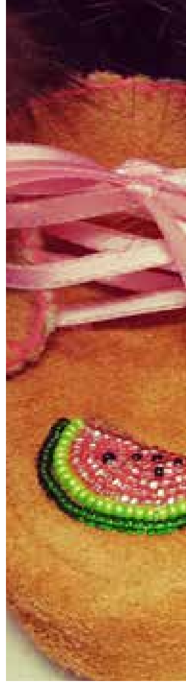
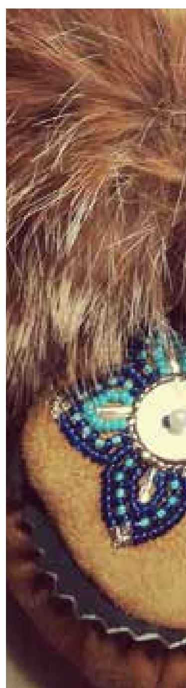


PERFECT FUR YUKON WEATHER

Two families come together to craft in western Yukon

By Leighann Chalykoff



Photos: Taylor Hunter

Photo: archbould.com

Above: Louisette Boudreau and Taylor Hunter wearing some of their work. **Left:** A collection of hand-sewn hide and fur baby booties and moccasins made by Boudreau and Hunter for their business Yukon Tough.

It began with one pair of boots made from fur and hide that turned into an addiction she couldn't shake.

"I learned how to make the mukluks from an amazing local artist," Taylor Hunter says, "and I have been obsessed with crafting ever since."

Hunter started sewing four years ago, after a job opportunity brought her from her home province of Manitoba to the communities of Destruction Bay and Burwash Landing, in western Yukon. She fell in love with the northern landscape and her now partner, Randy Johnson.

Over the years, she developed her skills at sewing with fur and hide, learning from Elders and Kluane First Nation members in the community. For her, creating pieces with local fur trapped by her partner and learning traditional skills was an important part of living in the Yukon. Then, Hunter had her first child a year ago and began hand-sewing hide and fur baby booties.

"I wanted to make my daughter a pair of run-around shoes for daycare," she says. "They were so much fun to make that I made another pair and another pair, and I've been going ever since."

Most days Hunter makes at least one pair of booties, and the hobby is turning into a career for the young mother. Hunter, along with her friend and sewing partner, Louisette Boudreau, started a business to sell their handmade fur products called Yukon Tough.

"You need to be tough to live in the Yukon," Boudreau says, explaining the meaning behind the business name. "You need to be able to deal with strong winds and temperatures that go down to minus 40. You need to be able to deal with the darkness of the winter. When it's minus 30 and you have two pieces of wood left, you have to go outside to chop wood, and sometimes you have to drive three hours through total darkness to go get groceries in Whitehorse."

And the products they make are tough as well.

"Some people ask me why I make mitts out of hide and fur when I could make mitts out of something like cotton," Hunter says. "I tell them, 'You try to wear those cotton mitts when you're working with wet snow and you're out on the land at minus 40. Let me tell you, you're not going to want your cotton mitts anymore; nothing does as good of a job keeping you warm as legit fur and hide. You'll learn quickly.'"

Boudreau's family living room has become their crafting studio, with fur, hide, and sinew piled around the room. It's a space where they both generate new ideas.

"The social aspect is definitely important. We sew together and spend time together and we get to be creative together," Hunter says.

Boudreau began sewing when she was a child. "My auntie sewed, and when I was a little girl she taught me how to make things," she explains. "Then,

"LET ME TELL YOU, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO WANT YOUR COTTON MITTS ANYMORE; NOTHING DOES AS GOOD OF A JOB KEEPING YOU WARM AS LEGIT FUR AND HIDE."

Photo: Taylor Hunter

Yukon Tough sells a variety of handmade boots and other garments.

Photo: archbould.com

when I moved to Yukon 17 years ago, I learned to sew with skin and fur."

In addition to sewing and creating beautiful things, the two women also help their families with trapping and skinning.

"You're out before sunrise and back in the dark; you're cold and tired, but it is like you're living the dream," Boudreau says. "I think a lot of people would choose to do this if they had the choice."

Boudreau, her husband, Luke Johnson, and two children run a trapline that extends over Kluane Lake, near their home in Burwash Landing. Hunter's partner works on the line as an assistant.

The trapline has been in the family for generations, and Boudreau's 15-year-old son, Nadaya Johnson (*Nadaya* means "little lynx" in Southern Tutchone), has been trapping since before he can remember.

"I've been trapping all my life with my dad and learning what he has to teach. Hopefully I'll be trapping in the future on the family line," Johnson says. "The line has been in our family since before the land was your land or my land; it was the land of the Kluane people."

As part of a school project, he recently made his own mitts from muskrat fur—an accomplishment that made Boudreau particularly proud.

"It's an amazing feeling to know that you made something yourself and it's going to help you in the future," Johnson says. "It's going to keep you warm and keep you dry, which is really important."

Beyond the warmth that fur and hide provides, the priority for both Boudreau and Hunter's family is to harvest sustainably.

"It's important that people know we live off of moose and caribou and sheep up here and trapping is part of controlling the predator population," Boudreau says. "I appreciate that the animals give their lives and so we use everything that we can—the fur, claws, bones. We're not wasteful."

And as Hunter adds, it's also about being connected to the land.

"I like knowing exactly where my stuff comes from and the story behind it, and I am proud that everything is from the Yukon." Y

CARVING OUT A HOME IN KASKA TERRITORY

Elder Dennis Shorty shares his craft

By Leighann Chalykoff | Photos by Archbould Photography

Dennis Shorty with his wife and partner, Jenny Fröhling.

Tara Roberts is concentrating on creating her first mask. She's awkwardly carving out chunks of soft wood, still getting the hang of the sharp spoon-shaped tool that's held downward, close to the wrist.

"I don't know what it's going to be quite yet, but I am sure it will tell me," she says.

It's a spring morning in Ross River, a small community northeast of Whitehorse, and Elder Dennis Shorty's carving tent is full of the rhythmic sounds of blades hitting wood and easy laughter. A stove in the corner keeps the coffee warm, and endless plates of nourishing food, like homemade muffins and moose stew, cover the tables.

For nearly a year now, Shorty and his wife and partner, Jenny Fröhling, have been welcoming people into their home and sharing their knowledge. They have about 10 regulars coming to the tent every other week learning to carve their own Dena-style masks.

Roberts has been in Ross River for about a year. As the wife of an RCMP constable who has been stationed in different places, she's accustomed to moving into new communities and facing the challenge of making new friends and finding her place.

She comes back to the carving tent, month after month, not only for the skill building, but also for the community the program creates. As a woman of European and Inuit ancestry, Roberts feels welcomed into the Kaska home and traditional carving practice, and that has changed her experience of living in Ross River.

"We joke around a lot. We tease each other and tell stories, but I think there is also something much more happening here," Roberts says. "New life is being created in the coming together of cultures and histories in peace, respect, understanding, and love. Here we can renew our spirits and create a new history."

The carving program started in fall 2017, when Shorty and the group harvested a poplar tree. They went into the woods to select the tree and had a ceremony to thank the land for its sacrifice. They cut the tree into even lengths and stripped the bark to prepare the wood.

Since then, Shorty has been patiently teaching his novice carvers how to find shapes in the wood. This December, the group plans to exhibit the finished masks at the Yukon College campus in Ross River.

Shorty is a respected member of his community. To many, he has earned the Elder title and is considered a master carver, but his path was not an easy one.

SHORTY HAS BEEN PATIENTLY TEACHING HIS NOVICE CARVERS HOW TO FIND SHAPES IN THE WOOD.

He was born on the land and spent his early childhood living near Beautiful Lake, just outside Ross River. There he learned from his grandfather by listening to his stories and watching him and his father carve tools and toys.

When Shorty was five years old, a floatplane landed on the lake and took him and other children from the community to the Lower Post Residential School, in northern British Columbia. He was nearly 400 kilometres from home and it felt like an insurmountable distance.

At the school he endured mental, physical, and sexual abuse. The only escape was when he and his brothers and sisters would sneak into the woods and speak their language. At night, while lying in bed, he would imagine himself back on the land with his family.

After seven years away, Shorty returned to Ross River and lived many lives he's still trying to forget. As a young man, he fell into addiction and was steered by anger.

"I wanted to die. I thought it was the only way out," he says.

That was about 11 years ago and around the time when he met Fröhling.

"I came to the Yukon with my boyfriend at the time, and we were visiting friends at a cabin when Dennis walked in and we locked eyes," Fröhling says. "And that was it, I knew that he was the one. He would be my honey."

She went back to Germany, but the pair kept in touch for a year before she uprooted her life and moved to the Yukon. They were married after Fröhling received her landed immigrant status and she's never looked back, even though at times things have been difficult.

Fröhling is a support, helping him work through anger and reclaim his

Left: Ryan Smith, Kris Bruneau, and Macy DeVera at work in Shorty's carving tent. **Right:** Shorty helps DeVera with her piece. **Below:** A mask in progress.

Masks carved by student Paul Derouter (top two pieces) and Elder Dennis Shorty.

Kaska culture. You never see them apart. They are so close they often sign emails with their compound name, combining Dennis and Jenny to "Jennis."

They are also partners in the musical group Dena Zagi, which means "Voice of the People" in the Kaska language. They often invite people from the community to come to their home to play music. Dena Zagi's first album, *Gucho Hin*, was nominated for Best Indigenous Language Album at the 2018 Indigenous Music Awards.

Today, making music and art is a way for Shorty to heal his past trauma and communicate with his ancestors. The memory of his grandfather looms large in his mind. He recently displayed a series of new watercolour paintings he created to illustrate the stories his grandfather told him as a child, and he often carves masks of his grandfather's face.

With Fröhling's support, his art career has taken off over the past few years. His work has been exhibited in Whitehorse at the Yukon Arts Centre Public Art Gallery, Arts Underground, and Yukon College. Last year, he travelled across the country as part of *From the North: A Travelling Show from the Yukon, NWT & Nunavut*, a Canada 150 project featuring performing and visual artists. Shorty was also profiled in the Yukon-made documentary *Journeys to Adäka* that tells stories of artists taking part in an annual cultural event in the Yukon, and his sculpture *Spirit Moose* was given to winners of the 2017 Arctic Inspiration Prize.

Now, through his carving program in Ross River, Shorty is sharing his skills with others who may be struggling with their own issues and has created a friendly place for them to come together.

As the day of carving in the tent comes to a close, Roberts is looking more comfortable holding and manipulating the razor-sharp tools, and her mask is starting to take shape. As her mask changes, so does her mindset.

"At first when I heard we were going to cut down a living tree, I felt bad. But we thanked the tree and Dennis offered it a gift, and I was told we were going to give it new life, and this is more true now than I knew was possible at the time," Roberts says. "I found new life, not only for this wood and these masks, but also for myself. This tree has given me so much more than I had anticipated." **Y**

Dennis Shorty works on a carving in his studio.

The Legacy of the YUKON PARKA

More than 30 years later, the beloved garment is finding new life

By Leighann Chalykoff

Photo: Yukon Archives, Yukon Indian Arts and Crafts Co-op fonds, 2002/131 #272

Opposite page: Brenda Chambers, an employee and frequent model for YIACC promotional material, had the standard body proportions from which patterns for the parkas and jackets were made. **Above left:** Theresa Hall (nee Shorty) from Ross River and several other women sewing in the production centre. **Above right:** Piles of completed duffle parkas in white and dark blue with flower appliqué.

Photos: Yukon Archives, Yukon Indian Arts and Crafts Co-op fonds, 2002/131 #933 and 2002/131 #208

On a mid-summer weekend morning, Katie Newman and a friend were hitting Whitehorse's garage-sale circuit hard. They visited a few houses, combed through stacks of other peoples' leftovers, and then happened upon an estate sale, where a vision in dusty rose caught Newman's eye.

"It was a maroon-rose-coloured Yukon Parka with the shell intact and the fur in pristine condition," she says. "It had been in storage and was only worn a few times, so this perfect, immaculate parka in my size—which is a rare size—was just hanging there."

The find was almost overwhelming.

"I actually had a moment where I thought, *I am not good enough for this coat. Someone else should own it because it's so beautiful,*" Newman says.

She collected her wits, paid the man, and took the coat home. Newman had found her Yukon Parka. Or perhaps the parka had found her. Some people say there is a certain type of magic at work with these classic coats—they find their owners when the time is right.

"I found my parka around the time I was settling into the idea that I was going to stay here in the Yukon," Newman explains. "Living in the North, buying a parka is a bit like buying a house—it's an investment and you spend so much time in it that it's important to find the right one."

Yukon Parkas are distinctive. Each consists of an embroidered wool duffle inner coat, fur lining the hood and hem, and a water-repellent outer shell decorated with northern-themed animal appliqués, such as sled dogs, bears, and wolves.

The parkas, handmade by skilled First Nations artisans in the 1980s and '90s, are now coveted treasures that pop up on Yukon's buy-and-sell networks and are found by a lucky few, like Newman, in places like thrift stores or at garage sales.

Each parka has a story. The garments were so well made that they've held up to decades of wear and being passed from one owner to another. And many have held or increased in value, fetching between $200 and $1,200, depending on the coat's condition.

Many of these parkas were handcrafted at the Yukon Native Production Centre in Whitehorse, which was established by the Yukon Indian Arts and Crafts Co-operative Ltd. (YIACC). The co-operative was run by a board of directors that included representation from First Nations throughout the Yukon. At the height of production, the facility was generating about 3,000 parkas per year.

"They are more than a parka; they are a piece of art," says Tony Gonda, who managed the production centre and YIACC retail stores for a decade. "Many of the winter coats I see today are puffy, lifeless things, but the parkas are so bright and cheery."

In the '80s and early '90s, the parkas were a true made-in-Yukon success as the coats were marketed and sold by retailers across Canada, in Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska, and by the Yukon Native Products retail division through craft shops in the territory. The production facility even hosted celebrities, such as Princess Anne, who was given a tour when she visited the Yukon, in 1982. It was reported in the *Vancouver Sun* that members of her entourage purchased 15 parkas to take back to Britain.

"It was more than a job for me; I was heart and soul into the thing," Gonda says. "We had to make money to stay in business, but really it was a social enterprise designed to promote the

Left to right: Adrianna and Shadelle Chambers, Katherine McCallum, Katie Newman, and Tony Gonda.

Photo: archbould.com

Adrianna and Shadelle (above) are members of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations. Shadelle's grandmother, Mary Chambers, and her sisters, June Bruton and Renie Smith, were some of the talented craftspeople involved in designing and creating the Yukon Parka. Adrianna is wearing a white parka made by her great-grandmother Mary Chambers, and Shadelle is wearing a black parka made by her great-aunt June Bruton.

"Having the parka allows me to have a piece of my grandmother. It means a lot to me. It's something I want to hold up and honour," Shadelle says. "It's also stylish—who would have known it would come back into fashion 30 years later."

"IT WAS A TEAM JOB, AND THERE WERE A GREAT BUNCH OF PEOPLE WORKING THERE."

cultural products of Yukon First Nations and create meaningful employment."

When Gonda was manager, about 50 people were employed in the retail stores and production facility.

First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizen Dorothy Profeit was one of the skilled sewers who made the parkas. For more than eight years, she stitched countless coats and worked her way up to a supervisor position, training other women to craft the iconic garments.

"I couldn't even tell you how many parkas I've made—first at the factory and then for my family and for other people who had to have one," Profeit says. "When I started out it was challenging, but now I am sure I could make one in my sleep."

Profeit learned how to sew from her mother and then enjoyed making clothing once she had children of her own. It was a natural fit to bring her talents to produce the Yukon Parka.

"I did a lot of sewing at home, but I had kids so I kept getting interrupted," she says. "It was a dream for me to go into work and be able to sew all day long."

The first step in making the parkas was cutting shapes out of the heavy wool fabric, and the production centre had a machine that could cut through 10 pieces of material at a time. Then, each sewer would be responsible for a different part of the coat: one would sew on the sleeves, another would attach the trim, and another would hand sew the flower embroidery.

"It was a team job, and there were a great bunch of people working there," Profeit says. "It was awesome."

She worked at the production centre until 1995, when YIACC stopped producing the coats and filed for bankruptcy.

"It was terrible. It really hit us in the heart," Gonda says. "It was the end of an era."

There are varying explanations as to why the production facility shut its doors, but records show YIACC had trouble fulfilling orders and with cash-flow for the operation. Archived documents indicate there were attempts to revive the company in a different format; however, YIACC eventually ceased operation in October 1997.

Since the official production of the Yukon Parka ended, Profeit has been sharing her skills in handcrafting coats and passing on what she learned to the next generation of craftspeople. In fact, she recently gave a workshop in the central-Yukon community of Mayo on how to sew children's parkas.

It has been more than 30 years since the last Yukon Parka was created through YIACC. As time goes by, these coats will only become more rare, valuable, and sought-after.

"The long-term thing that I think about is whether this coat belongs to me or to the territory," Newman says. "If I move away from the Yukon, should the coat stay here? It's something I think about a lot, and generally I come to the conclusion that I have to stay here so I can wear my Yukon Parka," she adds with a laugh. **Y**