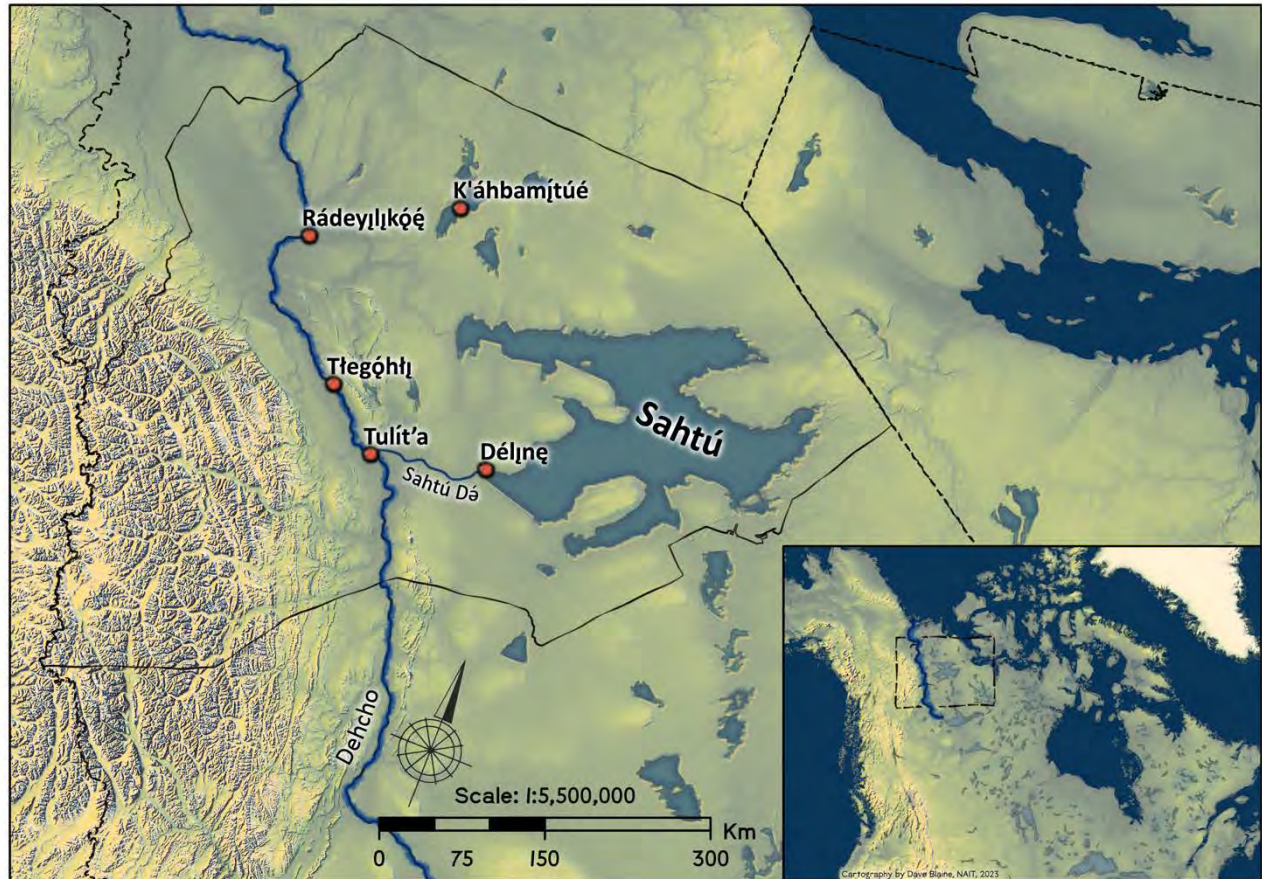


**“A Century of Petroleum Extraction at Tłegóhłı (Norman Wells)”**  
by the Petroleum Histories Project Team

Norman Wells in the Northwest Territories is the site of the first oil and gas operation in the Canadian North and one of the earliest in the country. The Norman Wells oil field has almost continuously produced oil since 1920, making it also one of Canada’s longest operating petroleum production sites.



Map of the five Sahtú communities and the Sahtú Settlement Area as defined in the *Sahtú Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement* (1993). Map by Dave Blaine, NAIT.

The conventional history of Norman Wells focuses on the prospectors and geologists who claim to have discovered the oil and the engineers and corporation that developed the installation at Norman Wells. It is a history that draws on the records of colonial archives and is measured in barrels of oil, profits for shareholders, and royalties for the federal government.

Sahtú Dene and Métis have been little more than a footnote in conventional histories of Norman Wells, if we are mentioned at all. Our people and our stories are absent from corporate and state archives; we have been overlooked and erased.



Courtesy of NWT Archives/©Imperial Oil Limited/N-1979-049: 0002.

The history of Norman Wells looks quite different when it is told from our perspective, the perspective of Sahtú Dene and Métis. Our experiences and knowledge are rooted in the land and preserved through story. In this post, we centre the voices and perspectives of our people. Industry and government narratives have been left for the footnotes.

Our knowledge of oil at Tłegóhł, which means “the place of oil” in Dene kədó (language), and at other points along the Dehcho (Mackenzie River) long pre-dates the arrival of explorers, drillers, and engineers to our territory. Most commonly, we used tar for waterproofing canoes.

To be clear, our use of small amounts of oil from naturally occurring seepages on land that we have cared for for millennia is fundamentally different than the extractive methodologies used over the last hundred years, which rely on drilling fluids, chemical additives, well solvents, and pipeline lubricants to recover and transport oil, and which produce tailings and effluents.

We shared our knowledge of oil seepages with mǫla (our word for non-Indigenous visitors to our territory), people like explorer Alexander Mackenzie and prospector James Cornwall, who in turn shared that knowledge with others and used it for their own benefit.<sup>i</sup>



Oil well at Norman Wells, Northwest Territories (NWT), 1921, by Unknown (CU182236). Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Our knowledge laid the foundation for Imperial Oil's drilling program in 1919 and 1920. On August 23, 1920, their crew struck oil at Discovery Well No. 1, about 50 miles downstream of Tulít'a ("the place where the rivers meet" in our language, Fort Norman in English).<sup>ii</sup> The following year, Imperial built a small oil refinery there.

Also in 1921, the federal government sent commissioner Henry Conroy to "negotiate" Treaty 11. (The text was already drafted when Conroy came north, and it differed significantly from what the treaty commissioner communicated to our people.) The timing was no coincidence. They wanted our land and our oil.

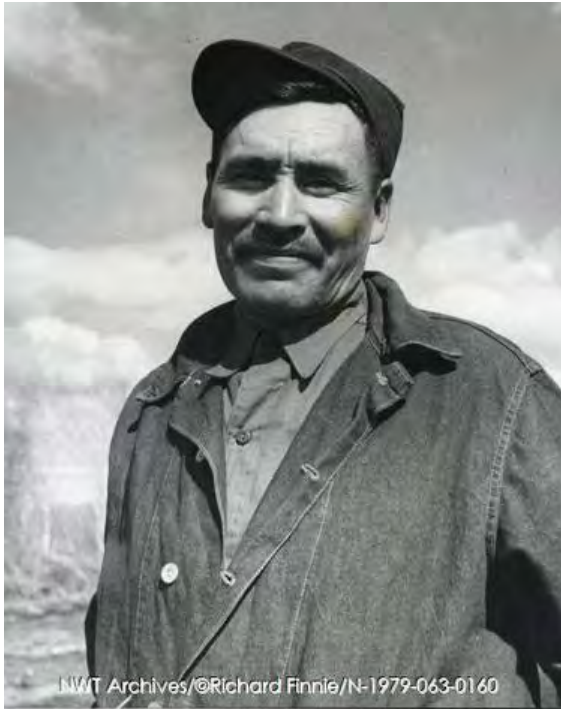
"Even before the treaty, things were happening. People knew about the oil. The government still went ahead and started issuing leases. That was well before the treaty. They didn't talk about the leases when they were negotiating the treaty. Why weren't they truthful? Why didn't they say, in order for us legally to get that oil, we have to get the treaty done with you? They didn't say that." – Walter Bezha, Délıne

Imperial's installation at Norman Wells exists both because and in spite of us.

It exists because we told visitors about the oil seepages. It exists because we shared food and warm clothing with early prospectors and army personnel, who would not have survived northern winters otherwise. It exists because we signed the treaty. It exists because we guided surveyors and engineers

across the mountains, following our ancestral trails, during World War II.<sup>iii</sup> It exists because we piloted boats and hauled barrels and worked the PortCo and drove trucks and did administrative work.

“I have heard those kinds of stories from Elders. When they ran out of their food, it’s Dene law to share and take care of one another. So what I heard people did back in the day was if somebody needed help, they would do it. They gave them meat. We are from here. I’m not saying we’re the best or anything, but we helped other people who needed it back in the day.” – Lisa McDonald, Norman Wells



Caption: Fred Andrew (Shúhtaot'ine) was one of a number of Dene and Métis guides who led expeditions for the CANOL project. Courtesy of NWT Archives/Richard Finnie fonds/N-1979-063: 0160.

It exists in spite of our presence. Tłegóhłı is a place where we have lived and harvested for millennia. The arrival of the first crew in 1919 marked the beginning of a century of displacement. More than once, our people have been forced to move because of Imperial’s operations. In some cases, our homes were bulldozed to make way for the expansion of the oil field.

“I hear stories of people who were living in Norman Wells at the time of the strike. A lot of them were displaced. Some of their homes were destroyed and they had to move elsewhere. They were forced to move somewhere else, which is not good.” – Doug Yallee, Tulít’a

It exists in spite of the concerns that we have raised about the impacts of petroleum extraction on our land, water, wildlife, and way of life since the 1920s: concerns about spills from drill rigs, tanks, barrels, pipelines, and sumps that contaminate the water we drink; concerns about flaring polluting the air that we breathe; concerns about hydrocarbons in the fish that we eat; concerns about waste, including barrels, that has been buried without thought to the consequences; concerns about waste that remains above ground like the telegraph wire that ran the length of the CANOL trail and that entraps animals; concerns about transient workers and large work camps; concerns about the habitat that has been irrevocably altered by exploration and extraction.



“When I used to work in those areas, there was waste oil. They would throw away waste oil into a pond. When the ducks come around, they think it’s water and the ducks are swimming in the oil. I witnessed that.”  
– Jimmy Dillon, Délıne

“We live downstream here in Fort Good Hope from Norman Wells. I know people have been talking over the years about a lot of contaminants and stuff in the water and in the turbot—in the loche, they call them—people are noticing a difference in their liver.” – Aurora McNeely, Fort Good Hope



“Oil refinery and storage tanks, Norman Wells, Northwest Territories,” 1944, by Unknown (CU1123679). Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

It exists in spite of our opposition because the federal government and Imperial Oil believed that oil and money were more important than the health and wellbeing of our homeland, or the sovereignty of our people. In 1981, just six years after we told Justice Berger at hearings across the region that we didn’t want a pipeline to run through our territory, a position we repeated at the environmental assessment hearings for the Norman Wells project in 1980, and just four years after Justice Berger released his report calling for a ten-year moratorium on oil and gas development, the Government of Canada approved Imperial Oil and Interprovincial Pipeline’s proposal to expand the oil field and build a pipeline.<sup>iv</sup>

Little is known of the Norman Wells oil field outside of the North. In 2021, ʔehdzo Got’ıne Gots’ė Nákedı (Sahtú Renewable Resources Board – SRRB) and the Norman Wells, Tulı́’a, and Fort Good Hope ʔehdzo Got’ıne (Renewable Resources Councils) initiated the [Petroleum Histories Project](#) to change that. Over the last two years, we have been gathering oral histories and archival materials so the story of ʔłegǫhı can finally be told from our perspective. Through this project we are also documenting the many impacts of the Norman Wells oil field on the land, water, fish, animals, and Dene and Métis ts’ıłı (our ways of life). We hope this article will be the first in a series as we synthesize the stories and information gathered through the Petroleum Histories Project.

“As Dene people, I’m just tired of being a rock you can walk over. It’s about time to put our foot down and say enough is enough and have a voice and start to speak. It doesn’t matter which language. As long as we talk, it’s good.” – Frederick Andrew, Tulı́’a

It's no small task to document the history and impacts of Imperial Oil's operations at Norman Wells because they have been extracting oil for over a hundred years, but this project is important for our people. It will preserve our stories and knowledge so future generations know what happened at Norman Wells.<sup>v</sup> It will support our participation in closure and reclamation planning and ensure that our vision for this area is respected. If more people know this history, we can also ensure that future development is more respectful of our people and our land.

Tłegóhłı was, is, and will always be our homeland.

*The Petroleum Histories Project was initiated by ʔehdzo Got'ıne Gots'ę Nákedı (Sahtú Renewable Resources Board – SRRB) and the Norman Wells, Tulit'a, and Fort Good Hope ʔehdzo Got'ıne (Renewable Resources Councils) in 2021. Under the Sahtú Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (1993), these are the bodies responsible for landscape, wildlife, and Dene and Métis ts'ıłı (ways of life). Together, community members and collaborators are working to document the history and impacts of Imperial Oil's operations at Tłegóhłı (Norman Wells). In addition to preserving this critical knowledge for future generations, this project is supporting Sahtú Dene and Métis participation in closure and reclamation of the Norman Wells oil field and strengthening present and future Indigenous roles in monitoring, stewardship, and decision-making. This research is supported by the GNWT Cumulative Impacts Monitoring Program and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council.*

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<sup>i</sup> In 1789, Alexander Mackenzie observed “pieces of Petroleum [sic], which bears a resemblance to yellow wax” along the banks of the river that would come to bear his name. A century later, members of the Canadian Geological Survey documented the existence of bituminous limestone at Bear Rock. In 1911, prospector James Cornwall sent samples of oil from the Mackenzie River near Fort Norman to Pittsburgh for analysis, which confirmed the presence of sweet crude. In 1914, a syndicate consisting of Cornwall, Fred Lowes, and James Woods, publisher of the *Calgary Herald*, contracted geologist Thomas Bosworth to lead an expedition on their behalf to what would become Norman Wells. Four stakes were claimed on the banks of the river that summer, bearing the names of Bosworth, Cornwall, and F.C. Bennet.

<sup>ii</sup> Imperial Oil acquired the four stakes claimed in 1914 in 1919. A small refinery was built there the following year. As a result of limited demand and the high cost of transporting product, the refinery was closed and the existing wells capped in 1924.

<sup>iii</sup> The discovery of uranium on Bear Lake brought the Norman wells back on line in 1932 and instigated the construction of a larger refinery, which was completed in 1933. Production at Norman Wells remained modest until World War II, when, in the course of twenty-two months, the field was expanded and a pipeline was built to carry crude from Norman Wells over the mountains to Whitehorse as part of the CANOL project. Imperial produced almost 200 million barrels of oil at Norman Wells between 1942 and 1944.

<sup>iv</sup> During this second expansion, six artificial islands were built in the Mackenzie River to improve access to the field and hundreds of new wells were drilled to increase production, and a 324-mm pipeline was constructed to carry oil from Norman Wells to Zama, Alberta.

<sup>v</sup> In recent years, production has declined. Since 2016, Imperial Oil has been planning for closure and reclamation, though they are currently in the process of applying to renew their operations authorization and water licence, which expire in December 2024 and March 2025 respectively.