



REMEMBERING OUR RELATIONS: DĒNESUĹINÉ ORAL HISTORIES OF WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

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1944 k'e nánj denesų́łíné ʔená bets'į nųłtsa k'eyághe ts'én nílya

One of the most profound changes following the 1926 annex and the establishment of the Park permitting system was a membership transfer that took place in 1944, through which about half of the ancestors of ACFN were transferred to what is now MCFN. This chapter's Denesų́łíné title literally translates to “in 1944, some Denesų́łíné were placed in the Cree reserve.” This event is in some ways unique in the history of national parks in Canada. Through this transfer, thirty-six Dēnesų́łíné families who had been living in the Park—a total of 123 individuals—were transferred from the Chipewyan Band's treaty payroll list to the Cree Band's treaty payroll list “through the stroke of a pen,” as ACFN Elder Leslie Wiltzen put it. Most of the families who were transferred had resided and harvested at the Birch River and Peace Point settlements, which had been home to the Dene for hundreds of years—as Elder Frank Marcel called it, “their traditional land where they've homesteaded for many years.”¹ Oral histories suggest that a number of the evictions of Dene people from their homes in the Park occurred immediately after the membership transfer.

There is little evidence to be gleaned from the government records to reconstruct why or how the transfer occurred. The few extant archival records suggest the transfer took place quickly and quietly, without the knowledge or consent of most Dene residents. Indian Agent Jack Stewart's diary entries from June 1944 refer to a meeting in which an unspecified number of Dene leaders requested the transfer and Stewart approved their request: “Had a meeting of the Cree Band in office today. Talked over the election system and also the reserve they have asked for. Part of the Chipewyan band was also here, and they put in an application for a transfer to the Cree Band.”² Stewart updated the band lists, and the transfer was made official between June and December 1944. The 1946 treaty annuity paylists for the region listed the number of members who had transferred, and the 1949 Indian Census report

showed a total population reduction for the Chipewyan Band from 259 to 161 between 1944 and 1949.³ At the time of the transfer, the full population of the Fort Chipewyan Cree Band (now MCFN) and about half of the Chipewyan Band's population resided at Peace Point and Birch River/House Lake within the Park. In oral histories, Elders note several Dene family names that are now typically included on MCFN's list of family names, and the 1946 annuity payroll indicates the family names and total number of family members of those who were transferred: Adams, Baptiste, Beaulieu, Bouchier, Cheezie, Dene, Evans, Fontain, Freizie, Gladue, Nadary, Piche, Poitras, Ratfat, Sepp, Shortman, Simpson, Trippe de Roche, Tourangeau, Vermillion, Waquan, Watsharay, and William.⁴

McCormack argues that the establishment of the Registered Fur Management Area (RFMA) system, often referred to as traplines, outside Park boundaries in 1942, may have driven Dënesųhíné leaders within the Park to request the transfer.⁵ The punitive nature of the prevailing wildlife management system—especially its power to expel people from harvesting areas within the Park if they were perceived to be breaking rules—put people living within the Park at risk of hardship and hunger. Tensions between harvesters within and outside the Park rose after 1926, as permitting rules limited access to the Park and resources outside the Park grew scarce due to an influx of fur trappers from the south of the province during the Great Depression. With the RFMA system established, places where people could trap outside the Park were effectively unavailable to Park residents, including those who lost their permits and were expelled for any reason after 1942. Furthermore, those Dene and Cree families living in the Park in the 1940s had little hope of establishing a reserve within the Park to protect their rights (MCFN did not obtain reserve land at Peace Point until 1986), partly because officials claimed that those living in the Park already had special privileges that others did not and that they were adequately provided for: “the Park is a wonderful game reserve for them and they have good hunting and trapping privileges,” wrote one official in 1945.⁶ Because of these unique challenges, McCormack and Sandlos argue that Dene people living in the Park were forced to “throw in their lot” with the Cree Band and that leaders requested the transfer as an act of desperation to protect members within Park boundaries. McCormack suggests that, given that Cree and Dene people within the Park shared common interests and had longstanding peace treaties and kinship connections already in place, an alliance through a band transfer made sense.⁷

The oral histories shared below suggest more complicated dynamics were at play. Some Elders believe that the transfer was forced by the Parks administration and Indian Affairs and may have been a deliberate effort to further limit who could access the Park. Several also contend that only a small number Indigenous leaders knew about the transfer, but there was little to no consultation with those residents who were most affected by the transfer. Some Elders and members believe that the transfer was intended to remove Dene people altogether from their rights and territories in the Park by cutting off kinship connections between those Dene families who had access to the Park and those who did not. Many Dënesų́nė people within or outside the Park did not know the change had occurred, and to this day do not know how it happened. “There’s no documentation that shows that our Chiefs negotiated and allowed for that to happen, because they would never have done that,” Leslie Wiltzen stated. Chief Adam also notes: “people weren’t consulted about it whatsoever, because my granny said it just happened just like that . . . she wasn’t told of it, nobody was told of this. All they were told [was] that if you want to stay in a park, you become Cree band. If not, leave. That was her consultation.” Thus, as Elder Horace Adam explained, people were left with no choice but to transfer bands in order to maintain access to their harvesting areas within the Park: “They told them they could move or they become the Cree band. So most of them did become Cree band just to keep their land, their traplines. That’s what happened.”

Some members, like Leslie Wiltzen, believe the decision was in part intended to reduce Indian Affairs’ administrative labour by consolidating multiple communities with claims to the lands in the region. Ray Ladouceur’s oral history suggests the transfer was the result of administrative oversight and ignorance about the differences between the communities, because families within the Park were fluent in both languages and were often also closely connected by marriage: “They [the administrators] didn’t know that and because they [the Dene people in the Park] spoke Cree, I guess, ‘oh, they’re all Cree in Birch River,’ [so] that part of the country, that area they took for Crees. And Dene was out of there.” According to these oral histories, those who did not change their membership in 1944 were told they had to leave the Park and relocate to Big Point, Old Fort, Jackfish Lake, Point Brulé, or Poplar Point. Some families who were evicted had to move several times to maintain an adequate livelihood. Thus, Park policies of division and exclusion displacing Dene peoples from their lands and severing their family connections

became further entrenched. What may have seemed to be a minor decision, made with just “the stroke of a pen,” had profound and long-lasting effects on the community.

ACFN members’ family histories suggest that women often bore the brunt of the impacts of this transfer. Several oral histories shared for this book explain that Dene women who married outside of the Nation or married non-Status men—thereby losing their Status under the *Indian Act*—before the transfer took place were not permitted to return to their family homes and family members within the Park later in life. This was the case for Helene Piche, Chief Allan Adam’s grandmother, and Elizabeth Flett, Garry Flett’s mother, whose stories are related below. The combination of the 1944 membership transfer and the gender-based discrimination of the *Indian Act*’s Indian Status rules meant that several Dene women and their families lost access to their homelands within the Park and were severed from their kin. Their descendants still experience and feel the impacts of these exclusions. For those who had to transfer because they refused to move out of the Park, the forcible identity change had long-lasting, harmful effects. Alice Rigney explained that some MCFN members maintain their connections to their Dēnesų́hné heritage: “the families here in Fort Chip are aware, you know, the Simpsons know they’re Denes, the Tourangeaus, the Grandjams, the Piches, the Ratfats, you know, they know, but it was the government that made them that.” Chief Adam stated that this knowledge is painful: “how much of Mikisew members suffered the burden that I suffer when our people got ripped apart? . . . You know, the struggle of being Mikisew Cree First Nation when their heart belongs to Dene.”

The oral testimonies shared in this chapter contains members’ general reflections on and histories of the membership transfer and relates specific family histories. These stories suggest that the membership transfer, regardless of the intentions behind it, divided families and the community, disconnected many members from their heritage and language, entrenched existing government-imposed separations between the people and their territories, and led to long-term emotional trauma and harmful impacts on health and well-being. Furthermore, some Elders suggest that the population loss had long-term political impacts for the First Nation. With a reduced population, they suggest ACFN’s bargaining power at government tables has decreased and that the Nation receives reduced per-capita government transfer payments. Nevertheless, ACFN members and some of their Dēnesų́hné kin living

in the Park boundaries are adamant that, despite this traumatic event, their identities as Dene will never disappear. As Donalyn Mercredi summarized, “If you’re born a Dene, you’ll always be a Dene.”

ORAL HISTORY

Helene Piche's story

ACFN Elder Alec Bruno's mother, Helene Piche, left the Park after marrying a man who did not have a permit for the Park. Alec Bruno was Chief Allan Adam's father. Chief Adam shared in detail his granny's oral history of the transfer and eviction and Alec Bruno's telling of the history follows.

Chief Allan Adam (2 February 2021)

The only things that I had known about Wood Buffalo National Park when I was a kid growing up, was that we were not allowed to go and hunt in Wood Buffalo. My dad was known back then [as] being [an] ACFN member—which was Chip Band 201 was the legal name—and the people that belonged on Chip Band 201 were the people that were outside of Wood Buffalo National Park. And that carried on for a while until I got older. And then I asked my dad, I said, “how come we're not allowed to be in the park?” And this was back in the '80s, and my dad told me a story about what had happened.

And my granny was still alive. My granny passed away in 1989 at the age of 89 years old. And the funny thing, the tragic thing about everything, was that my granny survived the pandemic [the influenza and smallpox epidemics in the 1920s], and I think her husband perished just at the later stages of the pandemic, and that would be around year 1922. She brought her husband into town [when he became sick] according to what my dad said. That would be my granny's first husband. She took him to town. [Before that], she was staying out at House [Lake], I think it is. She had a two-storey house. She had everything, they had a garden there. Everything.

When members of the Piche family grew up, they were wealthy people. They provided for their kids and everything. There was families there, certain groups of families, and my granny was one of them. Her last name was Piche at the time, Helene Piche. I forget who her husband was, but he did give me it [his name], it could have been Pierre Piche, I don't know. But in a way, when he got sick, [she] brought him to Fort Chip from House River or Birch River area that side over there, his ailment, his illness got worse, and he perished here in the community. And my dad said that after he perished, my granny did what she had to do, bury him and everything and stuff like that, then she wanted to go back home. She wanted to literally go back home to Birch, to

House River, and when she notified [Parks] people that we're going back to the park, the warden came there and told her that she's not allowed to go back to the park unless she changes her identity. Meaning that if she goes back, she'll have to become a Cree band member, to give up her identity. My granny said no. But she was insisted to go home because it's the only home she had, was a two-storey beautiful house and everything that was there. They refused her to go back. And you know she was still determined to get home. And so, they just burned her place down and told her that there's nothing there, we burned your house down and everything.

That's when she realized—this was probably about the year [19]20, [19]23 around there, maybe [19]22—and she realized she had her husband, her husband's deceased now, she had a house before her husband was deceased, she had her family there and cared for and living there and everything. They had a roof over their head. They had a garden. They had all the wildlife and everything, and it was abundance.

It's one of the richest countries in the world in this area right there. And she lost all that. Not only her, but other family members as well that were told to leave the Park and never come back, and she never went back. We were told after from finding out from history and everything that if my granny had went back, they were going to kill her because they were ordered to kill anybody if they resisted to leave, and that mainly meant ACFN members, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, known as Chip Band 201 back then. . . .

Then I hear stories about other family members. After we were relocated from the Park, my granny moved to Big Point. And then she was relocated again to Fiddler's Point. And then she was relocated to Jackfish Lake. And then she relocated to Old Fort, only to be put back in Fort Chip, in 1954, '56. My dad said they moved into town in 1958, '59. So from 1922 to 1959 my granny, with her family, relocated five times before she went back to Fort Chip.⁸ That's the legacy and the story that I have to bear. That's the story I'll have to tell because that's the story that was told to me from my grandma and my dad and oral history at its best. That's why I guess I have a keen memory about things that were told to me, and I hardly ever forget stuff. So that's where we're at right now, and that's as much as you know. I [have] given you all the information that I know about it and everything, but my granny said that she was forcefully moved, and [her] house was burned to the ground.

. . . People weren't consulted about it whatsoever because my granny said it just happened, just like that. She wasn't told of it. Nobody was told this

[was] to happen. All they were told, that if you want to stay in a park, you become Cree band. If not, leave. That was her consultation. And that's when she fought to go home. And that's when they said no and they deemed her as radical. They were probably going to shoot my granny if she went back home. That's when they decided to burn her house down. That's the exact words of what my dad told me.

Alec Bruno (Dene Laws Interviews, 2015)

Remember, I told you a story about my mom, when she got kicked out of her house. To me, that is unrealistic for Parks Canada to do: who gave them the rights to tell people? My mom was born and raised across from Lake Claire close to Birch River at a little place called House Lake. We went there about 4 years [ago] with Parks Canada to the site where we had lived. It was Dene people that lived there. My mom was born there, raised there, got married there, and two of her oldest boys are buried there at the graveyard. After WBNP was created in 1922, shortly after that, things started to change, and then by 1928, her husband got sick. Back then when people got married, the men [were] way older than the girls and same with my mom. Like my mom was born in 1900, by 1922 when WBNP [was established], she was already 22 years old, and she got married, she had kids, she said she got married very young. Maybe 15 or 16. You know, what [are] they called, pre-arranged or something like that? The guy comes and tells your mother and father, "I like your daughter and I want to marry her." She didn't like that but that's the way it was, but she said he was a good provider. A good hunter, a good trapper. But he got sick, and he died in 1929, I think, here in town.

Now she wanted to go back home, back to her place, and that's when Parks Canada intervened and said you can't go back there, that's Wood Buffalo Park now. The only way you could go back now is if you promise—you have to join the Cree Band if you want to go back there.

But who gives Parks Canada the rights to tell people? Who gave them the rights to say, "well, you join the Cree Band?" I asked that question many times. Nobody ever gave me an answer yet, especially when it comes from Canada or the government. Pat [Marcel] and I always talk about that. Pat's granny [Ester Piche, whose story follows] was my aunty, she was my mom's sister. She was from there too. I mean, mom used to cry sometimes, wanting to go back there. Nothing but the things she lost. She wanted to go back and see the gravesites too, her two boys, and she wasn't allowed to do that. . . .

Well, at the signing of the Treaty, it says, we will never take your land away from you, right? Okay, that's what Canada said, we will never take your land away, but we will share it; but with my mother it was different. She was told not to go back to her house. She had a house there, all her things, and she couldn't even go back to collect them.

Ester Piche's story

Alice Rigney (née Marcel) and several other Marcel family members shared a similar story about Ester Piche (Alice's grandmother, and Helene's sister), who also had grown up at the Dene settlement at Birch River. After refusing to transfer Bands in 1944, Ester Piche was required to leave the Park.

Alice Rigney (16 & 17 March 2021)

I'll think about my granny living at House [Lake], probably the most beautiful forests, and then being told to move and her moving to Old Fort and making a home there. I have a beautiful picture of my granny, you know, and . . . I get my strength from her and my mother. Their life was anything but easy.

At present, we [Alice's family] don't have anything to do with the Park because our traditional land is in the Delta on the Athabasca River, at a place called Jackfish Lake, by the Jackfish Lake, too. But in the past? Yeah, my grandmother lived at House Lake. My grandmother Ester Piche. I couldn't say for sure exactly the years, but it had to be probably in the 1920s, when the Park invaded us with their rules. You know, it's just a maddening situation when you think of all the wrongs that were done to our people.

Yes, my grandmother was living there. I don't think my mother was there because my mother was also in the residential school, in the mission. I know [she was in residential school] from 1926 to [19]32 and was like six consecutive years without going home. So I believe it was during that time that my grandmother had remarried. And when she left House [Lake], she moved to the south shore of Lake Athabasca at Old Fort Bay at a point which we call Poplar Point, which is across from Moose Point. So that's where she raised her daughters, and my mum took us there, showed us that little cabin that they lived in. . . . And that's where she lived and then when my mother married, and my auntie, they moved to Jackfish Lake, and my granny moved there too with them, because she lived with my Auntie Liza. . . .

Well, once you're evicted from your home, I mean, for what reasons? I mean, these guys, with the papers in their hand to say that the government

is creating a park and you have a choice—you either can stay and join the Mikisew Cree First Nation, or you have to leave. She left. I mean, she's Dene. And there's many, many [Dene] families that stayed in the Cree band, you know, the Simpsons, the Tourangeaus, and the Ratfats. You know, there's many families that, they're Dene, but chose to stay [in the Park]. So, I mean, it was the Parks demanding people, "you either become this or you become that." And our people . . . they believed in these people [government officials]. And I mean, if in this day and age you tried that, there'd be riots and whatnot, you know. But in those days, you were told, and okay, well.

My late brother, Pat, went out to House Lake with a few family members, and Parks Canada—it was a Parks project, I believe—and they went there, and they saw what was left of the remains in the cemetery there, and they had a little community there when they had to leave. And so there was antiques, artifacts there, that they were not allowed to touch or bring home.

You know, my brother Pat [Marcel] had said they saw sewing machines there [at House Lake] and copper pots, and it's all gone. They could not take it with them, and they more or less had to leave just with what they could. I mean, how would anybody feel, being told, "okay, you have to move because we are the government, because we are the Parks"? You know, and they're obedient, but they lost the trust of the white people again. And I mean, this has been going on, now we're standing up you know, we're standing up through the colonization. I mean, you're hearing more and more of our people speaking up and it's issues like this. You know, if I was to put myself in my granny's shoes, and probably she only owned just a few items for herself 'cause she made all her own dresses, you know, meaning she had to get material from the store. She had to make clothes for her children. She used rabbit skin to make jackets and caribou hides to make clothing, moose hides for moccasins, because you couldn't go buy these things. So she utilized the land wherever she was. And if I pictured myself in my granny's shoes, I don't know how I would feel . . . I mean she had to pack her child and cross Lake Claire and Lake Mamawi, and then find a place to start over again.

The Ratfat family

The Ratfat family resided at Birch River and Peace Point and were transferred to the Cree Band in 1944. Elder Ernie "Joe" Ratfat shared his history about the impacts of the transfer here. To this day, he maintains that he is Dene at heart, even if he is MCFN on paper.

Ernie “Joe” Ratfat (19 March 2021)

Well, I’m with the Mikisew Cree. But I am Dene. Yeah, that’s one of the things that happened to us. Kind of messed me up all my life. Those people changed my life without even asking. My dad always told me I was Dene . . . but on paper it says Mikisew Cree. Yeah, there’s a lot of families that, at Fort Chip, belong to Mikisew Cree that are Dene. My dad is Peter Ratfat. And, like he always told me I was a Dene, and we always spoke Dene in our home. . . .

I’ve been trying to get back to the Dene Nation. And, my chief, they wouldn’t let me go. They have the last word if we’re going to be transferred. So I just kind of gave up. I just gave up and accepted the fact that on paper I am Cree. But my soul is Dene, and it will always be that way.

The Simpson & Flett Families’ Stories

Some Flett and Simpson family members, whose relatives are historically connected by marriage, shared their families’ experiences with the transfer as well. Most Simpson family members, with the known exception of Elizabeth Flett (née Simpson), whose story is shared by ACFN member Garry Flett below), transferred to Mikisew Cree Nation in 1944.

Mary “Cookie” Simpson (11 March 2021)

When they made the Wood Buffalo National Park, the Indian Affairs decided it was so good for their books to move everybody, all the trappers living in the Park area, to the Cree band, [so] they just moved them without their consent. So we got moved again to the Cree band . . . like we were moved first to the Chip Band then we’re moved to the Cree band. They just did that on their own without consent, consenting of the people. And I know that the Trippe de Roche, too, were moved and . . . there was a lot of families that were just moved from different bands into the Cree Band because of the Park. Everybody trapping in the Park would be moved to the Cree Band according to the Indian Affairs—which is not even right, I don’t think. They shouldn’t be screwing around with people’s livelihood.

If they refused to transfer, then their park license and hunting and trappers license would be taken away. And so they had no choice. People had no choice. They were just moved, which is not right. I don’t agree with that . . . But after I learned about the history, I thought, holy, that’s really wicked. So it’s

either of the Park or Indian Affairs in cahoots with each [other] that just moved people. . . .

They took the people away [from ACFN], like us [the Simpson family]! We were, when they created the Park there, we were in the Chip Band. And then they just moved us without our knowledge or without letting us know. That's what my dad said anyways. He said, they just moved us, they just moved us to a different band just like that, he said.

Elizabeth Flett's Story

ACFN member Garry Flett's mother, Elizabeth Flett (née Simpson), shared her oral history of the membership transfer with her son. She was born the same year that the Park was established, 1922. Her grandfather, Edouard Shortman and his son Isidore Simpson (Elizabeth Flett's father) were Dene. They had been granted permission to live in the Park in 1925 and built a cabin at Peace Point the following year. Elizabeth grew up at Peace Point, and all her brothers hunted and trapped in that area. She married a non-Status man, lost her Status, and left the Park to live elsewhere. Following the transfer, Elizabeth Flett's situation was particularly challenging. After Bill C-31 was passed in 1985, changing the Indian Act provision that had stripped Indigenous women of their Status for marrying non-Status men, Elizabeth applied to regain her Status. The Department of Indian Affairs reinstated her to ACFN, where she had been a member at the time of her marriage, rather than to MCFN, to which all of her family had transferred after she lost her Status. Because of this, Elizabeth was refused access to her family home in the Park, and Garry and his siblings been barred from entering the Park to harvest as an ACFN member. Thus, he and his siblings, children, nieces and nephews are excluded from the Park, even though his grandfather's cabin, still standing, is a physical symbol of his family's claim to the live there.

Garry Flett (6 December 2020)

So we'll go back in history a bit too when my mother married my father. All of my mother's family were with the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, or known as the Chip Band at that time. So when my mother married my father, she had to leave the reserve, and she had to relinquish her Status rights because she married a non-Status person, which would be my father. At that time, when she was basically booted out of the reserve, it was ACFN. So, as time went by, and then back in 1986, when there was a challenge to the federal

government by a lady [Sandra Lovelace] in Manitoba, who went after the government to get her rights back . . . her challenge was successful. And she got her rights back and she was reinstated into her band.⁹ So I challenged the government on behalf of my mother to do the same thing.

But when my mother was out of the Band, she was with ACFN. During that time, and after that, Parks Canada came in and said [to ACFN members in the Park], “in order for you to continue hunting and trapping in the Park, you had to become MCFN, Mikisew, or the Cree band.” So it was of no significance to my mother because she was then non-Status. She already had been pulled out of the band sort of thing. In 1986, when we challenged, she was allowed back in, but she was put right back to where she started from [to ACFN, from which the rest of her family had been transferred]. She was kicked out of the Chip band, so she was reinstated back into the Chip band and meanwhile, all of her family were transferred over to the Cree band during that time. So that is why my mother is the only one out of all of her siblings that remained Chip band. All my uncles and aunts are all Mikisew Cree. . . .

It sounds like something you’d read in a novel, but you never experienced it until you had experienced it. And what was the thinking back then? It certainly wasn’t on the side of women. Women were, their rights were told to them . . . not just the women, but pretty well everybody. Your rights were told to you and delivered to you by the federal government.

Garry Flett (16 December 2020)

So I spent my years, if you were going to hunt in the Park, I couldn’t go with you. Even if they were my first cousins. They can all go but I couldn’t. And members of my family could. So yeah, that’s the piece that when I said that it affected me personally, that’s what it is. So I had to stay away from there, from the Park side. To have that as your sole lifestyle, to hunt and trap and fish in the Park, it wasn’t for us. I couldn’t even dream about it. I wasn’t allowed to because of what transpired there. But . . . my first cousins were—it was easy for them. They just got a park license and described who they were and who they belong to as members of the Cree Band or the Mikisew Cree Band. And they were granted those licenses. I would go back and say “well, that’s my mom’s brother’s children” and “that’s my first cousins” and they just [replied]: “no, not you. You’re ACFN. Your mom was ACFN . . . you are not entitled.”

GENERAL ORAL TESTIMONY ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Horace Adam (19 March 2021)

The people that occupy that area was the Cree. The Cree, yeah the Cree. And they, and there's a few Dene like the Ratfats, are the ones that were there. Because they had no choice . . . the treaties was signed and then the Dene people had their traplines there in the Park, at that time. They [Parks] told them they could move or they [could] become the Cree band. So most of them did become Cree Band just to keep their land, their traplines. That's what happened.

There was a lot [of Dene residents in the Park] at that time. There was Dene. There was a lot people from Fort Chipewyan. The Dënesųłné that was out there on the land. And, I can't recall all their names because I didn't really know lots of people at that time. They stayed [in the Park], they stayed and so they become Cree Band.

Leonard Flett (30 April 2021)

We were treated like—I don't know what. Who are they to tell us to relocate from where my mom was born [at Birch River], move us to the reserve [at Jackfish]? I don't know, it just pisses me off when I think about it. And, when I go to the National Park today in Fort Chip, I don't go ask for their permission, I just go. And that's our right. We're entitled to it. I don't think the government should tell us to move away or else become—this is the part that really pisses me off—they had the rights to make [ACFN] members become Mikisew members. That really pisses me off. I mean, who are they to decide that, right? I mean, we signed a Treaty agreement back in 1899. And they can just go in there and do whatever they wanted. It is not right.

Scott Flett (17 March 2021)

That's really where they were, like House [Lake] on the Birch River area and stuff. That's where there was kind of little settlements and stuff. That's where lots of—I remember the Ratfat family, they were Dene before and then when the Dene people were forced out of the Park then they had to become a Cree Band member. There was about—I forget how many families there must have been. I know there is Vermillion, Simpson, Ratfats. I know there's a couple

more that didn't switch over. And that whole area was like, they'd signed a treaty you know, like I said, Birch River, Gull River, south of Lake Claire also. The whole side of the south of Lake Athabasca and Lake Claire and stuff, that was all Dene territory. It's all Dene. . . . They didn't want to move, to get out of the Park. And I think the Simpsons and the Vermillions were in that area north of Peace side.

Fred (Jumbo) Fraser (12 March 2021)

What happened in the Park, I guess when they formed the Park [the expansion], south of the Peace, that's when they [Chipewyan Band members] had a choice of switching from ACFN to Mikisew if they wanted to trap in the Park. And I know some ACFN members did switch over, they went to Mikisew so that they could continue to stay in the Park and trapping. So the Métis were also kicked out of the Park because, you know, it's a brand Park, just freshly formed and the chief at the time for Mikisew said, no, the Métis do not leave, they stay in the Park.

As far as I know it's the Parks [who were responsible for the membership transfer]. Like I said, because they gave them [Dene residents in the Park] a choice, you know, like saying, "you could change from ACFN to Mikisew if you want to stay in the Park." You know, some did change and, like I said—Simpsons they had their trapline on the Peace River by west of Fort Chip. And they had a big house on the river, a two-storey building you know, and they had a very big family. Vermillions, they trapped up on the Peace River. They still own that trapline, one of the Simpsons still owns the traplines today. Not that anybody goes trapping. Vermillions, they have their traplines still up there.

Ray Ladouceur (18 March 2021)

Oh, it was mostly Dene [living in the Park], it was supposed to be all Dene, and the government when it came down here, most of them were people that was in Birch River, they [the government] called them Cree. Yeah, they called them Cree, but most of them belong to same Dene . . . But they call them Crees and they [the Dene residents in the Park] spoke Cree, so. They went under the name of Cree then. There's Vermillions and all those people there, they were Dene people at one time. Yeah, they [the Park] went and just went ahead without, well, of course they won't say anything, they wanted to do whatever they wanted to do.

At Birch River, people were mostly Dene, but then when the white man come in this part of the country, I guess there was a few Crees so they took that whole area, Birch River and the Peace River, all for the Cree. They [the white men] called them Cree 'cause they spoke Cree too, and their family, now they're all Cree. They don't call them Dene.

My understanding is, when the white man came over and took over the Park, it was Dene at Birch River. You know that same Dene that, to our area where we settled down, eh, same [thing—it was] Dene. But they [government officials] called them [the Dene living in the Park] Crees. Of course, there was—they were mixed with Cree. They called them Cree so that's where they got their name from, Cree. Most of them are Dene, you know. Yeah, that's what happened . . . the white man. They [white people] didn't know that [the Cree and Dene people were different] and because they [the Dene residents in the Park] spoke Cree, I guess, and [officials assumed] "oh, in the south they're all Cree in Birch River," that part of the country. That area they took for Crees. And so Dene was, you know, out of there.

Big John Marcel (18 March 2021)

Well, you know what it was—it was so many things that happened when Parks took over. And then, you know, I was told by the Elder people and my dad, when Park took over, most of our [ACFN] band members were all trapping in that area. Toward Birch River. And then, when things changed . . . all the band members that work there had to go back to our reserve. And they also—Fort McKay [Band] used to trap around that area, too.¹⁰ And then Parks told most of the people that I know were trapping there, they were trapping, and then parks says to them, "if you want to go back to the Wood Buffalo, okay, you have to change and go back to the Cree band." So, most of these people that I know, just like the Simpsons and Vermillions, and there's quite a few families, joined the Parks because they wanted to trap in that area.

Charlie Mercredi (n.d.)

Elder William Laviolette used to tell me lots of stories; like one day we were in Old Fort just the two of us, everybody else went to Fort Chip for supplies, and the old man said nobody here but us. I asked him what he meant, and he said one time there used to be lots of people, now not anymore; after WBNP we lost many of our people to MCFN.

Donalyn Mercredi (11 March 2021)

And that was their home, so they didn't want to leave their home. So they have no other choice, I'm guessing that they had no other choice. Like I wouldn't want to leave my home. So they probably just transferred to the Mikisew Band. Which I don't think it's fair. They were stripped of their Dene [identity]. They're born Dené; however, they were stripped of it just over their homestead. And they had to transfer bands to another band. Which they really didn't belong to in the first place.

Leslie Wiltzen (21 January 2021)

Leslie began his discussion of the membership transfer reading the 1946 treaty payroll list document, which lists the names of families and number of members [123] who were transferred from the Chipewyan Band to the Cree Band.

There's a lot of names so I can tell you, roughly I'll just give you . . . I'll just read a few of the names off here.

We got Lucien Vermilion, it says two transferred to the Cree Band 170. Then we got Salman Sepp, two transferred. We have Cheezie, Marcel Cheezie, one transferred to Cree band. We have Jonas Nadary, one transferred to Cree band. We have Paul Shortman, two transferred to Cree band. We have Germain Ratfat. Isidore Shortman, four transferred. Joseph Fontain, four transferred. Napoleon Freezy, two transferred. John Volio, one transferred. Louisan Poitras, three transferred. Maragine Poitras, Valentine Piche, Lucien Cheezy, Salma Shortman, Alex Ratfat, Isidore Shortman, Peter Ratfat, Mary Ann, Pauline and Archie: fourteen. Joseph Poitras, William Simpson, Alexander Vermillion, Marjorie Magloire Vermillion, Philip Evans, Isidore Shortman, Moses Nadary, Eugene Poitras, Peter Ratfat, Joseph Bouchier, Ambrose Bouchier, Archie Simpson, Pierre Simpson, Willie Waquan, Francis Waquan, Leonard Leon Bouchier, Joseph Dene, Martin Tourangeau, Willie Waquan, Mary Rose Deraso, Fred Vague. You look at these guys, [they] were all ACFN members that were transferred over to Cree band.

And you know a lot of people unfortunately, it's really sad because, when you look at it today, there's a lot of youth both on the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and on the Mikisew Cree First Nation that really don't know their history. There's a lot of kids today that don't realize—don't know that history of what occurred in the Wood Buffalo National Park.

There's no documentation that shows that our chiefs negotiated and allowed for that to happen, because they would never have done that. They would never, ever give their people up. So that was done without any consultation, without any negotiation. If there was negotiations or if there was consultations that took place it was obviously just amongst the federal government and the agents. It never occurred with the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation. It was never okayed and allowed to happen based on any written documentation, or any oral history that I've heard of or ever seen.

. . . From my understanding, the only details I have on that come from my Uncle Pat [Marcel] and from oral history. And from what I was told, was basically the federal government didn't want to have to deal with three people, three groups [two Nations in the Park and one outside the Park]. Right? So you have Mikisew there and then you have the ACFN that was asked to leave, and the majority took the option and left. And them that stayed, the federal government didn't want to have to deal with it, with the Chipewyan Indians anymore. They felt, they managed to convince the chief, the main part when he left, the federal government felt that they didn't want to have to deal with the other members. So they couldn't get them to leave. So it would be dealing with three groups. So they did that [Indian Affairs made the membership transfer]. That's why, that's where someone made the decision that we just turn them into Cree band members. My Uncle Pat used to say it really, really more thorough and complete, but that's kind of the oral history that I got out of it. It's not, again, it's not written anywhere. But that's all that's from my understanding, it was one of the main reasons there. And there might be more reasons that we don't know or never will know . . . It's funny when you read about all this. I mean, the federal government has a document—I've got a list. We know that these people were ACFN members. When we look at when the Treaty was signed, it showed the numbers of Mikisew members, and the members have drastically changed after that membership has changed. So we know there is a big transfer. It's in the federal government's archives. It's recorded in history. But [there's] nothing indicating what led up to that transfer and reasons that were made to transfer. It's like a book where you're reading a good story and then somebody rips out three pages and you never know what happens in those three pages. And that's what happened with the federal government. Why wasn't that more thoroughly documented, where we see that?