

Mitho Pimachesowin through Economic Development

The Legend of Thanadelthur: Elders' Oral History and Hudson's Bay Company Journals

Tthainaltth'er noriya hołts'j, Ęna chu Dene chu ętehęla nj; Bęghę honj ęrit'is hęla (HBC), ęłnędhę behonię tth'i łę sj

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Abstract: This article introduces the legend of Thanadelthur, a Dene woman who had a profound impact on the Dene people in Northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba during the eighteenth century fur trade. Thanadelthur was instrumental in the negotiation of a peace treaty between the Dene and Cree, and in helping the Dene to build a trade relationship with the Hudson's Bay Company. These actions helped to create new economic opportunities for Dene communities and a good life for Thanadelthur's people. While Thanadelthur's life is documented in scholarly works and Hudson's Bay Company journals, those records do not tell the entire story. Thus, this article also recounts oral stories told by Elders and others in order to expand this legend to include the perspective of the Dene. In bringing together the reports from Dene oral historians, scholars, and other authors, this article outlines the remarkable events in Thanadelthur's life in order to underscore her historical significance to our communities and Canada at large. This article is a chapter in the open textbook *Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin (Ability to Make a Good Living)* developed for the University of Saskatchewan course Indigenous Studies 410/810, and hosted by the *Northern Review*.

Tthainaltth'er t'ę-u Cęmpani Kęę ha Dene chu, Enę chu ętehęla nj snj, t'a-u dahłęłghęł nj-u; ęłnędhi chu Cęmpani Kęę honj njhęnjla si diri bęghę honj sj. Dene ętehęla tl'ęghę tsądhedh k'ets'jdel nj. Tthainaltth'er Denesuline ha njdhen-ų, la Dene ha horenjle hęł, Dene dorełti njthen t'a Dene ts'jnį nj. Tthainaltth'ur bęghę honj łę, ęrit'is k'e tth'i hęla, ęłnędhi behonię tth'i łę sj. T'ę-u Tthainaltth'er huya, yanathę honj k'onj ha. Canada k'eyaghę nąide si, Tthainaltth'er denęgodhę helj kuli horjcha hołts'j nj; Dena ha.

Introduction

This article introduces the legend of Thanadelthur, a Dene woman who had a profound impact on the Dene People during the eighteenth century fur trade in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The Dënesųliné herald Thanadelthur as the “Peacemaker,” as she was instrumental in the negotiation of a peace treaty between the Dene and Cree at a time when the Cree, who had access to guns, were prohibiting the Dene from accessing Hudson Bay. The famous peacemaking expedition, the 600 mile (966 km) walk led by Thanadelthur on June 27, 1715 (Book, 2001, p. 71), made a mark on Canadian fur trade history. Important references have been made to Thanadelthur’s peacemaking journey in the *Canadian Biographies* (Thorman, 2018) and the *Canadian Encyclopedia* (Conn, 2018). There are poignant points of Thanadelthur’s life that have been included in Hudson’s Bay Company archives and re-told by Elders and in stories shared by family and the community of Wollaston Lake, also known as Hatchet Lake Denesuline First Nation.

The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) also credit her negotiation skills for enhancing the company. Van Kirk (1974) states, “In the fall of 1714 when James Knight reclaimed the fort from the French under the Treaty of Utrecht, he was anxious not only to re-establish English trade but to extend it northward” (p. 41). Governor James Knight had a future plan—he wanted the Northern Dene to trade at York Factory (Fort York), on the southwestern shore of Hudson Bay. For his plan to work, however, peace would need to be made between the Dene and the Cree (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 67).

The Athabaskan Dene from Black Lake, Fond du Lac, and Hatchet Lake in Northern Saskatchewan are part of the Athabaskan People traditionally known as *Ĕdtthën Eldeli* (Caribou Eaters). The Athabaskan linguistic group of Dene occupy a vast area from Alaska eastward to the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and northern British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba along the Subarctic treeline. This article conveys the story of the Peacemaker from the perspectives of the Dene in Northern Saskatchewan. The literature and resources I rely on are from scholars, other authors, and Dene oral historians, who discuss how the story of Thanadelthur came to life and the events that unfolded. This is a story of a young Dene woman who took charge of a peace mission in order to benefit her people.

Thanadelthur’s Story

The company clerks who wrote the Hudson’s Bay Company journals recorded that, along with a small group of Dene hunters and her female friend, Thanadelthur was captured by Cree during a 1713 raid while hunting caribou south of the Barren Lands between Chesterfield Inlet and Eskimo Point, now known as Arviat. This young woman, described as a slave by her Cree captors, was from the *Ĕdtthën Eldeli*; in the history books she is Thanadelthur, while oral Dene historians called her *Tthainaltth’er* (Marten Shake), and the HBC archives refer to her as Slave Woman. Contemporary Dene recently took offence to her “Slave Woman” name, and they renamed her “the Peacemaker.”

Thanadelthur and her friend were held captive by their Cree master Natawapish, who took the two women as wives for a year. While in captivity, Thanadelthur observed the Cree using tools and utensils that her people did not have and which could ease the work of her people. Abel notes that Thanadelthur’s captors used guns and tools that made life easier for women and provided the weapons that killed her people, and reiterated that, “the metal tools and household utensils would make the lives of Dene women very much more comfortable in the facilitation of everyday tasks” (Abel, 1993, p. 51). She also overheard the Cree talk about trading at the Fort (York Factory) for necessities like guns and ammunition. Thanadelthur “was amazed when she realized that the Cree did not make all the weapons and utensils that gave them power” (Abel, 1993, p. 49). It was then that Thanadelthur began to formulate the idea that if the Cree could use tools to make their lives easier, the Dene could also enjoy these tools. According to Book (2001), Thanadelthur stated that “I want nothing more for my people than peace. I want them to have the things that make your lives easier; that make you better hunters, and make things better for your women. I want this for the Dene” (p. 97).

The version told by the historical records of the company men and the Hudson’s Bay Company archives indicate that Thanadelthur and her friend escaped in the fall while her master was busy at a tribal meeting. Almost a year later, and near starvation, Thanadelthur encountered the British: “Shortly after her companion had perished, she stumbled across some tracks which led her to the tent of the Company’s goose hunters on Ten Shilling Creek” (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 66). The men took her to York Factory and presented her to Governor James Knight. The Governor queried her, and she hastily told him that Cree captured her. She also told Knight tales of gold, copper, and wealth on her homeland (Book, 2001, p. 68). Contu and Hoffman-Mercredi (2002) mentioned that Thanadelthur promised James Knight, “yellow mettle and gold” (p. 133). She said her people covered a vast area and when taught to trap for furs, they would trade at York Factory.

Governor Knight saw the quality of strength and resilience in Thanadelthur. According to Van Kirk (1980), Knight said, “he had come to regard Thanadelthur as one of the most extraordinary persons he had ever met” (p. 69). Thanadelthur’s determination and passion cast her for the role to successfully navigate the HBC peace mission. She was instructed by Governor James Knight to accompany William Stuart and the Cree Captain Wapasu to help navigate the peace mission because she was familiar with Dene territory. Thanadelthur was an asset to the expedition because in addition to speaking her Dene language, she spoke Cree and English; she would be instrumental when peace talks began. The arduous peace journey that began June 27, 1715, and ended May 7, 1716 (see Figure 1), guided by Thanadelthur, is considered one of the most significant accomplishments in Hudson’s Bay Company history (Van Kirk, 1974, p. 41). Sickness and starvation forced most of the Cree in the delegation to return to York Factory. Thanadelthur and the others were camped near the site where another group of Cree had recently massacred a Dene camp. Abel indicates that the Cree party had attacked, and that “nine recently dead bodies were still lying in one of the tents and the other inhabitants had fled” (Abel, 1993, p. 49). At this point, William Stuart deemed the expedition no longer necessary; however, Thanadelthur took control of the situation and requested she journey alone to find her people.

Many researchers have reviewed the Hudson’s Bay archives and reported on the historical events (Oswalt, 1973; Van Kirk, 1980; Heber, 1989; Abel, 1993; Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002); however, the archives do not include the Dene oral history version of Thanadelthur. There is no written account of her ten-day walk in Dene country; however, specific details and events are in traditional oral stories.

The camp waited for ten days; Stuart and the Cree waited for Thanadelthur, and on the tenth day they decided to take the camp down. At the very last hour, an epic moment, and a pivotal moment for Dene history, she appeared with approximately 160 of her people. William Stuart was so happy to see her according to Contu and Hoffman-Mercredi:

With the timing of a legendary heroine, T’tha’nalt’ther chose the last moment to make her dramatic return and the peace ceremony was initiated: On the tenth Day when they were [Resolved] to Stay there no longer the Woman came and [hollered] and made her [signal] she had found some Indians ... 160 of the handsomest [strongest] that Stewart had ever seen in his life came to their tents. (Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002, p. 140)



Figure 1. Map of a possible route of Thanadelthur's peace delegation. Adapted from *Teacher's Guide for Blackships / Thanadelthur: Young Heroes of North America, Vol. 1*, by Rick Book, 2001 (p. 31), developed by Jane Huck, Heartland Associates, 2004. Reprinted with permission.

Although her people came along with her, the tension and fear between the Dene and the Cree were intense. Book states Thanadelthur was frustrated with her kin because she felt they were afraid to make peace and she yelled at the men and women:

‘Do you want to live like hunted rabbits? [sic], Do you want the constant threat of war?’ She was enraged and frustrated because no one was making the first move, she just wanted peace. Thanadelthur stamped her feet in disgust. Whirling around, she ran back, grabbed some women by their coats and pulled them out of the trees into the clearing, ‘Do you want war or peace?’ She pleaded, ‘Do you want sharp knives and guns that mean your children will never go hungry again?’ (Book, 2001, p. 103)

Thanadelthur’s energy and determination were to ensure *ëghëna*, a term used by Dene that means to ensure healthy living, to provide sustenance, and to live by

the laws of the land. When she was near exhaustion, her people finally relented and smoked the peace pipe with the Cree. Book notes that Thanadelthur asked, while smoking the peace pipe with Dene and Cree, “years from now around the fires whose names will be remembered from this day” (2001, p. 103)? Despite the peace negotiation, animosity was still prevalent, and trust had to be re-established. What a momentous moment to begin peace talks; these talks would have been through translation and no doubt Thanadelthur took the lead role.

There is no known painting of Thanadelthur; however, the company clerk could describe her features. William Stuart described Thanadelthur: “She had a flat brown face of a Copper woman with a broad handsome nose and full wide lips” (Book, 2001, p. 64). Her most striking feature was her eyes; there was such determination as though she was obsessed: “There was fierce burning I had never seen before, not in any same man, not in any woman for certain” (Book, 2001, p. 65). An Elder reported that, “She was a very good looking woman” (Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002). When raiding and massacring Dene camps, the Cree often took slave women, especially if they were pleasing to the eye. Hendley (1967) quotes Hudson Bay explorer Samuel Hearne’s description of a Dene’s version of beauty: “A broad flat face, small, high cheekbones, three or four broad black lines across each cheek, a low forehead, a large broad chin, a hook nose, tawny hide...” (p. 11). Multiple sources describe Thanadelthur to be of small stature, five feet tall, and beautiful, and that she could make a full-grown man shake from fear of her (Hendley, 1967; Houston, 1989; Book, 2001; Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002). The stories told by Elders also describe her as a beautiful woman; however, the oral historians did not detail her as a beauty, rather, they acknowledge and concentrate on her accomplishments.

Thanadelthur is considered the first woman in Dene history to be recognized and “one of the few women to have achieved a place in the history of the Canadian North” (Van Kirk, 1974, p. 41). In 2000, Thanadelthur was recognized by the Government of Canada as a Person of National Historic Significance, and in 2003 she was also named an historical role model for youth by the Government of Canada. This recognition was initiated by the Churchill Ladies Club and Sayisi Dene Chief Powderhorn (Book, 2001, p. 107). In 2017, the Sayisi Dene of Tadoule Lake and the communities of Black Lake, Fond du Lac, and Hatchet Lake (Wollaston Lake), along with Parks Canada, bestowed honours on Thanadelthur with a commemorative plaque in Churchill, Manitoba, unveiled by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) Manitoba representative. Canada’s then Minister Responsible for Parks Canada Catherine McKenna, said:

I am proud of the commemoration of Thanadelthur, an inspiring woman who occupied a central role in the consolidation and expansion of the northern fur trade. Her story highlights the significant contributions of Indigenous women in our country’s history, and her accomplishments, as a result of her peace-making attitude, are an inspiration for all of us. I invite all Canadians to discover and be inspired by the stories of the people, places, and events that shaped the land of Canada. (Government of Canada, 2017)

Van Kirk notes that few people in their lifetime attain the status, respect, and authority that this Dene woman achieved in her short life (Van Kirk, 1974). She had a strength of character and raw determination, which could so quickly and easily overturn centuries of patriarchal domination. In McGoogan’s (2003) book, Samuel Hearne, an explorer for the Hudson’s Bay Company, observes that “like beauty, a woman’s temperament was of little consequence, if only because the most stubborn females would be brutally beaten into compliance” (p. 134). Beauty was irrelevant; nevertheless, hardiness was a desirable quality in Dene women who worked hard to keep the camp in order. Their work was a basic expectation and not appreciated by their male kin. Oswalt (1973) further explained that “females were subordinated to men in every way. They were treated cruelly and were held in gross contempt by the men” (p. 42). Thanadelthur’s strength of character indicates that not all women were victims of male power and at the time of her abduction she was in her Dene territory enjoying life on the land.

Oral stories tend to be descriptive, entertaining, and captivating. Unlike the records written by the company men of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the Elders recall that Thanadelthur joined the Cree at the Fort (York Factory) to trade and was told to stand outside, out of view, and to wait. Elder Bart Dzeylion’s version reported that, “The Hudson’s Bay men take Thanadelthur to the fort where the Cree are inside negotiating trade. The manager of the post, Chief Factor James Knight, sees Thanadelthur and asks her to come in” (Holland & Kkailther, 2003, p. 31). She was curious and started looking through the window, and the Balaı (a term used to describe French) saw her and told her to come in. The term Balaı was also used by an Elder in Bussidor’s book (1997, p. 14), and also by Elders who shared their stories of Thanadelthur. (This was in the early 1700s, and the term Balaı was used exclusively at the time the English and French were vying for fur trading territory and competition to conquer the Hudson’s Bay Company.)

According to my father, A. Tsannie, the first encounter with Europeans was fascinating for Thanadelthur, who he referred to as “our grandmother”; she apparently said, “they stood there looking at me like seagulls (bright blue eyes), and they look deathly pale as though they lack blood” (Tsannie, 2015). She took

advantage of her circumstance and began telling the Governor that the Cree were killing her people, and when loud icicles fall Dene people died. She could only relate to her world; there were no guns, and she was referring to the icicles breaking and snapping and making loud cracking noises. Thanadelthur told her people, “These items are for you to lead a good life, *eghēna ha* (to provide life), and to bring fur pelts to trade at York Factory. You will trap marten, fox, and otter to trade at York Factory.” This is how the Dene learned to trap and trade, and this is when Dene started to trap (Tsannie, 2015). My father was a trapper, and we lived this life too.

In the early 1700s, Dene people were in constant hiding, knowing if the Cree came upon them, they would die for sure. One of the gifts given to the Dene by the HBC were hatchets; traditionally, the Dene used a crude handle made from tamarack and with beaver teeth wrapped by caribou sinew for chopping purposes. Imagine how tedious these blunt beaver teeth hatchets would be compared to the steel axe of today. My father told me that it took the Dene one week to chop down trees on a big hill (Tsannie, 2015)! Bart Dzeylion, cited in Holland and Kkailther (2003), shares his story of the Dene’s introduction to the axe:

Before this they use to use beaver teeth. Boy, that axe was sharp! When the people came to the big hill they stopped. One of the men cut down a spruce tree. Then another ... then another ... thousands and thousands of trees. Just about all the trees were gone from that hill. It’s called Sheth gai ye. (p. 32)

According to a young leader, P. Gazandlare (Gazandlare, 2016), this hill is near Keehn Lake in Northern Manitoba. This famous hill is identified as Elders retell the story of when Dene people first accessed axes. According to B. Dzeylion, the location of the hill was White Hill Mountain (as cited in Holland & Kkailther, 2003, p. 32). It is near the vicinity of Keehn Lake (known as *Sakie Tue* in Dene), the location coordinates are latitude 59.1661 and longitude 101.0760, northwest of Whitmore Lake.

Oral stories told by Elders recall that Thanadelthur followed the Cree because she understood Cree. She understood their discussions about business at York Factory. Contu and Hoffman-Mercredi (2002) did a comparative study on oral history and the HBC archives, and they found that oral stories differ if told by Elders who did not speak English compared to Elders who spoke English. There may be a bias from Elders who spoke English:

Elders who retained important traditional knowledge spoke primarily Chipewyan [Dene]. Those Elders who also spoke English were often insistent on relating the story in the Chipewyan language. When asked to repeat a traditional story in subsequent interviews, they did so in an almost rehearsed fashion, with the story maintaining its identical form and content. (Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002, p. 132)

There are many versions of Thanadelthur’s story. Dene from different communities convey slight variations; however, the original story of her captivity and introduction to the fur trade are similar. What the Hudson’s Bay Company did not capture in their journals is the ten-day trek; this version is told through generations of oral storytelling. Thanadelthur wanted her people to participate in the peace exchange. She was exhausted and travelled many miles to find her people. Because of the warfare, the Dene were challenging to find; however, she knew her country and found them. She worked feverishly, talking and shouting to them; thus, her voice was hoarse upon her return to York Factory.

Thanadelthur was a remarkable young lady who exhibited and earned prestige in her role as a negotiator. She was an example of determination in the eighteenth century, and she was an intelligent young woman. She demonstrated her knowledge of the land, linguistic ability, and leadership skills by navigating the peace mission. As indicated by Book (2001), she navigated “using the sun by day and the Wolf Star at night” (p. 67). She successfully negotiated a peace between the Cree and the Ēdthhēn Eldeli. She was reportedly an eloquent woman, forceful enough to persuade hundreds of men to choose commerce over war. She changed a way of life for her Dene people and the Cree by trading peacefully at the Hudson’s Bay Company. While on an expedition, she did not hesitate to discipline her Cree companions. According to Contu and Hoffman-Mercredi (2002), “She made them all stand in fear of her as she scolded at some while pushing at others ... and forced them to be at peace” (p. 138). Her journey of peace was so important to her that she used all her power and might to establish peace and was admired by people who knew her, including the company clerk who admired her:

William Stuart was full of admiration, ‘Indeed she has a Devillish Spirit and I believe that if there were but 50 of her Country Men of the same carriage and Resolution they would drive all the Northern (Southern) Indians in America out of their Country.’ (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 68)

During Thanadelthur’s short life, she continued to promote both the interests of the Hudson’s Bay Company and of her people. Even on her deathbed, she

wanted to ensure her people were cared for. As stated by Book (2001), “she was so determined that her people get new goods that she taught a young English lad her Dene tongue, in her last feverish days” (p. 106). She was sick for several weeks, and her immune system could not handle the European diseases. Then, sadly, she died on February 5, 1717. Governor James Knight lamented her loss and was devastated. Thanadelthur’s character and passion affected the lives of people who were honoured to be in her presence, the Hudson’s Bay Company and Elders who continue to tell her story.

Thanadelthur’s story is about creating a good life for her people; they live by the concept of *ëghëna* (living and creating a good life). She created economic opportunity and resource sustainability for her people and for the Hudson’s Bay Company. The fur trade era caused monopolization and exploitation of land for trapping that resulted in war between the Cree and Dene. As Bone (2001) wrote, “profit was the foundation of the Hudson’s Bay Company. For over 300 years, the HBC dominated the Canadian fur trade. This British company was the most powerful economic, social, and political force in the Canadian North” (p. 71). Thanadelthur’s role as a peacemaker impacted the lives of the Dene, *Ëdtthën Eldeli*, for over three hundred years. As stated by Bart Dzeylion, an Elder interviewed by Mary Ann Kkailther and cited in Niigaanwewidam and Cariou (2011), “Thanadelthur is the reason we exist today” (p. 90). She is esteemed by Dene people, and they credit her courage for their existence.

Through the leadership of Thanadelthur, the Northern Dene were enticed from the boreal forest and barren lands to begin a new way of life; they were introduced to a world of commercialism. There can be no denying that the lifestyle of the people improved; however, the fur trade economy demanded that there was a cost to be paid—diversion from traditional survival to sustain the fur trade exploitation. What was the compromise for the Dene to leave a way of life on the land for commercialism—freedom to travel and hunt without fear for their lives, and access to tools to make their lives easier and to explore their new status as trappers. Canada and the Dene People acknowledge Thanadelthur’s role in history, which leaves an everlasting image of a woman who wanted only a life of comfort for her people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a young Dene girl changed the course of history for her *Ëdtthën Eldeli* People. This story has been told through the Hudson’s Bay Company archives and celebrated by Elders who are the “gems” in the oral history library that keep her spirit alive. I, among other writers, took excerpts from these sources of information to formulate how we interpret this famous expedition. I also rely on traditional oral stories passed on by Elders, Dene authors, and my father.

Although there are discrepancies in the foundation of Thanadelthur’s historical events, stories will convey her through the historical envelopes of her Dene people. Her feats and accomplishments are told and celebrated. People may challenge the oral stories; however, these stories are in the memory and minds of Dene people. This is a story of Dene people; they came out of the boreal forest and barren lands to trap and it has changed their way of life forever by creating the concept of *ëghëna*. In her short life, Thanadelthur introduced commercial hunting and trapping as a way of life for her people. I am inspired by this young Dene heroine who, at the time of male patriarchy, would not bow down to submission and created a place for her people in the history books of Canada.

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Mitho Pimachesowin through Economic Development

Participation in the Traditional Economy in Northern Saskatchewan: The 21st Century Landscape

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Abstract: This article discusses the resilience of the northern traditional economy. In northern Saskatchewan *mitho-pimachesowin* speaks to the freedom and capacity to make a good living. For northern Indigenous People, this includes participation in the traditional economy that reflects their culture, identity, and way of life. Most still blend their land-based livelihood activities (harvesting, trapping, commercial fishing) and other forms of revenue income to support their families and communities. This blended approach is an example of sustainable development that works, and it should be supported by all levels of government with strategic approaches and investments. This article is a chapter in the open textbook *Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin (Ability to Make a Good Living)* developed for the University of Saskatchewan course Indigenous Studies 410/810, and hosted by the *Northern Review*.