

# Crossing the “Big River”



NWT Archives/NWT Dept. of PWS fonds/G-1995-001:0654

The Mackenzie River is known by the Slavey and Tłıchǵ (Dogrib) name Dehcho, which translates as “big river.” Advancing from the western end of Great Slave Lake and twisting through the northwesterly region of the Northwest Territories until finally reaching the Beaufort Sea, the Mackenzie River’s expanse is roughly 1,738 kilometres, making it one of the longest rivers in the world.

## Deh Cho or Dehcho?

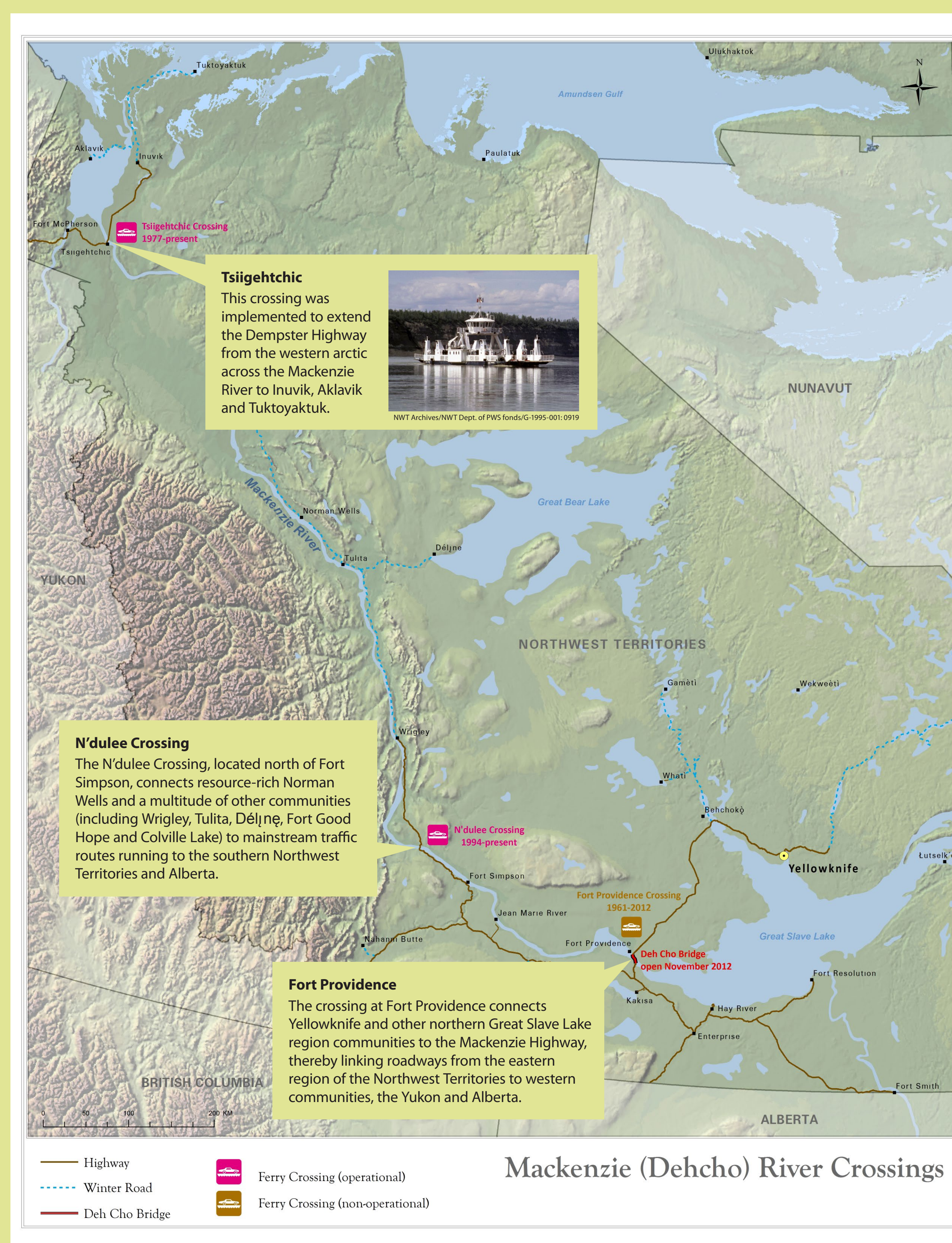
In South Slavey, “cho” is a suffix meaning “big.” In accordance with the rules of the language, a suffix does not comprise a word on its own and must be compounded with another word to be grammatically correct. While the single-word spelling of Dehcho is now understood to be correct, the alternative spelling continues to be popular. As the Department of Transportation has adopted Deh Cho as the correct spelling in the past, the official name of the bridge at Fort Providence is the Deh Cho Bridge. The Dehcho First Nations has transitioned to the single word spelling, and so the river and the Dehcho region are correctly spelled as a single word.



A truck drives across the Mackenzie River at the Fort Providence ice bridge crossing during sunset.



The Louis Cardinal, docked on the Mackenzie River near Tsiigehtchic.



While the Mackenzie River has traditionally served as a transportation route within the territory, it can also act as a barrier separating the western territory from the eastern region. As a result of the industrial boom of the 1950s, residents, business people and politicians discovered a need for roadways which could cross the Mackenzie River to reach communities as well as resource-rich regions. The increasing commercial activity within the Northwest Territories also necessitated roadways that could link northern communities with each other and with the rest of Canada. In time, three major crossing points were established along the Mackenzie River. Beginning in mid-May to early June and ending in October, ferryboats carry cars and passengers across the river, while ice bridges are constructed during the winter season.



# Passage at Providence

The busiest Mackenzie River crossing is at Fort Providence, where passage across the Mackenzie connects much of the Northwest Territories to southern Canada via the Mackenzie Highway.

In early 1958, then Prime Minister John Diefenbaker introduced the Roads to Resources program which designated funding for a road that would run 300 miles around the west end of Great Slave Lake to join Yellowknife with the Mackenzie Highway. However, the program did not provide a solution to one major question: how would this mainstream traffic route cross the great Mackenzie River?

As construction of the road began, residents and politicians began a debate between two options: a relatively inexpensive ferry running through summer months with an ice road in the winter, or an expensive but all-season bridge. Vocal proponents of a bridge were unable to convince the federal government that such expensive infrastructure over a relatively low traffic area was justifiable, and a ferry crossing was established in 1961.



## The Mackenzie River Bridge Company: Building a Bridge \$5 at a Time

The inconveniences of seasonal crossings over the Mackenzie River at Fort Providence inspired continual demand for an all-season bridge long after the ferry crossing had been established. In 1979, the Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce led an aggressive lobby for the construction of a bridge, arguing that the capital would be left out of economic development and become a second-rate government town if such infrastructure

was not developed. In an effort to help raise money locally for a bridge, lobby head Ter Hamer began the Mackenzie River Bridge Company which sold Mackenzie River Bridge shares for five dollars each. Shares continued to be sold throughout the 1980s and 1990s, allowing the Chamber of Commerce to establish the Mackenzie Bridge Foundation. Over one thousand shares were sold for five dollars each.

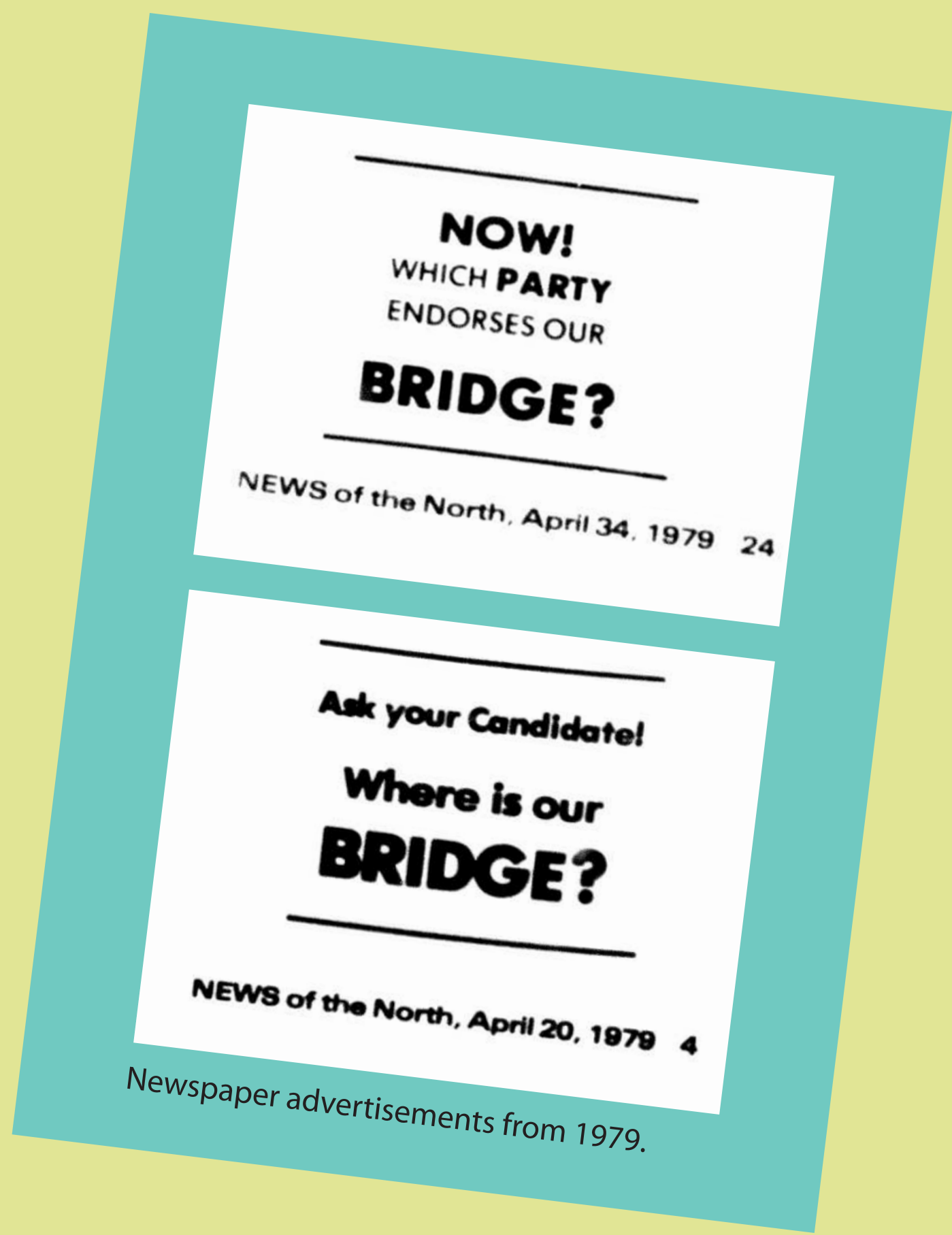


Deckhand Harvey Simba and the Merv Hardie ferry.



NWT Archives/Henry Busse fonds/N-1979-02:CH441

Merv Hardie held office as Member of Parliament during the initial debate throughout which he actively advocated in favour of a bridge crossing.



Newspaper advertisements from 1979.



NWT Archives/Henry family fonds/N-2008-016:0027

The first ferry at Fort Providence made its inaugural crossing in 1961. It was named after Johnny Berens, a skillful riverboat pilot who commanded the SS Distributor along the lengths of the great Mackenzie for 26 years.



NWT Archives/Rene Fumoleau fonds/N-1995-002:5640

A vehicle drives across the ice bridge during winter of 1974.



NWT Archives/Rene Fumoleau fonds/N-1995-002:564

As traffic across the Fort Providence crossing increased, the Johnny Berens was replaced with a larger ferry. The Merv Hardie's namesake was a well-liked Member of Parliament for the Mackenzie River riding from 1953 – 1960.





Fireworks above the Deh Cho Bridge on opening day, November 30, 2012.

GNWT Dept of Transportation, billboardphoto



GNWT Dept of Transportation, billboardphoto

One of the final crossings of the Merv Hardie ferry at Fort Providence.



GNWT Dept of Transportation, billboardphoto

Transportation Minister David Ramsay, left, Premier Bob McLeod, elder Beatrice Christie, representing the Fort Providence Metis, and Lennie Lacorne, representing the Deh Gah Gotie Dene, cut the ribbon to officially open the Deh Cho Bridge.



GNWT DOT

Crossing the bridge for the first time, a procession of political leaders, community leaders, visitors and residents of the Northwest Territories make their way across the Mackenzie River.

## Long Road to the Bridge

The sentiment of the 1970s linking the economic growth of the Northwest Territories to the construction of a reliable all-season bridge that could support heavy traffic did not disappear. As the NWT entered the new millennium, departments at all levels of government, First Nations groups and local alliances began talks about funding construction of what would become the Deh Cho Bridge. While planning

began as early as 2001, it wasn't until November 30th, 2007 that Transport Canada approved the Deh Cho Bridge Project, giving the green light for construction to begin. Despite setbacks, the bridge was officially opened on November 30th, 2012.

## Fun Facts

- The Deh Cho Bridge can support a maximum traffic load of 2,000 tonnes, which is the equivalent of 48 semi-trailer trucks.
- The total cost for the Deh Cho Bridge was roughly \$202 million – that's 25 times the cost of the \$6 million estimated in 1958 when constructing a bridge was first considered by the Government of Canada.
- It is estimated that 500 people attended the opening ceremony.
- Approximately 300 people took part in the inaugural crossing by walking across the bridge on November 30th, 2012, despite the chilly weather. The temperature outside was -30° Celsius!
- Planning for the bridge began in 2000, construction began in 2008, and the inaugural crossing took place on November 30, 2012 – that's eight years of planning and four years of construction!
- Plans are underway to construct a Texas Gate, like those used in Banff National Park, to prevent bison from roaming onto the bridge. In the meantime, wolf silhouettes and wolf urine will be used on either side of the bridge to deter bison.

Information from GNWT DoT: <http://www.dehchobridge.info/index.html>

## 1972

### Mackenzie Ferry Comments

The ferry Johnny Berens was pulled out of the water late last week due to ice conditions on the Mackenzie River. This annual occurrence, (and the break-up problems) affects all Yellowknife residents, as the ferry is the connecting link for the Mackenzie Highway and highway traffic comes to a complete halt during these two periods, which in the past, have lasted as long as seven weeks.

**EUGENE CLEMENTS**— THE ORIGINAL ANSWER IS A BRIDGE BUT THERE WOULD BE DIFFICULTY IN FINANCING.

**FRED RICHMOND**— WHEN WE COULD GET A BRIDGE, SEEMS TO BE EASIER TO GET A MAN ON THE JOB THAN TO KEEP THE FERRY OPERATING LONGER.

**ANNE MALCOM**— AS SOON AS THE FERRY STOPS, UP GO THE PRICES, AND THE INCONVENIENCE TO ALL. IF WE BRIDGED AT THE INCONVENIENCE OF THE NEW FERRY.

**DON MCKINNON**— INSTEAD OF PUTTING A BRIDGE UP TO BRIDGE, WE SHOULD HAVE A BRIDGE OR HOVERCRAFT.

**GRAYCE DIER**— CAN'T SEE WHY WE CAN'T HAVE A TOLL BRIDGE WITH EXPENSIVE PAYING, BUT I SURE WE ACCEPT THE FERRY BECAUSE WE'RE IN THE NORTH.

**LOIS AVERY**— ABOUT TIME WE HAD A BRIDGE ON A TOLL. HOW MUCH OF OUR LIFE DO WE HAVE TO LIVE HERE TO GET NORMAL TRAVEL FACILITIES.

**ED OVERBO**— WE WOULD THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT A TUNNEL OR A BRIDGE, AND I CAN'T SEE WHY THERE SHOULD BE PRICES UP FOR GOODS THAT ARE USUALLY IN STOCK BEFORE FREEZE-UP.

**MARY ANNE SCHROEDER**— IT'S SHAPED IN THE NEW FERRY, IT WAS TO HAVE ALLEGEDLY MOST OF THESE PROBLEMS WITH ITS ICE-BREAKING CAPABILITIES, THERE CHECKS FOR THE OLD "JOHNNY BERENS."

**MURRAY SIGLER**— THE CONCEPT OF THE FERRY IS OUTDATED. FEASIBILITY STUDIES HAVE SHOWN WE SHOULD HAVE A BRIDGE, AND ITS ABOUT TIME THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAD THE FUNDS AVAILABLE.

**HUBETTE DUNCAN AND BAMBER**— AN EXCUSE FOR YELLOWKNIFE MERCHANTS TO INCREASE THEIR PROFITS BY RAISING PRICES UNNECESSARILY.

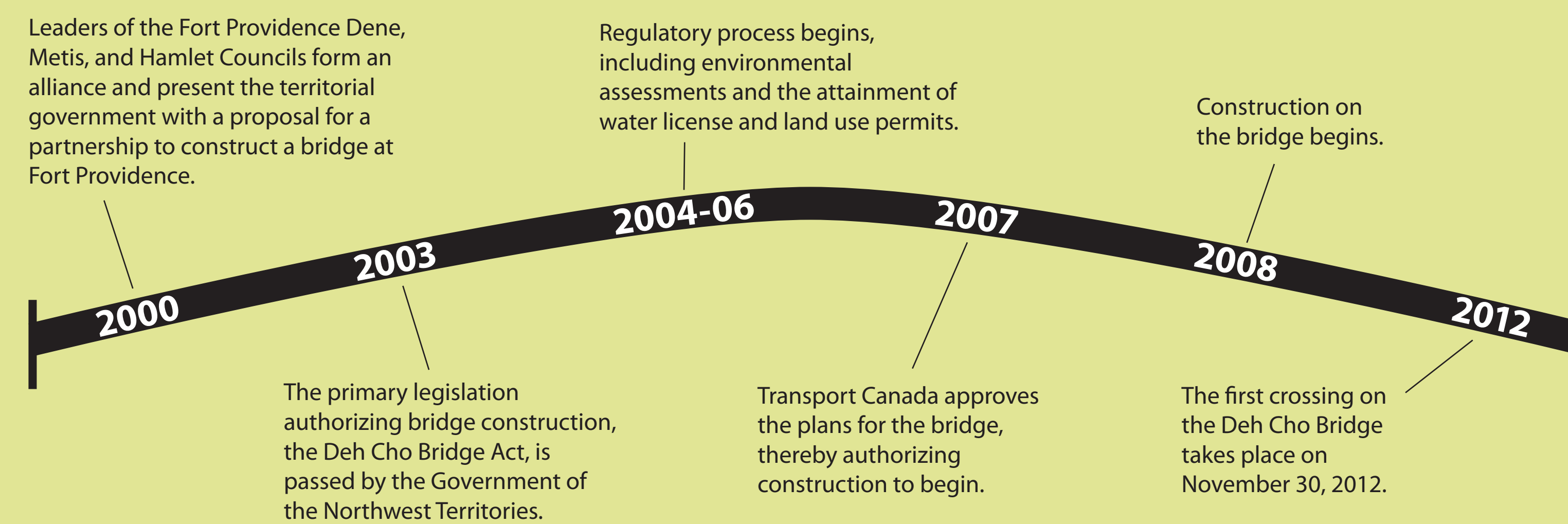
**JACK CARNEY**— IT IS DIFFICULT FOR FAMILIES WHO MOVE TO YELLOWKNIFE FROM OTHER PLACES TO PLAY AND VISIT. THERE TO GO INSIDE WITH THE FERRY SHUTDOWN, RIGHT NOW, WE CAN'T, FISHING, AND RECREATION EFFECTS ARE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, AND IT MAY BE A LONELY WALK.

**NANCY BUNDERLAND**— A REAL MISMANAGEMENT TO SEE PRICES GO UP BUT THAT'S THE BRIDGE WE MUST PAY FOR LIVING IN THE NORTH. A BRIDGE WOULD BE TOO EXPENSIVE.

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## 2007

YELLOWKNIFE, Wednesday, August 22, 2007 7

### opinions

#### STREET TALK

with Amanda Vaughan

**Do you think the government should be going ahead with the Deh Cho bridge even though it's going to cost more than \$150 million?**

**Patrick Ryan**  
"Yes. It would be better for the economy here."

**Jonathan Selig**  
"Yeah, they should. Eventually it will save them in transportation."

**Cris-Ann Makiling**  
"If the government can afford it, then they should do it."

**Shawn Ryan**  
"That's a lot of money. I don't think so."

**Gwen Przednowek**  
"Yes, I do."

**Amber Corothers**  
"I think they should. I think it will be hard while they are building it, but much better once it's finished."