River watershed, a region rich in fish and wildlife that sustained the Northern Tutchone-speaking people on their seasonal round throughout this rugged landscape.<sup>3</sup> It was near the headwaters of the McQuesten that high-grade galena, or silver ore, was discovered by Jacob A. Davidson in 1903. Hoping for gold, Davidson abandoned the find, unaware that he had stumbled upon one of the largest and richest silver deposits in the world, soon to be known as the Keno Hill mining district. Two years later and approximately one hundred kilometres downstream from Davidson's discovery, Dave Hager was born in McQuesten Village, a seasonal Na-Cho Nyäk Dun settlement at the mouth of the McQuesten River. Although it was not immediately apparent, Davidson's discovery would bring great changes for Hager, his family, and for the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun.

By virtue of their location, the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun had managed to escape some of the most severe impacts of the Klondike gold rush of 1898—the onslaught of thousands of gold seekers, the devastation of local wildlife populations, and the destruction of traditional hunting and fishing lands (to name a few). As the Klondike gold rush began to wane, however, increasing numbers of prospectors flooded into Na-Cho Nyäk Dun territory in search of the next bonanza.<sup>4</sup> There was gold in the area, but as more silver discoveries were made, many with ore averaging 300 ounces of silver to the ton, most prospectors abandoned their placer gold claims in search of silver. The first major staking rush did not occur until the 1920s, but when it did, development came quickly to the area. Mining techniques rapidly progressed from individual miners collecting float, or surface chunks of galena, to mechanized underground mining with corporate financing from the likes of the Guggenheim brothers. As the mines proliferated below ground, so too did the new communities above: the wild boom town of Keno City sprang up at the foot of silver-rich Sourdough, Galena, and Keno hills; while mining camps like Calumet, Wernecke, Elsa, and Bellekeno clung to the tops of these wind-swept peaks. Down in the valley, the more sedate community of Mayo

developed into a regional centre on the banks of the Stewart River, where the silver-lead-zinc ore could be shipped out on sternwheelers (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally, Na-Cho Nyäk Dun people had travelled throughout this area in order to take advantage of seasonal harvests and lessen their impact on the land. In the summer months, Na-Cho Nyäk Dun families gathered on the banks of the Stewart and McQuesten Rivers to fish for chinook and chum salmon; in the fall, they moved into the mountains to hunt gophers and caribou, pick berries, and gather medicinal plants; and in winter, they returned to the lowlands to hunt for moose and ice-fish in the region's many lakes.<sup>6</sup> As the Keno Hill mining district developed, the expanding network of mines, roads, and communities bisected these traditional hunting and gathering grounds, contaminating water sources and ruining delicate plant and animal habitats. The Na-Cho Nyäk Dun were exposed to new diseases, religions, and societal pressures transported by newcomers. In keeping with the colonial policies of the day, the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun were forcibly settled into a sedentary community two miles downriver from Mayo, now known as the Old Village, where, despite being subject to curfews and segregation, they managed to live a semi-traditional lifestyle for many years.<sup>7</sup> As Na-Cho Nyäk Dun elder Dave Moses described it, his people adapted their seasonal round and subsistence patterns in order to accommodate the newcomers and their needs:

After the boom, lots of people comin' to this place . . . Indian go get rifle to shoot moose and sell meat to Whiteman and make his living that way. When they find some rock in Keno, [First Nation] people move to Mayo and work on steamboat, cut wood, pile wood and sold wood on the barge . . . Pretty soon they use machine to grind the ore so it comes to a flour and put it in a sack . . . I been around Keno Hill when they first start. When I was a little boy people worked around Keno, Elsa, and hauled ore with horse team and caterpillar in the wintertime . . . Later they put in the highway and we haul ore back from Keno, back and forth with truck.<sup>8</sup>

As Moses explained, many First Nation people joined in the new economy, cutting wood for the steamships, selling meat, fish, and berries to

the miners, and eventually, working in the mines themselves. For the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, the way that they related to their environment began to change, as they adapted their hunting and harvesting patterns to help feed and shelter these newcomers and as they became involved in the extraction industry that quickly transformed their land.

By the late 1940s, most of the silver claims in the area had been consolidated by United Keno Hill Mines Ltd. (UKHM) and large-scale industrial mining had taken hold in the Keno region. UKHM operated up to nine different mines in the Keno Hill district, most of which consisted of a series of deep underground shafts, where miners worked in tandem, blasting out veins of ore to be hauled away by narrow-gauge railways. All ore was then transported by truck or aerial tramway to the company town of Elsa, the hub of the district, where a 250-ton capacity mill would separate out silver, lead, and zinc concentrates to be shipped to a smelter in Trail, British Columbia.

The expanding UKHM operations required massive amounts of electricity, which was provided by the Mayo hydro dam, built by the Yukon government in 1952 at the urging of UKHM. This dam drastically changed the hydrology of the Mayo River and raised the level of Mayo Lake by six metres. Transmission lines and roads were completed between Keno, Mayo, and Whitehorse, shifting the mode of transportation away from the rivers and damaging moose and caribou habitats.<sup>9</sup> Also in the 1950s, the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun were asked to relocate once again, this time back into the town of Mayo, where they were subject to discrimination, and many of their children were taken away to residential schools.

After the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, the Keno Hill district went into a slow decline. Aging technology and low silver prices prompted cutbacks, strikes, and eventually, the indefinite closure of the mines in 1989. Most UKHM employees left the Yukon, Elsa was abandoned, and there was virtually no reclamation of the mine sites. As life in the region slowed, many Na-Cho Nyäk Dun people returned to traditional pursuits, such as hunting and trapping, and the environmental destruction left by the mining industry became more apparent.

Throughout this cycle of boom and bust, Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizens became adept at operating in two new worlds: both the dark, cavernous world of the underground mines and the capital-based world of

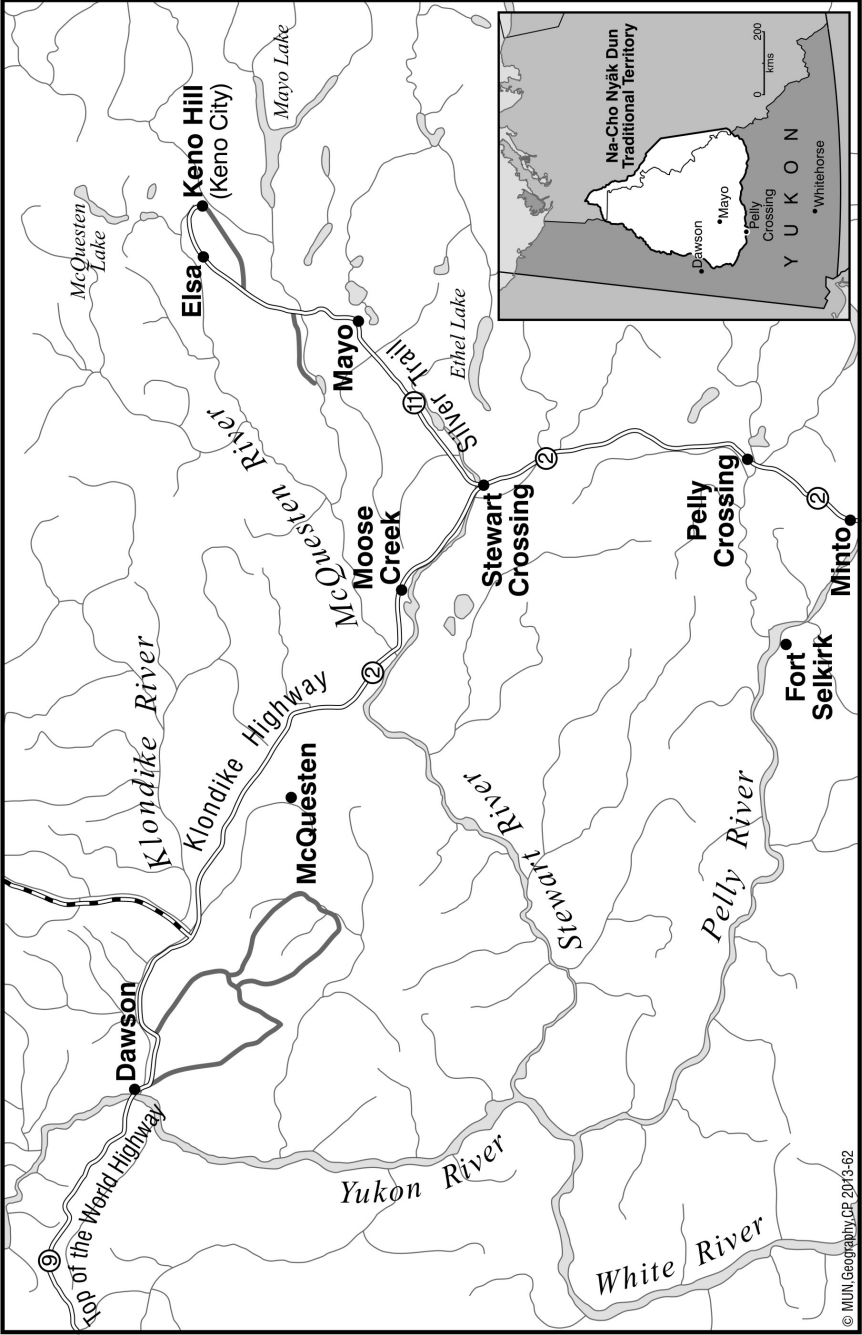


FIGURE 1: The Keno Hill, Yukon, mining district. Map by Charlie Conway.



FIGURE 2: Herman Melancon. Photo by Evan Rensch.

the newcomers who built them. The Na-Cho Nyäk Dun weathered environmental, economic, and social changes, while struggling to maintain their traditions, language, and culture. Perhaps the most severe impact was the newcomers themselves—an influx of hundreds of single Euro-Canadian men, who streamed into the region to work at the mines. Many of the newcomers entered into relationships with local Na-Cho Nyäk Dun women, and, whether they were considered legitimate or not, these relationships forever altered the cultural makeup of the region.

This complex reality is embodied by Dave Hager’s grandson, Herman Melancon—the son of Dave’s daughter Irene and Maurice Melancon, a non-First Nation miner from Quebec. At age fifty, Herman Melancon has spent more than half his life underground working as a miner. When asked to introduce himself, Herman quickly acknowledges his mining background:

I’m Herman Melancon, from Mayo. I lived here most of my life, but I also lived in Tungsten, Northwest Territories for a couple



years, it's another mining town. It's running right now, that mine, and I been mining for 26 years. I first started in the Keno Hill Mine . . . I learned just from, probably from, coming from my Dad being a miner, see? It's just natural. I grew up around it, eh?

Just as Kitty Smith likened herself to the Jack pine—"I branch here," she said, her family and her history growing and diverging like the southern Yukon tree<sup>10</sup>—Herman Melancon's family grew and expanded with the development of the Keno Hill silver mine. Like the roots of a tree seeking water, the shafts, caverns, and tunnels of the mines have spread underground, following the silver-rich mineral veins. So too have Herman's family and the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun culture grown, so that both are now irrevocably intertwined with the history of the mine. Knit together in a complex pattern of mutual involvement and unequal impacts, the story of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun and the Keno Hill mine is illustrative of how Aboriginal people across Northern Canada have been both affected by and involved in one of the most destructive forms of industrial development in their traditional lands. Our goal as researchers, authors, and community members is to share Herman's version of this story, which may help us to understand this complex relationship.

In order to help tell this story, we employ anthropological, oral history, and indigenous methodologies. The work of anthropologist Julie Cruikshank has influenced our approach to oral history and ethnography. Cruikshank's early work with Yukon First Nation women helped to set a new standard for oral history. By using long, uninterrupted interview excerpts, Cruikshank allowed, as much as possible, for stories to be told by the tellers themselves.<sup>11</sup> We make use of this style of storytelling here.

Indigenous academics such as Shawn Wilson, Lianne Leddy, and Margaret Kovach have also informed our approach to research.<sup>12</sup> As Wilson suggests, "We cannot remove ourselves from the world in order to examine it."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this would be difficult for us, as we both live in or very near to the communities in which we have conducted research. Indigenous methodology also stresses the need for researchers to locate themselves during and within their research;<sup>14</sup> therefore, we will take a moment to do so now. Alexandra met Herman while conducting research



for her master's degree. In the summer of 2011, Alexandra and a young Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizen, Kaylie-Ann Hummel, interviewed Herman about his experiences with the Keno Hill mine. Joella (herself a Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizen) met Herman through his wife Bobbie-Lee. Joella cannot remember exactly when she met him, as Herman has always been there, in the background, working in his garage or as the main character in Bobbie-Lee's stories. In the winter of 2013, Joella and Bobbie-Lee conducted another interview with Herman for this book chapter.

We have also been influenced by our own life experiences, storytelling cultures, and family histories, which counsel us to listen well, give credit to storytellers, and ask for permission before sharing their stories. Therefore, we have attempted to work as collaboratively as possible with Herman as we conducted research for and wrote this contribution. We are very much aware that our personalities and backgrounds have had an impact on our relationship with Herman and the way in which we portray his story; as such, we have included our own questions and responses in Herman's interview excerpts. We have used initials (HM, AW, JH, KH) to indicate who is speaking in these excerpts. As much as possible, we hope to allow Herman to tell his own story, fostering a relationship with the reader, who may then see the connections between Herman's community and his or her own.

According to Cruikshank, such narrative connections are vital to understanding change in modern First Nation communities:

Yukon storytellers of First Nation ancestry frequently demonstrate ability to build connections where rifts might otherwise appear. They use narratives to dismantle boundaries rather than erect them . . . narrative storytelling can construct meaningful bridges in disruptive situations.<sup>15</sup>

In a complex era of mineral redevelopment, coupled with new Aboriginal self-government, we believe that Herman's story can serve as one such bridge. By sharing his narrative, we hope to create a broader understanding of the modern relationship between the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, their land, and the processes that have affected it. Na-Cho Nyäk Dun are not alone in this situation; indeed many northern Aboriginal people are now faced with the difficulties of engaging in a modern economy,



FIGURE 3: Dave Hager standing on the sternwheeler “Keno” ca. 1930s. Yukon Archives/Dave Hager fonds/#8875.

while balancing new self-government responsibilities and struggling to preserve traditional ways of being. We hope that by sharing this story, we will shed light on the complexities of this modern era for northern Aboriginal people.

## DOCUMENTING CHANGE

On September 27, 1905, Dave Hager was born to Jenny Jimmy at McQuesten Village. Known his entire life as “Big Dave,” Hager was an amateur photographer, who both took part in and recorded a time of great change for the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. His photographs can be found in the homes of his children as well as in the Yukon Archives. Dave documented his life and those around him through the lens of his camera; photographs of him show a young man in the early days of mining, when he was working on the steamboats (Fig. 6). These wooden paddlewheelers

pushed barges loaded with ore from the Keno mines down the Stewart River toward Whitehorse. Ore would then be shipped on the White Pass Railway to the port of Skagway, Alaska, and then out to a smelter in Southern Canada. The Stewart and Yukon Rivers were lined with wood camps, where many First Nation men worked, providing the thousands of cords of wood needed to fuel the boats. Big Dave worked as a deckhand, loading the wood from shore onto the boats. Later, when the highways replaced the steamships, Hager worked for the Yukon territorial government, conducting highway maintenance between Mayo and Whitehorse.<sup>16</sup>

Dave, like many Na-Cho Nyäk Dun men, engaged in the new economy but did not catch gold—or in this case, silver—fever. He managed to keep a foot in both worlds by maintaining traditional pursuits, such as hunting, trapping, and raising his family on the land as much as possible. An anecdotal account, which appears in *Hills of Silver*, the only book dedicated to the Keno Hill silver mine, reveals Dave's attitude toward mining. After watching a crew of miners struggle for three days to move a large piece of mining equipment just one thousand feet, Dave, who was repairing a nearby bridge, is purported to have remarked, "those white men will do anything for money."<sup>17</sup>

In 1929, Big Dave married Alice Louise, a First Nation woman from Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories. Together, Dave and Alice had six daughters: Martha, Rosie, Jenny, Irene, Laura, and Mary, all of whom were raised in the Mayo area. The Hager girls would all marry non-First Nation miners, or men involved with Keno Hill in some way. As Herman's wife Bobbie-Lee said, "they were all attracted to miners." One of these daughters, Irene, met and married Maurice Melancon, originally from Quebec. From a mining family himself, Maurice came north to work as an underground miner for UKHM. While Maurice was transplanted to the Mayo area, like many others, he gained acceptance in the community and knowledge of the land from his First Nation wife and her family. The skills to operate in both worlds were then passed on to their son Herman, who learned to hunt and trap from his grandfather and learned about the mining industry from his father.<sup>18</sup>

For a brief time, Maurice worked at another mine, called Tungsten, located in the southern Yukon. Tragically, Maurice was killed in a car

accident while driving to work on the Tungsten road. Herman recalled the accident:

He was driving to work in Tungsten, after he got called back there to go to work. And he was driving back there and there was only about, I don't know, bad pass there and he went over the bank. He drove right from Mayo too, that day, it was too far . . . I was nineteen. I went mining after he died, right after.

Born to a miner, Herman became a miner himself at the age of twenty. While Herman is definitely the miner in the family, his brothers have all been involved with mining either directly or in the support industries. When asked why he continues to mine, despite the dangers of underground work, Herman replied: "Well, it's part of me, it's in my blood. My Dad, probably to, in some way, make him proud a' me. And then, plus for the money, I like the money."

Herman is just one of the many Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizens in the modern community of Mayo who are of mixed ancestry, due to the influx of young, Euro-Canadian men who came to work in the mines. These men came alone, and many of them married local Na-Cho Nyäk Dun women. According to the enfranchisement policies of the 1876 Indian Act, these women and their children then lost their status as Indian people and the few privileges it provided. Years later, they fought to regain their status and take part in the land claim agreements that were occurring across the territory.<sup>19</sup> The women were also isolated from their families, as many of them went to live in Elsa with their new husbands. Of course, these struggles did not change who they were, or their ability to connect with their culture or the land. Debbie Buyck, a Na-Cho Nyäk Dun woman whose husband worked in Elsa, has said that even while living in a predominantly non-First Nation company town, built on the standards of southern Canadians, Na-Cho Nyäk Dun women managed to practise many of their traditional activities:

We did continue in our traditional ways outside of work, we went berry picking, hunting and fishing. We would go out on the weekend for drives or day hikes and would scout out old places our parents had taken us when we were kids . . . the mothers

and kids would go berry picking and fishing while our husbands worked in the mines, we took lots of picnics and some of the old First Nation ladies in camp taught us our traditional ways.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun women who lived up at Elsa talk of picking berries, hunting, and snaring small animals in the region, all attempts to maintain aspects of the seasonal harvest. The increased mining activity in the area and a more sedentary lifestyle affected the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun's ability to hunt, fish, and pursue traditional activities; however, these pursuits did not disappear entirely. Men and women both found ways to balance this new life with traditional ways of living, which were passed down to the generation currently in Mayo.

## “IT’S HARD TO IMAGINE THESE HILLS WITHOUT MINING”

For Herman's grandparents and parents, the mine was a new development, an oddity, which altered their environment, brought newcomers into the area, and drastically reshaped their relationship to the land and to others. For Herman, however, the mine has always been there, and his involvement with it began early. As Herman's father was a non-First Nation man who worked for UKHM, his family was able to live in the company town of Elsa, where UKHM provided housing, recreation facilities, free steam heat, and discounted groceries. While Herman has fond memories of a busy youth in the community, not everyone was able to live there. Most First Nation men who worked for the mine lived a few kilometres down the road, in a small cluster of houses called Millerville. It is unclear whether they were forced to live there rather than in Elsa, or whether they received the same benefits as residents of Elsa.<sup>21</sup> For a young man of mixed ancestry, like Herman, life in such a racially divided mining camp must have been somewhat difficult, but, like many people now living in Mayo, he is reluctant to speak about the segregated past.

When Herman's father got better-paying work at the Tungsten mine, the Melancon family moved back to Mayo. After his father's sudden death, Herman began working for UKHM himself. His first job was

digging trenches, but, being a tall, strong man, Herman quickly moved up to the position of trammer. As he explained, there was a natural progression in the training of an underground miner and a gradual increase in pay:

HM: Trammer . . . that's where you drive around little trains for the miners, go outside and dump it [the ore], then you come back and help them, have to help them . . . And then you go to miner helper, later, from that. And then eventually you can do your own minin'. But now, it's all trained differently, they're all trained on heavy equipments, eh? Right off the bat, usually.  
AW: So they didn't have those sorts of training programs when you were young?

HM: No, you learn different . . . I went underground, they get you diggin' ditch, eh? And they start you off from the bottom.

Herman has worked as a miner ever since, and now, as he said, "I run everything underground. Yeah, anything that moves, I run it, eh? I have to." While he is known throughout the community as a good miner, his career has not been without its dangers. When Herman was twenty-seven, he was in a horrific accident that occurred when a co-worker, drilling into the rock face beside him, accidentally hit a hole pre-loaded with dynamite. Joella asked Herman about the incident:

JH: Do you want to tell me the story about how your arm got blew up?

HM: . . . Well, we were drillin', I was in Bellekeno . . . I was workin' three weeks by myself . . . And then they hired young guy, [name omitted], used to live in Elsa. And the night shift crew, they bootlegged the face, so bootleg is like a socket of holes that they built, you know, couple feet deep, or a foot deep, whatever and then the shift boss spray paint them all blue, fluorescent blue, so you could see them, eh? . . . it's the law to drill away from them, six inches minimum, away from all those holes. Because if there's power still to light it, you can't see inside, it's frozen eh, the holes, all crushed. . . . So I was just pulling that drill down off

the backhoe on the left side, I only had three holes left to go and then it went off . . . just when my arm was in the air, I guess. And it blew me back or wherever, by the time I woke up I was probably about thirty feet from the face, landed about thirty feet away. Banged my arm. I could see something happened, 'cause I was laying on the ground and it was all quiet, you couldn't hear nothing. And then I could hear [Herman's co-worker] moaning away, way up at the face there. But I was lookin' around for my arm, 'cause I couldn't see it on my side. And something was hurting on my right side. And I was looking around, bending over, look around on the ground for my arm, 'cause I thought it was blown off, like that bending over and then all of a sudden, my arm . . . come flying, fell off the back of my neck and come, was hanging there. Then I was happy, 'cause it was still there. But I couldn't do nothing, I had to hold it up, it was broken, broken right off, eh? The bone was busted right off.

Fortunately, both men survived the explosion, and, after just two months off work, receiving workers compensation, Herman went back underground. "I had to," he said, "'cause workers comp bother me. . . . I still got pins in here, pins there and screws. . . I was scared for a while, to work underground, but it actually was a good therapy. . . . It helped me become stronger, after a year or two it didn't bother me no more."

This accident and others have left physical imprints on Herman's body. After so many years of working with loud, heavy machinery in a poorly ventilated, underground environment, his hearing is diminished, his lungs are damaged, and he bears the scars from potentially deadly accidents. These corporeal impacts are easy for Herman to discuss. Intangible impacts on his community and his culture are more difficult to express. While Herman is quick to acknowledge the history of the mine, he struggles to articulate how it may have affected his ancestors:

KH: How do you feel about the mining history in the area?

HM: I uh, there's a lot of history there. I think it goes back right to 1900's, so there's still silver up there. There's still silver



there for a while. And there is a lot of history there, you can just tell by that old museum in Keno, eh? Just by going through there . . .

AW: And how do you think that mining history has affected the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation?

HM: I'm not sure how it affected. . . I know they're getting more um, native people involved in mining, with their training, eh?

Instead of discussing the past impacts of the mine, Herman speaks about the future, pointing out that there are more First Nation people working within the mining industry. Perhaps this is because Herman has never known the area without mining—as Joella says, “for this current generation [of which she and Herman are a part] . . . it is hard to imagine these hills without mining.” The history of the mine and Herman’s family story are so intertwined, it is impossible to separate one from the other in order to examine it.

Although Herman’s family history has revolved around the mine, mining is just his work, and there is much more to his life. Herman also learned how to hunt and trap from his grandfather, Dave Hager, and he still employs these skills, as he hunts for moose each fall and maintains a trapline near Mayo. Herman was happy to speak with us about this aspect of his life:

AW: . . . And what about trapping, what sort of animals do you trap?

HM: Usually marten and wolverine, link [lynx] usually. Usually the one that pay, eh? ‘Cause now it’s pretty well . . . pretty low right now.

AW: And where do you trap?

HM: I got a little line ten miles out of Mayo, it starts on the, it’s called the Kurtz River and the Ridge Trail. I have a little, I got a little trapping shack on it too.

Hunting and trapping are important activities that, along with mining, tie Herman to his traditional territory and keep him connected to the land. Hunting and trapping are also important skills that Herman was able to rely on to keep him afloat when the mining industry went into an inevitable decline.

## MINE CLOSURE AND SELF-GOVERNMENT

In January 1989, as many employees were returning from Christmas holidays, UKHM suddenly announced that, due to low mineral prices, the company was closing the mine indefinitely. All residents of Elsa were given two weeks to vacate the town, which was quickly abandoned. Most UKHM workers left Elsa immediately, finding work at other mines in Southern Canada, but about half of them remained in the Yukon, some moving to Mayo and a few others settling in Keno or the surrounding rural areas.<sup>22</sup> The mines were shuttered, with just a small crew of loyal employees left to treat run-off water from the mines and guard the buildings from vandals. Herman was not immediately affected by the mine closure, as he had already moved on to contract mining work and was able to support his young family, while supplementing his wages with trapping. Kaylie-Ann asked him about this time:

HM: 1989? When it shut down? I quit before it shut down. I worked there for six years and then I went to work for contractors, so I was already gone outta there. Like I say, I guess it shut down, everybody moved out, all to B.C., all the families moved right outta there. And they just had a skeleton crew there, eh? That's what I remember from the closure, how it shut down there.

Eventually, Herman also had to leave his home community to seek work in mines in the southern Yukon and British Columbia. Herman hinted at the difficulties of this lifestyle: "... you're always gone, eh?" When the mine shut, most Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizens moved into Mayo to be with their extended families, but this was a quiet time for the Mayo region. While there was some employment to be found with the territorial government and the Local Improvement District,<sup>23</sup> there was little other

work to sustain the population. However, long-awaited land claims and self-government processes were finally beginning to take shape.

When the mine was in its final years, Na-Cho Nyäk Dun elders and a team of land use technicians and negotiators were working on a monumental self-government and land claims agreement. Historically there were no treaties negotiated with Yukon First Nations. In order to address this, in 1973 the Yukon Native Brotherhood delivered a landmark document to Prime Minister Trudeau, *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow*, which was Canada's first comprehensive land claim.<sup>24</sup> This claim eventually developed into the Yukon Umbrella Final Agreement, a modern-day treaty under which the majority of Yukon First Nations negotiated individual land-claim and self-government agreements.<sup>25</sup> In 1993, after decades of negotiations, the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun became the first Yukon First Nation to sign its land-claim and self-government agreements with the federal and territorial governments.<sup>26</sup>

During the land claims process, blocks of land were selected in a large range of sizes throughout the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun traditional territory. These lands were selected for traditional pursuits, harvesting, protecting heritage sites, and future housing and development, as well as for economic development. Much of this land was selected with future generations in mind. Many young Na-Cho Nyäk Dun men were charged with surveying the lands, interviewing elders, and documenting these sites for land claims. Those who were involved with self-government had hope for a brighter future, while others were able to maintain a subsistence lifestyle by cutting wood, trapping, or working as hunting guides.

As Na-Cho Nyäk Dun people began the long process of reclaiming the land, both on paper and in person, they became more aware of the environmental degradation caused by years of mining. There had been very little reclamation or remediation work done at the mine sites; as a result the relics left from mining activity were a danger to wildlife, such as moose, which were found tangled in wire left over from the mine. People became cautious about hunting and fishing near the shuttered mines, and concerns were raised about the quality of water and the impacts on fish and wildlife.

Na-Cho Nyäk Dun began the slow process of self-government, taking over services formerly operated by the federal government,

such as administration of housing and health and social benefits. Self-government ushered in a new era for the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, who again have a measure of control over their traditional lands. The First Nation now owns approximately 4,700 square kilometres of settlement land, within a traditional territory spanning 162,465 square kilometres.<sup>27</sup> The First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun now must be consulted regarding development within that region. In order to ensure that their citizens benefit from future development, the First Nation created the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Development Corporation, a business arm of the government, which can enter into agreements with mining and exploration companies.<sup>28</sup> Now, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun must act as stewards of the environment and the economy, keeping an eye on the activities of new mining companies, while at the same time supporting work and training opportunities for its citizens.

## A NEW ERA OF MINING

Throughout these years, Elsa remained abandoned, Keno City shrank to approximately twenty residents, and Mayo experienced an economic downturn: with the need for services greatly diminished, the town fell to 800 residents, or half of its former population.<sup>29</sup> Tourism was regarded as an important economic alternative to mining, so the Yukon government and local tourism organizations marketed the Mayo area with a mining theme. The name “Silver Trail” was given to the Yukon Highway 11, which links Mayo, Elsa, and Keno with the Klondike Highway, and wilderness tourism was suggested as a complementary attraction to the region’s mining history.<sup>30</sup>

But in 2006, after sitting abandoned for nearly two decades, the Keno Hill mine site was purchased by Alexco Resource Corporation, a junior mining and reclamation company based in Vancouver. The Yukon government awarded Alexco a contract to remediate the mines and the Elsa townsite, while simultaneously allowing the company to conduct its own exploration work and assess the possibility of redeveloping the mine. In 2010, the Bellekeno Mine, one of United Keno Hill’s top producers, was

reopened by Alexco, and the first trucks of silver, lead, and zinc ore in over twenty years began to run through the Keno Hill region.

With a settled land claim and the implementation of self-government, the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Development Corporation was eager to create economic opportunities for its citizens and the region of Mayo and has done so by supporting the redevelopment of the Keno Hill mine. For Herman, this new relationship was inevitable for his First Nation, but it also creates a new form of responsibility:

AW: What do you think about Na-Cho Nyäk Dun being involved in the mine up there?

HM: Well, I guess they probably have to keep an eye on them, what they do up there. I dunno, make sure they keep the area clean and everything, and treat the water. I guess they gotta keep treating the water steady there, eh?

AW: So how do you feel about the First Nation being involved in the mining industry as a whole?

HM: Well, if they're, eventually they will have to, eh?

AW: Yeah?

HM: They'll have to uh, know about mining and have more people trained.

The mine redevelopment was not of immediate concern for Herman; however, he soon returned to work at Keno Hill:

KH: How did you feel when you heard that the mine was reopening?

HM: At the time I didn't mind, 'cause it was close to home. But I wasn't worried about it, 'cause I had a job somewhere else anyway, but then I got on with . . . I went to work for Alexco for a while . . . then I got on with the contractor, soon as they started mining, eh? Right away.

Even though twenty years had gone by, Herman found little difference between his work for UKHM and his work for Alexco; however, he easily draws contrasts between the communities, the old Elsa and that of the new Alexco operation. UKHM Elsa was a real town, with families and an air of permanency, whereas the new incarnation of Elsa is simply a work camp:

HM: Elsa, when it was a town site, when people, families lived there, it was more busy. Now it's more like a work-camp, eh, basically. It's pretty quiet up there now. Like, this is just a working camp, eh?

AW: And what's it like for you to be working around Elsa, now, a town that you sorta grew up in, that you spent some time in? When you see the old school and buildings like that, how does it feel?

HM: Well there's probably lots 'a memories in there, yeah, when you're a kid. I remember playing hockey there all the time and that. And it was a pretty busy little town, eh?

AW: Yeah. Do you miss it? Like, do you miss living there, or having that town around?

HM: I dunno, yeah, a little, in a way, but I just like quiet places, eh? Quiet towns, I don't like very big places. I could stay in a big place, but not very long. 'Cause see here, some days you still, you don't even have to lock your door.

For Herman, there was an emotional connection to the town of Elsa, but with eight young daughters to care for, Herman is less concerned with the changes in Elsa, an abandoned mining town, than with the possible changes in Mayo, where his family now lives:

AW: So how do you think the mine reopening there, how do you think it's affected the community of Mayo?

HM: It probably bring a little more money into the community, more than anything, and some jobs. Yeah. But the majority jobs always go to outside, eh?

AW: Why do you think that is?

HM: Um, they're more qualified.

Herman is one of the few experienced Na-Cho Nyäk Dun miners working at Keno Hill. As in the previous era of mining, most of the well-paid management and technical trades positions are awarded to people from outside the Yukon, who work on a fly-in, fly-out basis. Much like the UKHM era, the influx of young, predominantly male workers at the mine has created concerns about alcohol, drugs, and social changes in the community. However, it was just such an influx of young men that brought Herman's father to the Yukon and created a comparable situation for Herman's grandfather, Dave Hager. Both Herman and his grandfather Dave managed to balance traditional subsistence work while engaging in a modern economy, and both were living in a time of cultural and social change—for Dave it was an influx of newcomers and industrial development, while Herman has witnessed the revival of such development in a new era of Aboriginal self-government. Like his grandfather, Herman also has a large, primarily female family to look after—Herman has eight daughters, and Dave had six. Herman continues to drill away at the same mineral veins his father worked on, expanding the underground maze of tunnels and shafts, some of which are supported by timbers cut by his grandfather. But while his family history may be intrinsically linked to that of the mines, Herman appreciates the world above ground much more than the dark, damp mines below:

AW: . . . So what's it like working underground, like what are your days like there?

HM: If you keep busy, it go by fast. Yeah, I like that. Sometimes you get tired of the dark, I like to come out in the daytime when it's nice outside, I'll come all the way outside to eat lunch, yeah, like if it's real nice.



AW: Just to get some sunlight?

HM: Yeah, to come see some daylight, eh?

[Laughter]

HM: 'Cause you know, I don't wanna spend all day down there, like to come out at least once, eh? . . . So, you see a lot 'a dark, eh? Feel like a mushroom.

Herman also sees an important distinction between his work life and his home life. Mining may pay the bills, but most important for Herman is the rural, northern lifestyle, which he is able to maintain despite physically demanding shift work:

AW: . . . Well, when you're not working up there, what other sorts of activities do you do out on the land and in the area around here?

HM: Well, I like hunting. I used to trap and all that before, but prices are way too low, I don't bother anymore, in the winter.

AW: Where do you go hunting?

HM: Usually up towards Elsa, up that way. Up in that area, or up river.

AW: Is it for moose, mostly?

HM: Yeah. Sometime I go hunting for sheep too.

AW: Have you noticed any changes with the moose habitat or behavior, or anything around the mine sites?

HM: Yeah, there's less moose around. There's more activity, eh, with this mining going on.

AW: Right. So how does that affect your hunting?

HM: Well, usually people have to go further out, eh, for their moose.

Herman, a man who has spent more than half his life mining—who sustains his family and his traditional pursuits through mining—is still critical of such development. While he is not given to public speaking, his wife, Bobbie-Lee, has represented him at community meetings, speaking out about certain mineral development projects to which Herman is opposed, such as a proposed hardrock mine near Mayo:

HM: . . . But see they're gonna open that Victoria Gold too, and that's in huntin' country there, boy. Yeah, that's out McQuesten Flats there, and all that, that area.

AW: How do people feel about that one?

HM: I'm not sure. Me, myself, I don't care much for open pit mining, 'cause it makes a big hole, eh? And too, when they start using heap leach, eh?

AW: Right. So do you think that kind of mining, up at Keno Hill is better for the environment?

HM: In a way, eh? Yeah, because it's one hole in the side of the mountain, not compared to a open pit. Open pits are huge. When they, they can affect the area way more, yeah, so but they still, it still goes on all over, eh?

AW: Do you feel like you have a say? Like as a First Nation person in the area, like your First Nation has sort of a say in that kind of mining?

HM: Uh, yeah, yeah, they must have some kinda say, 'cause that's all Band land [First Nation settlement land] over there, on this side of it. But they usually go ahead anyway, eh?

Both dependent on the mining industry and critical of it, Herman personifies the complexity of the mining and development debate in the Yukon. In spite of the sometimes fierce rhetoric surrounding contemporary mineral development in the territory, few Yukoners are completely against or completely in favour of mining. Instead, there is a spectrum of what people view as acceptable. Herman, like all of us, is mired in the

modern, industrial world, which is still dependent on non-renewable resources, such as metals and fossil fuels. While Herman toils underground to uncover these metals—silver, lead, and zinc—many of us benefit from his work and in turn, partake in the industry.

## “LONG AS IT DOESN’T CHANGE THE YUKON TOO MUCH”

The United Keno Hill Mine has left its mark on the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun traditional territory. The largest environmental scars are hidden deep within the Wernecke Mountains, where there are hundreds of kilometres of hollowed-out mining shafts and, as people say, more timber below ground than above. The social and cultural effects of the mine, however, can still be seen, heard, and felt in the community of Mayo and among the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. For Herman Melancon, who has worked at the mine nearly his entire adult life, this work has not only shaped his family history, it will also leave a permanent, physical impact on his life. Indeed, with each scar and injury, the story of decades of underground mining is slowly being inscribed on Herman’s body. Near the end of our interview, Herman did confess that he was concerned about his health and would eventually like to stop working underground:

AW: Well, I think that’s pretty much all of our questions, do you have anything else you wanna add, or . . .?

HM: I’d probably like to quit, uh, stop from it, you know, stop mining eventually, try something else, maybe placer, maybe placer mining. ‘Cause sometimes all the diesel smoke underground, I get tired of it, coughing that black stuff up.

AW: Right. You’re worried about your health?

HM: Yeah, I’m starting to get worried about my lungs, actually. I start trying to wear mask more, you know? I wear mask more now, ‘cause some equipment, you know, you got lots a’ equipment moving underground and the ventilation is not good

enough then you, you get too smoky and breathe too much of that diesel fumes in, eh?

AW: Right, right. Do you notice any effects, any like physical effects yet, from working down there, or . . . ?

HM: . . . my hearing is less, eh? Percentage. It's still pretty good, but it's, as years go by it's gonna get less, eh?

Herman is critical of the environmental degradation caused by mining and of the physical impacts on his own body, but for him, mining is a part of his life. A career change would mean shifting from one form of mining (underground) to another (placer). Herman has been a miner since he was twenty years old, and while he is realistic about the boom and bust life cycle of the industry, he is confident there will always be another mine where he can find work:

AW: . . . So who do you think should regulate that [the mining industry]?

HM: Probably government, eh? Don't open it up too much. There's a lot a' nice country, eh, up in the Yukon. But I dunno how long the mining boom will last, eh? Maybe it'll last ten years.

AW: Do you think about that, like, what you'll do if the mine shuts down again?

HM: Keno Hill? I'd probably just go out, more out in B.C. again, eh? But there's another mine open, there's another one at Minto anyway, Minto too. There's how many mines going in the Yukon—one, two, three, eh? I think.

There may always be another mine at which Herman can work, but with each new mine, or redevelopment, there are social and environmental consequences to bear. One of the most significant social impacts of the Keno Hill redevelopment has been a polarization of opinions between people in the surrounding communities. For the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, differences in opinion about the mine have served to widen the gap between elders and the younger generation who, like Herman, grew up

with mining. For many elders, protection of the land is of the utmost importance, while for a younger generation, who are now running the First Nation government, economic development is also a high priority. Herman spoke about this gap:

AW: . . . Do you think there's a difference between the way elders in Mayo feel about the mining and the way younger people feel about mining?

HM: Yeah, there's probably a difference. Elders never like it very much, eh? . . . in the old days, elders didn't bother with mining very much. That's 'cause long time ago, Indian people, they used to find gold in the river and they just threw it back in there, didn't they?

AW: Yeah.

[Laughter]

HM: Didn't bother, but now, I'm not sure how elders feel about it now. But you see more younger people working at mines, now, eh? . . . Long as it doesn't change the Yukon too much, eh? The Yukon should be left the way it is, see. You uh, shouldn't overpopulate too much, here, shouldn't change very much, 'cause they'll just ruin it.

Herman demonstrates an important similarity between the opinions of elders and those of younger Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizens. While they may strive for economic development and recognize their historical connection and economic dependence on the Keno Hill mine, Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizens, old and young, value the land and feel that they belong to it. As Na-Cho Nyäk Dun elder Helen Buyck has asserted, "The land was their teacher, and the knowledge they have of it is far greater than most people can appreciate."<sup>31</sup> This land and the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun culture have been shaped by over one hundred years of underground mining, but those hundred years represent just a fraction of their story. While some of that history will remain hidden deep within the silver-laden mountains,

much of it will be told both through the stories and the bodies of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun themselves.

We have shared elements of Herman's story, in an attempt to bridge the burgeoning gaps between generations of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizens and between First Nation and non-First Nation Yukoners. However, as Julie Cruikshank points out, "that a culture is shared does not mean that all individual interpretations will be the same."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this is not a definitive representation of contemporary Na-Cho Nyäk Dun opinions or culture, it is simply our interpretation of Herman's story, which is one we find particularly poignant and illuminating. The very act of sharing stories such as Herman's may serve to create understanding between generations and, we hope, demonstrate the ability of narrative to unravel the complexity of modern relationships between northern indigenous peoples, industrial development, and the land that they share.

**AUTHORS' NOTE:** At the time of editing in 2013, Alexco Resource Corporation announced that, due to decreasing silver prices, the company would be laying off up to 25 per cent of its employees at the Keno Hill silver mine, with tentative plans to reopen in the early 2015.<sup>33</sup> Herman was laid off and has been exploring other work opportunities at mines down south. Unfortunately, fur prices have been too low for Herman to profitably work his traplines.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

- 1 Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 1.
- 2 This literal translation omits much of the meaning held within the name. Northern Tutchone elders speak of a much more nuanced definition, in which “Na-cho” translates to “our elders,” thus Na-Cho Nyäk Dun means “flowing from our elders,” demonstrating the direct connection between the words of the elders and the Stewart River, which has sustained the Northern Tutchone people.
- 3 Northern Tutchone is an Athabascan language, traditionally spoken by First Nation people of the central Yukon, whose descendants still identify as Northern Tutchone people. Although they are now divided into three separate communities and First Nations—Mayo (First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun), Pelly (Selkirk First Nation), and Carmacks (Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation), there are still many historical, cultural, and familial ties between the Northern Tutchone. Na-Cho Nyäk Dun was the name chosen by the Northern Tutchone people of the Mayo area for their government during the land claim and self-government process. Here, we use the term Na-Cho Nyäk Dun to represent the Northern Tutchone people living in the Mayo area, both historically and today.
- 4 Ken Coates, *Best Left as Indians: Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territory, 1840–1973* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991), 86–95; Lynette R. Bleiler, Christopher Robert Burn, and Mark O’Donoghue, *Heart of the Yukon: A Natural and Cultural History of the Mayo Area* (Mayo, YT: Village of Mayo, 2006), 99; Dominique Legros, “Oral History as History: Tutchone Athapaskan in the Period 1840–1920,” in *Occasional Papers in Yukon History* No. 3 (2) (Whitehorse, YT: Yukon Cultural Services Branch, 2007).
- 5 Lynette R. Bleiler and Linda E. T. MacDonald, *Gold and Galena: A History of the Mayo District, with Addendum* (Mayo, YT: Mayo Historical Society, 1999), 60–70.
- 6 Bleiler, Burn, and O’Donoghue, *Heart of the Yukon*, 86–89; Legros, “Oral History as History,” 244–308.
- 7 Yukon Archives, Mayo and Area 1/2, John Hawksley, *Report on Mayo Band of Indians* (Dawson City, YT: Department of Indian Affairs, 1916), 1–3; Bleiler, Burn, and O’Donoghue, *Heart of the Yukon*, 90–91.
- 8 Dave Moses, in *Heart of the Yukon*, 91.
- 9 Bleiler, Burn, and O’Donoghue, *Heart of the Yukon*, 119.
- 10 Quoted in Cruikshank, *Social Life of Stories*, 1.



- 11 See Julie Cruikshank, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).
- 12 Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Press, 2008); Lianne Leddy, "Interviewing Nookomis and Other Reflections: The Promise of Community Collaboration," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 30 (2010): 1–18; and Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies – Characteristics, Conversations, and Context* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- 13 Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 14.
- 14 Kathy Absolon and Cam Willet, "Putting Ourselves Forward: Location in Aboriginal Research," in *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-oppressive Approaches*, eds. Leslie Allison Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press/Women's Press, 2005), 97.
- 15 Cruikshank, *Social Life of Stories*, 3–4, 24.
- 16 Bleiler and MacDonald, *Gold and Galena*, 275.
- 17 Aaro E. Aho, *Hills of Silver: The Yukon's Mighty Keno Hill Mine* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2006), 58.
- 18 Much of this information came from personal conversations between Joella and local elders throughout 2012 and 2013.
- 19 Coates, *Best Left as Indians*, 83, 89, 239.
- 20 Bleiler, Burn, and O'Donoghue, *Heart of the Yukon*, 92.
- 21 We only learned about Millerville through oral history, as it is not mentioned in any of the written documents about the Keno Hill area.
- 22 Yukon Territory, *Silver Trail Tourism Development Plan* (Whitehorse, YT: Yukon Department of Tourism, 1989), 8.
- 23 This became the municipality of Mayo.
- 24 Coates, *Best Left as Indians*, 162, 231.
- 25 These agreements are collected on the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada website, accessed January 5, 2015: <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100030607/1100100030608>.
- 26 Bleiler, Burn, and O'Donoghue, *Heart of the Yukon*, 129.
- 27 First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, "History," Retrieved from <http://nndfn.com/history/>.
- 28 Bleiler, Burn, and O'Donoghue, *Heart of the Yukon*, 91.
- 29 Ibid., 122.
- 30 Yukon Territory, *Silver Trail Tourism*, 1.
- 31 Bleiler, Burn, and O'Donoghue, *Heart of the Yukon*, 87.

- 32 Cruikshank, *Social Life of Stories*, 43.
- 33 Alexco Resource Corporation, News Release, *Alexco Implements Cost Savings Measures* (Vancouver: Alexco, May 31, 2013), 1–2; “Alexco Wants to Head Back to Work at Keno Silver Mine,” CBC News, December 6, 2013, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/alexco-wants-to-head-back-to-work-at-keno-silver-mine-1.2453849>.