

Where Happiness Dwells

A History of the Dane-zaa First Nations

ROBIN RIDINGTON AND JILLIAN RIDINGTON

in collaboration with

ELDERS OF THE DANE-ZAA FIRST NATIONS



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Preface, with Linguistic Note and Pronunciation Guide

Where Happiness Dwells, a history of the Dane-zaa First Nations, focuses on the people who were known as the Fort St. John Beaver Band until they divided into the Doig River and Blueberry River First Nations in 1977. A large part of the book takes the form of stories told by Dane-zaa elders and recorded on tape, minidisc, and video. The citations refer to recordings in the Ridington/Dane-zaa Archive, which is in our possession. Many of the stories have been digitized and are available online.* Although we recorded a few stories in English, most were told in Dane-zaa Záágé? (Beaver), an Athapaskan language. We owe a great deal to Doig linguistic expert Billy Attachie as well as to Madeline Oker, Eddie Apsassin, Margaret Davis, Maryann Adekat, Lana Wolf, and Liza Wolf for their translations of Dane-zaa texts. We also owe a debt of gratitude to linguists Marshall and Jean Holdstock, Patrick Moore, and Julia Miller for providing a proper orthography of Dane-zaa words.

To help readers understand these stories, we include the pronunciation guide used in *Dane Wajich: Dane-zaa Stories and Songs – Dreamers and the Land*, a National Museum of Canada virtual website developed by Amber Ridington and Kate Hennessy in collaboration with members of the Doig community and participating linguists. Previous scholars

* Search online for “Ridington/Dane-zaa Digital Archive” for further information on accessing the archive.



Billy Attachie, a Doig linguistic expert, ca. 1968. Photo by Robin Ridington

used the terms *Dunne-za* or *Beaver Indians*, but following Billy Attachie's direction, we use *Dane-zaa* throughout the book.*

Dane-zaa Záágé? (Beaver Language) Pronunciation Guide †

This guide, based on the *Doig River Dictionary* by Marshall Holdstock and Jean Holdstock, is intended as an introduction to pronouncing and writing the sounds used in *Dane-zaa Záágé?* Since *Dane-zaa Záágé?* has sounds not found in English, these descriptions in English are only close approximations.

To begin learning the language, go to the virtual website,‡ where you can hear Billy Attachie pronouncing the alphabet. Click on each letter and then practise the pronunciation.

* We have chosen to retain the simple and most common orthography of *Dane-zaa*, with no underline under the *z*.

† © Doig River First Nation, 2006. Prepared by Billy Attachie, Patrick Moore, and Julia Miller, July 2006. Funded in part by a grant from the Volkswagen Foundation and titled "Beaver Knowledge Systems: Documentation of a Canadian First Nation Language from a Place Name Perspective."

‡ See <http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/danewajich/>.

Beaver		English meaning	English equivalent (or near equivalent) of the sound
Letter	Word		
a	gat	“tree”	Sounds like the vowel in the English word <i>cut</i> .
aa	saa	“sun”	Sounds like the sound at the beginning of the English word <i>ah</i> .
aạ	aháạ	“yes”	Sounds like Beaver <i>aa</i> , but pronounced through the nose.
ae	egae	“spoon”	Sounds like the two vowels <i>a</i> and <i>e</i> pronounced as a single vowel, with the <i>a</i> brief and the <i>e</i> longer.
ai	hak'ai	“cow”	Sounds like the two vowels <i>a</i> and <i>i</i> pronounced as a single vowel.
b	bes	“knife”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>ball</i> .
ch	aché?	“tail”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>chain</i> .
ch'	ch'ónê	“coyote”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>chain</i> , except the sound is glottalized so there is a “popping” sound.
d	dane	“person”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>dog</i> .
dl	dlezhe	“grizzly”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>d</i> followed by <i>l</i> as in <i>toddler</i> .
dz	adzě?	“heart”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>d</i> followed by <i>z</i> as in the English word <i>lids</i> .
<u>dz</u>	<u>dzení</u>	“calendar”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>d</i> followed by <i>z</i> as in the English word <i>lids</i> , except with the tongue just behind or between the teeth.
e	se	“belt”	Sounds like the vowel in <i>face</i> but without the glide to <i>i</i> at the end of the vowel.
ẹ	ẹbaa	“weasel”	Sounds like the Beaver vowel <i>e</i> said through the nose.
ea	dabea	“sheep”	Sounds like the vowel in the English word <i>hat</i> .
ẹa	kuleą	“old man”	Sounds like the Beaver vowel <i>ea</i> said through the nose.
g	gaah	“rabbit”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of the English word <i>goat</i> .



◀ Beaver		English meaning	English equivalent (or near equivalent) of the sound
Letter	Word		
gh	ghaje	“goose”	This sound is different than any English sound, although in rapid speech many English speakers change the <i>g</i> sound of <i>ragged</i> to a sound that is close to the <i>gh</i> sound of Beaver.
h	aháą	“yes”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>hen</i> .
	hadaa	“moose”	In many words <i>h</i> has a stronger sound at the beginning of syllables.
i	shin	“song”	Sounds like the vowel in <i>stick</i> .
ii	jiih	“grouse”	Sounds like the vowel in <i>seat</i> .
j	jéyǫ?	“bull moose”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>job</i> .
k	ke	“shoes”	Sounds like the sound at the beginning of <i>kite</i> .
k'	k'at	“willow”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>kite</i> , except the sound is glottalized so there is a “popping” sound.
l	aláá?	“boat”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>leaf</i> .
lh	lhuuge	“fish”	This sound is different than any English sound. It has the sibilant quality of <i>s</i> , but the air comes around the sides of the tongue.
m	mēlh	“snare”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>me</i> .
n	nódaa	“lynx”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>net</i> .
o	gogosh	“pig”	Sounds like the vowel at the beginning of <i>only</i> .
ǫ	at'ǫ?	“leaf”	Sounds like the vowel at the beginning of <i>only</i> , but pronounced through the nose.
s	sas	“bear”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>son</i> .
<u>s</u>	<u>s</u> án	“star”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>son</i> , except with the tongue just behind or between the teeth.
sh	shin	“song”	Sounds like the sound at the beginning of <i>she</i> .

◀ Beaver		English meaning	English equivalent (or near equivalent) of the sound
Letter	Word		
t	tís	“crutch”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>tea</i> .
tʻ	atʻóʔ	“leaf”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>tea</i> , except the sound is glottalized so there is a “popping” sound.
tl	tlɛzaa	“dog”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>t</i> followed by Beaver <i>lh</i> . There is no similar sound in English.
tlʻ	tlʻuulh	“rope”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>t</i> followed by Beaver <i>lh</i> , except the sound is glottalized so there is a “popping” sound. There is no similar sound in English.
ts	tsááʔ	“beaver”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>t</i> followed by <i>s</i> as at the end of <i>lets</i> .
<u>ts</u>	<u>tse</u>	“pipe”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>t</i> followed by <i>s</i> as at the end of <i>lets</i> , except with the tongue just behind or between the teeth.
tsʻ	tsʻádéʔ	“blanket”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>t</i> followed by <i>s</i> as at the end of <i>lets</i> , except the sound is glottalized so there is a “popping” sound.
<u>tsʻ</u>	<u>tsʻiih</u>	“mosquito”	Sounds like a sequence of <i>t</i> followed by <i>s</i> as at the end of <i>lets</i> , except the sound is glottalized so there is a “popping” sound and the tongue is just behind or between the teeth.
u	chush	“down feather”	Sounds like the vowel in <i>book</i> .
uu	chuu	“water”	Sounds like the vowel in <i>food</i> .
w	wáʎáʎe	“butterfly”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>worm</i> .
y	yaṣ	“snow”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>yes</i> .
z	mazíʔ	“his/her body”	Sounds like the consonant at the beginning of <i>zigzag</i> .
zh	dézhaa	“she/he has started to go”	Sounds like the second consonant in <i>measure</i> .

Accents used			English equivalent (or near equivalent) of the sound
Beaver	Beaver	English	
ʔ	ma'aahéʔ	“his/her snowshoes”	Sounds like the consonant sound that comes between the two parts of <i>Oh-Oh!</i> It is heard as a break between vowels.
á	táádézhaa	“he is going up”	The acute accent (high tone) indicates that the vowel has a relatively higher pitch.
ě	maděʔ	“his/her eye”	The hachek over the vowel indicates a rising pitch.
ê	ch'òné	“coyote”	The circumflex over the vowel indicates a falling pitch.

Introduction: Trails of Time

“Those stories I remember, that’s what I live by now.” When Billy Attachie told us this, he was talking about the stories his grandmother Nache had told him and her other grandchildren, but he was also talking about stories that had been told for centuries by the Dane-zaa people. *Dane-zaa* means “real people” in Dane-zaa *Záágé?* or Beaver, an Athapaskan language. Nache had learned the stories from her first husband, Apaa, in the early years of the twentieth century. She told them to Billy and his siblings when they were children, many years ago. This is the nature of oral history, and all history, for history is a series of stories. Nache, and many of the other elders whose stories make this book possible, have followed their relatives along *yaak’ihts’é? atanii*, the trail to heaven. The elders say that heaven is like *Su Na chii k’chige*, the summer gathering place where people from different bands met to sing and dance and renew their relationships. Lana Wolf translates *Su Na chii k’chige* as “the place where happiness dwells.” Former chief Gerry Attachie suggested that *Where Happiness Dwells* would be a suitable title for this book.

When the chief and council of the Doig River First Nation of the Dane-zaa asked us to create a history of their people based on oral histories, we knew that our work would be to put together and explain all the wise stories the Dane-zaa had told us over the past half century. We wrote this book in collaboration with Dane-zaa people who have kept their stories alive for millennia. Whenever possible, Dane-zaa people tell their own stories. We add information from historical

documents only when necessary to help non-Dane-zaa understand the context. We wrote this book so future generations of Dane-zaa can know and understand their heritage and so interested lay readers and other First Nations can have access to Dane-zaa knowledge. Consequently, we have kept the language accessible. Readers who want to learn more about the academic literature pertaining to northern First Nations will find a discussion of relevant sources in Chapter 16, “Dane-zaa Stories and the Anthropological Literature.”

The history of the people who are members of the Doig River and Blueberry First Nations is a trail of time, a trail of braided stories. We recorded most of the stories in this book in Dane-zaa *Záágéʔ*. Robin recorded some of them from elders in the 1960s. We recorded others specifically for this book. In both cases, we relied on the expertise of bilingual translators to convey the meaning of Dane-zaa *Záágéʔ* words in English. In the 1960s, Robin used two tape recorders. He played the original story as told in Beaver on one recorder and recorded the translation on the other. We now use a computer to play digital audio files and transcribe the translations directly into a word-processing program. We take careful note of the time code of the original recording. Recordings and translations were on reel-to-reel tape before Robin developed a system for cataloguing them. Recordings and translations from the 1960s are catalogued according to the name of the speaker and the translator. Some are included in an unpublished collection of the translations called *Beaver Tales*; others appear in our later publications (see *Works Cited*). For those recordings that were transferred to or recorded as digital audio files and then catalogued, we note the catalogue references. Many people contributed to the translation process and are listed in the Preface, but much of our recent work has been in collaboration with Billy Attachie, who obtained training in linguistic transcription during his work with Marshall and Jean Holdstock. They taught him well, and his work has been invaluable.

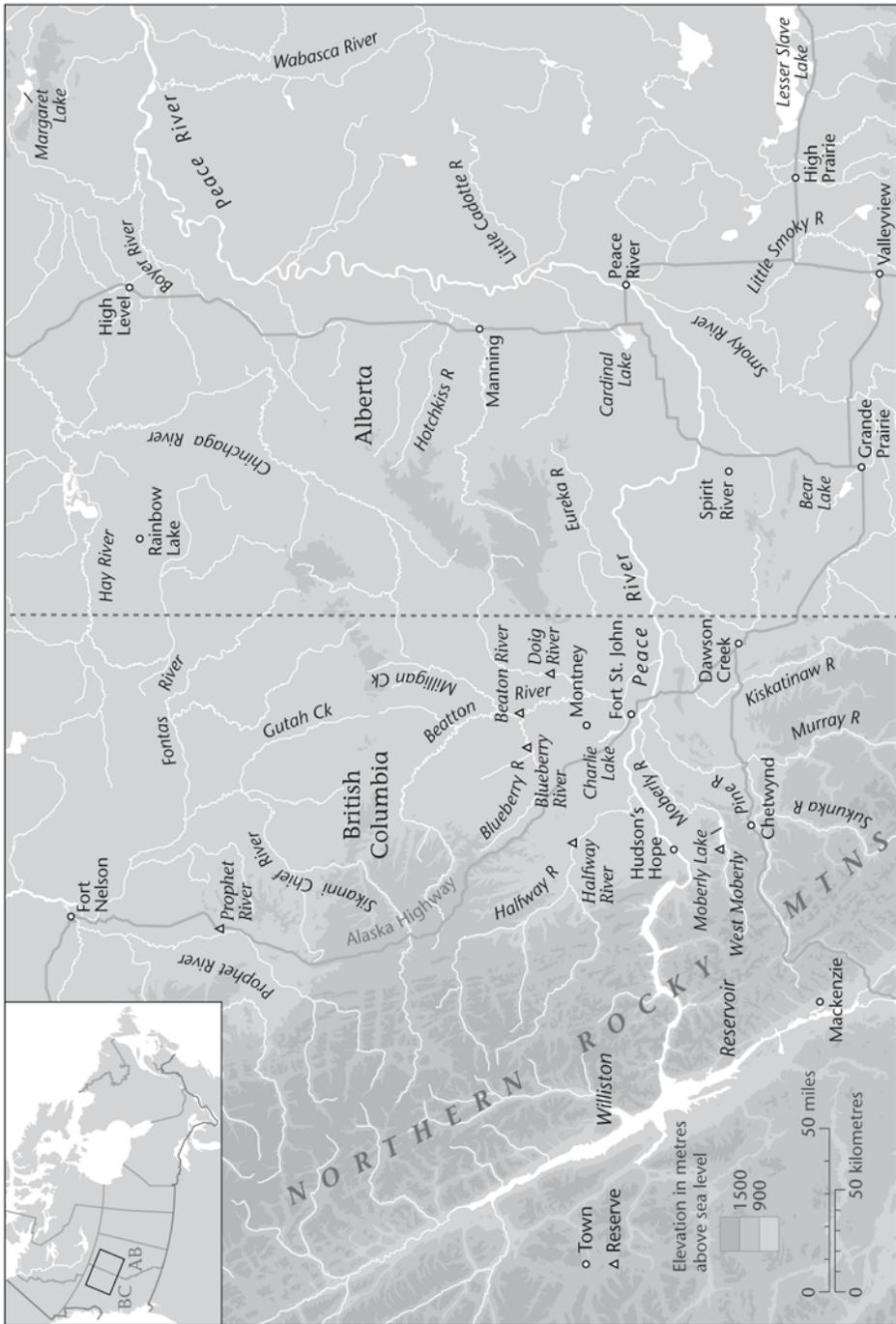
To understand Dane-zaa history and culture, one must understand Dane-zaa storytelling. As in all small communities where people share a common history, Dane-zaa tell stories without direct references to shared experiences. Storytellers do not begin a story with a full description of the context. Billy Attachie told us that people in the old days got together each evening to tell and listen to stories. The storyteller knew that each member of the audience had heard some version of the story in the past and understood the system of kin terms that guided Dane-zaa in their relationships with one another. Because everyone understood the references, the storyteller used pronouns

rather than the names of characters, much the same way one would use a kin term to talk about a relative. In other publications (e.g., Ridington and Ridington 2006), we describe this type of discourse as highly contexted. To facilitate and enrich understanding of these stories, we present most of them in a poetic form that does justice to the rhythms of Dane-zaa storytelling.

Some of the stories describe people and events that occurred before the arrival of white explorers and settlers. Fur traders first recorded Dane-zaa names in a North West Company post journal in 1799, but Dane-zaa families had lived in the land east of the Rocky Mountains, where the Peace River flows through what is now northeastern BC and northwestern Alberta, for millennia. Some oral stories record the names of people who lived in the region before there were white people in the country. Others describe the fur trade, the Dreamers, and events in the recent past.

In 1977, the former Fort St. John band split into the Doig River and Blueberry River First Nations. The English names *Doig* and *Blueberry* reflect recent events and are derived from the white place names for the rivers that run through Dane-zaa land. Tommy Attachie told us that white people named the Doig River for a Scottish trapper named Fred Doig. The Dane-zaa name for the river is Hanás Saahgé? (Raft River, also spelled *Saahgii*). The name reflects a time during the fur trade when Dane-zaa trappers loaded their furs onto rafts and floated down the Raft River and the Pine (Beatton) River to trade. White people named the river *Doig*, however, and the Scottish surname is now used by those Dane-zaa people who were once called Ts'ibe Dané? (Muskeg people, also spelled *Ts'ibii*) because some of the land where they hunted and camped was in the muskeg north of the Peace River and east into present-day Alberta. This muskeg country is good for hunting and trapping. Those Dane-zaa people who sometimes camped near Charlie Lake were called Lhuuge Leq (suckerfish people; literally “fish penis”) because suckerfish were once abundant there. Elders from Doig remember fishing in the area as part of their seasonal rounds (see Chapter 11).

Dane-zaa nané? (the people's land) is ideal habitat for moose, beaver, and other fur-bearing animals whose boss is *Nówe* (the wolverine). Bison were also abundant in the territory until demand for meat and furs by white traders caused the animals to be hunted to near extinction in the late nineteenth century. When Alexander Mackenzie visited Dane-zaa country in 1793, he described the prairie near the place later named for Chief Attachie as “so crowded with animals as to have



Areas referred to in the text. Map by Eric Leinberger

the appearance, in some places, of a stall-yard, from the state of the ground, and the quantity of dung which is scattered over it” (Mackenzie and Lamb 1970, 264).

For the Ts’ibe Dané?, Lhuuge Leḡ, and all other Dane-zaa people, history is a trail that begins in a time before measured time. It is a trail defined by the Dreamers, people who have shown the way when the trail ahead seemed to be unclear. The trail’s branches follow all of the creeks, rivers, and valleys that lead from Lake Athabasca to the Arctic-Pacific Divide. Within that territory, the Dane-zaa’s trails intersected with those of animals who shared their land and who, when needed, gave their lives to Dane-zaa hunters. Their trails intersected with those of people from other bands who were related by blood or by marriage and with those of neighbouring tribes such as the Slavey who also spoke an Athapaskan language. Their trails began to intersect with those of the Cree, who belong to the Algonkian language family, when the Cree became middlemen in the fur trade in the eighteenth century and began to move west. The Dane-zaa met no Europeans until just over two centuries ago, when Peter Pond established Fort Vermilion in 1788 and when Mackenzie passed through their land on his epic journey to the Coast, “from Canada by land,” in 1793.

In some ways, Dane-zaa history is like the history of all First Nations in Canada. Yet it differs in one critical way. At the time when the Cree, the Iroquoian nations of Quebec and Ontario, and many other First Nations were adapting to newcomers (or, in the case of Beothuk in Newfoundland, were exterminated by them), the Dane-zaa were still following the trails of their ancestors. They first learned of the changes to come in the late eighteenth century, when the Dreamers prophesied the coming of the white men. Loss of land and traditional culture, developments that began to affect the indigenous people of eastern Canada three and a half centuries ago, have challenged the Dane-zaa for little more than a hundred years. Pond built his forts on the eastern side of Dane-zaa territory, and Mackenzie passed through the area but did not stay. Fur traders came to the area in 1794, and Catholic priests arrived in 1859, but neither lived with the people. Fur traders stayed at the post, and priests came through about once a year to perform baptisms and marriages. As we discuss in Chapter 7, the Dane-zaa successfully integrated the new teachings into their traditional beliefs.

Fort St. John, now the centre of British Columbia’s oil and gas industry as well as a hub city for the thousands of farmers in the region,

is near the site of Rocky Mountain Fort, the earliest fur trade post in British Columbia, established in 1794. So-called pioneers began settling in Dane-zaa territory early in the twentieth century, but they were too few to have a heavy impact on the Dane-zaa's traditional way of life. Many Dane-zaa, especially the women, had little contact with the fur traders and rarely encountered white people until the building of the Alaska Highway in 1942. The fathers and mothers of contemporary Doig elders spoke little or no English, had no driver's licences, and lived most of their lives without a telephone, electricity, or indoor plumbing. No Dane-zaa children attended school until 1950.

Today, the Dane-zaa language is written by tribal linguists but not spoken by most Dane-zaa children, and the trails of the people are invisible beneath roads, highways, and seismic lines that bring opportunity but also threaten to extinguish the traditional ways of the Dane-zaa. Members of the Doig River and Blueberry River First Nations run energy companies, negotiate land claims, and meet to decide how to allocate trust funds. In only six decades, a traditional hunting-and-gathering people have learned to succeed in a modern world that would have been incomprehensible only one or two generations ago. Despite these changes, the Dane-zaa remain strong in their sense of kinship, community, and culture. They still think of themselves as being related to one another, even though younger people may not know the proper Dane-zaa *Záágé?* terms for these relationships.

Robin first visited the Dane-zaa in 1959. He returned for a year in 1965-66 and for shorter visits throughout the late 1960s with his first wife, Antonia (now Antonia Mills), and their small son, Eric, who was called Aballi by the Dane-zaa. Their daughter, Amber, was born in Dane-zaa territory in 1969. She relates her own experiences with the Dane-zaa in her biography on the website she created with Kate Hennessy and Dane-Zaa youth and elders, *Dane Wajich: Dane-zaa Stories and Songs – Dreamers and the Land* (Doig River First Nation 2008).

We (Jillian and Robin) married in 1976 and made our first trip to Doig in June and July 1978. Eric, Amber, and the late “soundman” Howard Broomfield accompanied us. We have visited “Beaverland” on a regular basis since then. Howard was part of those journeys until his death in 1986, and our children and grandchildren often travelled with us. More recently, we have worked with Amber and our former student Kate Hennessy. We watched as new houses replaced the government-issued plywood buildings that once lined Doig's main street. We recorded preachers who came through the area with a



Howard Broomfield, Jillian Ridington, and Robin Ridington at Doig, 1978.

Photo by Amber Ridington

newer, more inspiring message, and we watched as the Catholic church, no longer used, came down. We were there when the new band hall and cultural centre opened with drumming and song, replacing a small, worn, and dark old building. Our contemporaries have grown old, as have we, and the children whose voices we recorded as they played in the 1970s are now parents. We have shared in Dane-zaa celebrations and memorials and in times of sorrow. Jillian has observed and documented everyday and unusual happenings and tried to learn traditional women skills. She relates some of these interactions in *When You Sing It Now, Just Like New* (Ridington and Ridington 2006). Her experiences also formed the basis for radio documentaries for the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) and Vancouver's CFRO (see Works Cited). Robin continued to learn from the elders and to document traditional stories. He began to add video documentaries to the archive in 2002.

In the late 1970s, the Dane-zaa communicated with relatives on other reserves via "Message Time," a radio program that was broadcast at noon every day on CKNL Fort St. John. Now, almost everyone, from teenagers to pensioners, has his or her own cellphone or Blackberry

and uses them frequently. Communication is constant and immediate. When we met with the Doig council and elders to discuss this book, Chief Norman Davis sent Robin, who was sitting across the table, a message from his Blackberry. It arrived in Robin's in-box seconds later.

Throughout the years, we have used cassettes, cameras, microphones, reel-to-reel tape, minidisks, and video recorders to document images, songs, stories, and conversations. The Ridington/Dane-zaa Archive includes photographs, tape recordings, and videos, along with radio programs produced by Jillian Ridington and Howard Broomfield in the 1960s and broadcast on the CBC or local stations. It also contains an extensive genealogy based on Robin's fieldwork in the 1980s. The chief and council of the Doig First Nation asked Jillian to update the genealogy in 1990. The request turned into a five-year project. Both of us worked closely with Patrick Cleary and Mitchell Goodjohn, researchers for Blueberry River First Nation, to include government and church records and many more interviews. Our work resulted in a comprehensive genealogy of the former Fort St. John Band. The Doig and Blueberry First Nations used this genealogy in treaty land entitlement negotiations with the federal government. The genealogy is also a resource for Dane-zaa seeking to know more about their ancestors.

The archive also includes many hours of stories, some told in Dane-zaa *Záágé?*, some in English. Elders shared with us their rich oral history of events. They documented key events; they explained the very nature of the universe and how people and animals developed ways of living together. *Where Happiness Dwells* is very much their book. We bring their stories together with historical documents to create a portrait of life as it has evolved and changed in the territory of the Ts'ibe Dané? and Lhuuge Lęą and beyond to all the people of Dane-zaa nané?. We have tried to facilitate understanding of their stories and, where necessary, contextualize them for a non-Dane-zaa audience and younger Dane-zaa who do not speak the Beaver language and are not familiar with their oral history. Younger people continue to create history and tell about it in new electronic media. Some of them worked with Amber Ridington and Kate Hennessy to create the Virtual Museum of Canada's exhibition *Dane Wajich: Dane-zaa Stories and Songs* (Doig River First Nation 2008).

We are now elders ourselves, and the Dane-zaa elders we record are our contemporaries. These elders include Tommy Attachie, Billy Attachie, Gerry Attachie, May Dominic Apsassin, Sam Acko, Margaret Dominic Davis, Madeline Sagónáá? Davis, and Jack Askoty.

Others who taught us a great deal have gone on the trail to heaven. Margaret Attachie, Albert Askoty, Alice Askoty, Sally Takola Makadahay, John Davis, Mary (Daeda) Davis Dominic, Margie Wolf, and Marguerite Yahey Davis were among them. These elders listened to their own elders. Some of them also studied the recordings we made of people from their parents' and grandparents' generations; Aku, Charlie Yahey, Jumbie, Sam St. Pierre, Charlie Dominic, Johnny Chipesia, and Nache (Mary Pouce Coupe). Those of us who are now elders feel a responsibility to the people we knew when we were young to bring their words forward to a new generation. As the Dreamer Charlie Yahey said on one of Robin's recordings, "I am talking to this white man and his tape recorder, but through this the world will listen to my voice" (Ridington/Dane-zaa Archive [RDA] CMC 8-1).

Charlie Yahey was the last of the Dreamers. The Dreamers have been essential to Dane-zaa life since before white people came to their land. Dreamers are men, and sometimes women, who can follow a trail of song to a place beyond the sky where they come into contact with the spirits of the people who have gone before. Prior to contact, they were hunt chiefs who visualized the plans for communal hunts. Since the white people came, Dreamers have dreamed about the future and told their people how to cope with the pressures of living in a changing world. This book would not have been possible without Charlie Yahey's wise words and the encouragement he gave Robin to document his knowledge.

For us, this book is more than a collaborative ethnography. It is a celebration and fulfillment of fifty years of friendship, and it expresses our appreciation of the Dane-zaa. Any wisdom that it contains comes from the wise stories we have been privileged to learn. Any errors are our own. If this book informs and enriches the lives of future generations, we will have achieved the purpose set out for us by the Doig River First Nation. The Dane-zaa oral history that follows goes back more than two hundred years. Many of the stories are no doubt much older than that. We hope that two hundred years from now the descendants of today's Dane-zaa will continue to learn from the wise stories the elders remembered.

1

The Dane-zaa Creation Story

Every culture has a story that takes us back to the beginning of time. The Dane-zaa creation story has many parallels with explanations of the universe found in Western science. It describes the unfolding of time and space, but unlike the creation story told by physicists, the Dane-zaa creation story is also about people, animals, and other living things. It also bears similarities to the biblical story of creation, but creation unfolds in the Dane-zaa universe as a result of conversations between the creator and conscious and sentient animal persons, rather than through the actions of a solitary creator. As in the Bible, the Dane-zaa creation story begins with an enormous body of water and a creator, but it then takes a different direction. The creator, Yaak'ih Sadę (Sky Keeper), draws a cross on the water as a way of establishing the four directions. He or she (Dane-zaa Záágé? has gender neutral pronouns, and we follow that usage in our commentaries) then sends animals down beneath the water's surface to bring back earth, from which Yaak'ih Sadę creates land. Muskrat dives way down and brings a bit of earth up under his or her fingernails. The creator tells this earth to grow, and it eventually becomes large enough to support people and the animals whose bodies give the people life. Instead of giving man dominion over other beings, the creator enters into a conversation with the animal people, who already existed in the creator's mind. Indeed, humans do not play an important part in the Dane-zaa creation story. Sky Keeper made men and women, just as he or she made him- or herself. The late Dreamer Charlie Yahey told Robin two versions

of the Dane-zaa creation story. At the end of the second version, the Dreamer says, “At that time, there was starting to be people” (Ridington/Dane-zaa Archive [RDA], CY 8).

This creation story is the basis on which the Dane-zaa First Nations’ understanding of the past, present, and future has been built. The creation story is so familiar to those brought up speaking Dane-zaa *Záágé?* that it is seldom told from beginning to end. Every Dane-zaa person recognizes elements of the story that form part of other stories. References to the cross on the water and to the Muskrat come up frequently in ordinary conversation, much the same way that a literate Christian can bring up a Bible story, knowing that his or her audience of believers will understand the references. Similarly, when Dane-zaa storytellers talk about Chehk’aa, the Muskrat, listeners already know that this animal played a central role in creation. The late Sally Makadahay was called Chehk’aa. For those who knew her, she was both a unique human being and the embodiment of the brave little muskrat who long ago brought up from the primordial ocean a speck of dirt that became the world.

When Dane-zaa children listen to elders telling stories, they hear bits and pieces of the creation story. When Robin heard segments in the mid-1960s, he realized that there was a bigger story, and he wanted to hear the whole thing from beginning to end. Only someone from outside the culture would have thought to ask for the whole story in one sitting. The obvious person to give such a special telling was the last Dreamer, Charlie Yahey. Charlie Yahey was a Dreamer for everyone in the former Fort St. John Band as well as for Dane-zaa of the Halfway River and Prophet River bands. Robin recorded him speaking to people at both Doig River and Halfway River as well as at his own Blueberry River Reserve. Charlie insisted that his real home was Charlie Lake, the lake near Fort St. John that was named for his stepfather, Usulets (Big Charlie), and perhaps also for his grandfather Charlie Aluulah. The Fort St. John Band was divided into the Doig River and Blueberry River bands one year after the Dreamer’s death in 1976. His relatives and descendants are now members of both these First Nations.

Robin first recorded the Dreamer telling the creation story in August 1965, when he visited the Halfway River Reserve with people from Prophet River. One of Charlie Yahey’s daughters, Jihgenahshihle (pronounced “Chikenesia”), lived at Halfway with her husband, Bob Achla, and their children. Back then, vehicles such as Robin’s 1965 Chevy panel truck were rare at Halfway River. People still used horses

and wagons as their main means of transportation. Jihgenahshihle asked Robin to drive her son Amos Achla to the Blueberry Reserve to pick up Charlie Yahey. When they arrived, Charlie was out hunting, but on his return, he and his wife, Aanaatsweq̓ (Bella Attachie), were glad to visit relatives from another community. On the drive to Blueberry River, Robin had the car radio tuned to CKNL, the Fort St. John radio station. On the way back, he turned the radio on again. Without a word, Amos turned it off. When Robin asked Amos why he had done that, Amos replied, “Old man don’t like that kind music.” He provided no further information. Robin later learned that Charlie Yahey’s power meant that he could not listen to the sound produced by a stretched string without becoming “too strong.” Country and western music is full of guitars and fiddles. Any Dane-zaa knows that the medicine power of another Dane-zaa must be respected. To wilfully ignore that knowledge is to disrespect the other person’s power and to risk turning that power into a destructive force.

For a few days, Charlie visited with his daughter and with elders from Halfway River and Prophet River. He sang with the drummers and spent many hours talking with Mrs. Skookum (Amaa), one of the few women Dreamers. Finally, he was ready to make a recording of the creation story Robin had requested. Robin quickly set up his reel-to-reel Uher tape recorder. Charlie told the creation story and several others. His contemporaries Augustine Jumbie, Sawe (Jumbie’s wife), Thomas Hunter, and Mrs. Skookum served as an audience.

Charlie Yahey wanted Robin to record his words so that, as he said, “the world will listen to my voice.” As a Dreamer, Charlie could see ahead to a time when his words and songs would become an important resource for future generations. By speaking into the tape recorder, he sent a message to the people who would come after him.

Robin got a quick translation of the story. Many years later, in 2006, he sat down with Doig linguist Billy Attachie and recorded a closer translation of part of the story. Billy explained that Dane-zaa *Záágé?* speakers often use fewer words to describe something than do English speakers. Robin and Billy agreed on ways to fill in words to make Billy’s literal translation meaningful in English. This contextualization appears in brackets in the oral stories or as lengthier footnotes. Dane-zaa storytelling is full of references to knowledge that the storyteller assumes the listener already has, knowledge that requires no further explanation. For instance, storytellers assume that listeners understand that dreaming is an important way to obtain knowledge. At one point in the creation story, Charlie Yahey says:

When this world began, it was all covered with water.
 There were no people. There was only him [Sky Keeper].
 He made a big cross. He floated that cross on the water.
 (RDA, CY 8)

Charlie simply refers to the creator with a personal pronoun, which in English is usually translated as *him* but in Dane-zaa *Záágé?* can mean *him*, *her*, or *it*. In his translation, Billy Attachie substitutes *God* for the pronoun. To a modern Western reader, the term *God* almost inevitably suggests an image from the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition. Charlie Yahey specifically distinguishes between the Western way of knowing through books and the Dane-zaa way of knowing through dreaming. The Dane-zaa have had contact with the Catholic Church for a hundred and fifty years. Many now embrace evangelical Christianity, yet knowledge through dreaming continues to be an important way of making contact with the spirits of animals and human ancestors. Charlie Yahey and other storytellers often refer to the creator as *Yaak'ih Sadę*, which literally means “Heaven He’s Sitting” but in a more abstract sense could be translated as “motionless at the centre of the heavens.” *Yaak'ih* in Dane-zaa *Záágé?* means “beyond the sky, heaven, or the heavens.” *Sadę* is more complex but expresses the concept of sitting or being motionless. Garry Oker gives *Yaak'ih Sadę* a more poetic translation – “Sky Keeper.” Garry’s version tells us that *Yaak'ih Sadę* is the keeper of the heavens, in the same way that each animal species has its own keeper. We have chosen to use *Sky Keeper*. When referring to God rather than the creator, Dane-zaa commonly use the more Christianized term *Ahatáá?* (Our Father).

Charlie Yahey’s Creation Story: Version 1

These people, the white people, must have known
 about how Sky Keeper created the world.
 They knew it because they read it in a book.
 I myself am not old enough to remember what happened.
 I don’t know what was in their book. I don’t remember that
 far back.
 I only know with my dream.

With my dream, I know about everything that has gone before.
 I drew a picture of the trail to heaven.

I drew a picture of what I saw in my dream.
The ancestors of the white people must have had a history
about what happened long ago.
They have a history about how he made it for them to live.
That history is in their book.

This land, this whole world, was created many times.
This story is about two or three of the worlds that he made.
A long time ago, someone stayed in a boat.
I don't know much, but with my dream, I can find the trail.
I can find the right way.
I can remember when the Dreamers made new songs.
I didn't say anything. I just listened to them singing.
They sang new songs from their dreams.

Ever since I can remember, I have been singing.
Then I started to make songs from my own dreams.
The Dreamers' songs are the music of the Dane-zaa.
They are our music.
The white people have their own music,
but the Dreamers' songs are the Dane-zaa way, our way.
The drum and the Dreamers' songs, those are our music.

You must have good ears to listen.
If you don't, you won't understand.
Those who have good ears, those who are good listeners,
will put their ears toward the storytellers.
They will hang onto what they hear. They will listen to the
stories.
They will remember what they heard. They will hold onto
all of it.
I thought this man himself [Robin] knows everything about
the creator
because he is a white man,
but he wants to hear it from me. He wants to know.

When this world began, it was all covered with water.
There were no people. There was only him [Sky Keeper].
He made a big cross. He floated that cross on the water.
From the centre of that cross,
he sent all the water animals down to find earth.

Many tried but couldn't make it.
 Then Chehk'aa, the little muskrat, tried.
 He went way far down. He dove down deep into the water
 and came up with a little bit of dirt [beneath his nails].
 He just made it back up. He came back.
 Sky Keeper put that earth at the centre of the cross.
 "You are going to grow," he told it.
 "You are going to grow into bigger and bigger ground.
 You are just going to keep on growing."
 Sky Keeper made man, and he made woman
 to stay with him and work with him.

Sky Keeper wrote down everything that happened in a book.*
 What he wrote about came to pass.
 He wrote about water, and it came into being again.
 He wrote about the rivers and creeks.
 He made the water flow into the ocean.
 He made these mountains, too.
 He said that if there were no mountains,
 the ground would break away from the force of the water.
 He made the mountains big so the water wouldn't run out.
 In wintertime, too, the snow falls, and then it melts,
 and there is lots of water on the land.
 There is lots of water, but it goes into the big water, the ocean.
 He made it like that.

After he finished with making the mountains and waters of
 this world,
 he made the rest of the animals. He made moose.
 He made black bear. He made mountain sheep and fish.
 He knew that this world was becoming big.
 He thought about how the people were going to live.
 The people need animals. He made the spruce grouse.
 He made everything from the mountain.
 He made mountain sheep, mountain goat, caribou, deer.
 He wrote them down in his book. He wrote them down
 on paper.†

* Like the way the white people wrote their creation story in a book.

† The Dane-zaa *Záágé?* word for paper is *adíshtl'ishe* (birchbark).

He wanted all the animals to multiply.
He wanted all of them to grow up.

The creator made a world
where all the different birds could find a place to live.
How could they live if it was winter all year long?
He made a place to the south,
where the birds could go during the winter.
They could stay warm there when it is winter and cold
over here.
All the birds that stay down south
know when the time has come to fly back north.
When winter is over, they come back.
Some people don't even know about these things.
They don't know that he made everything for the people.
They don't know this is how it is supposed to be.

When Sky Keeper made this country for us
he gave us the ability to live from the land.
We cut our own wood. We had a hard time,
but he accepted us into his world.
We don't know how to read and write,
but we know what is happening.
Sky Keeper knows that we don't read and write,
but he chose us.
He chose every one of us in this world.
He gave us the ability to dream to heaven.
That is a place where Dreamers talk to one another.
We talk about how to know him.
This is the way he gave us the ability to dream to heaven.
All the different tribes have ways to dream.
That is how it was. That is how he made it.

Someone [Billy says Satan] tried to imitate Sky Keeper,
but his creations were all the bad things.
He created the bad things when he tried to copy Sky Keeper.
That was the way it was, when Tsááyaa [the Transformer]
began to follow the trails of the giant animals.
Tsááyaa made all the world nice and quiet for us.
He killed one of the big animals. He followed its trail.
When he caught up with that big animal, he killed it.

He cut its body up into pieces and threw the meat away.
Every time a piece of that meat landed on the ground,
it turned into a different animal, like fisher and marten.
Even wolverine, the boss of all the fur animals,
came from a piece of meat he threw down. That is how it is.

When Sky Keeper created the world,
the other one did the same thing, too.
But Sky Keeper made all the different trees – poplar, willow,
spruce.
He made all the different trees for the animals.
The animals started to eat those leaves.
Each different animal found the one it liked to eat.
They ate more of the ones they liked,
and those trees became more abundant.
Sky Keeper made beaver to live in the creek
and live from the poplar trees.
As there became many beavers all over the country,
they spread out to live in all the rivers and creeks.
There came to be many beavers. That is how it was.
He made all the different animals.
He made caribou and the rest of the animals
that live in the mountains. He made the big whistlers
[marmots], too.

The animals remember that Sky Keeper provided for them.
When the winter is very hard, they start talking to him.
They start praying. When they can't survive on their own,
they begin to talk and pray to him.
Sky Keeper hears their voices. He answers them
and makes warmer weather return.
People are not the only ones who call out to him.
All the animals do the same thing.

Each animal has a different song.
The Dreamers sing songs about the different animals.
Swan, without dying, went straight through to heaven.*
There is a song about this.

* Like the Dreamer, Swan is able to fly through to heaven without dying.

If there are not enough swans on Earth,
they stop flying through and let the population grow up again.*

Even prairie chickens multiply in this world.
Sometimes there will be no prairie chickens and no rabbits.
Then, sometime after, they will come back.
After that, there sure are lots of them.
When they eat up all the little trees that are their food,
the trees are all gone. They disappear.
Then everything grows back, and they come back again.

Sky Keeper made himself.
He made everything else in the same way he made himself.
He made the water, everything.
He even made those big stars in the sky.
He made the big kettle [the Big Dipper] in the sky.
He made all the different stars. He made the moon.
He thought, "If there are no stars, no North Star,
when it's dark, it's going to be really dark."
He made the stars and moon so that it will not get really
dark at night.
He must have written everything down, how to make it.
If the big kettle goes wrong, it is going to be the end of
the world.
Just watch the big kettle every night. It stays in the same place.
When it's coming toward daylight,
it goes way up and turns right around.
When it turns around, that means that daylight is ready to
return.
He made the big kettle. He made how it goes around in the sky.

This is what I am thinking. I am thinking about the way it is.
Everything started happening.
Some people must have known, but they didn't do anything
about it.
I am the last one of the Dreamers. I am the only one left here.
This man [Robin] is recording my voice.

* The implication is that, although Charlie is the last living Dreamer, there may be more Dreamers in the future.

This whole big world will listen to my voice.
 Through this tape recorder, the world will listen to my voice.
 (RDA, CMC 8-1)

Charlie Yahey's Creation Story: Version 2

In 1968, Robin was eager to record more of Charlie Yahey's words. He wanted to ask how Dreamers get their songs and have Charlie tell the creation story again. In July, Charlie Yahey visited his relatives at the Doig River Reserve. He sent word to Robin that he was ready to make a recording. He chose to do this in the house of Jack Acko and his wife, Eskama. Eskama was the daughter of Charlie's cousin sister (his father's brother's daughter) Tl'ok'ih Náázat. Jack was the grandson of another cousin. At that time, kinship ties were far more important than administrative details such as which reserve a person was officially registered to, and the people at both the Doig and Blueberry reserves shared membership in the Fort St. John Band. Jack Askoty interpreted the questions Robin put to Charlie. Charlie began by explaining how Dreamers get their songs. Eddie Apsassin provided this translation. (See Appendix 1 for a line-by-line phonetic transcription of the translation by Patrick Moore and Eddie Apsassin.)

That is the way it is. *Háwóch'e*.
 Over here, they [Dreamers] are singing.
 Over here, they [Dreamers] are singing,
 and they bring the song out, just like in this tape recorder.
 That is the way they bring out the song.
 That is how they grab it. That is how they grab it there.
 They wake up with that song over there.
 They grab one song over there and then another one.
 Over here when the dream is moving.
 They wake up holding that song.
 The people over there [in heaven] are singing,
 and they sing it exactly like that.
 They do it exactly like that. They wake up with it.
 Over here, when they grab it. They know it really well.
 Sometimes, when they are going to lose it,
 it seems like it's covered, and then they don't grab it.
 But when they wake in the morning, they grab it really well.
 It looks like this. It's just there. There are many songs like this.

People [Dreamers] are singing like this.
And that is how the people listen to it.

(RDA, CY 8)

When he paused, waiting for another question, Robin asked him to tell the creation story. He laughed and said, “I guess you heard that story before, but you want to hear it twice to see which one is better.”

That is how it was.
Even though he [Robin] knows everything, he wants to know it twice.
When he [Sky Keeper] first made this world, there was not much on the earth.
There was only water. He made that land, and from there, all this land started to grow and grow.
All of it, until all this land became big. That is what people say.
There was only water. What will be on Earth? he thought.
There must be something on it.
He must have had a boat. He would make things by himself.
What he thought about appeared for him.
He made a big raft in the form of a cross.
He floated that raft. He floated that raft, at that time.
He must have done that. Something was looking for this land.
“Go into the water!” he told them, but there was nothing.
Just like that, then, they [animals] crawled out of the water like that.
It was like that.
“Wait, Chehk’áa (Muskrat). You go in the water,” he said. And Chehk’aa was gone.
Chehk’aa pushed up a little bit of land, and he put it on the cross raft.
Sky Keeper placed it there carefully and said, [speaking to the land], “You will grow!”
What he said was written [according to Eddie Apsassin, as commandments].
From then on, the land was growing, growing, growing.
Then finally, finally, then finally,
it must have been then, it must have been, that it was growing.
That’s what people say.

His dog changed itself into a *tlęchuk* [big dog, like a wolf].*
He changed an ordinary dog into a big dog.

That's how it was.

"The earth is so big. Run around it!" he told him
[to find out how large it was].

After that, it disappeared. It was gone a long time,
and it must have travelled to a different land.

And when it returned, it brought back a person's arm.

"That is not what I made you for," he told it.

Then he sent it away. "This dog will sit behind us people.

You will only eat behind us now!

Now you will stay where you belong" [as a camp dog].

There was nothing. There was nothing at all.

People know about it. "They will run on this land," he said.

And then the wolf changed back into a camp dog,
and from there it disappeared for a long time like that
[travelling around the world].

Then, finally, finally, it was gone.

"Ah, what happened to the dog I love?"

He knew how things would be.

"Wait, he shall live by his legs," he thought [so it could catch
game].

As he thought these things, they were written [as
commandments].

He made its teeth out of metal. They are still like that today.

When it grabs something, its teeth are just like a knife.

And then, back then, he must have made this earth big.

Even though the dog ran away, it could not hide.

The dog heard him, but did not do what he was told.

That's what the people said.

Then something was coming onto the land, coming together
onto it.

It was just like the birds landing in flocks, there were so many.

He [the dog] went where people stayed different places,

* Eddie translated *tlęchuk* as "horse," the modern meaning of the word, but in the context of this story it makes more sense to translate it literally as "big dog."

but not just to visit people [the dog showed the people where the Creator was staying].

At that time, there were starting to be people.

(RDA, CY 8)

Understanding the Creation Story

Each telling of a story in Dane-zaa tradition is a new experience. As Tommy Attachie told us when he was identifying Dreamers' songs that Robin had recorded, "When you sing it now, just like new." Charlie Yahey, like his contemporary elders at Doig, told a particular version of a story to fit the audience and the occasion. Telling the creation story is not like reading from the Bible. It is a re-creation, not a recitation. Essential elements of the story are the same in both versions, but the storyteller puts together particular elements differently with each telling. The storyteller may choose to emphasize different elements in different settings, but the essential meanings remain the same. In this case, the common and essential element is the story's description of how the physical world as we know it came into being as a product of the creator's thought and communication with the animal people.

The images in Charlies Yahey's stories are similar to those in the Biblical creation story. First there was water. Even the four directions had not yet come into being. Into the creator's mind, his dream, came the idea, the image, of a place where north, south, east, and west came together. He wanted the world to grow from that centre, so he floated a raft in the form of a cross on the water.

Every Dane-zaa singer's drum offers a visual retelling of the creation story. Each drum is round and has a cross of babiche (cord made of rawhide or sinew) to hold onto. Charlie Yahey's double-sided Dreamer's drum pictures the cross at the centre of creation, and each side of the drum tells the story in a slightly different way. Charlie asked Robin to photograph him holding the drum and told Robin that it had been made by Gayeꞁ, his teacher.

The image of a place where trails intersect is central to Dane-zaa hunting. Hunters say that it is impossible to kill an animal without first having dreamed of a place where the animal's trail and that of the hunter come together. An image of the creation story, a centre where two trails come together, exists within every hunt dream. When



Charlie Yahey with Dreamer's drum, 1968. Photos by Robin Ridington

a hunter encounters an animal in his dream, he shares an image of creation with that animal. An animal will not give itself to a hunter unless it trusts that the hunter will respect its body and use it generously for the benefit of his people. When an animal gives itself to the hunter and its body is used with respect, the animal's spirit is born again in the body of another animal. Each hunt makes the world "just like new."

Charlie Yahey's creation story is similar to that of many other First Nations and to stories told by aboriginal peoples in many other places throughout the world. The story sets out the fundamental qualities of time and space within which human activity takes place. As the story begins, there is only water and no directions. The water's surface is flat and without contour. The creator wants to extend the dimension of vertical space, so he sends Chehk'aa, the Muskrat, down to discover earth. As Chehk'aa dives down, he explores the vertical dimension and discovers earth at the ocean's bottom. At the story's end, the land is created, complete with mountains, ridges, valleys, and rivers. The Dreamer tells us that swans, like Dreamers, can fly through to heaven without dying and return in the same body. The flight of swans and Dreamers completes a three-dimensional world. Muskrat dives down from the centre. Swan flies up from the same place. All of this complex symbolism is inherent and understood in Charlie Yahey's creation story.