

Community Profile:

The Caribou Eaters



Albert Thorassie

Editor's note: This article is the first of a new series in Caribou News in Brief. Each issue, we will profile a different community located from around the caribou range.

Tadoule Lake is a community in northern Manitoba reachable by plane, snowmobile, and dogsled. Pronounced "Ta-doo-lee", derived from the Dene ts'euoli, translated as "floating ashes", the Tadoule Lake settlement is one of the most northern and isolated communities in Manitoba. The nearest

rail link is in Churchill, 250 miles to the east. The settlement is located by the Seal River, about 200 km south of the treeline, and centered within the winter range of the Qamanirjuaq caribou herd.

The people of Tadoule Lake are Chipewyan and are traditionally referred to as the Sayisi Dene, or the "People of the East." Originally known as the Duck Lake Band, anthropologists refer to the Dene people as the Edthen-eldili-dene ("Caribou eaters"). Their original homeland stretched west from the shores of Hudson Bay and occupied a vast territory that straddles what are now northern Manitoba, the southern Kivalliq region of Nunavut and southwest corner of the Northwest Territories.

The registered population of the Sayisi Dene First Nation as of March, 2014 was 789 with 317 members living on reserve and 472 members living off reserve. It is governed by Chief Peter Thorassie Jr. and three councillors.

Although the community is small, the pull is strong for the Dene people who grew up as part of the Tadoule settlement. Just ask Albert Thorassie, who has represented the communities of northern Manitoba on the BQCMB since 1991. After growing up in Churchill (see sidebar) he moved to Winnipeg in 1969 and later to Brandon to attend college. A summer visit to Tadoule to see his Mother in 1984 became permanent. "I didn't want to leave," he

In 1956, due to the influence of European trade, the entire Duck Lake community was relocated to the outskirts of Churchill, Manitoba. The transition to the urban environment was very difficult, and the Sayisi Dene spent over a decade living in tents and shanties on the outskirts of the city. Sadly, it is believed that as many as one third of the Sayisi Dene people lost their lives as a direct result of the relocation to Churchill and the abuse and poverty they suffered.

In 1969, some Duck Lake Dene began discussing the possibility of again becoming self-reliant and returning to the ancestral caribou-hunting and gathering lifestyle. In 1971, about 75 members of the Band returned on their own to Duck Lake. Later, they moved further north to set up a new community at Tadoule Lake, where they returned to their barren-ground caribou hunting life.

Today, the people of Tadoule Lake struggle to restore and maintain their traditional culture. Many of the elders with knowledge of the old ways have passed away and much of their knowledge has died with them. Although many young people are keen to observe a First Nations identity, there is often no basis in Sayisi traditions. Hopefully, in time, the Sayisi people will be able to build upon the foundations of their own traditions and values, and continue carrying them forward to future generations.

admits. At the time he could understand Dene, but couldn't speak it. "I sort of lost it for awhile. It was all here, and I understood it, but now I speak it, too," he says.

He was soon elected as a band councillor and served for 11 ½ years. Today, Thorassie is part of the Sayisi Dene who work at returning to their traditional winter hunting and trapping ways, by encouraging local youth to do the same. "We're trying to get the kids involved with traditional hunting and learning how to live like our ancestors did. We keep that up all the time," says Thorassie. "We are trying to work with these kids to try to do more than play games. You have to go out on the land, learn how to track, and live off the land like our ancestors did."

The hardest job, according to Thorassie, is trying to find people to coordinate community hunts. "We've been losing elders off and on and now the elders that we have left are very, very few that can tell us how they used to live."

Thankfully, community members like Thorassie step in and do their part, making sure the youth recognize the importance of traditional knowledge AND education. Thorassie has spear-headed youth projects about caribou and taken advantage of the BQCMB's 'On the Land' program that sponsors caribou hunts, poster contests and classroom studies across the range. He describes his reaction when youth hear about a caribou hunt: "They say 'can I come? can I come?'" And I say "do you go to school?" I explain that it's not fair for them to come if a kid that goes to school everyday stays home."

That leadership is why Thorassie, and others like him, are considered young elders, who will likely remain in Tadoule for many years. "It's the lifestyle that I just don't want to throw away...it's my own backyard. And when people say 'I have nothing to eat,' I shake my head and say "What's that? Caribou! Go and shoot it and clean it up and take it home."

"That's the stuff we want them to learn. We can't lose it."•

Sources:

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Photos courtesy Albert Thorassie



Community hunts and "On the Land" camps are some of the ways community members in Tadoule Lake are passing on traditional knowledge.