

## **Rampart House Reconstruction Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Old Crow, Yukon**

Freddie Frost, Wilfred Josie and Moses Lord have years of experience working the trapline, hunting caribou, and setting nets for salmon in the Porcupine River.

In addition to their skills on the land, they are excellent carpenters, handy with hammer, saw and ax. They have built cabins in the bush and smoke houses for fish and meat. And they have worked as carpenters in their village of Old Crow, in northern Yukon.

Despite their vast experience, in the last several years the men have had to learn what, for them, are new carpenters skills: how to strip the bark from timber and square the ends, and how to cut notches the old way, with a flat ax.

That is because Frost, Josie and Lord are the core of a team of builders who are restoring an abandoned fur trading post called Rampart House.

Rampart House, on the Porcupine River, 80 kilometres downriver from Old Crow, is a cluster of buildings from an old settlement that was abandoned about 60 years ago.

This northern corner of the Yukon is the land where the Vuntut Gwitchin and their ancestors have lived for thousands of years. Vuntut Gwitchin means "people of the lakes." The people take their name from the nearby Old Crow Flats, which is covered with lakes.



Wilfred Josie and Moses Lord hewing  
Credit: VGFN and S. Smithlogs



Cadzow House reconstruction  
Credit: VGFN and S. Smithlogs

Rampart House is near a traditional location for hunting caribou. Archaeologists have found lots of evidence of the caribou—bones and caribou fences which people used to build to corral the herd and make it easy to spear the animals.

These northern reaches of the Porcupine River are where the Porcupine herd, which numbers about 150,000, cross each spring and fall during the migration. The animals spend their summers calving on the Arctic coast.

Caribou have sustained the Gwitchin of northern Alaska, Yukon and the Northwest Territories since time immemorial. Fur trading companies like the Hudson Bay Company and independent traders built posts near where the Gwitchin hunted caribou.

The Bay built a trading post at Rampart House in 1890. Soon after, the Anglican Church and St. Luke's Church arrived and built churches and schools. Next, an independent trader named Dan Cadzow opened a store in 1904. Judging from his impressive twin-gabled house, Cadzow must have done pretty well for himself.



Wilfred Josie, Moses Lord, Stanley Njootli Jr.  
Credit: VGFN and S. Smithlogs

While the Northwest Mounted Police built a post here, the Gwitchin—a nomadic people—lived here for periods of time during their seasonal round.

Over time, however, the Gwitchin left Rampart House to settle in Old Crow.

The Rampart House is co-managed by the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation government and the Yukon government.

The Vuntut Gwitchin government is now working with the provincial government to hire Vuntut Gwitchin citizens to develop oral history projects and film documentaries which celebrate and preserve their heritage. The restoration of Rampart House is an important part of that initiative.

Every summer since 1999, when the water is high in the Porcupine, a building crew, including Frost, Josie and Lord, leaves Old Crow and travels downriver to Rampart House. For a short but intense four weeks, they work long hours to restore the old buildings.

"The men are very skilled carpenters," says Brent Riley, who is the historic sites restoration officer for the Yukon Department of Tourism and Culture.

So far they have completed a beautiful reconstruction of the Cadzow store. It was a major job because cracked and rotten lumber had to be removed. The project also meant the men had to learn an old log construction technique called "pièce sur pièce." A heritage log expert from Parks Canada showed them how it was done.



Reconstructed Cadzow Store  
Credit: VGFN and S. Smithlogs

The crew has also started the restoration and reconstruction of Cadzow's two-storey, log home.

The carpenters from Old Crow who are rebuilding Rampart House are reconnecting in a very real way with their ancestors. Not only have they seen photos and records of family members who lived and traded at Rampart House, they have heard stories from the Elders who hunted the caribou in the hills beyond the trading post.

Rampart House

<http://www.oldcrow.ca/ramp1.htm>

<http://www.tc.gov.yk.ca/436.html>