

GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN KUTCHIN

(Northern Athapaskan)

A Preliminary Report of Research Activities


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From:

John T. Ritter
Assistant Professor of Linguistics
Michigan State University, and
National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow
Alaska Native Language Center
University of Alaska




I. General Aims

The purpose of this project is to record, as exhaustively as possible, the geographical nomenclature of the Kutchin Athapaskan Indian bands of the Yukon and Northwest Territories. It is part of a much broader ethnographic and linguistic study of the Kutchin supported by a contract from the Ethnology Division, National Museum of Man. Virtually all field work has been conducted among the Peel River Kutchin of Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories, but important supplementary data have been gathered in the course of periodic visits to the neighboring Kutchin settlements of Arctic Red River, Northwest Territories, and Old Crow, Yukon Territory.

There are several motivations for conducting a toponymic survey among the native northern peoples. First, there has been only one substantive account of Northern Athapaskan place-names to date (Osgood, in press) and that, based on data obtained in 1928, deals exclusively with the Great Bear Lake region. While the Kutchin have been the subject of numerous ethnographic studies (Balikci 1963; McKennan 1965; Osgood 1936; Slobodin 1962), none of them have dealt with toponymy in any direct fashion -- perhaps in part because the topic was viewed as tangential to the central focus of those studies, perhaps in part too because of the linguistic difficulties which attend any serious investigation of place-names. Only Slobodin (1962) makes explicit reference to the detail and richness of Kutchin toponymy, giving English translations of names of historically important areas and sites. While the existence of a large and untapped reserve of important historical information has thus been noted, little by way of explicit documentation has appeared. The present study is designed to fill this lacuna in our knowledge of Kutchin traditional culture.

A compelling reason for undertaking the study at the present time lies in the fact that extensive knowledge of toponymy is found -- with few exceptions -- only among the oldest remaining Kutchin speakers, i.e., those who traveled on the land throughout most of their lives and who have in only relatively recent years been drawn into sedentary settlement life. While mortality has already taken a severe toll among these people, enough of them do remain to provide, collectively, an accurate and detailed account of band movements, land-use, and toponymy dating back to the turn of the century. From their "memory culture" it is possible to make consistent projections into the last half of the nineteenth century. The number of individuals who can contribute to this reconstructed mosaic is fast dwindling, however, and this fact underscores the urgency of completing this work as expeditiously as possible.

The present investigation of place-names fortuitously coincides with the efforts of individual bands to delimit the areas which they have traditionally occupied, an undertaking viewed by them as an essential prerequisite to informed negotiations of aboriginal land claims. The Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories has initiated an intensive land-use study which critically involves the input of the native people themselves. The sorts of questions they pose will center around such topics as individual trapping and fishing areas, favored hunting sites, and the dynamics of land occupancy in general; and it is quite likely that their investigations will touch on toponymy as well. The evidence resulting from these parallel areas of investigation will be mutually supportive and reinforcing. The results of the present Kutchin toponym project, originally conceived as an historical reconstruction of land occupancy, should therefore intermesh with and lend support to what is, conceptually, a quite different avenue of inquiry.



Finally, compiling an accurate list of place-names can also serve to correct and expand the body of toponyms which appear on existing maps. For a large portion of Kutchin traditional land few, if any, names of local origin have made their way into official EMR maps. In some cases toponyms of native provenance are given, but even these meager few are often misplaced or mistranslated. The Department of Energy, Mines and Resources is now in the process of compiling an exhaustive set of 1:50,000-scale maps for these regions, so this is a particularly propitious time to make the proper emendations and additions. All recommendations will be made with the advice and approval of the Settlement and Band Councils and forwarded to the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names.

II. Research Schedule and Methodology

During the summer of 1972 initial survey trips were made by boat and covered the Peel River from its confluence with the Mackenzie to as far south as Mount Deception on the Wind River, one of the major tributaries of the Peel lying in the northern Yukon Territory. A subsequent trip into the upper Peel drainage in the summer of 1973 allowed us to recheck the original data and to make a brief side trip into the Snake River, another important tributary of the Peel. During the same summers several boat trips were made between Ft. McPherson and Inuvik and the names gathered in the course of these trips allowed us to extend our coverage to include at least a portion of the Mackenzie Delta proper.

Since summer travel by boat is limited to major navigable areas, the vast majority of the land traditionally occupied by the Kutchin could be "surveyed" only through the medium of informant accounts. Typically our procedure in this case consisted in eliciting the names along certain common routes (Fort


McPherson to Dawson City; Arctic Red River to Fort Good Hope; etc.) which many people could recite from memory with unerring accuracy. We then attempted to locate these points as accurately as possible on the maps at our disposal. Although the 1:250,000-scale sheets are far too gross for the purposes of collecting extremely fine detail, it was possible to arrive at quite reliable grid-points for each named site by cross-checking individual accounts and by utilizing the talents of several informants who are skilled in map reading. The difficulties involved in this procedure were considerably lessened when working on regions covered by presently available 1:50,000-scale maps.

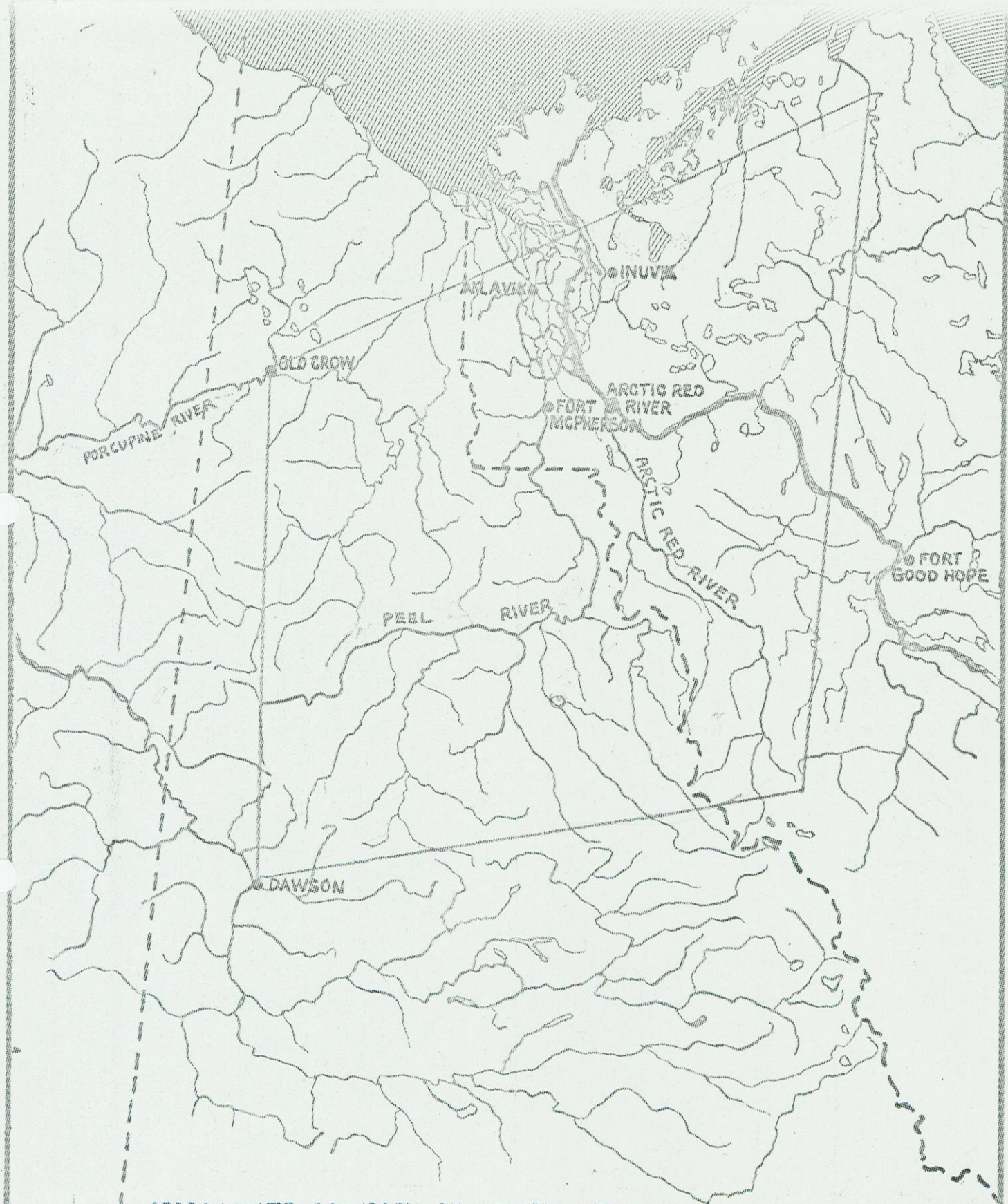
III. Polar Continental Shelf Project Assistance

For two successive summers PCSP has made fuel and equipment available to the Kutchin place-names project. It has supplied the use of a 14' fibreglass speedboat and 20hp. Mercury outboard motor and donated approximately 500 gallons of gasoline and 10 cases of oil. We wish to gratefully acknowledge this material support from PCSP which has made it possible for the project to proceed at a smooth and unencumbered pace.

IV. Findings

Approximately 550 Kutchin toponyms have been recorded to date. The boundaries of the named areas are sketched on the accompanying map (p. 5). A numerical breakdown by band is as follows: Peel River Kutchin 315, Arctic Red River Kutchin 220, with the remainder lying either within Old Crow Kutchin territory proper or else within the shared Peel River/Old Crow land interface. It would be seriously misleading, of course, to speak of boundaries (as a formal entity) between the three groups. The entire network of named territory can be described as a rough quadrangle with the following extremal points:






APPROXIMATE BOUNDARY OF NAMED AREAS
PEEL AND ARCTIC RED RIVER KUTCHIN
YUKON AND NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Old Crow, Yukon Territory, on the northwest; Anderson River on the northeast; Dawson City, Y.T., on the southwest; and the upper reaches of the Arctic Red River on the southeast. Within this quadrangle certain densely named regions can be found, and these are, of course, obvious reflections of land occupancy patterns. For the Arctic Red River Kutchin this includes the large lake-filled area centering around Travaillant Lake; for the Peel River Kutchin it encompasses the general area described as Rat Pass, as well as the entire stretch of the Peel River from the Mackenzie south to the mouth of Snake River. The Mackenzie Delta contains a large number of sites named by both groups. Due to budgetary and logistic limitations it has not been possible as yet to gather an equally detailed account of Old Crow Kutchin toponymy, and our record of it must be considered extremely preliminary.

A carefully detailed account of these toponyms is now being prepared and should be available for distribution by July, 1974. Thus far we have analyzed the data into lists of generic terms for topographical and directional features (rock and soil types, watercourses, vegetation types, cardinal points, etc.), as well as into categories for individual place-names. The latter include names which commemorate historical or mythical events, individual people, and striking local features. Transcriptions are given both in English and Kutchin, the latter employing a modern practical writing system. We present below three sample entries which illustrate the nature of the documentation thus far gathered. The numbers correspond to grid points displayed on a full set of maps which accompany the report.



Examples:

#54. chan tr'inehlik tshik

Starvation Creek (WN)

(again people-coming-together creek)

This creek has its source in the plateau area separating the Peel and Arctic Red River watersheds. According to informant reports the mouth of the creek does not freeze during the winter months and it is said that loche can always be obtained there. WN states that in former years the Peel River people knew that they could always return to this creek in the event of a scarcity of game and thus be saved from potential starvation. The area has often been trapped in by Peel River Kutchin and is considered good marten country.

#55. ta'ai khanjilnai

Paddle Creek

(paddle it-split-apart)

Designated "George's Creek" on Count DeSainville's early map (cf. Graham 1935), this name has also been recorded on subsequent EMR topographic maps. Its origin is unknown: all Peel River Kutchin call it "Paddle Creek" in English and claim no knowledge of "George's Creek" except as a White importation. All reports agree too that the name derives from a small band of Eskimo intruders who managed to penetrate that far south into the heartland of Peel River country. It is said that by the time the Eskimos had traveled up river for such a distance they were compelled to stop at this creek and fashion new paddles, their old ones having been worn out and "broken up" after such lengthy and difficult travel.

WN states that the "old timers" related to him that the Peel River Kutchin were aware that Eskimos were traveling the river at that time, but that it was their custom to remain in the bushes rather than risk a direct

confrontation. He presumes that the event must have taken place "over 200 years ago" and states, "The Eskimos don't care how far they go. They're strong people that time."

It is not clear whether this was a single event or whether the Eskimos actually penetrated into this area more than once. It may be impossible to resolve this issue, but the event must have occurred in pre-contact times because none of the historical accounts of Kutchin-Eskimo encounters mentions anything of this particular region, and all reported skirmishes and battles were fought considerably to the south of present-day Paddle Creek (cf. Slobodin 1962: 24, 25). The evidence thus suggests that in some pre-contact period the Mackenzie Eskimos were able to make at least one lengthy incursion into what must have been, at the time, hostile foreign territory.

#80. shildii

Shiltee Rock

(etymology unknown)

Shildii is a well-known sandstone formation located on the top of a small hill several miles above Fort McPherson. It is the subject of an interesting legend which is short enough to quote in its entirety here. The following is an English translation of the Kutchin original recorded by Mr. William Nersyoo.

"Long ago an old couple lived at Scraper Rock (located a few miles above Shildii). They had two sons and one daughter. The daughter, who was named Ts'ehch'in, had magical powers. She lived apart from her parents in a separate hut and was looked after by them. She ate very little and spoke very rarely. One day her brothers said, 'We're going up to the mountains

to hunt.' The mother told Ts'ehch'in, 'When your brothers return from the hunt you musn't say a word'. Some time passed and one day, while the mother was making bannock, Ts'ehch'in saw her brothers walking down the mountain toward them, accompanied by a small dog. Ts'ehch'in was so happy to see her brothers returning that she called out, 'Mother, my older brotners are coming back!'. The very minute that she said this the two brotners turned into stone pillars. The dog also turned into stone. All the bannock which Ts'ehch'in's mother had made, it too turned into stone.

"I don't know what became of Ts'ehch'in and her parents after that. When I was a small child I saw the two big rocks with the dog standing between them. My people told me about them. One of the rocks later fell down and when it did lots of Peel River people died off. Now today only one rock remains standing. If that one falls down, we'll have to wait to see what happens."

V. Map Corrections


Certain names of Kutchin origin have been placed on topographic maps but are either misplaced or inaccurately translated. One section of the final report is devoted to correcting these errors, and by way of illustration we present below a list of emendations to sheet 116P, "Bell River" (1:250,000-scale).

(a) Corrections:

- (1) "Bear Creek", flowing into Rat River from the north at approximately $67^{\circ} 44'$; $136^{\circ} 7'$, should instead read "Sheep Creek". Bear Creek is located a few miles to the east of Sheep Creek (cf. sheet 106M, #6).

- (2) "Sheep Creek", flowing into Rat River from the south at approximately $67^{\circ} 44'$; $136^{\circ} 17'$, should read "Rampart Creek".
- (3) "Rat River," flowing from the mountains on the east and emptying into Bell River at approximately $67^{\circ} 26'$; $136^{\circ} 57'$, is an error. It should bear the name "Lashupe Creek".

(b) Additions:

- (1) "Horn Lake", located in the Rat Pass at approximately $67^{\circ} 45'$; $136^{\circ} 3'$.
- (2) "Drum Creek" flows into Rat River from the south at approximately $67^{\circ} 44'$; $136^{\circ} 26'$.
- (3) "Summit Lake", with approximate coordinates $67^{\circ} 43'$; $136^{\circ} 30'$, is known as "Loon Lake" in English and Kutchin. The map designation should be changed to reflect this fact.
- (4) The single creek flowing between the Big Bell and Little Bell Rivers is known as "Loon Lake Creek".
- (5) "Yeechyah Creek" flows from the north into the Big Bell River at approximately $67^{\circ} 42'$; $136^{\circ} 49'$.
- (6) "Isaac's Fish Trap" is a point on the Big Bell River at approximately $67^{\circ} 27'$; $136^{\circ} 54'$.
- (7) "Standing Timber Creek" flows into Lashupe Creek from the north at approximately $67^{\circ} 22'$; $136^{\circ} 25'$.
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VI. Toponymy and Land-Use Reconstructions

Intimately bound up with the topic of toponymy is that of land-use by the Kutchin people, but in principle the two investigations must be kept separate. If a given area is named in Kutchin then, ipso facto, it must be known to them. From this rather simple fact, however, it cannot immediately be assumed that a list of toponyms would provide a necessarily revealing picture of land use by the band at any one point in time. What the toponyms do provide, on the other hand, is a static historical schema of land use, revealing the general outlines of land occupancy by successive generations of Kutchin people.

A considerable amount of information concerning land use has been gathered in the course of this investigation, most of it offered spontaneously by informants in discussions of individual creeks, lakes, and mountains. This information is included in the commentaries on each named site, but it must be considered fragmentary and incomplete with respect to collective band use. Fuller documentation will no doubt emerge from the intensive studies planned by the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories.

VII. Proposed Research, Summer 1974

A major effort is presently being made to systematize and analyze the body of data thus far recorded, and it is anticipated that the summer months will be devoted largely to finishing this task. Only two boat trips are tentatively planned at present. The first will concentrate on the Mackenzie Delta in the vicinity of Aklavik, while the second will trace the Mackenzie from Arctic Red River to Fort Good Hope.

A serious gap in our documentation consists of those areas north of Old Crow commonly referred to as the "Crow Flats", and indeed we have not yet

obtained anywhere near the detail for the Old Crow area that we have for the Peel and Arctic Red River regions. Therefore two weeks of intensive work will be conducted in Old Crow during the summer months.

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