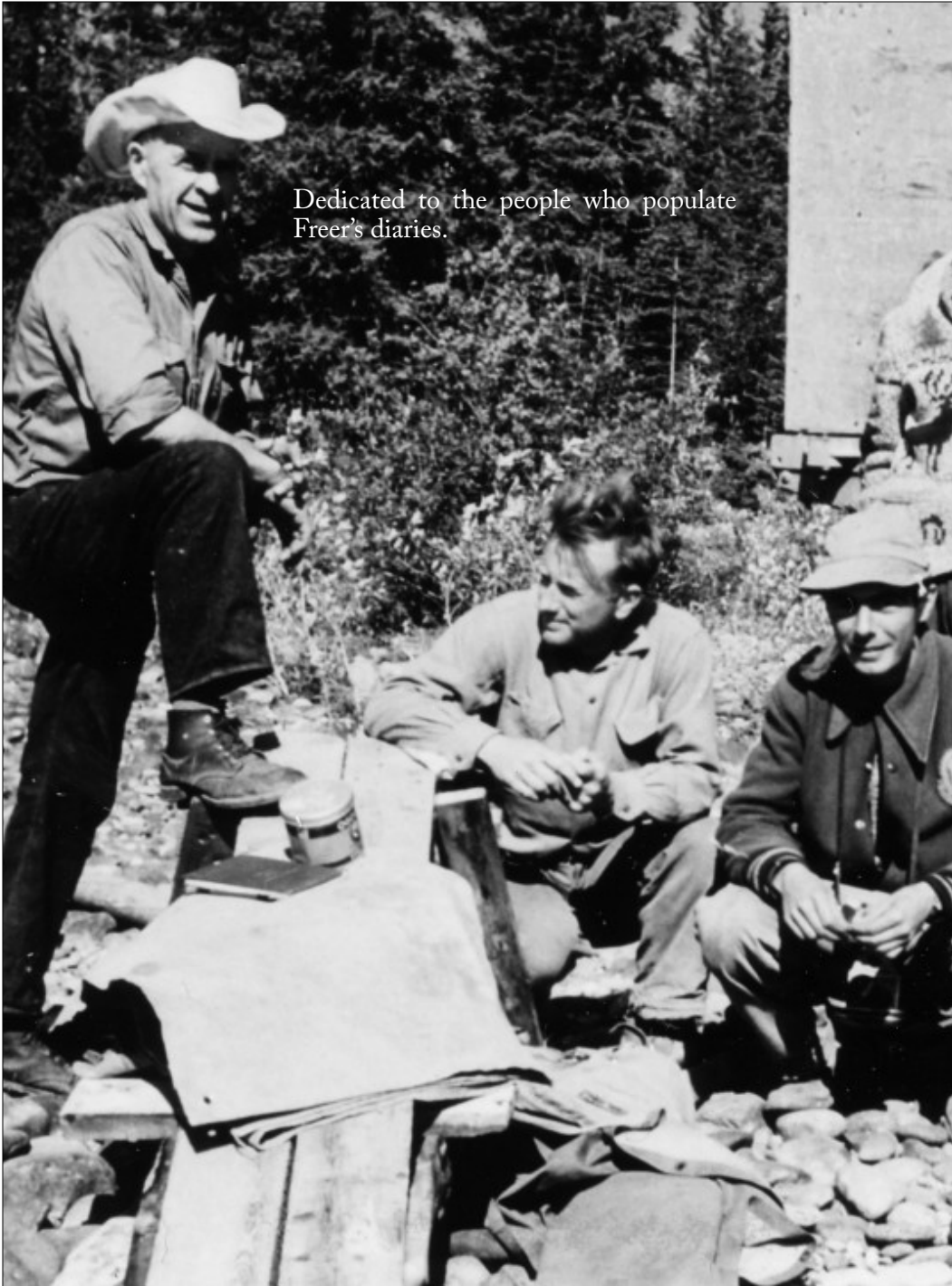


KECHIKA CHRONICLER

Willard Freer's Northern BC and Yukon Diaries, 1942–1975

JAY SHERWOOD

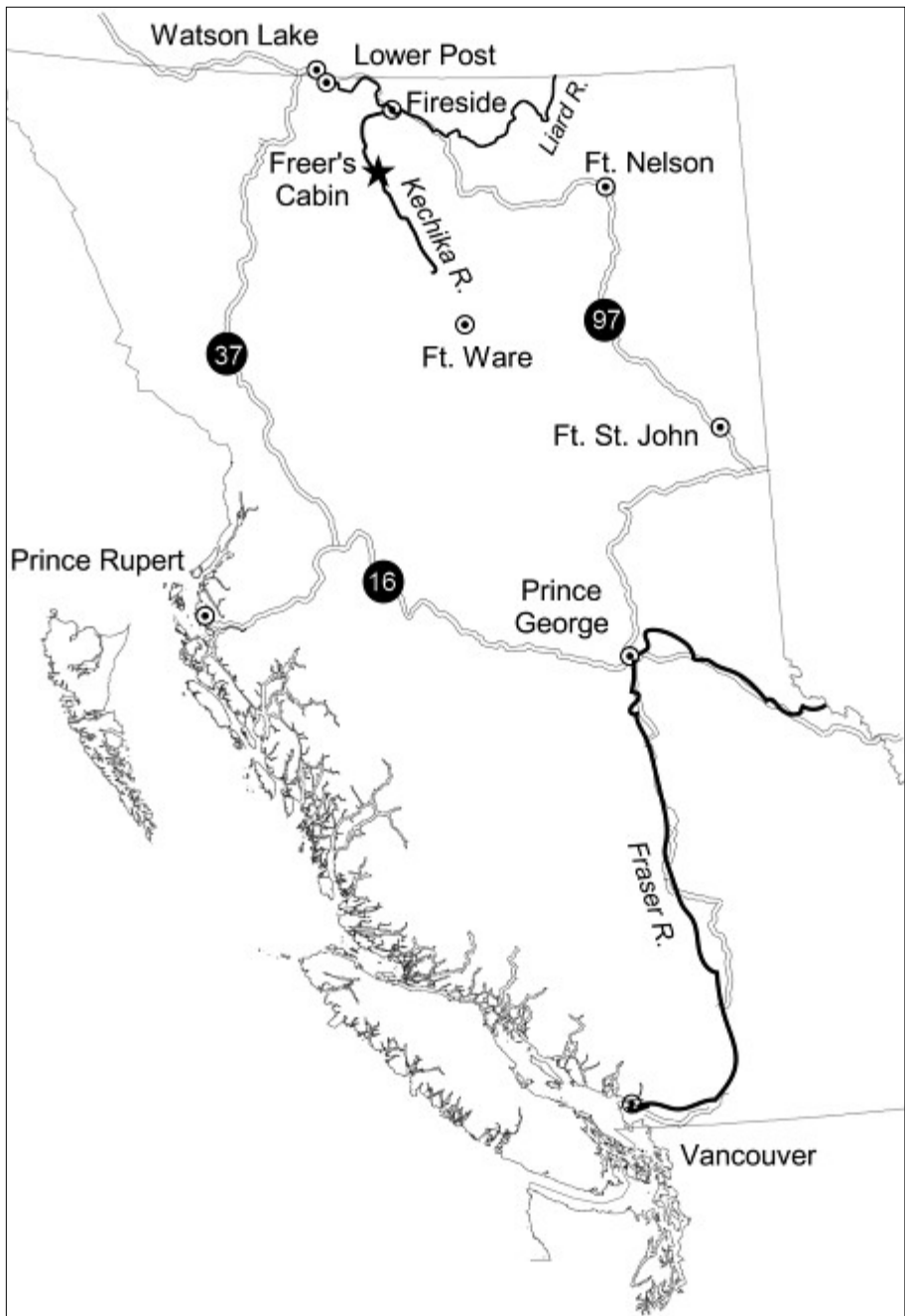
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Dedicated to the people who populate
Freer's diaries.



MAPS



INTRODUCTION

Kechika Chronicler is the story of Willard Freer (1910–1981) and his experiences in northern BC and Yukon, told mainly through more than thirty years' worth of personal diaries. Freer lived in the remote Kechika River valley where he had a cabin and trapline and interacted with the Indigenous people who inhabited the area. As a packer he was involved in many important projects that took place throughout northern BC and southern Yukon. Willard also worked at a couple of lodges on the Alaska Highway, and he describes life along this important road. Freer's diaries are the best written record of the Indigenous people who lived in the Kechika River valley in the mid-twentieth century. They also contain information and details about many prominent people and events in the area where he lived and worked.

Willard was born in Kamloops, British Columbia, on April 19, 1910, a few months after his parents had emigrated from the United States. Freer's ancestors had been farmers for many generations. The earliest documentation of the Freer family in North America is a ship record of Hugo Freer arriving in the city of New York in July 1675. The Freers were farmers in New York state for several generations. In the early 1830s, Jonas Elisha Freer moved to Michigan, which was still a territory, to farm. His grandson, Jonas Melville Freer, born in Michigan in 1855, continued westward to Dakota Territory in the early 1880s where his son, George Elisha Freer, was born in 1885. In early 1910, George and Edith Key left North Dakota to search for agricultural land in Canada, abetted by the fact that Edith was pregnant. On February 11, George and Edith were married in Miles City, Montana. Three days later, they entered Canada at the Coutts/Sweetgrass border crossing. They journeyed north to the Canadian Pacific Railway line and travelled by train to Kamloops where their first child, Willard Melvin, was born on April 19.

When Willard was three weeks old, his parents drove by wagon to Fort George (present day Prince George). In the 1911 census, George Freer was recorded as a rancher living on rented land near Cluculz Lake. This lake in the Central Interior region of British Columbia was near the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, which was being constructed across northern BC at that time. By fall of that year, Freer had filed for a pre-emption along the Chilako River southwest of Fort George, and a second son, Merle, was born there in October. In addition to the farm, George probably worked on construction



The Freer family at their farm on Bear Flat (Freer on far right) shortly before he moved to Hudson's Hope. Willard Freer Family collection

of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. A daughter, Ella, was born a year later, and in the fall of 1913, Freer received a Crown grant to the land along the Chilako River.

However, George and Edith believed that the land was “not open enough and the soil burned out,” and they decided to go north to the Peace River district. Edith was pregnant again, so the family temporarily split. Edith took the three children and went back to her parents' home in Missouri where the fourth child, Harold, was born on June 19, 1914. Meanwhile, George and a companion spent the late fall and winter of 1913 and 1914 trapping in the Crooked River area north of Prince George. In early spring, the two men travelled down the Crooked and Parsnip Rivers to the Peace, then proceeded down this river valley to Hudson's Hope, where they sold their furs.

George continued down the Peace River valley toward the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) post at Fort St. John. Along the way he found land that he thought would be productive at a place called Bear Flat, which was located on the north side of the Peace River adjacent to Cache Creek. During the summer of 1914, he earned money cutting wood for the *D.A. Thomas*, a steamboat that plied the Peace River.

In the fall, George was reunited with his family. They spent the winter in northern Alberta, and George filed for his pre-emption at the land office in Grouard. At that time, governments did not consult with Indigenous peoples regarding their connection to their traditional territories.

The Freers purchased supplies and livestock and, in late winter and early spring 1915, travelled to their homestead along the Peace. Willard wrote about the last section of the trip, from Fort St. John. “My next brother and I were put on a pack horse in two boxes and rode that way for 22 miles [35 kilometres] where the parents settled down.”

Willard grew up at Bear Flat. Of the seven Freer children, he was the one most influenced by the remote wilderness to the north and west. When he was about twenty, he moved to Hudson’s Hope, a small community farther upstream on the Peace River that was closer to the Rocky Mountain wilderness. Around 1936, Willard moved northwest, taking up a trapline in the Ingenika River valley. (The Ingenika flows into the Finlay River, one of the headwater rivers of the Peace.) In 1942, Willard ventured north into the remote Kechika River valley, which is less than a hundred kilometres from the Yukon boundary. He worked and lived at the ranch of the famous packer Skook Davidson for several years before building his own cabin farther north along the Kechika. There Willard lived for the rest of his life, with some intervals spent working at the Fireside Inn on the Alaska Highway (near the junction of the Kechika and Liard Rivers).

Willard was at home in this remote area: self-reliant, confident in his ability to live in the wilderness and comfortable with his surroundings. Almost everyone who knew Willard described the same character traits. He was quiet and shy. As a worker, he was reliable. Willard, like many people who lived in remote areas, was also very versatile. Among his many abilities, he could pack horses, operate a motor boat, trap animals for fur, and cook, along with building and repairing items. When he worked at the Fireside Inn on the Alaska Highway, he did a variety of jobs: operating the gas pump, repairing tires, basic carpentry, cooking and shovelling snow.

Although Willard was quiet around people, he had an important way of communicating. In a letter that he wrote in 1935, he stated that he had started keeping a diary when he left home. Unfortunately, his early diaries have been lost. In the summer of 1939, while Freer was away working, the BC Provincial Police investigated his neighbour Frank “Shorty” Weber as a suspect in a local murder. The police seized Freer’s diaries from his trapping cabin as potential evidence. Freer wrote to the police requesting the return of his diaries, but he never received them. Fortunately, Freer had made copies of his diaries for the summers of 1932 and 1934. His diary for 1934 is particularly important because he was a member of the Bedaux Expedition.

Freer’s existing diaries begin in the spring of 1942, when he was still living in the Ingenika River valley, and continue until 1975. The notebook for 1950 and 1951 is missing, and the January to September 1961 section has been removed. The diaries from 1942 to 1972 are in the possession of

the Freer family, while the 1973 to 1975 notebook is housed at the Alaska Highway Museum in Fort Nelson. Freer presumably kept a diary beyond that time, but there is no record of its existence.

Throughout his adult life, Freer wrote a daily journal. The entries are usually brief and direct, with minimal philosophizing. They are often repetitive, describing daily routines. However, the cumulative narrative of Freer's diaries provides a rare look into the history of one of British Columbia's most remote areas.

The pantheon of people recorded in Freer's diaries include many notable individuals who lived and worked in the Kechika River valley and along the Alaska Highway. Willard's journals provide details about specific events in the lives of these people. There are many references to the famous bush pilots Stan Bridcut and George Dalziel. He notes several prospectors who are well-known in northern BC and the Yukon.

Willard's work involved extensive travel though northern BC and Yukon. His diaries provide details about the locations he visited. In particular, Freer kept an important record of travel on the Davie Trail between Fort Ware and Lower Post. For every overnight trip he made, Freer recorded the campsite he used, and the amount of time he spent travelling each day.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Kaska and Kwadacha Tsek'ene still followed their traditional yearly rounds in the Kechika drainage. Freer's diaries detail the lives and routines of numerous Indigenous people over many years. Some of them are mentioned over a hundred times in Freer's diaries. By all accounts, Willard had good relationships with the Indigenous people. In the remote northern BC and Yukon region, where there were few people, working co-operatively was important.

Willard lived and worked at Skook Davidson's Diamond J Ranch during most of the 1940s and at intervals in the 1950s, so his journals provide considerable information about Skook and life at the ranch. In addition, there are recently located fragments of Skook's personal diaries from the 1940s and 1950s. These records show the impact that Skook and Willard had on the ecology of the Kechika valley through their sizeable herd of horses and the economic effect on the Indigenous people through the establishment of an informal trade store during the trapping season where goods and fur were exchanged.

Freer's diaries contain considerable information about daily life in the lodges along the Alaska Highway. There are numerous entries describing the activities of both Jack and Flo Christy, who operated the lodge at Lower Post, and Margo and Ken Windrem, owners of the Fireside Inn for many years. At Fireside, Freer had a close friendship with the Nelms family, particularly George, who was the head of Highway Department maintenance

for that section of the Alaska Highway, and the Nelms family is frequently mentioned in diary entries in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Freer was involved in many important projects in northern BC and Yukon. He was a member of the famous 1934 Bedaux Expedition. Freer was a packer for BC and federal government survey crews for several summers; worked on the British Columbia-Yukon Boundary Survey for four years; was employed on Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) crews for several years; and spent three field seasons on the BC government's Forest Inventory program. Willard also packed for a couple of large mining exploration companies and was a hunting guide for Robin Dalziel and other guide outfitters.

Freer's diaries can also be used to monitor events like the weather and snowfall. In the winter, when he lived at Skook's ranch or at his cabin, he recorded the temperature in the morning, at midday, and in the evening. He also noted snowfalls. Willard recorded the date that the Kechika froze over in the fall, and when the ice melted off the river in the spring. He also noted his first observations of birds in the spring.

Freer's journals reflect some of the prejudices common in that time. Willard drank liquor, but usually in moderation. In his diaries, he wrote disapprovingly about instances where people drank excessively to the extent that it impaired their judgment, behaviour and ability to work. Many of Freer's interactions were with Indigenous people, so some of his diary entries appear to depict the stereotype of their relationship to alcohol. However, he equally decried Skook's famous drinking binges at Lower Post and the behaviour of other workers at Skook's ranch who started drinking almost immediately after arriving at that community.

Similarly, Freer thought that a person should work hard when there was labour that needed to be done. In his diary, he sometimes mentions a person whom he felt was not doing their share of the work. Although this can appear to be a stereotype when applied to Indigenous people, Freer's disapproval was more generally of laziness.

In his diaries, it appears that Willard used the name(s) of the Indigenous person(s) if he was writing about an individual or small group of people that he knew. If it was a larger group of people, or individuals that he didn't know, Willard used Indian(s), the term generally used at that time to describe Indigenous Peoples.

There is one stereotype that appears frequently in Freer's journals. Freer, Skook Davidson, and many other people in the area viewed the wolf as a predator to be eradicated. The BC government had a bounty on wolves and supplied poison to be used in an effort to kill them. Skook brought a herd of horses into the Kechika valley in the fall of 1939, and thereby changed the

ecology of the area. For Skook and Freer (when he had his own herd), one of the important and ongoing duties of maintaining horses was protecting them from wolves. This meant watching for signs of wolves, shooting them if possible, and poisoning them if they stayed close to their dwellings. In the winter, Freer often went out to check on the horses and make sure that they stayed in bunches large enough to provide security. He would also move the horses to different locations to ensure that they found enough feed to survive the long winter. To Freer and Skook, the stereotype of wolves was part of a personal struggle to maintain their livelihood in the Kechika River valley.

The diaries of Willard Freer, which chronicle over thirty years of life in northern BC, are a unique account, providing a gateway to many of the people who lived there and some of the important events that occurred.