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Treatment by **Geoff Bowie**

With **Michael Alder** and **Gordon Henderson**

The Nahanni River in Canada's Northwest Territories runs through one of the wildest, most beautiful, little known, and fascinating landscapes in the world. Celebrated as Canada's Grand Canyon, the Na'ha Dehé (Nahanni) is within the traditional aboriginal territory of the Dene. In May 2017, a group of several Dene families (16 people) will follow the spirit of their ancestors on an epic journey through their most sacred land.

High in the mountains near the headwaters of the Nahanni, they will build a great boat almost 20 metres long. It will be constructed in the traditional way reviving ancient, almost forgotten, engineering skills passed down from generation to generation. The Dene will fabricate a boat of moose skin stretched over a ribbed frame of spruce wood and navigate it down the river.

No boat of this size or construction has been seen on the Nahanni in a hundred years.

The Dene journey, 400 kilometres long, down one of the fastest flowing rivers in the world will take 21 days. They will see many unique and spectacular features including Rabbitkettle Hotsprings (*Gahnjthah*), source of the largest tufa mounds in Canada, Virginia Falls (*Nailicho*), twice as high as Niagara Falls, and a series of river canyons with walls rising over 1200 metres! The travelers' final destination is Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie River where they will arrive on June 21st as the special highlight of Aboriginal Day celebrations.

"This is a trip to honour our ancestors. It is actually our ancestors making the trip once again through their descendants."

Herb Norwegian, Grand Chief of the Dehcho First Nations

THE LAND

The Dene journey will be through a varied and dramatic terrain that has been shaped over millions of years by three major geological events. The first was a long period of sedimentary rock deposition during the Paleozoic era, 200 to 500 million years ago. Oceans covered the area, depositing up to 6000 metres of sedimentary rock.

The second event was the deformation and uplift of the sedimentary rocks by continental drift forces to form mountain ranges. Dramatic mountain-building began approximately 110 million years ago when molten volcanic rock from deep within the earth rose to within 3000 metres of the surface where it hardened and cooled. This force pushed up the sedimentary rock above and around the intrusion, creating the mountain ranges that surround the Nahanni River. Even today, the land is still rising in the east end of the park.

The third significant event was glaciation, which first occurred between two and eight million years ago. Since then, the landscape has been influenced primarily by continental erosion, with short episodes of glacial action interspersed with longer periods of river erosion. The last glaciation, which ended 10 000 years ago, only reached the far eastern and far western portions of the park. The Dene will pass through First Canyon (*Ala Tthe Zhíhgoi'a*) near the end of their trip. Here glaciers cut through the more resistant limestone of the Nahanni Plateau to create the highest, most vertical of all the canyon walls. Jon Tsetso, the Nahanni Park Superintendent will share his knowledge of this region's remarkable geology and natural history.

THE PROCESS

In late May 2017, the Dene will fly to the headwaters of the Nahanni River high in the mountains. They will camp near where they can find the ideal spruce logs to build the boat and close enough to shore so it can be easily launched. While the men hew the wood and assemble the frame, the women will work with 8-10 untanned moose skins, sewing them together with moose sinew in a way that is strong and waterproof. It will take them just five days to have the boat ready to depart.





The Ragged Range

The Ragged Range, a spectacular formation of ragged granite peaks is the backdrop to the Dene camp. They are the highest mountains in the Northwest Territories and contain extensive glaciers. They were formed 110 million years ago when molten igneous rock was injected into the earth's crust from the underlying mantle. As it hardened and cooled, it pushed the sedimentary rock up from below. Over time, the upper layers of sedimentary rock eroded, exposing the hard granite of the Ragged Range. The last glaciation sculpted the formation which is seen today.



The river is gentle here – a perfect place to test the moose skin boat and prepare for the daredevil run downriver.

After two days travel they come to a key resting place called Rabbitkettle (*Gahnjtháh*). At this ancient and sacred hot springs about two kilometres from the river's edge, water bubbles to the surface from deep beneath the earth, warmed by the same volcanic energy that formed the Ragged Range.

The Rabbitkettle tufa mound is the largest in Canada. The tufa mounds are very fragile and have special meaning in the lives of Dene and Métis people. Gifts such as tobacco and matches have been left at the springs to bring good luck. It is said that as long as the kettle is overflowing it is a sign of good luck, but if the kettle is low or empty it is bad luck. For the Dene, this is a mysterious healing place where legends and stories are told of a spirit world where consciousness can move freely between the past, the present, and the future.



Tufa mounds are created by the precipitation of dissolved minerals, primarily calcium carbonate, from thermal spring water. In the Nahanni, this water retains a temperature of 20° C year-round. As the warm mineral water pours from the spring, it radiates outwards over the surface of the tufa mound. Calcium carbonate precipitates out of the spring water and hardens to form tufa. The North Mound, believed to be 10 000 years old, is 30 m high and 60 m in width.

After another three days of river travel the Dene will arrive at one of the Nahanni's most astonishing landmarks. One of the wildest rivers in North America, the South Nahanni claws its path through the rugged Mackenzie Mountains, and then charges over Virginia Falls (*Náilicho*), twice as high as Niagara Falls. The skillful use of UAV (drone) technology will poetically convey the awesome power and splendour of this monumental landscape in stunning ultra high definition video.



Virginia Falls is where the South Nahanni River picks up speed, transforming from a wide placid river to a raging torrent which plunges in a spectacular curtain over a vertical drop of 92 m. The falls are divided by a central rock spire which has resisted erosion as the falls migrated upstream. It was the gradual erosion induced by the falls that created Fourth Canyon, the first of a series of four deep canyons downstream.

The portage around the falls is just 3/4 of a kilometre long but will take two days to cross. The boat's skins have to be kept wet and the craft moved carefully so they don't rip. It's still an open question about whether it's even possible to do this portage in the way of the ancestors because of the growth of the forest and the sharp switch backs on the last part of the portage. If it's impossible, a helicopter will be used to lift the boat over the falls. Either way, high definition images from several camera positions will convey the extreme effort of the operation in close detail.



It's well known that people often experience overwhelming emotions travelling the Nahanni. For the Dene, it's an especially spiritual place that will evoke deep feelings. It is a sanctuary to heal the soul, a place for speaking from the heart, for truth telling, and communing with the spirit world.

Resting at the bottom of the Nailicho portage, stories about Dene ways will emerge. We'll ask about the mythic figure Yamoria, the Great Dene Lawmaker endowed with strong medicine power who is said to have come from Mother Earth. What is medicine power? Does it still exist? What does it mean to follow your spirit?

As the enormous boat is running the rapids, veering toward canyon walls, past rocks, through showers of spray, viewers will experience the action and the emotions of the crew viscerally in gripping detail through images captured by an array of high quality, miniature cameras fixed inside and outside the moose skin boat.



Downstream of Fourth Canyon is Third Canyon, a 40-km stretch which gashes through the mountains of the Funeral Range. Its long slopes are a mixed strata of shales, sandstones and limestones.



Key features include The Gate (*Tthetahtlúah*), where the river makes a sharp hairpin turn and squeezes through a narrow gap flanked by a vertical limestone wall that is 460 m high, and Pulpit Rock, a distinctive pinnacle on the east side of the gap.

At Second Canyon, the Nahanni River bisects another mountain range, the Headless Range. This section is only 15-km long and leads into Deadmen Valley (*Dahtaehth'i*). One of the best known Nahanni legends gave this valley its English name. In 1908, the headless bodies of two gold prospectors, Willie and Frank McLeod, were found at the mouth of a small creek at the lower end of Second Canyon. Stories about murder and decapitation spread rapidly and gave us names like the Funeral Range, Headless Range and Deadmen Valley.

But for aboriginal people, the value of the land is more than the extraction of mineral and murderous prospectors. The Dene consider themselves OF the land and so since ancient times the Na'ha Dehé is like a great cathedral, one of their most spiritual sites.

The days on the river will be startling and exciting. The long evenings will be time for Dene story telling. Lawrence Nayally, one of the young men who will be on the boat with his wife and two young boys is a renowned story teller. Raised in a traditional way by his grandparents, as he came of age, Lawrence turned down a career as a lawyer to become a true Dene. Does he regret his decision? "Absolutely not – it opened doors for which I'm so grateful. I really saw spirituality for what it is, what it means to be connected to the land, really connected." He became interested in the culture. "It is priceless and it was up for grabs for me. It revitalized my life." Lawrence is now the host of CBC North's popular afternoon radio show called *Trail's End*.

Another remarkable feature of the lower river will be the the Tlogotsho Plateau where a massive alluvial fan dominates the area. The fan is an important nesting area for sandpipers and other shorebirds. Mineral licks in the area attract Dall's sheep, deer, moose and caribou.



Beyond Deadmen Valley lies First Canyon, the most spectacular of the four canyons. Here the Nahanni River has cut through the resistant limestone, creating the highest and most awe-inspiring vertical canyon walls in the park, towering some 1300 metres!

Dene legends of tropical forests near here, likely stem from the Kraus Hot Springs. There are two thermal water sources, one a small channel behind a meadow and the second along the bank of the river. Although the spring water contains all the mineral components of tufa, the high level of hydrogen sulphide prevents the tufa from forming.

A little further down river, at the Sand Blowouts, outcrops of white sandstone have been eroded by the wind into formations of softly rounded domes, pedestals and arches. Fine sand, mixed with sandstone spheres ranging in size from marbles to tennis balls, surrounds the area. The entire setting seems more evocative of a beach or desert environment rather than its actual location in a pine forest high on a mountain.

Finally, the energy of the river slows at Nahanni Butte. During the final evenings, as the trip winds down the Dene will reflect on the larger issues that underlie their journey. They will talk about reconnecting to their past, about the meaning of reconciliation in the present, and about the Nahanni as *The River of Forgiveness*.

The party will continue to Fort Simpson on the Dehcho (*Mackenzie River*) arriving on June 21st, for special Aboriginal Day celebrations marking Canada's 150th birthday. Thousands will take part in traditional drum songs and dances, with a sacred fire ceremony to commemorate the bravery and skill of the returning Dene. Finally, the moose skin boat will be taken to a place of honour on the front lawn of the Dehcho First Nations museum in Fort Simpson.

CONFIRMED PARTICIPANTS



Herb Norwegian, is Grand Chief of the Dehcho First Nations and lives with his family in Fort Simpson, NT. He is deeply bound to the well being of his people. As a hunter and trapper and a lead negotiator with Canada, his life work is the traverse between two cultures. Herb has been the driving force behind the moose skin boat project for at least 15 years! He loves a good laugh and to tell stories.



Lawrence Nayally is part of the new generation of bright young Dene with a renewed interest in traditional teachings and an ambition to take their rightful place as fully participating Dene Canadians. He is 29 years old, speaks his native language perfectly, and is the popular host of CBC North's daily afternoon radio show, *Trail's End*. Lawrence sees his generation as more hopeful and enthusiastic than the previous generation. Lawrence is warm, lively, and a renowned storyteller.



Chief of the Nahadeh Dene Band, **Michael Matou** is 29 years old and lives in Nahanni Butte. He went to High School in Fort Simpson with Lawrence Nayally. Michael worked as a guide in Nahanni National Park. He knows the river as well as anyone. Michael is a young man who has chosen to stay and lead his small community. He and his father will be the navigators of the boat.



Michael's father **Leon Konisenta** is a hunter and trapper. He's sceptical about portaging around *Náilicho*, and worries about the rapids and channels that are always changing. He supports his son even if he's not always sure he knows what he's doing. Leon is the voice of cautious wisdom. He has the most experience on the Na'ha Dehé (Nahanni River).

David Etchinelle is an elder from Tulita, a community 500 km north of Ft. Simpson on the Dehcho. His father Gabe built a moose skin boat in 1980 on the Keel River. **David, Chief Frank Andrew, and Boniface Mayalle** are the most experienced boat-builders. They'll show the next generation how it's done.



Laura Vital is a teacher from Nahanni Butte. One year, instead of going on a field trip to the south, she took her students into the Nahanni. She remembers it was "the most spiritual place I've ever been and it was the best school trip ever." Laura, her daughter Deborah, and Elsie Marcellais work expertly with moose skins. They will be key members of the crew sewing together the 8-10 hides needed to cover the boat.

Other trip participants include **Raymond Vital** and others to be determined.



CONCLUSION

The River of Forgiveness is about more than a perilous, exciting, boat voyage through some of the most remote, magnificent, and unspoiled nature in the world. Filming the river trip will be an artistic and poetic passage into the indigenous point of view on who they are, where they have come from, where they are going and how they see their own and mankind's destiny on the planet we share.

The moose skin boat is a journey to revitalize the language and culture. Young people will learn who they are and where they came from. It will be a statement to the world that the Dene is a people of bravery and survival.

Herb Norwegian, Grand Chief of the Dehcho Dene First Nations

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PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

Development	August 1, 2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Final proposal• Demo reel• Production budget	
Completion Financial Plan	August, 2017 – December, 2017
Pre-Production	January, 2017 – May, 2017
Production (30 days)	May 23, 2017 – June 23, 2017
Post-Production	August 2017 – January, 2018
Delivery	February, 2018

PRODUCERS/DIRECTOR

The River of Forgiveness is produced by 90th Parallel and Elan Productions Ltd, of Toronto, Canada.

Executive Producers: Gordon Henderson, Geoff Bowie
Producers: Michael Allder, Geoff Bowie
Director/Writer: Geoff Bowie

Geoff Bowie - CV

gbowie@rogers.com www.elanfilms.com

Geoff Bowie has been making documentaries for public television as a Producer, Director, Writer, and Researcher for 30 years. His films have been screened at national and international film festivals and honoured with awards. ***The Hospital at the End of the Earth***, about the Aral Sea environmental catastrophe in Central Asia was awarded a **Silver Medal** at the New York Festivals. ***When is Enough Enough***, about a First Nation in Alberta trying to slow down the rate and scale of development in Canada's oil sands, won a **Bronze Plaque** at the Columbus International Film Festival in Ohio, USA and was invited to the prestigious Wildscreen Festival in Bristol, UK.

Geoff works in both English and French. He is passionate about social issues. ***My Heart is Like a Bomb*** (CBC French 2014) is about the challenge for immigrant men, especially Muslim, to integrate into Canadian society and the potentially tragic costs if the process fails. ***Courage*** (2012 NFB) is about the resilience of the working poor in Canada as they struggle to make ends meet.

Geoff directed a feature documentary that was invited to 11 international festivals. ***The Universal Clock: The Resistance of Peter Watkins*** takes a critical look at the media and the commodification of the documentary. ***Ghosts of Futures Past: Tom Berger in the North***, about the massive Mackenzie Valley pipeline project in Canada's north is one of 4 films Geoff produced for the CBC science program, ***The Nature of Things with David Suzuki***. ***Walk Naked Singing***, is an off-beat documentary musical about marijuana. It was nominated for **Best Director** and **Best Social Documentary** at the Yorkton Film Festival.

Geoff graduated with Distinction with a **Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Film Production** from Concordia University in Montreal in 1982. He was a Director participant in the Dramalab program held in Edmonton & Montreal in 1987-1988. He's a founder,

contributor, and former editor of the Canadian documentary magazine *Point of View* and in recent years a teacher of documentary production at Centennial College, in Toronto, Canada.

Gordon Henderson – CV

www.90thparallel.ca www.gordonhenderson.ca

Gordon Henderson's company 90th Parallel Productions has produced award-winning documentaries for many of the world's foremost broadcasters.

Before founding 90th parallel Productions in 1987, Henderson was a parliamentary correspondent and senior current affairs field producer. He was also a senior series producer on the celebrated CBC/Radio-Canada series **Canada: A People's History**, the largest documentary series ever produced in Canada.

Recent 90th productions, include **Mom and Me**, which was featured at the Hot Docs Festival, a film about American attitudes toward their northern neighbour, an exposé on "super-prisons" in the United States and Canada, a POV film about identical twins and the science of epigenetics, and **Franklin's Lost Ships**, with the UK's Lion TV, about the discovery of Sir John Franklin's ship, The Erebus in the Canadian Arctic.

90th's films in production include a feature documentary on the global legacy of *The Little Prince*, an adventure documentary along the China's ancient Tea Horse Road, a film following recent immigrants to Canada, a documentary about animal intelligence, an examination of racism in Canada and our third film about neuroplasticity with Dr. Norman Doidge.

For more than a decade Henderson taught in the Journalism department at Toronto's Ryerson University. His first novel, *Man in the Shadows*, was published by HarperCollins in 2014.

Michael Alder – CV

Michael Alder has extensive experience as a producer, director and executive producer of television and cinematic productions, in both the public and private sectors in Canada and Britain. He was from July 1997 to September 2010 the Executive Producer of the **Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's** Science and Natural History Unit, and from September 2010 to September 2011 Executive Producer Special Projects. As well as running the flagship

documentary series ***The Nature Of Things***, he initiated, developed, and launched seven major limited series, spanning medicine, science, anthropology and natural history. He also developed and produced a tabloid science series ***Project X***, and two feature length documentaries seen at Festivals and Repertory cinemas in Canada and many other countries.

Immediately prior to taking over the CBC Science and Natural History Unit he was a staff producer for the **National Film Board**, Ontario studio, where he produced and on occasion directed both feature length and numerous other documentaries. He also has wide-ranging experience as a participant, workshop leader, panel moderator etc., at international television conferences, in China, Australia, Brazil, France, England and the United States. He has taken part in various educational, training and mentoring programs for filmmakers both in Canada and Europe, and more recently, developed and taught his own course in the Physical and Environmental Sciences Department at the University of Toronto.