



## John Burton Denison

“A dreamer and his ice road”

1916 - 2001

Lynne Denison Foster

Little Creek, Kelowna, B.C.

January, 2026

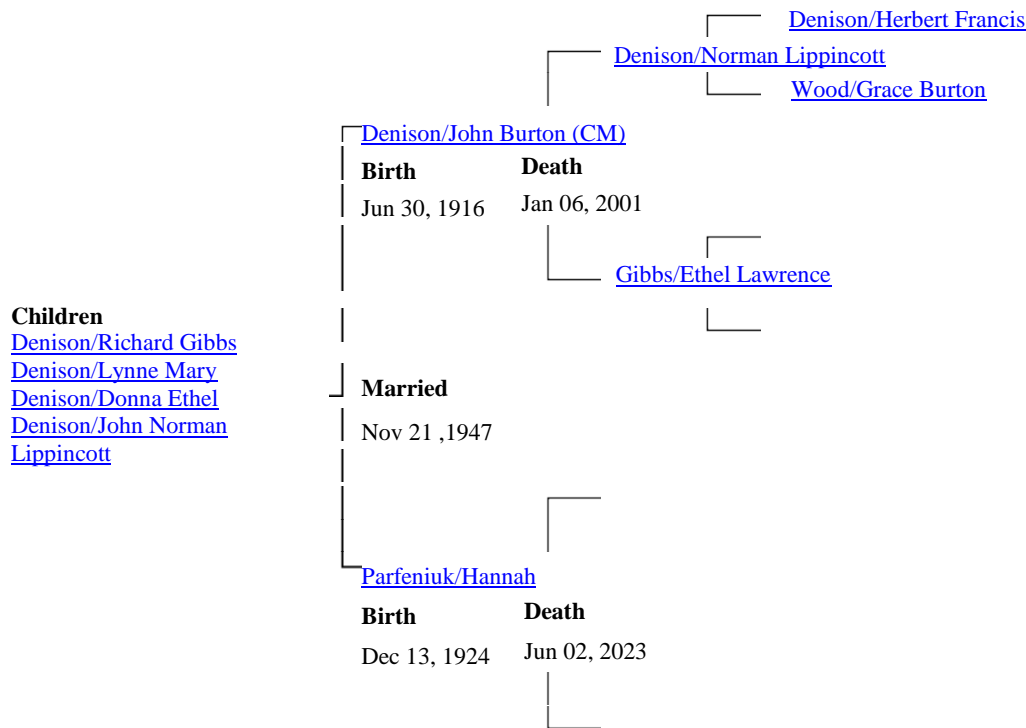
## Foreword

This story includes extractions from an article written by Ed Struzik, Edmonton Journal Staff Writer, February 11, 2001, and excerpts and quotes from the book, Denison's Ice Road written by Edith Iglauer, first published in 1974.

It has been edited for accuracy with additional comments written by Lynne Denison Foster (John Denison's daughter) and verified by his sons, Richard G. Denison, and John N. L. Denison, who work with him in Yellowknife. Additional edits by Tim Martin.

## About John Burton Denison

John Burton Denison [CM](#) (June 30, 1916 – January 6, 2001) was a Canadian [ice road](#) engineer who operated in the [Northwest Territories](#) in the 1950s to 1970s.<sup>[1]</sup>



Born in Coldstream, BC, near Vernon, on June 30, 1916, John Denison worked with his father, Norman L. Denison. Being the eldest son in a family of eight children, he did chores on the farm, made roads through the forest to get to Norman's fur trap lines, loaded fruit crates in packing houses, worked on logging operations and was briefly employed by the railroad before twice joining the RCMP.

John Denison's family motto is the Latin word **Perseverando**. The family crest is a hand with its index finger pointing to a star. For John Denison, that star is the North Star. The bright twinkle of the North Star, securely located above the North Pole, was the one dependable feature for the small band of adventurers who annually braved the savage cold, blinding snow, wild winds and perilous terrain to build the Ice Road.

## What motivated John

Perseverance was Denison's outstanding trait during the ten years he was engaged in his eccentric specialty of building winter roads where no one else dared to make them.

It was a crazy idea, but John Denison was just determined enough to "get it done".

His ostensible purpose had been economic: to double the period for shipping freight in and out of one particular silver mine during the year. The road, which melts each spring and is rebuilt each winter, has made travel possible for the three-to-four cold months, using the icy surface provided by nature on the lakes as a highway. These frozen lakes lace the region between Yellowknife, capital city of the Northwest Territories, situated on the 11,000 square mile Great Slave Lake, and a tiny point of human habitation called Port Radium on Great Bear Lake, which is a thousand square miles larger and 1,356 feet down at the deepest point. (pg 2, [Denison's Ice Road](#))

Denison's Road was Big John's crazy invention, in which he and his crew used an old Cat, a Bombardier 'bug' and a battered truck they called The African Queen to level and pack a route from Yellowknife to Echo Bay Mines in Port Radium. As mentioned in the book, Denison's Ice Road, the road gave the company an extra three months of freight-hauling time each year to supply its operations on Great Bear Lake. The rest was shipped in by large barge via the Mackenzie and Great Bear Rivers during the short summer.

Crude as it was, a convoy of trucks could haul everything from fuel to prefabricated buildings to the mine much more economically than any airplane. According to Jim Watson (son of Sybil Denison Watson), Denison's nephew and associate, the job was brutal. Working around the clock in 15 to 20 hours of darkness and temperatures that routinely dropped to -50C, there was always the possibility of brakes failing, or trucks plunging through the ice in blinding snow. Meals were often cooked with a blowtorch beneath a tarp, or on the manifold of the truck.

Frozen or failing brakes didn't frighten Denison though. He once boasted he could slow down or stop by either gearing down or dropping the shovel on the front of the truck into the snow. Failing that, he said, you could always veer off the side of the road into a snowbank. *"None of this amuses me, particularly, but it suits me"*. Denison once told New Yorker magazine journalist, Edith Iglauer who accompanied him for a few weeks in 1968 and later wrote Denison's Ice Road. *"Nobody else wanted to do the job so I said, 'Why not?' Anyway, I like doing' it and if I lie down and quit, I might as well never have started."*

## Canadian Army and the RCMP

When his first five-year stint with the RCMP was completed, it was 1944. World War Two was still raging. His brother Harry (W.H. Denison) and sister, (Norah Denison) were already enlisted, so he heeded the call of his Denison heritage (aka the 'Fighting Denisons of Toronto) and joined the Canadian army. He was stationed in Newfoundland guarding the transatlantic telephone cable against sabotage until the war ended.

The second time he joined the RCMP, after the war in 1946, he was given a choice between a posting in Whitehorse and one in Yellowknife.



He chose the booming mining town in the Northwest Territories. Hal Tipper, an Edmontonian who was working for the Hudson's Bay Company in Yellowknife at the time, played 25-cent limit poker with Denison, and recalls him as a big, amiable man who had the gift of the gab and a heart of gold. *"John had a real presence*

*in the community,"* he recalls, *"I remember a dance when some of the miners were getting pretty rowdy. Big John (he was 6'4" in his prime) was at the back of the hall in full RCMP uniform. He calmly walked up to a couple of these fellows, picked them up by their collars and banged their heads together. Things calmed down after that."*

Years later, when John's two sons were teen-agers and had grown to 6'5" and 6'8", he encouraged them to use their height and their natural strength as a tool to find a non-violent solution to a potential physical confrontation. He told them that their height alone was enough to discourage others to try and mess with them. It worked...because both of his sons are well-liked and were never known to be bullies.

Denison didn't last long as a Mountie in the wild, untamed, and rugged north. He quit about two years into the job because his head and heart were no longer in it. *"To tell the truth,"* Denison later explained, *"one of the reasons I quit was because I was squeamish when I came to an accident out in the bush and found a guy half-dead or dying. It made me sick that I couldn't do anything for him. There was no access to medical assistance to ease his pain and suffering. Another reason is that I wanted to do something on my own where I could use my own initiative to make things better."* (Pg 173, [Denison's Ice Road](#))

## John gets married

John's wife, Hannah (nee Parfeniuk), was another reason why he quit. They met in Yellowknife where there was only five single women working in the town. She was a waitress in one of the restaurants that had opened to serve the influx of prospectors. Hannah recalled his reason for quitting a bit differently. She said her husband decided to leave the RCMP after they had sent him out onto the tundra in December 1946 with a dog team to look for a missing trapper. It was one of the coldest Decembers on record. Denison and a guide picked up the trapper's tracks, but never caught up with him after the trail disappeared on a wind-swept lake. Hannah says by the time they got back to Yellowknife, Denison was so frostbitten he had to be hospitalized. That assignment,

along with a few others, including responding to a report of a burning cabin and having to remove from it a prospector's body that had been burnt beyond recognition, was enough for Denison. Besides, in those days, single members of the RCMP were not permitted to marry, so he bought out his contract and proposed to Hannah, whom he married on November 21, 1947.

## **The trucking business**

They moved to Peace River, Alberta where Denison first started trucking in 1947 when he and his brother, Harry bought an old army truck, started a small trucking business with Bob Seddon and plowed a route from Peace River to Hay River in the Northwest Territories. Two of their four children, Richard Gibbs Denison and Lynne Mary Denison were born in Peace River.

During that time, he endeared himself to the mining industry when he managed against all odds, to deliver a two-ton generator from Edmonton to Giant Mine in Yellowknife in the dead of winter. This was particularly impressive since the roads at the time were basically crude bush roads or non-existent.

After moving to Edmonton to expand the business, John was contacted by an old friend from Yorkton, Saskatchewan - his first RCMP posting. Roger Forsyth had expanded his trucking operation in Dawson Creek, BC where the newly-built Alaska Highway had recently been opened, and he needed an operations manager to oversee his Northern Freightways fleet of trucks and drivers. John took the job and moved his family to the northern BC community. His brother, Harry followed him and managed a gas station in Fort St. John. When Forsyth sold his company to Canadian Freightways in 1959 Denison moved back to Edmonton where he eventually entered a partnership with the Chapman Brothers who had purchased Byers Transport. By this time, two more children were added to his family, Donna Ethel Denison who was born in Edmonton in 1951, and John Norman Lippincott Denison who was born in Dawson Creek in 1954.

Acquiring the fleet made it possible for the partners to provide transportation of much-needed supplies from Edmonton to the communities that were being established throughout the Northwest Territories. Denison's connections with those northern communities were a valuable asset for Byers Transport and for the mining companies who were contributing to the fast-growing commerce of the Canadian North. He was the partner that was hands-on, taking responsibility for the operations and ensuring the fleet and the drivers were ready and able to take on any task that was required to keep the freight moving, even if he had to do it himself. To quote one of his drivers, Tom Berry in the book, 'Denison's Ice Road', "*John's a straight, go-ahead driver. You don't make any money backing up, though, and if it wasn't for him some of the mines around here wouldn't have opened. The Cat trains were so slow, and you had to take the sleighs over the portages one at a time.... John's proved that freighting with standard trucks right up into the Arctic is feasible. Take a load of lumber from Vancouver to Port Radium! Why not? This kind of operation is making this country*". Tom continued, "*He builds and maintains the roads, operates and repairs his own equipment, everything. John's road is part and parcel of the growth of the North. He's not more experienced than a lot of old-timers around*

*Yellowknife with ice, but he's willing to take more chances. When he started hauling freight in trucks successfully this far north, even into the Barren Lands, he was the only man in the Territories doing it. Everybody said he was nuts. Everybody.*"(pg 57, [Denison's Ice Road](#))

Denison got the job of building the ice road to Tundra Mine in 1961. He already was well known for his company's ability to take on hauling jobs into Yellowknife that nobody else would consider, such as transporting houses from Rayrock to Yellowknife. The Byrne brothers whose company started up Rayrock, Tundra, and Discovery Mines needed a fuel-storage tank from the old Negus gold mine in Yellowknife to be taken to Tundra. *"If you think we have haywire equipment now, you should have seen what we started with to Tundra," he said. We really had a bunch of old trucks! A six-wheeler, an old tractor, maybe five or six old wrecks besides. I wouldn't try it again with the equipment I had then. It was a lot tougher than this, especially hauling a fifty-three-thousand-gallon fuel-storage tank from the old Negrus gold mine in Yellowknife to Tundra. That tank was so big -twenty feet in diameter- that the current had to be cut on one of the main power lines for an hour to let us raise the wire and go through it. I deal with J.C. Byrne, Norm's brother, in Toronto, and he said to me, 'If you can haul that tank to Tundra you can keep it filled up with fuel,' so I said, 'Give me the most you can and I'll see if I can make a dollar.' We made our agreement with a handshake the way we always do. About a thousand dollars to bring the tank and I needed the work, but do you know why we hauled it? Not for the freight charge for the tank itself, but for the oil to be hauled later, twenty cents a gallon or one thousand dollars a trip. It was that road to Tundra that made me think I could make a winter road to Port Radium."* (pg 163, [Denison's Ice Road](#))

Hannah says she hardly ever saw her husband after that. By that time, he had moved his family to an experimental suburban community outside of Edmonton called Sherwood Park. *"He was crazy for that ice road," she said. "That's all he could think about."* His family got used to the idea that in the winter he didn't belong to them. His heart and his focus were completely on the North. But, when he came home every year after he built the ice road, he was devoted to his family.

His family was the most important thing to him, especially his children. He was a gypsy by nature and loved to travel. Many times, he would come back from months working on the road, and say to his wife, *"Let's take the kids and go somewhere."* Hannah would quickly pack up the kids, make some food and they would hop into the car and go visiting. As well, he took each of his four children on at least one special one-on-one trip with just him.

Building an ice road and hauling freight over it was dangerous work. Over the years when he was responsible for constructing the road, he lost numerous vehicles and equipment in the lake, and many drivers had hair-raising stories to tell about escaping from their truck as it broke through the ice. But during the time that John Denison was in charge of the operation, he never lost one man. After his predecessor took over, at least five men lost their lives to the treacherous ice road. *"It's a strange feeling going through the ice,"* recalls Jim Watson, who lived in Sherwood Park and has now passed. *"The truck slowly sinks to the bottom of the river. It gets darker and darker, the cab starts to fill with water, and you look up and you see this light that is coming through the hole in the ice."*

Watson was eighteen in 1961 when Denison first got the contract to build the road. *“No one had done anything like this before,”* he said. *“But my Uncle John had the three D’s – drive, determination, and desire. There was nothing stopping him from getting it done.”*

In 1969, Byers Transport was purchased by Pacific Western Airlines, which resulted in Denison being hired by PWA Cargo Sales department as a consultant to assist in the transition to a land-air combined cargo service. At this time, John’s health was deteriorating. He had an ulcer and eventually a ruptured esophagus and he knew his devotion to building the ice road and managing the operation had to end.

## **After the trucking**

Denison dreamed of one day returning to the Okanagan Valley to retire, do a bit of consulting work, drive his backhoe around his property and fix things. He and Hannah eventually did make the move. His ageing childless uncle and aunt, Dimitri and Marjorie (Denison) Schoch had a beautiful piece of property called Little Creek on Lake Okanagan, just outside of Kelowna. With some of his share of the profits from the sale of Byers Transport, John purchased the property, making a deal with the Schochs that they could remain on the property until he was ready to fully retire.

But Hannah says he was too restless to settle for the simple life. His son, Richard, was looking for a change and so they invested in a run-down marina on Lake Okanagan in Peachland, BC. As a breakwater, they use an old passenger/freight boat, called ‘The Pentowna’ which in its previous life, ferried passengers and fruit from orchards located on the shores of the lake. John and Richard combined their skills and resourcefulness to successfully operate Kingfisher Marina for eight years (1972-1980).

His other son, John Jr, followed his father’s footsteps and started his own road paving company. Lynne, the oldest daughter, had a successful career as a trainer in the aviation industry, for which she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the British Columbia Aviation Council. Donna, the younger daughter, created a salad dressing that is now the highest selling organic salad dressing in Western Canada.

In 1996, John was driving his motorhome, with his wife Hannah, and his sister Barbara on the Alaska Highway to attend an RCMP reunion function in Whitehorse, when he blacked out and ended up crashing the motorhome into a ditch. Hannah and Barbara were a bit shaken up but suffered no serious injuries. John was injured enough to be taken to the hospital and while there, it was discovered that he required a pacemaker and was told he would no longer be able to operate a vehicle. It was a devastating blow to the man who spent his life driving and being in charge. To come to terms with this permanent change to his lifestyle, he went home to his place on the lake and proceeded to build a rock wall by hand by himself to prove that he was still capable of getting things done.

## The Order of Canada

In 1998, at the age of 82, John Burton Denison was named to the Order of Canada for his legendary and revolutionary work as a transportation pioneer. At first, he humbly



didn't feel right about the recognition. But after thinking about it for a bit, he said to his daughter, Lynne, that maybe he did accomplish something good for his country, and that he was very grateful and proud to receive such an honour. He felt that he was okay with the way his life had worked out. He had a good life, but he didn't want to end up a useless sickly old man, sitting in his chair depending on someone else.

## End of the road

In his 50's, he explained his view on death and dying to author, Edith Iglauer when she expressed concern about his health: *"I wonder why you do this kind of work, when it makes you so sick,"* (Edith) said. *"Everybody thought you might die."* *"Well, I'm not going to,"* he said indignantly. *"If I don't want to, I don't have to, do I? Those gravediggers are not going to get me because I'm not ready!"* He was silent, then said, *"I really don't know why I'm doing this, but I guess it's because I like doing it. Why does a guy do a lot of things? I fell into it and landed up doing it. Turning left or right sometimes makes a difference. Because I turned this way, I went this way."* He searched a little bit further *"Oh, I don't know. Something about the North, maybe. You feel a little more as if you're on your own. You're your own person somehow."* (pg 235/6, [Denison's Ice Road](#))

John loved his life. He loved his family, his friends, and the beautiful property on Lake Okanagan that his uncle had named Little Creek. What he didn't love was the loss of his independence, so he decided it was time. He was ready! On December 28, 2000, John became ill with severe pneumonia. He was admitted to the hospital. He told his son, Richard, *"That's it, I'm done...I'm leaving on Friday."* Richard told his Dad he couldn't go until Lynne and John, who were out of town, got there. Lynne arrived with her two daughters and, upon hearing that John had decided to leave this world on Friday, her youngest daughter's 15th birthday, she whispered to him, *"Dad, please don't die on Rebecca's birthday. It would break her heart."*

So, he waited and after spending the day with his wife and four children reminiscing about all the wonderful times they shared as a family, John Burton Denison died in the presence of his wife, Hannah and daughter, Lynne at 11:55 pm on Saturday, January 6th, 2001. In true typical fashion, one day after his granddaughter's birthday and three days after the anniversary of his mother's death. *"He always had big plans like the ice road,"* Hannah said. *"A lot of them didn't always come out the way he wanted or expected, but that didn't stop him. He was a dreamer and a doer."*

## Quotes from the book about what others thought of him:

*"When I met John, he had just got out of the RCMP and was freighting on a barge ... he always was a good-natured fella, but bullheaded, because when he decides to do something he's going to do it...I built the first snow plow for John. We remodelled a farm tractor plow to John's design, and I set it up on an old truck and drove it to Tundra that first time. You wouldn't think of pullin' out of town with that old equipment now, but John had no choice. That's all the trucks he could get with the kind of money he had. He just had to be stupid and determined and damned good to do what he did. That first time to Tundra there were some pretty rough places, but I think it was worth the effort. I really think it was. They couldn't have kept that mine going without us." (Hugh Parnall...pg 150 Denison's Ice Road)*

*"I've been thinkin' about John's role,"..."He was the figurehead, the manager, It was his plan, his idea, and he was lookin' after everybody movin'. He was quite sure he could haul that stuff back from Echo Bay with a truck and he damned well proved it could be done." He paused. "With modern equipment, it might not have been so heartbreakin'...well, heartscarin', but with the equipment he had he done extremely well. He had fellows like Parnall here, Demelt and myself, and, well, he had foolish damn determination, and that was it." (Joe Major...pg 154, Denison's Ice Road)*

*"John'll take a chance't where other men won't. He'll push things through when nobody else can, and do it hisself if somebody won't do it for him. If he had a crew of all John Denisons he wouldn't have to worry... It'd be pretty hard to meet a nicer guy than John. I don't know where you'd meet one, and he's always paid me as much as he could afford.." (Jim Magrum...pg 155/160, Denison's Ice Road)*

*"Ill as he was, or perhaps because he was so ill, the fury of Denison's spirit affected the others; the sicker he got, the more they strained to finish the Ice Road. He was a tough boss, made outrageous demands by any normal working standards, but the men were in it for more than the job. 'He's proved it could be done.' Was the phrase men used about Denison even while they grumbled at the lack of sleep, the long hours of hard work, usually adding, 'I would do anything for John.' They trusted his judgement, relied on his strength, suffered with him. 'If you're too tired, sick as he is, he's not afraid to get up and have a go at it,' Davy Lorenzen said to me later that day." (Davy Lorenzen...pg 180, Denison's Ice Road)*

*"He's a wonderful guy to work for. See how the guys put out for him! Until two in the morning and then get up and start again at five, and he'll have dinner out on the table when you've turned your truck off. He talks back and forth (on the radio) with the men, too, and has a way with them that they really like. He has no business bein' out here in the bush now. Everybody knows their job and does as well when he's not here, but John's got to be in the bush. It's a good life here in the bush, with good guys, nothin' but beautiful trips." (Davy Lorenzen...pg 191, Denison's Ice Road)*

John Burton Denison, a humble man who inherited admirable qualities and characteristics from the genetic pool of his Denison forefathers made a lasting impact in this world. Until his dying day, he epitomized the family motto...Perseverando, and will long be remembered for his independence, determination, commitment and optimistic good nature by all who knew him.

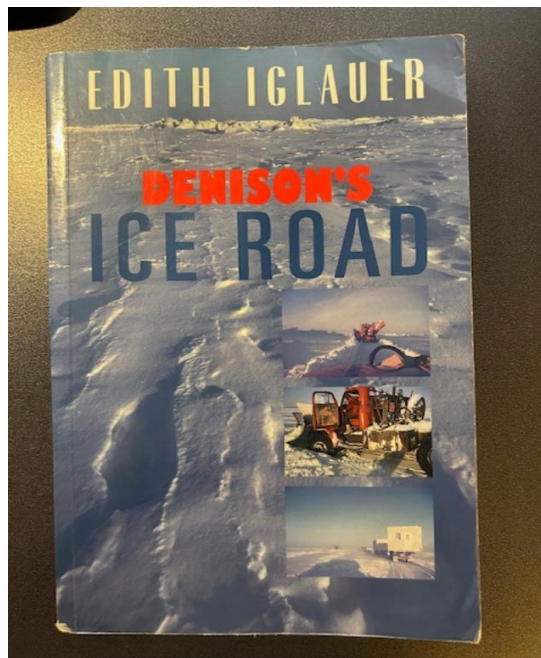
## Epilogue

In 2000, History Channel aired a 46-minute episode titled "Ice Road Truckers" as part of the *Suicide Missions* (later *Dangerous Missions*) series. Based on [Edith Iglauer's](#) book [Denison's Ice Road](#), the episode detailed the treacherous job of driving trucks over frozen lakes, also known as ice roads, in Canada's [Northwest Territories](#).

After 2000, reruns of the documentary were aired as an episode of the series [Modern Marvels](#). Under this banner, the *Ice Road Truckers* show garnered very good ratings.

***Ice Road Truckers*** (commercially abbreviated ***IRT***) was a [reality television](#) series that originally aired on [History Channel](#) from 2007 to 2017 until returning from hiatus in 2025. It featured the activities of drivers who operated trucks on [ice roads](#) crossing frozen lakes and rivers, in remote territories in Canada and the U.S. state of [Alaska](#). Seasons three to six also featured Alaska's improved but still remote [Dalton Highway](#), which is mainly snow-covered solid ground.

The many shows and episodes were viewed by millions of people all over the world.



Harbour Publishing  
PO Box 219  
Madeira Park, BC, Canada  
V0N 2H0